

## Rock, Paper, Spear?: How the Gamification of Classical Warfare has Corrupted our Reading of Xenophon

Creative Assembly's 2004 *Rome: Total War* changed how students and scholars thought about ancient warfare. In the video game, each group of combatants – each unit of *hoplites*, archers (*toxotai*), and cavalry (*hippeis*) – had specific predetermined strengths and weaknesses. It was ultimately just a more elaborate version of Rock, Paper, Scissors: archers were strong against spearmen, who could easily defeat cavalry, who could in turn easily destroy the archers. There were more unit types and groups besides these, but the game-design logic presented ancient armies as having a set list of abilities and deployments, rooted in their appearance and equipment. In turn, this logic earmarked certain historical conflicts as inevitable – since the Romans had better stats, they inevitably conquered the Mediterranean. This system of gamifying ancient violence long predates *Rome: Total War* and has its roots in many flawed positivist framings of history, but it continues to characterize how we study and teach Classical warfare. Life is not a video game – a spear might be better at fighting someone on horseback than an arrow, but what if your spear breaks? This paper uses Xenophon's *Anabasis* as a case study to explore how gamification has limited our ability to understand the novelty, experimentation, and broader impact of Xenophon's adventure.

Deterding et al. define gamification as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (2011, 9). When we gamify history, we impose strict rules and guidelines that are not rooted in reality. In video games, riders die simultaneously with their horses and archers use their bows against enemies regardless of their distance. In reality, cavalry picked themselves up and continued fighting on foot and archers switched to hand-to-hand weapons at close range.

Translations of the *Anabasis* describe archers and slingers moving to the sides of the engagement to make way for the Greek *hoplites*, but that is not what Xenophon says.

In a particularly telling scene, the Greek forces are suffering under Persian pressure and none of their missiles can match the range of the Persians' arrows (Xen. *An.* 3.3.16-3.4.5). Xenophon gathers his forces and decides to try something new. He identifies everyone with experience on horseback, gives them all horses and armor, and then assigns a commander to lead his new cavalry on scouting and flanking missions. He then identifies those with experience slinging, hands out slings and sling bullets, and then lets them return to their positions in the battleline. Some commentators indicate that Xenophon created two new distinct units of combatants who operated independently of the *hoplites* and *peltastai* (e.g. Lee 2008, 84). Recent handbooks on Greek warfare, like Konijnendijk et al.'s 2021 volume, have described Xenophon's actions as a tactical response to the Persian's troop typologies. The Persians used rock, so Xenophon used paper. Wrightson (2019) further argued that Xenophon's reorganization of the military during the *Anabasis* set the Greek world on a path towards Combined Arms Warfare, a firmly twentieth-century battle strategy in which battle groups coordinated an attack from multiple directions. But only the cavalry formed into a new group. Xenophon's slingers were still *hoplites* and *peltastai* – they did not stop being *hoplites* and *peltastai* when they became slingers – and they continued to stand in their original positions in the army while they used their new weapons.

Before the professional militaries of the Hellenistic period, Greek armies were a chaotic mob of private individuals who dressed and fought however they wanted. The Spartan citizens may have been the singular exception to this rule, but Spartans were extraordinarily rare by the

end of the fifth century,<sup>1</sup> due to their remarkably reduced citizen body. By equipping those with experience, Xenophon was subverting tradition and trying something new. To understand the broader context and implications of Xenophon's harrowing escape, we must set aside our gamified perspective of antiquity. Xenophon and his companions did not make it back to the Aegean by playing the rules, they pushed forward and experimented with new ways to struggle, kill, and survive. It was not a game, and we trivialize the horror and suffering of history by removing the human element.

#### Works Cited

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Anabasis*, Xenophon only names one Spartan, Dracontius, and he emphasizes twice that he was a true Spartan exile (Xen. An. 4.8.25, 6.6.30). Xenophon describes both generals from the Spartan diarchy, Klearchos and Cheirisophos, as Lakedaimonians.