

Xenophon on the Thirty

Xenophon's narrative of the Thirty occupies a place of special prominence in the *Hellenica*. Coming hard on the heels of the "Thucydidean" section, a stylistic transition at 2.3.10 also marks a thematic transition into a different type of narrative, whose focus is no longer a protracted war between two powerful city-states and their allies but an aporetic account of the disordered state of Greek affairs (Ἑλληνικά) in the forty years following the Spartan victory in the twenty-seven-year war (Dillery 1995: 17–38). The *Hellenica*, picking up where Thucydides left his unfinished History of the Peloponnesian War in 411 B.C., may have been a direct continuation (for ancient comments, see, e.g., Marcellinus' *Life of Thucydides* 45), but Xenophon had greater ambitions than simply filling out the footnotes of his magisterial forebear. The gruesome story of the Thirty, whose rule had already come to be viewed as a watershed in Athenian history, functions as a watershed in Xenophon's writing as well. Falling within a ten-month period from 404–403 B.C. and confined to the borders of a single *polis*, this vignette rates twenty pages in the OCT, the remaining forty years down to Mantinea requiring only 206 pages (about 5 per year). No other year receives such fulsome treatment. Moreover, although certainty is impossible, some scholars suppose that *Hell.* 2.3–4 constituted Book 3 in the original division. If this reconstruction is correct, the prominence of the Thirty would have been even more marked, since the story comprised an entire book that served as a linchpin between the final years of the Peloponnesian War and the remainder of the work.

The narrative of the Thirty is a prologue to the disordered state of the post-Peloponnesian War world, but it is also a paradigmatic account of the ultimate corrupt regime, serving to concentrate diverse trajectories of Xenophon's political thought upon a single historical crux. In this capacity, *Hellenica* 2.3–4 dramatizes many aspects of the vigorous contemporary fourth-

century debate about ὀλιγαρχία, maps the problem of Critias' oligarchy onto a broader discussion about the rule of law and common good of the polis, problematizes the Spartan model for constitutional framing, and underwrites the whole with divine providence by adducing examples of vengeance on the impious, thereby implicitly attacking Critias' atheistic political conceptions at the same time. The artful compression of these intersecting themes into a brief space has yielded a complex narrative, virtually every sentence of which is laden with commentary on one or more of these contemporary issues of political philosophy.

In this presentation I cannot explicate the entirety of this intellectual tapestry but will instead focus on a salient thread of Xenophon's thought – the distinction between “oligarchy” and “aristocracy” – and explain how Xenophon puts a contemporary political debate on stage through the words and actions of Critias and Theramenes.

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