

The Ethics of Empire in Xenophon's Continuation of Thucydides

All works of history from the Greco-Roman period tend to confound modern readers, who are accustomed to the “scientific” approach to evidence and documentation and are unaccustomed to historians with serious literary and philosophical ambitions. Even among the ancients, Xenophon proves especially problematic and intractable. The *Hellenica* has no preface and precious few authorial interventions, and it does not fall neatly into the Herodotean or Thucydidean stream. Xenophon's preoccupation with religious observance and the real-world consequences of moral behavior are likewise discordant with naturalistic, historicist premises. What exactly is Xenophon, the Socratic philosopher, up to in writing history?

The *Hellenica* is a complex work that cannot be reduced to a single reading, but I am attempting to identify an overriding paradigm for the whole history: the adaptation of a Thucydidean theme into Xenophon's philosophical framework. Xenophon both attempted to explain the success and failure of states in terms of the divine operation of justice and believed he was acting as a faithful follower of Thucydides' narrative arc in the *Peloponnesian War*.

Three major story “arcs” (two partial, one complete) can be detected in Xenophon's narrative. The first “completes” Thucydides' narrative of the moral decay of the Athenians, who grow more and more brazenly conventionalistic over the course of the war. In Book 2 of the *Hellenica*, they get their comeuppance in poignantly ironic form. Their greed and brutality come back on their own head, and they suffer what they had inflicted on weaker cities (2.2.4). Divine vengeance on the Athenians, implied in Thucydides, finds its culmination in the first, “Thucydidean,” section of the *Hellenica*. (Whether or not this was a good reading of Thucydides' narrative purposes is a question for another time.)

The second is the only complete arc: the rise and fall of Sparta. Sparta is on their heels for much of Book 1, but the ascendance of Lysander starts Sparta on its path toward hegemony of the Greek world. At the apex of their power, the Spartans reveal their pride and greed, committing various crimes against the natural order and following in the footsteps of the sins of the Athenians. The Spartans' fall, which has begun in earnest by the end of Book 5, is explicitly linked to the work of the gods (5.4.1).

As Spartan decline becomes more and more marked, Xenophon begins a third arc (the rise of Thebes), which he leaves unfinished, inviting a future historian to pick up the overlapping arcs. He alludes to their *pleonexia* and implies their eventual ruin but, like Thucydides before him, does not finish the story.

These arcs connect to Xenophon's didactic purposes. Each of these cities (Athens, Sparta, Thebes) is viewed in moral terms drawn from individual ethics, and each takes on its own "character." Xenophon portrays individual and collective as microcosm and macrocosm, the soul and regime corresponding respectively to the person and the city. A key concept in this network of values is the temptation of *pleonexia* ("greed" / "grasping for more"), which leads to overextension and injustice and eventually to a fall. Another important theme is the Xenophonic ideal of leadership (on which see Gray 2011; Ferrario 2016). These principles apply to city-states as they do to individuals, and the oppressive, top-down approach of each individual city-state falls short of the Socratic ideal and falls into self-destruction. The *Hellenica* provides many *exempla* of great generals and statesmen and their wicked counterparts, but the city-states themselves also take on paradigmatic force as models of imitation or avoidance. In this, Xenophon meant his work to be seen as a faithful continuation of Thucydides.

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