Xenophon the philosopher, a man who alone out of all philosophers adorned philosophy with both words and deeds.

Eunapius (ca. AD 347–414), Lives of the Sophists 453

Virtually every volume devoted to Xenophon begins with a discussion of his life and times. The more you investigate Xenophon, though, the more you realize how little is known for certain about his personal history.

One thing we can say: Xenophon wrote prolifically. His works, fourteen in all, often cross genre lines.1 Anabasis, a mix of memoir, leadership manual, and travelogue, records his years (401–399) with the mercenaries whom Cyrus the Younger (ca. 424–401) enlisted to help seize the Achaemenid Persian throne from King Artaxerxes II (405/4–359/8). Hellenica examines war and politics in the Greek world from 411 to 362 BC, picking up where the historian Thucydides left off. Cyropaedia, an account of how Cyrus of Anshan (r. ca. 550–530) founded the Persian Empire, stirs together biography, romance, and political philosophy.2 Agesilaus offers an idealized portrait of Xenophon’s Spartan benefactor, King Agesilaus II (r. 400–359), while Lacedaemonion Politeia (Constitution of the Spartans) does something similar for the Spartan way of life. Xenophon’s mentor Socrates (469–399) is at the heart of a quartet of texts that blend dialogue and narrative: Memorabilia, Oeconomicus, Symposium, and Apology. Dialogue appears again in Hiero, a fictionalized encounter between the Syracusan tyrant Hiero (r. 478–466) and the poet Simonides of Ceos (ca. 566–465).

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1 A fifteenth work once ascribed to Xenophon, Athenaion Politeia or Constitution of the Athenians, is now attributed to another author. Doubts have also been expressed about Xenophon’s authorship of Cynegeticus (On Hunting); Breitenbach 1967: 1920–1.
2 Cyrus was king of Anshan in what is today southwestern Iran. We call the Persian Empire Cyrus founded “Achaemenid” because the Persian king Darius I (522–486) claimed that he and Cyrus shared a common ancestor named Achaemenes. For a brief overview of Achaemenid Persia see Waters 2014, for full discussion Briant 2002.
In *Hipparchicus* (Cavalry Commander), *De re equestri* (On Horsemanship), and *Cynegiticus* (On Hunting) Xenophon displays his expertise in warfare, horses, and hunting. And in *Poroi* (Ways and Means) he turns his attention to the public finances of Athens.

All Xenophon’s works survive. Yet, wresting biographical detail from his writings is difficult. *Anabasis* offers a sometimes day-by-day picture of Xenophon’s life during 401–399, but for the decades before and after we get only snippets of personal information. Modern authors often mold their interpretations of these snippets to fit their own preconceptions about Xenophon’s character.¹ Some infer his presence at specific events from the vividness of his narrative, especially in *Hellenica*. Others contend that vividness and detail could result as much from Xenophon’s access to talkative eyewitnesses as from his being there, for his works include vivid descriptions of events at which he was clearly not present. There is also the challenge—some might say the impossibility—of disentangling Xenophon the historical person from Xenophon the textual character.⁴

To supplement Xenophon’s words we must rely on a scattering of other sources. Most important is a short biography written by Diogenes Laertius in the later second or early third century AD, part of a series of philosophers’ lives.⁵ Diogenes probably relied on a now-lost first-century BC account by the grammarian Demetrius of Magnesia, though he also read some of Xenophon’s writing.⁶ Diogenes provides more chronological narrative about Xenophon than is usual in his lives, yet some of it is manifestly incorrect.⁷ Moreover, Diogenes no less than modern authors shaped his portrait of Xenophon to suit his own purposes.

### The Age of Xenophon, ca. 430–350 BC

Diogenes does not say when Xenophon was born, only that he was at his peak (*akme*) in the fourth year of the ninety-fourth Olympiad (401–400 BC). Since the ancients often judged one’s *akme* as about age forty and Xenophon does write in *Symposium* that he was present at a party whose dramatic date is 422 BC, some have concluded he was born ca. 440. Others argue that we need not take the *Symposium* passage literally.⁸ Likewise, in *Anabasis* the Thracian king Seuthes thinks Xenophon might have a

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¹ Humble 2002b offers an excellent discussion of modern portrayals of Xenophon.
² Flower 2012.
³ Date of Diogenes: Mejer 1978: 57–8.
⁵ Hägg 2012: 313–14.
marriageable daughter but that could just as well mean he looked or seemed
older to Seuthes.\(^9\) We can also discount Diogenes’ report that some believed
Xenophon was at his peak in the eighty-ninth Olympiad (424–420), tying
him with older followers of Socrates such as the aristocrat Alcibiades
(ca. 450–404/3) and Plato’s maternal uncle Critias, for that would put him
in his sixties in 401 B.C.\(^10\)

Xenophon himself writes in Anabasis of being at his peak or prime of
strength in 401, in a speech meant to convince Cyrus’ mercenaries he is
suited for command despite his youth. After taking command he describes
himself as one of the youngest of the generals. He also describes a Persian
emissary addressing him as a young man (\textit{neaniskos}), which in the mili-
tary context of the Anabasis could mean someone under thirty. Possibly
Xenophon was younger than his friend Proxenus, who was about thirty in
401 B.C.\(^11\) That would make Xenophon one of the younger men in the army,
which included many soldiers over thirty and some over forty-five.\(^12\) While
some still prefer an older Xenophon and others go for a much younger
one, most scholars these days concur that he was born sometime between
430 and 425 B.C.\(^13\)

Diogenes is more precise about when Xenophon died: the first year of the
hundred and fifth Olympiad or 360/59 B.C.\(^14\) In his Poroi, though, Xenophon
references the Social War (357–355) between Athens and its allies. And in
Hellenica he mentions events in Thessaly that may have happened as late as
August 353.\(^15\) So, he was alive until the mid to late 350s.

What we might call the Age of Xenophon, then, stretches from about
430 to 350 B.C., cutting across the artificial split into “fifth” and “fourth”
centuries that standard histories of Classical Greece often employ. His life-
time saw rapid change in mainland Greece and the wider West Asian world.
The bipolar divide between Athens and Sparta that had structured Greek
politics for generations broke down, to be replaced by multiple regional
powers and complex interstate rivalries. “Common peace” and “autonomy”

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\(^9\) Seuthes: Xen. Anab. 7.2.38; Xenophon had no children at the time: Xen. Anab. 7.6.34.
\(^10\) Diog. Laert. 2.55, 2.59.
\(^11\) At his peak: Xen. Anab. 3.1.25. Youngest of generals: Anab. 3.2.37. \textit{Neaniskos}: Anab.
2.1.12–13, Mem. 1.2.36. Some manuscripts name the young man Theopompus rather
than Xenophon, on which see Farrell 2012: 49–51 and Rood 2004a: 321–2. Proxenus:
Xen. Anab. 2.6.20.
\(^12\) Ages of Cyrus’ mercenaries: Lee 2007: 74–6.
\(^13\) Younger Xenophon: Gray 2010b: 8 n. 34 suggests a possible birthdate as late as 420,
\(^14\) Diog. Laert. 2.56.
Tuplin 1993: 30.
became political buzzwords, alongside the reality of more intense, more professionalized warfare. Light troops and cavalry became ever more important, and mercenaries became ordinary sights even in the Spartan army. Exiles remained a source of political instability, while wealth concentration and economic inequality increased.16

During Xenophon’s life, Athens suffered defeat at Spartan hands, the loss of its empire, and civil war, then managed gradually to recover a modicum of power and prosperity before again losing much of it. Xenophon saw Sparta rise to hegemony over Greece only to find its supremacy continually challenged abroad, while at home Spartan society faced serious demographic problems. He served with the Spartan army and became close with the Spartan king Agesilaus. He witnessed Thebes rise to new heights as it defeated a Spartan army in battle and invaded the Peloponnese, threatening Sparta itself. He saw federal leagues, which promised to transcend the limitations of individual Greek city states, arise in Boeotia, Arcadia, Thessaly, and the Chalcidice. And, after taking part in the civil war between Cyrus and his older brother Artaxerxes II, Xenophon survived to see Achaemenid Persia, which had for a generation kept out of Greece, become a major force in mainland Greek affairs. Under Artaxerxes, the longest-ruling Achaemenid king, a Persian fleet cruised Aegean waters for the first time in nearly a century; the empire re-established undisputed control over Asia Minor and repeatedly dictated terms to the Greeks. While lack of evidence keeps many details of Xenophon’s life uncertain, it is still possible to sketch the outlines of his personal history against the broader backdrop of these momentous developments.

Xenophon the Athenian, ca. 430–401

Few people flying into Athens these days realize it, but as their aircraft descends for a landing over the olive trees and houses of eastern Attica they are passing above the ancestral lands of Xenophon. Ancient Erchia, Xenophon’s home deme or district, lies in the Mesogeia plain near modern Spata, north of the international airport. From Erchia it is about twenty kilometers west to the Agora of ancient Athens; the way there skirts the north slopes of Mount Hymettus. Little remains at Erchia today but scattered potsherds and stone blocks.17


Xenophon, relates Diogenes, was the son of Gryllus of Erchia. The name Xenophon was not uncommon at Athens, but his father’s name is rare and was perhaps in origin a nickname (“Porky” or “Grunter”).¹⁸ His mother, whose name may have been Diodora, must have been a freeborn Athenian for Xenophon to be a citizen.¹⁹ We know nothing of siblings or other relatives. Nor are we sure Xenophon was born in Erchia, for many Athenians did not reside in their ancestral demes. We can say that Xenophon was younger than his demesman Isocrates, born in 436/5, and about the same age as Plato, born around 429–427. Athenian citizens were divided into ten civic tribes and both Plato’s urban deme Collytus and the rural deme Erchia belonged to the same tribe: Aegeis, named after its eponymous hero Aegeus, mythical king of Athens. Xenophon, Plato, and Isocrates thus shared a common civic identity. A deme such as Erchia counted only a few hundred citizens, so Xenophon and Isocrates probably knew each other from childhood. It may be that Xenophon and Plato also met as children, for while tribes were much larger than demes, festivals, civic duties, and other events often brought tribesmen together.

Plato, whose family had been prominent in Athens for centuries, and Isocrates, whose father rose from modest beginnings to become one of the richest men in the city, both came from the wealthiest stratum of Athenian society. Their fathers were liable for liturgies, a form of taxation through which rich men paid for public expenses such as warships and religious festivals.²⁰ Xenophon’s father Gryllus, though, apparently was not wealthy enough to perform a liturgy.

In Anabasis, Xenophon mentions owning horses and cavalry armor, most likely an indication that his family kept horses in Athens.²¹ Maintaining horses was expensive and many have inferred that Xenophon’s father belonged to the second-highest Athenian property class, the hippeis or Knights. That did not necessarily make Xenophon naturally anti-democratic. Popular Athenian stereotypes linked horse owning with free-spending, dim-witted aristocrats, yet many prosperous Athenians supported democracy. Cavalry was also glamorous and appealing enough to feature prominently on the public democratic sculpture of the Parthenon frieze. Furthermore,

¹⁹ Diodora: Breitenbach 1967: 1571. The name is attested once at Athens, on a late fifth-century lead curse tablet from the Kerameikos: Peek 1957: 59–60 (no. 206).
²¹ Xen. An. 3.3.19. Xenophon explicitly distinguishes the horses he has at his quarters (παρ’ ἐμοὶ: LSJ s.v. παρὰ B.II.2) from others that had belonged to Clearchus’ Thracian cavalry and yet others captured from the enemy. Cavalry armor: Xen. Anab. 3.4.48; see also Eq. 12.1–2, Mem. 3.10.
probably in the 440s the Athenians had begun subsidizing the costs of horses and fodder, so less wealthy men could serve in the cavalry.\textsuperscript{22} Not until later in Xenophon’s life would cavalrymen be seen as especially hostile to democracy.\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, Xenophon’s own writings reveal a sympathy for democracy that is at odds with the modern stereotype of him as a born oligarch.\textsuperscript{24}

Athens at Xenophon’s birth was still near its height of power. In 480–479 BC the city had joined with Sparta to defend against an Achaemenid Persian invasion of Greece. Afterwards Sparta turned to isolationism while Athens took over the Delian League, a Greek alliance meant to forestall Persian attack. As the Persian threat receded, the Athenians during the mid-fifth century transformed this league into a maritime empire run for their own benefit. Meanwhile, the Persian Empire, stretching from the Mediterranean coast all the way to central Asia, remained powerful under the long-lived Artaxerxes I (r. 465–424). In the 450s, the Persians suppressed a major revolt in Egypt and crushed an Athenian force sent to aid the rebels. After about 450, open hostilities between Athens and Persia ceased.

Back in Greece, Athenian imperialism made enemies of the Boeotians and their chief city Thebes, and led to outbursts of open war with Sparta. Following a brief rapprochement, tensions with Sparta grew anew in the 430s. By now, democracy had brought Athens decades of internal political stability and prosperity. With their fleet of three hundred war galleys called triremes, the Athenians held a firm grip on an empire that stretched across the Aegean. Imperial tribute paid for the Parthenon and the gleaming chryselephantine statue of Athena. It was with great confidence that Athens went to war with Sparta in 431 BC. This conflict, the Peloponnesian War (431–404), defined the first third of Xenophon’s life.

From 431 to 425 the Spartan army invaded Attica every summer. If they were not already living in town, young Xenophon and his family may have moved there for safety.\textsuperscript{25} Refugees crowded within Athens’s walls and plague followed, killing thousands. After that, word of relatives and friends slain in battle probably arrived with sad frequency. Even if family circumstances sheltered Xenophon from the worst, the war must always have colored his early years. Fortunately the Spartans left Attica each winter. When they left, Xenophon could return to the country, where there was space to ride and hunt. Judging from the superb knowledge of horses he displayed later in

\textsuperscript{22} Spence 1993: 10, 164–211.
\textsuperscript{24} Gish 2012, Kroeker 2009.
\textsuperscript{25} Living in town: Xen. Oec. 11.14–18.
life, it is likely that Xenophon learned to ride young. Indeed, we are told his
demesman Isocrates rode horses as a boy.\textsuperscript{26}

The war continued as Xenophon grew, though neither Athens nor Sparta could gain a decisive edge. A peace of exhaustion in 421 was followed by a gradual slide back into open hostilities. Then, in 415 BC the Athenians decided to attack Syracuse, far away in Sicily. Just before the Athenian fleet sailed, the herms of Athens – religious markers that stood before house doors and temples – were defaced during the night and Alcibiades, the expedition’s driving force, was accused of mocking the sacred Eleusinian Mysteries. Nonetheless the expedition went forward. Xenophon, now aged ten to fifteen, would have been old enough to join the crowd that went down to the port of Piraeus to watch the magnificent armada depart.\textsuperscript{27}

Alcibiades fled into exile, the Athenians fumbled their best chance to take Syracuse, and in 413 the Spartans re-entered the war. This time they built a fort at Decelea, about twenty kilometers north of Erchia, from which to ravage the Attic countryside year-round. Thousands of slaves escaped to Decelea. Some Athenians, amongst them Isocrates, lost everything. Xenophon’s family may have suffered as well, although it would come out of the war still able to maintain horses.\textsuperscript{28} By now Xenophon was entering his teens. Possibly he got his first sight of combat as early as 413, helping guard Attica against Spartan raiders. Memories of Decelea certainly stuck with him into old age.\textsuperscript{29}

The Sicilian expedition ended in catastrophe for Athens in 413, with thousands of men and hundreds of ships lost. Widespread uprisings against the Athenian Empire ensued. Even privileged allies such as Chios revolted. Worse, the Persian king Darius II (r. 424–405/4), working through his satraps Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus in Asia Minor, began to support Sparta. Persian funds helped Sparta build ships and hire rowers to challenge the Athenian navy, threatening the imported grain supply that kept Athens alive. A misguided attempt, instigated by the still-exiled Alcibiades, to win Persian favor led the Athenians to overthrow their own democracy. From summer 411 to spring 410 a series of oligarchic governments held a shaky grip on Athens.

Sometime between 412 and 407 Xenophon turned eighteen. It was an important milestone, for at this age male Athenians were formally enrolled

\textsuperscript{26} Isocrates: Plut. Mor. 839c. Farrell 2012: 84 speculates Xenophon might only have learned to ride in Anatolia, but the skill Xenophon shows in Anab. 3.4.49 reveals many years’ experience.

\textsuperscript{27} Thuc. 6.27–30.

\textsuperscript{28} Isocrates’ property: Isoc. 15.161. Xenophon’s horses: Xen. Anab. 3.3.19.

\textsuperscript{29} Decelea and Athenian cavalry: Thuc. 7.27. Memories: Por. 4.25.
as citizens.\textsuperscript{30} Five years, though, is a long time for a teenager. If Xenophon was born in 430, he would have been just old enough to participate in the events of 411–410. Some associate Xenophon with the armed youths and young cavalrymen who supported the Four Hundred, one of the oligarchic regimes that ruled Athens in 411–410, but that requires assuming he opposed democracy.\textsuperscript{31}

Xenophon probably served in the cavalry even before turning eighteen; Athens needed every soldier it could get during these years. Details from \textit{Hellenica} may suggest he participated in the Athenian attack on Ephesus in 409, under the general Thrasyllus.\textsuperscript{32} Interestingly, \textit{Hellenica} omits a battle near Megara that occurred around the same time, in which Plato’s older brothers took part; was it because Xenophon was not there?\textsuperscript{33} Thrasyllus went on to join forces with Alcibiades – now rehabilitated and leading Athenian forces – in the Hellespont, not returning home until spring 407.\textsuperscript{34} If he indeed accompanied Thrasyllus, Xenophon perhaps also served under Alcibiades, taking part in sieges and plundering forays as well as pitched battle. That might explain the military expertise he displays in \textit{Anabasis}. On the other hand, \textit{Anabasis} gives no sense Xenophon had previously seen the Hellespont. In any case, Thrasyllus returned to Athens ahead of Alcibiades, so Xenophon could have been in the crowd that came down to Piraeus to see Alcibiades briefly return from exile in 407.

It is to these years we might assign a passing remark by the early third-century AD Athenian writer Philostratus, who says Xenophon spent time as a prisoner in Boeotia, during which he heard the philosopher Prodicus of Ceos.\textsuperscript{35} Xenophon’s works show a familiarity with Prodicus but that does not confirm the story, for Prodicus was no stranger to Athens.\textsuperscript{36} Still, a sojourn in Thebes could explain how Xenophon met the Theban Proxenus, whom he describes in \textit{Anabasis} as an old friend. Philostratus presents himself as a careful researcher, but he also wrote in an era when invented traditions about figures such as Xenophon circulated widely.\textsuperscript{37} Did Philostratus or one of his sources make up Xenophon’s time at Thebes to explain his friendship with Proxenus, or do we trust Philostratus?

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\textsuperscript{30} Rhodes 1981: 496–8.
\textsuperscript{31} Youths and cavalry: Thuc. 8.69.4 (compare Xen. \textit{Hell}. 2.3.23), 8.92.6.
\textsuperscript{32} Xen. \textit{Hell}. 1.2.1–1.4.10, Anderson 1974a: 18.
\textsuperscript{35} Philostr. \textit{VS} 1.12.
\textsuperscript{37} Hägg 2012: 322–4.
However much he was out of Athens, Xenophon still had plenty of opportunity to meet Socrates. In Diogenes’ telling, Socrates encounters Xenophon in a narrow alley, stretches out a walking stick to bar the way, and quizzes him on where to find various kinds of food.\textsuperscript{38} Socrates finally stumps Xenophon by asking where men can become noble and good (\textit{kaloi kagathoi}).\textsuperscript{39} “Follow me and learn,” Diogenes has Socrates say, after which Xenophon becomes a devoted follower. Whether or not this story is true, and despite the doubts of modern scholars who would dismiss Xenophon simply because he is not Plato, Xenophon seems to have been among the close associates of Socrates in the last decade of the 400s.\textsuperscript{40} Diogenes claims Xenophon and Plato were rivals, but his main reason is that they both wrote about Socrates.\textsuperscript{41} While Plato never explicitly names Xenophon, Xenophon mentions Plato by name in passing. There is evidence that the two read and responded to each others’ writing, though the nature of their literary interactions is much disputed.\textsuperscript{42}

Diogenes asserts Xenophon was extremely handsome, which if true may have played a role in his first meeting with Socrates. Although Socrates was famous for controlling his sexual impulses, he did not deny his erotic attraction to youths. Xenophon too recognized the power of same-sex desire. He admired Socrates’ abstinence, while allowing that not everyone could live up to the rigorous Socratic ideal.\textsuperscript{43} Although his writings stress the dangers of uncontrolled lust, Xenophon acknowledges same-sex relations as a normal part of life, including military life. He relates how same-sex desire or relationships sometimes distracted soldiers from duty, but also notes how they inspired courage.\textsuperscript{44} And, in \textit{Memorabilia} Xenophon depicts himself – or at least the textual character bearing his name – becoming aroused at the possibility of kissing a beautiful youth.\textsuperscript{45}

The war went on. In 407, Darius II sent his teenaged son Cyrus the Younger out to coordinate Achaemenid activities on the western frontier. Athens was now fighting for survival. In summer 406 the Spartans defeated the Athenian fleet, trapping the survivors at Mytilene on Lesbos. The Athenians scraped together a rescue force, melting down gold statues
from the Acropolis for an emergency coinage and conscripting slave rowers. Xenophon notes that even some of the cavalry – was he among them? – took ship as rowers or marines. Near the Arginusae Islands east of Lesbos the Athenians managed a victory, but a storm afterwards forced the Athenians to abandon the crews of their own damaged ships. Probably several thousand men perished.$^\text{46}$

Two of the fleet’s eight generals did not bother returning to Athens. The others came back to rough justice: the Athenian Council’s inquiry degenerated into a mass trial before the Assembly. Since by any reckoning Xenophon was now of citizen age, he may well have attended the Assembly meetings where the matter was debated, an angry scene of shouting and threats as he describes it. Both Xenophon and Plato remembered that Socrates, one of the Assembly’s fifty-member presiding committee (\textit{prytaneis}) and perhaps even its chair (\textit{epistatēs}) for the day, refused to do anything contrary to the law despite the uproar.$^\text{47}$ Nonetheless all the generals were found guilty and the six who came back were executed.

Arginusae was only a temporary reprieve. Late in $405$ BC, the Spartan commander Lysander caught the entire Athenian fleet on the beach at Aegospotami in the Hellespont. Only nine of the $180$ Athenian ships escaped, one reaching Athens after dark with word of the calamity. Xenophon may have heard the lamentations spreading up from Piraeus as people learned the news; he tells us no one in Athens slept that night.$^\text{48}$ The city resolved to hold on, but the Spartans set up a blockade and food began to run low. Early in $404$ the starving Athenians surrendered. A Spartan fleet sailed into Piraeus, exiled oligarchs returned, and the city’s walls were demolished – to the music of flute girls, writes Xenophon, again perhaps a detail from his own memory.$^\text{49}$

Thebes and Corinth wanted Athens destroyed. Instead the Spartans installed thirty commissioners, including Plato’s uncle Critias, to chart the city’s future. The Thirty soon turned to tyranny. They got garrison troops from Sparta, disarmed most citizens, and arbitrarily executed as many as $1500$ people. Democratic insurgents gathered at the mountain fortress of Phyle, beat back troops sent to quell them, then reclaimed Piraeus for the democrats. After fierce street fighting in Piraeus in which Critias was

$^\text{46}$ Arginusae: Lazenby 2004: 227–34.

$^\text{47}$ Xen. \textit{Hell.} 1.5.15; Xen. \textit{Mem.} 1.1.18, 4.4.2; Plat. \textit{Apol.} 32b–c; Krentz 1989: 163–4, Rhodes 1981: 533–4. The fifty \textit{prytaneis} were chosen by lot from one of the ten tribes and served for a month. The \textit{epistatēs} held office only for a single night and day.

$^\text{48}$ Xen. \textit{Hell.} 2.2.3. Compare the sleepless night after the execution of the Cyrean generals: Xen. \textit{Anab.} 3.1.3.

$^\text{49}$ Xen. \textit{Hell.} 2.2.21–3.
killed, the Spartan king Pausanias intervened and brokered a settlement. In spring 403 Athens returned to democracy and a general amnesty was declared, though some supporters of the Thirty went to live apart at Eleusis in Athenian territory. 50

Most scholars these days believe Xenophon served in the cavalry under the Thirty and that he sympathized with their cause. It is true that the cavalry were strongly associated with the Thirty and that Hellenica spends a lot of time on the activities of the cavalry. 51 Xenophon, though, portrays the Thirty very negatively and depicts the cavalry as ambivalent. 52 He shows Critias forcing cavalrymen and hoplites to vote for the execution of fellow citizens from Eleusis, and describes how some cavalrymen objected when their commander cut the throats of prisoners. 53 Perhaps he is just covering his tracks. Yet, he need not have been a wholehearted oligarch. 54 Civil wars are filled with people who fight for causes or leaders they do not believe in. Family obligations, loyalty to cavalry comrades, or plain reluctance to seem cowardly could have kept Xenophon in the ranks just as much as sincere political belief.

Xenophon emphasizes how well the amnesty worked, even excusing the democracy’s forcible reincorporation of Eleusis in 401. The amnesty was indeed remarkable, for Athens never again saw such an oligarchy. Even so, horsemen who had sided with the Thirty suffered financial penalties, and when in 399 the Spartans demanded three hundred riders for service in Anatolia, the Athenians sent men who had fought for the Thirty. Xenophon writes that the people thought it would be a good thing if these men went abroad and perished. 55 Moreover, Athens in the wake of military defeat and civil war faced an uncertain future. 56 Its population was perhaps half or two thirds of what it had been at Xenophon’s birth, the Attic countryside was wrecked, and the city remained beholden to Spartan power. Xenophon was probably not the only young Athenian wondering what to do next.

50 On the Thirty see Krentz 1982.
51 Ath. Pol. 38.2; Rhodes 1981: 458.
54 It has even been suggested Xenophon could have fought against the Thirty. After Critias was killed, people apparently defected to the democrats (Diod. 14.33.4) and some cavalry fought for the democrats (Xen. Hell. 2.4.25).
The rest of Xenophon’s life began with a letter from his xenos or ritualized guest friend, Proxenus of Thebes. Athens and Thebes had been enemies during the Peloponnesian War, so how did Xenophon and Proxenus become xenoi? As noted earlier, perhaps Xenophon was a prisoner in Boeotia during the war. Another possibility is that they inherited the relationship, for guest friendships could cross generations. Proxenus, a pupil of the rhetorician Gorgias of Leontini who had taken service with the Achaemenid prince Cyrus, had an offer for Xenophon: join Cyrus’ expedition against rebellious Pisidian highlanders in Anatolia. Cyrus, said Proxenus, was worth more to him than his native Thebes. If Xenophon came along he too could become a friend of Cyrus.

In a famous Anabasis passage, Xenophon recalls how he consulted Socrates, who, worried that joining Cyrus might get him in trouble at Athens, told him to go to Delphi. There, instead of asking the oracle whether or not he should go, Xenophon asked to which of the gods he should sacrifice and pray in order to make the journey worthily and, having done well, to get home safely. When Xenophon returned to Athens, Socrates chided him that he had not really consulted the oracle, but made up his mind to go and then asked the god the best way of going. Some would take this story as evidence Xenophon learned nothing from Socrates, but it is better read as an older and wiser Xenophon looking back on his impulsive younger self. Exactly what motivated him to accept Proxenus’ invitation remains unknown, but we are fairly sure he was unmarried at the time and had no family to keep him at home. Xenophon sailed from Athens to join Cyrus early in 401 BC. It would be decades before he returned. He would never see Socrates again.

Unbeknownst to Proxenus and Xenophon, Cyrus’ real goal was to unseat his older brother, King Artaxerxes II (405–359/8). Darius II had groomed Artaxerxes as his successor, but also displayed early confidence in Cyrus, sending him out west in 407 BC as regional overlord. Late in 405 Darius called the two to his deathbed, perhaps reminding them that he had fought his brothers for power and admonishing them not to do likewise. Barely had Darius breathed his last and Artaxerxes become king, though, than the brothers were at odds. Xenophon says Tissaphernes falsely accused Cyrus of

57 For more on the Thirty and their aftermath, see Wolpert 2002, Shear 2011.
58 “Worth more to him”: could this suggest Proxenus was an exile from Thebes? If so, he and Xenophon could have become friends in Athens. It is worth noting that Isocrates also studied with Gorgias of Leontini.
59 Xen. Anab. 3.1.4–10.
conspiracy; others claim Cyrus did really try to kill Artaxerxes. Whatever the truth, their mother Parysatis intervened and Cyrus returned to Sardis, where he began plotting to usurp the throne.

Cyrus’ plan included recruiting more than twelve thousand Greek and non-Greek mercenaries to supplement his satrapal troops. Achaemenid commanders had long employed mercenaries, but never before in such numbers. Proxenus brought two thousand men to join Cyrus at Sardis, where Xenophon caught up with them just as they were setting out, ostensibly against the Pisidians. Xenophon says he went along as neither general nor captain nor ordinary soldier, but he clearly got to know Proxenus’ officers and met Cyrus himself.

Across Anatolia the army marched, as the mercenaries became increasingly wary of Cyrus’ true aims. A few deserted, but the prince kept the rest going with new cover stories and promises of extra pay. Finally, at Thapsacus on the upper Euphrates River, Cyrus revealed the true objective. More promises – a year’s extra pay in silver! – got the mercenaries across the Euphrates. Then they headed downriver towards Babylon, where Artaxerxes waited with his army.

The two brothers and their armies met at Cunaxa northwest of Babylon, sometime in August or September 401. Cyrus and Artaxerxes got within spear’s reach and Cyrus wounded Artaxerxes before being killed. The mercenaries swept their part of the field, but the rest of Cyrus’ army disintegrated. In the days that followed Cyrus’ erstwhile Persian supporters began to reconcile with Artaxerxes, who soon held the upper hand. The mercenary commanders, now led by the Spartan Clearchus, tried negotiating their way out. The Persians invited Clearchus, Proxenus, and the other generals to a conference, then seized and executed them. That might have been the end of it, but Xenophon, as he tells it, helped the army rally and select new generals, amongst them himself.

Unable to return along the Euphrates, the mercenaries fought their way up the Tigris valley, then slogged across rugged mountains and frozen plains to reach the Black Sea near Trapezus early in 400 BC. About a quarter of them perished along the way. West along the Pontic coast they went on foot and by sea, their numbers steadily dwindling as generals and men fell to squabbling amongst themselves. Xenophon, offered sole command, declined the post. The army held together just barely, reaching Byzantium in autumn 400.

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61 Xen. Anab. 1.1.3–5; Plut. Artax. 2.3–5, 3.3–6.
62 Xen. Anab. 1.2.3, 3.1.4, 3.1.8–9.
63 Xen. Anab. 1.7.10, 5.3.3.
Xenophon claims he wanted to return to Athens as early as summer 400, and he actually sailed out from Byzantium late in 400 before deciding to rejoin the mercenaries, who now went to work for the Thracian dynast Seuthes. After a cold winter in Thrace, he again planned to go home, but again ended up sticking with the army. Along with about five thousand other survivors, Xenophon returned to coastal Anatolia in spring 399. Probably he did not know that back in Athens his mentor Socrates was about to go on trial. Socrates was executed in late May or early June; how long afterwards Xenophon got the news is unknown.

If Athens defined Xenophon’s early life, the years 401–399 shaped his outlook for decades afterward. To begin with, marching with Cyrus gave Xenophon in-depth exposure to the Persians and their empire. Greeks had gone into the Achaemenid realm before, but few—notably Ctesias of Cnidus, court physician to Artaxerxes II—had such a sustained opportunity to interact with Persians from the highest levels of Achaemenid society. Through them Xenophon gained access to the wealth of information on Persian culture, traditions, and practices that shows up in his writings.

Furthermore, during these years Xenophon got to know men from across West Asia: Greeks and non-Greeks, exiles, ex-slaves, even a former professional boxer. There were a few Athenians in the ranks but half the Cyreans, as the mercenaries of Cyrus came to be called, were from rugged Arcadia and coastal Achaea in the Peloponnese. Some of the close comrades Xenophon names in Anabasis, such as Eurylochus of Lusi, who saved his life in battle, and the loyal captain Agasias of Stymphalus, were Arcadians. He also emphasizes his good relations with the Spartan Cheirisophus, even presenting the pair ribbing each other about hometown customs. Other men he recognizes as brave commanders became rivals by the end of the expedition. One of them, Sophaenetus of Stymphalus, may have composed a competing account of the march (about which more later). Xenophon’s diverse comrades opened his eyes to the world beyond Athens, a world in which humble mercenaries and even slaves could count as good and noble.

Religion was another key part of Xenophon’s Cyrean life. He made sure to perform the proper rituals, regularly looked to the gods for guidance, and

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65 Return home: Xen. Anab. 6.2.15, 7.1.4, 7.1.8, 7.1.39, 7.6.11, 7.7.57.
66 Socrates’ trial took place in the Athenian month Thargelion (late April–late May) and about thirty days separated his conviction and execution: Plat. Phaed. 58a–c, Xen. Mem. 4.8.2.
68 Cheirisophus: Xen. Anab. 4.6.2–3, 4.6.10–21.
69 For example, Callimachus of Parrhasia: Xen. Anab. 4.7.8–12, 6.2.9.
even took his dreams seriously. It is common to dismiss this religiosity as “conventional” or “traditional,” as if Xenophon’s piety rendered him somehow less intelligent or admirable, or to see religion as a tool used to manipulate superstitious common soldiers. Yet religion helped Xenophon and the Cyreans endure weather and hunger, cope with death, and make sense of uncertainty. If Xenophon was as religious as he portrays himself, his belief deserves our understanding, even respect, as a genuine human response. Indeed, the extraordinary experience of surviving the march to Babylonia and back may have led Xenophon to emphasize religion (and its connections with good leadership) in a way that might not have happened had he stayed in Athens. Another way to think of it: secular academia often prefers Thucydides, but in the context of his age Xenophon was not exceptionally religious.

Agesilaus and Exile, 399-ca. 394

*Anabasis* ends with the return to the west coast of Anatolia, today western Turkey, and Xenophon picks up events in *Hellenica*. After the sharp focus of the *Anabasis* years, the next phase of his life emerges only in blurred outlines.

From 399 to 394, Xenophon served in western Anatolia under a series of Spartan commanders, campaigning against the Persian satraps Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus. At first Xenophon led the surviving Cyreans, but after King Agesilaus came out to take charge of Sparta’s forces in 396 he moved to another role, perhaps helping improve Agesilaus’ cavalry. Sparta’s quest to “liberate” western Anatolia from the Achaemenids proved quixotic. Agesilaus won battles, but never truly controlled anything. Meanwhile, Sparta’s disgruntled allies Thebes and Corinth joined forces with Athens to challenge Spartan hegemony. In spring 394 Agesilaus and his army had to march back to Greece and confront the threat; Xenophon went too.

That August, near the Boeotian town of Coronea, Agesilaus narrowly defeated an allied Greek army that included Athenians. Xenophon was there, although whether he actually bore arms against his countrymen is debated. Agesilaus then headed to Delphi to dedicate the spoils of victory.

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74 Xen. *Anab.* 5.3.6; *Hell.* 4.2.1–4.
75 Coronea: Xen. *Hell.* 4.3.15–20, Plut. *Ages.* 18.2. We can place the battle soon after August 14, 394 BC thanks to the partial solar eclipse Xenophon mentions (*Hell.* 3.4.10).
Probably at this time Xenophon made his own offering at Delphi, using his portion of the tithe to Apollo that the Cyrean generals had set aside nearly six years before on the Black Sea coast. Inscribing the votive with his and Proxenus’ names, he dedicated it in the Treasury of the Athenians.\textsuperscript{76}

The decisive battle had already taken place on the other side of the Aegean, where the Persians destroyed the Spartan fleet off Cnidus in southwest Anatolia. Agesilaus had gotten this news just before Coronea but lied to his army by proclaiming a Spartan victory. The truth could not long be concealed. Without a fleet, Spartan hopes of controlling Anatolia were finished. While the Persians reasserted their hold there, the Spartans faced one battle after another in mainland Greece. This struggle, called the Corinthian War because much of the fighting took place around Corinth, would drag on until 386.

By then, Xenophon had been exiled from Athens. When and why has been endlessly debated. Socrates had worried that associating with Cyrus might get Xenophon in trouble at Athens, and many ancients took that worry as the actual reason. Joining Cyrus, though, could not have been the cause of Xenophon’s exile, for he was still planning to go home in spring 399.\textsuperscript{77} Diogenes says Xenophon was sentenced to exile for “Laconizing” – siding with Sparta – but the specific charges are unknown, and Xenophon’s own writings reveal he was not mindlessly pro-Spartan.\textsuperscript{78} Since Athens was formally still allied with Sparta until 395, Xenophon may not have been exiled until 394–393.\textsuperscript{79}

### The Scillus Years, ca. 392–371

Xenophon perhaps stayed in the field with Agesilaus for some years after Coronea, but by the late 390s the Spartans had given him a new home at Scillus just south of Olympia in the Peloponnese. The location was no accident: Scillus lay in the strategic region of Triphylia, which the Spartans had recently wrested from neighboring Elis.\textsuperscript{80} Within a few days’ walk lay the hometowns of many Cyreans. Xenophon may have found himself amidst a network of fellow veterans. By now he also had a wife, Philesia, and two sons, Gryllus and Diodorus.\textsuperscript{81} We know nothing of Philesia’s origins or how

\textsuperscript{76} Delphi: Xen. \textit{Hell.} 4.3.21, \textit{Anab.} 5.3.5; see also Badian 2004: 41, Tuplin 1987: 64–6.

\textsuperscript{77} Xen. \textit{Anab.} 3.1.4, Diog. Laert. 2.58, Dio Chrys. \textit{Or.} 8.1, Paus. 5.6.5.

\textsuperscript{78} Diog. Laert. 2.51, but cf. 2.58. Not pro-Spartan: Tuplin 1993: 41.


\textsuperscript{81} Diog. Laert. 2.52.
she met Xenophon. Her name is attested at Athens but is not distinctively Athenian, and that her sons later served in the Athenian cavalry does not prove she was an Athenian citizen.82 Gryllus and Diodorus were born after 399 and probably before Xenophon arrived at Scillus. Possibly Xenophon left his wife and children at the Spartan base of Ephesus while he was campaigning in Anatolia.83 Later authors claim the boys were sent to Sparta for education, but even if the story is true it seems unlikely they went through the full Spartan upbringing.84

Scillus’ proximity to Olympia must have brought Xenophon visitors and probably made it easy for him to send and receive correspondence. It is tempting to wonder how much contact he had with Plato, who did a fair amount of traveling in these years, or with Isocrates, who had become a hugely successful rhetorician back in Athens.85 He certainly got a visit from Megabyzus, the neokoros (temple warden) of Ephesian Artemis, who brought with him the tithe Xenophon had deposited at Ephesus before marching back with Agesilaus. With the money Xenophon bought a rural estate for Artemis, building an altar and temple in emulation of the great temple at Ephesus. In Anabasis he gives an idyllic description of the fertile landscape, with meadows, tree-covered hills, a stream, and abundant wildlife, and of the festivals and hunting the whole community enjoyed.86

While Xenophon found respite at Scillus, Sparta’s wars continued. Athens, its walls and fleet rebuilt, and the Theban-led federal state of Boeotia were Sparta’s main rivals. The Spartans reached for Persian support, resulting in the King’s Peace of 386, which recognized Persian authority over the Greeks of Anatolia.87 The remaining Greeks were supposed to be “autonomous,” a term which immediately became the cause of dispute. The King’s Peace was a triumph for Artaxerxes II and set a pattern for repeated Achaemenid

82 Philesia: SEG 21.855 (fourth century BC) attests a Philesia at Rhamnous in Attica, as does Agora XVII.712 (Bradeen 1974: 135–6), a fourth-century funeral stele from the Athenian Agora. Interestingly, SEG 11.1174b (second century BC) attests a Philesia at Letrinoi in Elis, about 15 km northwest of Scillus. See also Anderson 1974a: 162–3. Letrinoi: Xen. Hell. 3.2.25, 3.2.30, 4.2.16; Paus. 6.22.8–11.
84 Plut. Ages. 20.2, Diog. Laert. 2.54; Humble 2004b. Could Gryllus and Diodorus have been old enough to be among the foreign companions or foster children (trophimoi xenoi: Xen. Hell. 5.3.9) who volunteered for military service with Sparta in 381?
85 Isocrates’ Panegyricus, written in 380, references the Cyreans, as do several of his later works: Isoc. Paneg. 4.146–8, 5.89–96, Letter 9.9.
86 Megabyzus and the sacred precinct: Xen. Anab. 5.3.6–13. Megabyzus came for the Olympics, but which one is uncertain; perhaps 392 or 388? Hunting: Xen. Cyn. 13.18 alludes to women hunting; one wonders whether Philesia hunted, as Persian noblewomen did. For more on Scillus, see Tuplin 2004b.
87 King’s Peace: Xen. Hell. 5.1.31.
intervention in Greek affairs in the 370s and 360s. Still, Artaxerxes had bigger problems elsewhere. Egypt had rebelled around 400 BC, and Artaxerxes could not recover it despite trying in the 380s and 370s.\textsuperscript{88} Many Greek mercenaries served in these Egyptian wars. Even Agesilaus found himself there at the end of his life, working for one Egyptian king then another.\textsuperscript{89} Egypt remained independent when Artaxerxes II died in 359/8, and only in 343/2 did his son Artaxerxes III (r. 359/8–338) retake it.

Back in Greece, Sparta used “autonomy” as an excuse to consolidate power: breaking up the Boeotian league (386), dismembering neighboring Mantinea (385), and subduing Olynthus in northern Greece (382–379). En route north in 382, a Spartan commander took it on himself to seize Thebes, an action the Spartan government confirmed and Xenophon severely criticized.\textsuperscript{90} Sparta now stood at its acme, but not for long. In winter 379/8 Theban patriots liberated their city and refounded the Boeotian league, now more democratic and more Theban-dominated. The next spring the Athenians founded a new naval confederacy, attracting allies by abjuring the garrisons and tribute that had marked the empire of Xenophon’s youth.\textsuperscript{91}

The Spartans sent armies against Boeotia and ships into the Aegean. But, off Naxos in 376 the Athenians defeated the Spartan fleet.\textsuperscript{92} Worse came on land, where the Thebans under their leaders Epaminondas and Pelopidas were developing new battle formations and tactics. At Leuctra in Boeotia during summer 371 the Thebans inflicted a stunning defeat on the Spartans, killing King Cleombrotus and up to a third of the entire Spartan citizenry.\textsuperscript{93} The next year the Arcadians, led by a refounded Mantinea, broke with Sparta. The Arcadians created a federal state of their own, built an entirely new capital city at Megalopolis only 50 kilometers northwest of Sparta, and allied with the Thebans. The Thebans then repeatedly invaded the Peloponnese. They liberated the Messenian helots whose labor had underpinned the Spartan system for centuries, and helped the Messenians found a new capital city, Messene. The Theban Pelopidas even won the favor of Artaxerxes.\textsuperscript{94} Sparta’s day was done.

\textsuperscript{88} On the Achaemenids and Egypt see Ruzicka 2012.
\textsuperscript{89} Xen. Ages. 2.28–31; Plut. Ages. 36–40.
\textsuperscript{90} Thebes: Xen. Hell. 5.2.29, 5.35–6, 5.4.1.
\textsuperscript{91} Xenophon never describes the foundation of the league. For an overview of the league see Buckler 2003.
\textsuperscript{93} Leuctra: Xen. Hell. 6.4.4–15. Xenophon never mentions that Thebans had already beaten Spartans in a skirmish at Tegyra in 375 (Plut. Pel. 17).
\textsuperscript{94} Xenophon says nothing about the foundations of Megalopolis and Messene. Pelopidas: Xen. Hell. 7.5.33–7.
At Scillus, Xenophon had kept track of events through the 380s and 370s. During this time he had also begun writing. When he wrote what, for whom he wrote, whether he worked from notes or a diary – especially for *Anabasis* – whether individual works were composed as a whole or in pieces, when and why he revised or rewrote, and how his works circulated are all subjects of discussion. There are a few secure points: *Agesilaus* records the king’s death, so it must have been finished after 360/59. *Hellenica* mentions the Thessalian dynast Tisiphonus, active ca. 357–353. The last book of *Cyropaedia* refers to a Persian satraps’ rebellion in 362/1. On the other hand, *Lacedaemonion Politeia* is variously dated to the late 390s, 378–377, and to the 360s or early 350s. *Agesilaus* and *Hellenica* show mutual influence, but it is hard to tell which was worked into the other. Possibly *Agesilaus* was written at least before the second part of *Hellenica*. The first part of *Hellenica*, up to the end of the Peloponnesian War, was written earlier, perhaps in the mid–380s; the rest in sections during the 360s and 350s. *Anabasis* perhaps appeared in the interim, in the early 360s; perhaps earlier written or oral versions circulated in the network of Cyrean veterans around Scillus. Xenophon may have written to correct other writers’ misrepresentations. His old rival Sophaenetus of Stymphalus, for example, is said to have written an *Anabasis* of his own. And in *Hellenica*, Xenophon refers to an account of the Cyreans written by Themistogenes of Syracuse: was this a pseudonym for Xenophon himself, or the name of an actual author whose work does not survive?

With Xenophon’s Socratic writings, particularly *Apology* and *Symposium*, there is also the question of date relative to Plato’s works. Plato is often assumed to have written first, with Xenophon’s writings following, perhaps sometime in the 380s or 370s, but some have argued the opposite. If so, *Symposium* could have been written as early as the 390s. *Memorabilia*
may refer obliquely to the Spartan defeat at Leuctra in 371, meaning that Xenophon completed or revised the text after that battle.\textsuperscript{103}

\textbf{Athenian Again, ca. 371–350}

Xenophon did not do all his writing at Scillus, for after Leuctra the Eleans reclaimed Triphylia. Pausanias (a late second-century AD travel writer) claims the Eleans pardoned Xenophon after a trial and let him stay at Scillus, but Diogenes says he fled with his family to Corinth.\textsuperscript{104} Diogenes also says the Athenians pardoned Xenophon.\textsuperscript{105} Since some of his later works, notably \textit{Hipparchicus} and \textit{Poroi}, focus on hometown issues of the late 360s and 350s, he may well have visited Athens. Although any family property in Erchia had probably long since been sold, it is not impossible Xenophon had maintained connections with relatives or friends during the long years of his exile – one wonders again about contacts with Plato and Isocrates. Diogenes and Pausanias agree that Xenophon’s sons served in the Athenian cavalry in the late 360s.

The last years of Xenophon’s life brought Greece a dizzying succession of shifting alliances. Theban military supremacy led the Athenians to support Sparta and to renew their old imperialistic ways. By the mid–360s Athens and Thebes were at war and the Thebans were trying to expand into the Aegean. The Thebans also attempted to gain influence in Thessaly and Macedon, but Pelopidas was killed in Thessaly. The only lasting result of the push north was that a young Philip of Macedon spent time as a hostage in Thebes, where he likely observed Theban military practices. In the Peloponnese the Arcadians, Eleans, Achaeans, and others took turns fighting for Thebes, against Thebes, against Sparta, and amongst each other. The Olympics of 364 were interrupted mid-pentathlon, as the Eleans and Arcadians fought a battle within the sacred precinct, the Arcadians tearing up the wooden bleachers to build barricades.\textsuperscript{106} In 362 Epaminondas and the Thebans again invaded the Peloponnese, assaulting Sparta itself before being turned back. At Mantinea the Thebans met an army of Spartans, Athens, Eleans, and Mantineans; Arcadians and mercenaries stood on both sides. Epaminondas’ innovative tactics won the battle, but the Theban leader fell mortally wounded.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{103} Xen. \textit{Mem}. 3.5.
\textsuperscript{104} Xen. \textit{Hell}. 6.5.2, Paus. 5.6.6, Diog. Laert. 2.53.
\textsuperscript{105} Athenian pardon: Diog. Laert. 2.59.
\textsuperscript{106} Xen. \textit{Hell}. 7.4.27–32.
\textsuperscript{107} Mantinea: Xen. \textit{Hell}. 7.5.19–25, Diod. 15.84–9.
Xenophon and his Times

Xenophon ends his *Hellenica* with the battle of Mantinea, commenting that “there was more uncertainty and disturbance after the battle than there had been before.”

He does not mention that Mantinea was also a personal loss: his son Gryllus, serving with the Athenian cavalry, died in a skirmish just before the decisive clash. In one final twist to Xenophon’s eventful life, his fallen son became a public hero. The Mantineans paid for Gryllus’ funeral and set up a sculpted stele in his honor. Cavalry made a comeback in popularity at Athens. Later, perhaps as late as the 340s, a painting in the Painted Stoa at Athens depicted Gryllus actually wounding Epaminondas. By the time Pausanias traveled Greece nearly five centuries later, even the Thebans agreed with this story, although the Mantineans and Spartans had their own versions.

Xenophon lived to see Philip II become king of Macedon in 360/59, but perhaps he paid more attention to the news the next year, when Artaxerxes III, son of the Artaxerxes he had fought to dethrone so many years ago at Cunaxa, became Great King. As the Greek cities staggered on into the 350s, Xenophon saw Athens again lose power over its allies in the Social War of 357–355, after which he wrote his last datable work, *Poroi*, with recommendations on how Athens could restore its battered finances. He was dead by the late 350s, at Corinth says Diogenes, though in the second century AD locals at Scillus showed Pausanias “the tomb of Xenophon.” His tribesmen from childhood, Plato and Isocrates, survived him. Plato died around 347; Isocrates made it to 338.

The Limits of Biography

Every generation writes its own Xenophons. British writers used to cram him into the stereotypical molds of the retired brigadier, country squire, or dunderheaded Colonel Blimp. In the United States there are visions of Xenophon as inspired amateur, citizen-soldier, or symbol of manifest destiny and imperialism. My interpretation of Xenophon’s life is likewise shaped by my own circumstances and experiences. For someone raised on Confucian
values, Xenophon’s emphasis on proper ritual and behavior carries an appealing familiarity. Marrying into a farming, hunting, riding family has given me a deep appreciation for aspects of Xenophon’s writing that are generally foreign to U.S. academia. And my understanding of Xenophon has been shaped over the past decade by reading him with student veterans, women and men who like Xenophon saw war in Mesopotamia, who have returned home physically yet sometimes still find themselves exiles metaphorically, their military service setting them apart from the carefree innocence of their classmates’ college lives.

Realizing how little we know for certain about Xenophon’s personal history is but one element of the general reassessment of Xenophon that has occurred over the past few decades. Instead of the stereotyped aristocrat, Laconophile, and country gentleman we now have a much more nuanced Xenophon to consider. Above all, realizing the uncertainties of his biography reminds us that if we cannot pin down Xenophon the individual, we are fortunate that so much of his writing has survived. His many and varied works, rather than his person, are the true focus of this volume.

Further Reading