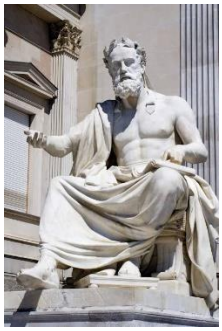
What do we learn about the development of leadership and tactics after the Peloponnesian war?

The ill-fated campaign of Cyrus to take the Persian crown from his brother Artaxerxes from 401 BC to 399BC is the next major campaign in the ancient world after the Peloponnese war. In an age where there were no maps or compasses Xenophon's Anabasis can be seen not only as a historical record of this campaign; but also a guidebook for future Greek expeditions, particularly the campaign of Alexander the Great into Asia Minor around seventy years later. Significantly, even though it was written thirty years later in approximately 370BC, this anabasis was a first-hand account by Xenophon of his command of the 10,000 strong Greek army who survived the Battle of Cunaxa and returned to Athens via the Black Sea. Many other ancient records were written years after the events they described such as Arrian's Anabasis of Alexander the Great; written 400 years afterwards. The story of Xenophon provides insights into the development of Greek military leadership and tactics after the Peloponnesian war.



To understand the development of Greek warfare tactics and command it is important to know the "Who" and "Why" of Xenophon to set the scene. He was an Athenian, born into a wealthy, middle class family around 430 BC. An indication of his family, or personal, wealth is that he took horses on the campaign. Well educated, he was a student of Socrates and a philosopher of ethics. He died in exile around 354BC.

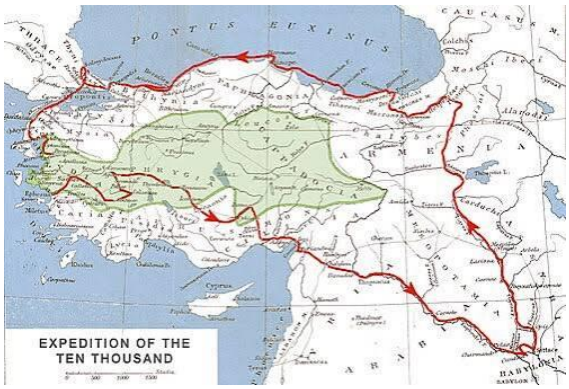
As he did not come from a military background, there are a number of theories on why Xenophon joined Cyrus's campaign, but his reasons are not clear. Firstly, that his relationship with Socrates had soured, there was certainly friction about Xenophon consulting Apollo at Delphi. Out of spite he may have followed Cyrus because Socrates didn't want him to go and learn about politics from Cyrus. Socrates was sentenced to death in 399BC for godlessness and corrupting the youth of Athens. Maybe realising that Socrates' days were numbered, rather than stay in Athens he chose to leave. Finally, he could have been nakedly ambitious. This essay will explore the importance of the first four books of his Anabasis and his contribution to the leadership and the tactics which were used on the escape to safety.

The Greek mercenaries, who initially thought they had won the battle of Cunaxa, were isolated and in the territories of their enemies after the death of Cyrus and after the Greek generals had been murdered by Tissaphernes; described as "like a freshly decapitated chicken poised to skitter aimlessly for a while, haemorrhaging men, before collapsing dead"[1]. At the River Zapatos, Xenophon made a series of inspiring speeches along with tactical suggestions to the surviving army, rousing them to move homeward rather than stay and probably be killed by the Persians. Using Athenian democratic values, he made sure that all his suggestions were put to the vote, he was elected a

[1] Xenophon's retreat, Robin Waterfield, 2007, Faber and Faber, page 112

military leader; presumably by the power of his oration rather than his service record of valour and military excellence[2].

The Greek army came face to face with the essentials for their survival; weapons and food. Using the Socratic method with his generals, of using questions and answers to create the consensus, Xenophon manipulated his understanding of human behaviour to convince the army that it was possible to get home and to motivate his troops for battle in the face of overwhelming odds. Not only did he have to ensure that his army could survive on the battlefield he also had to provide his army with food in hostile territory and he employed scorched earth tactics to deny the same facilities to his enemy pursuers.



During the Peloponnesian war the armies of citizen militia depended on their generals for strict orders. Xenophon recognised that his force were mercenaries, fighting for wealth not a cause; for instance, they went on strike when Cyrus did not pay them[3]. They needed handling differently when their main concern became survival. Discipline was required, but his virtuous behaviour and democratic approach were essential to the success of the mission and suited to the command of his force in these extreme circumstances[4]. This democratic command was not just top-down but bottom-up management. An example of this is that two young soldiers could approach Xenophon with a solution to crossing the Kentrites river[5].

In terms of philosophy, the Greeks were considered superior thinkers with a code of ethics that Xenophon would have studied with Socrates. However, this code was ignored under pressure. After a couple of Greek soldiers had been lost, one of two local guides was tortured and killed in front of Xenophon[6]. In an attempt to save his daughter, the guide was prepared to die rather than help the Greeks. This is the only example of the mistreatment of a prisoner in the Anabasis, but statistically over the period of time involved, this has to be more commonplace when an army cannot appreciate the gap between military necessity and moral virtue[7].

Very quickly, Xenophon learned to be pragmatic to ensure an efficient fighting force. One of his early recommendations was jettisoning any unnecessary baggage, only taking what was necessary for

[2] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, pages 85 to 92
[3] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 24
[4] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, Introduction page xliv
[5] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 120
[6] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 113
[7] Xenophon's retreat, Robin Waterfield, 2007, Faber and Faber, page 134

supporting a fighting force[8]. In Kardouchoi the army left behind the weaker draft animals and prisoners, so that the non-combatants could carry less food and maintain an effective fast moving fighting force[9].

Also, at this early stage in his command Xenophon innovated the marching formation of the Greeks, away from the traditional march in a long column. He proposed marching in a hollow rectangle formation, with the heavy infantry on the outside protecting the light infantry and baggage train in the middle; again, this was put to the vote. The four sides of the rectangle had individual commanders and responsibility was shared. Cheirisophos commanded the vanguard; two older generals took the sides and Xenophon and Timaison commanded the rear, significantly forming a rear-guard to protect the forward-facing army from attack from behind[10]. He recognised that this new formation was also weak and would disintegrate when in narrow terrain and he created six companies of one hundred men to plug the gaps in the vanguard and flanks to maintain the formation[11].

Another example of Xenophon's tactical flexibility is how he reacted when he made a mistake. Very early in the adoption of the rectangle, Mithradates attacked the rear-guard and Xenophon went in pursuit on foot, leaving the rest of the Greeks force exposed to the superior Persian fire power on horseback. Xenophon credited himself with suggesting that the Greeks respond to the enemy superiority in archers by creating a corps of Rhodian slingers[12] who could achieve greater range with their lead shot than the Greek and Persian archers could with their arrows.

More importantly, Xenophon recognised the need for cavalry, so that they could respond and attack at speed. Using the available horses, he created a cavalry of approximately fifty and these were successful immediately when they led a charge that routed Mithradates superior force[13], this cavalry was critical to the success of the Greek retreat and its success became influential to the success of future Greek campaigns particularly Alexander the Great.

Xenophon was certainly "learning on the job" but it could be that because of his lack of military experience he was more free thinking and his tactics could be unorthodox in his solutions to problems; he regularly didn't do the expected. For example, when the route was in danger from Persian forces occupying high ground, he took a small force of Peltasts onto the higher ground and, leading by example, the Persians were dispersed[14]. He created a reserve at the rear of his forces, who routed Pharnabazos after the Greek peltasts had been charged[15] but this was also flexible enough for the peltasts and cavalry to protect the hoplites when crossing the Kentrites river[16]. Xenophon developed a classic system of retreat and rear-guard fighting.

Thinking outside the box he used two unusual tactics to take the stronghold of a Taochian fort. Cheirisophos reported to Xenophon that the fort was impregnable because he had already approached the fortifications in the usual way with an advance of hoplites, but they had constantly been beaten back by a barrage of stones thrown from the ramparts of the fort. Xenophon's solution

[8] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 92
[9] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 112
[10] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 93
[11] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 100
[12] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 329
[13] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 330
[14] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, pages 103 to 104
[15] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 332
[16] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 333

was that they should encourage the defenders to keep firing at them. Competition was encouraged between his captains to play hide and seek with the defenders until they eventually used up all their ammunition. When the defenders had no more rocks to throw, the fort was overrun by the hoplite force[17].

Communication within the force was important particularly between vanguard and rear-guard of this large moving force and this typically appears successful. However, when under attack from the Kardouchoi, this communication broke down as Cheirisophos continued to advance when Xenophon wanted to halt. Due to this failure in communication two of Xenophon's officers were killed and Xenophon blamed Cheirisophos. Their relationship was under pressure and they had it out, but it cannot be seen if this exchange was jocular or aggressive[18].

Like the Anabasis itself, this essay is intentionally both broad brush and high on some detail to illustrate issues. The Greek force was developed by Xenophon according to its need for survival. The Anabasis shows hoplites adapting to all sorts of conditions from flat land deserts to snow covered mountains; not just fighting in formation but as garrison troops, siege troops or in an ambush; charging up hills and fording rivers as best as they could[19]. Xenophon's lack of military experience allowed his "blue sky thinking", he was not bound by convention on tactics, which were successful as the army achieved its goal, marching and fighting its way to safety at the Black Sea.



Always outnumbered, Xenophon motivated the 10,000 with inspirational speeches, and his democratic leadership style allowed him to be pragmatic, imaginative and flexible according to conditions because he had the backing of the consensus of the army. The old rigid ways of the leadership where two Phalanx's crashed into each other like two snow ploughs colliding head on, was not relevant to the 10,000. This democracy would have been in stark contrast to earlier times when a single leader would have been in command of an army.

The most significant changes to tactics were how the structure of his army changed. The creation of a fast and mobile cavalry force was then adopted successfully by Alexander the Great and remained relevant for centuries. The creation of a rear-guard and its use in a strategic retreat are still relevant to the modern military world and used in battles such as the evacuation of Dunkirk.

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[17] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, pages 138 to 140

[18] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 113

[19] The Landmark Xenophon's Anabasis, Shane Brennan and David Thomas, 2021, Pantheon Books, page 332 to 333

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