

ANABASIS; OR, THE MARCH UP-COUNTRY

(XENOPHON)

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Are you often disheartened by the world around us? Do you see almost nothing but enervation and cowardice displayed in public life? Of course you are, and you do, or you're not paying any attention. But it does not have to be this way. Read, instead of your Twitter feed or the latest regime propaganda, this book—the story of how, four hundred years before Christ, ten thousand Greek soldiers, free men all, through determination and vital energy extracted themselves from the disastrous situation in which they found themselves. You will then perhaps remember that all ages, most of all the current Age of Stupid, come to an end, and you will see what spirit must be reborn to remake the world as it should be.

Anabasis is the story of how the Ten Thousand, Greek mercenaries, backed the loser in a Persian succession struggle and, rather than folding their hand when they found themselves friendless in the heart of the mighty Persian empire, cut their way out with spear and sword. The Persian king Darius II died in 405 B.C.; he had two legitimate sons. The elder, Artaxerxes, inherited the throne; the younger, Cyrus, was the favorite of their mother, Parysatis. Artaxerxes, given advice by evil councilors, notably one of his satraps, Tissaphernes, accused Cyrus of plotting to overthrow him. Yet Cyrus avoided execution through the intervention of Parysatis, and Artaxerxes then unwisely allowed Cyrus to return to Anatolia (roughly today's Turkey, and the western end of the Persian empire), much of which he had been administering while Darius was alive.

“Anabasis” means “the march up-country”; though that march, from Greece to Babylon, was only the beginning of the Greeks' travels. The author was one of the Ten Thousand, an Athenian: Xenophon, famous for this and for several other books. But he was an Athenian on the outs; he had served the Thirty, the ruthless Athenian oligarchy installed by Sparta after it defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War (ended 404 B.C.), making Sparta for a brief period the hegemon of Greece. The Athenians quickly overthrew the Thirty (though not Spartan domination), and Xenophon was in bad odor in Athens. His being unwelcome in Athens was probably why Xenophon turned mercenary. We should

be clear that by writing this work, thirty years after the facts it relates, Xenophon was pushing himself. Why, exactly, is not so clear—maybe some political reason, maybe just egotism. It is lost to us now, as are, for the most part, other narratives about the Ten Thousand known to have existed, which might have given us a different picture.

Xenophon saw himself, it seems, as an applied philosopher. Socrates appears in *Anabasis* as his advisor; there is debate about their precise relationship, but they knew each other. Xenophon was keenly interested in how a man should rule—one of his other works is the *Cyropedia*, the *Education of Cyrus*, an entire book not really about the earlier Cyrus who founded the Persian Empire, but about an idealized ruler using that Cyrus as the frame—generous, wise, brave, and so forth. For example, that Cyrus was said to have slain a bear in single combat; as Michel Pastoureau relates in *The Bear*, this was a very common trope about rulers in the ancient world, not something that probably actually happened. Regardless, Xenophon's interest in how men can and should best lead and rule is on full display in *Anabasis*.

Many Greeks were mercenaries in this period, of Greek empire and no longer under threat from abroad. This was not so long after, but in very different political times from, Marathon, Salamis, and Thermopylae. In John Hale's *Lords of the Sea*, he discusses how, around 450 B.C., Greek mercenaries were hired to fight in an Egyptian civil war (which also involved the Persians). That, in itself, is not surprising or particularly interesting. What caught my imagination was the aside that as the hired hoplites rowed up the Nile, they passed the Pyramids—which were already two thousand years old. That'll give you a sense of deep history. Along similar lines, the editor of this edition of *Anabasis*, Shane Brennan, notes how twenty years ago (before George W. Bush, God rot him, arbitrarily and stupidly plunged the Middle East into chaos and death), he traveled the entire path of the Ten Thousand. "Striking features, such as a booming fountain by the roadside in western Turkey, plains as flat as the sea in Syria, and deserted ancient ruins on the banks of the Tigris in Iraq, remained almost exactly as Xenophon saw them 2,500 years ago." For Americans, for whom anything remaining from two hundred years ago is viewed as very old, this is a hard feeling to capture—but worth trying, because it explains in part how differently other peoples often view the world.

Speaking of the editor, this edition of *Anabasis* is part of Random House's Landmark series, which has offered in the past few years several new editions of classic works: Thucydides, Julius Caesar, and so forth. I can't speak to the quality of the translations, although they seem fine to me, but what really makes these books valuable is the enormous amount of supporting material. This includes copious footnotes, excellent maps, and numerous short essays on related matters. I had, ten years ago, read the Loeb edition of *Anabasis*; it got the story across, to be sure, but reading a Landmark book takes it to a whole new level—particularly in these uneducated days, when few learn about the Classical world in school, much less read these books, and no mention is made of history in regular conversation.

Back to the main story. Trying to overthrow Artaxerxes was probably the right call for Cyrus. His position would have been forever precarious otherwise. But he needed men; he had some Persian forces, but what he really needed was hardcore professionals—Greek heavy infantry. Persian soldiers may not have been quite as worthless as the Greeks liked to say and think, but the Greeks, armed, trained, and fighting of their own free will, were unparalleled in their effectiveness. Thus, in 401, roughly 10,000 Greeks, from all over Greece, captained by four different generals, were gathered by Cyrus at Sardis, a Greek city somewhat inland of the western coast of Anatolia (not too far from Ephesus, later made permanently famous by Saint Paul). Tissaphernes, still floating around Anatolia, no doubt to keep an eye on Cyrus, immediately ran to Artaxerxes to report that Cyrus had built an army to overthrow him. Nothing daunted, Cyrus began his march up to Babylon. But he did not tell the Greeks what his plan was, and after a few weeks of marching, the men mutinied, saying they had not signed up for what Cyrus was clearly planning (he had told them they would be used in local campaigns).

It is at this point that one of the main themes of *Anabasis* shows up—that the men of the army had to be repeatedly convinced, in open debate, by their leaders to undertake one course of action or another. “Mutiny” here does not have the same freight or wholly negative connotation it does in a modern army. These were free men—bound, to a large degree, by the collective will of their peers, but free in a way very hard for us, bombarded by decades of Left propaganda, to grasp. These were free men in the sense always recognized before modernity—they

had the freedom not of license, but of not being slaves, dependent on the whim of another. This was, to them, the crucial distinction between themselves and the Persians who served the Great King. Thus, if the leaders at any given time were seen as not transparent with the men, or putting their own interests before those of the men, they risked mutiny and either being stoned or put on trial for their life, as happened later more than once to Xenophon.

While certainly democracy is a very stupid political system, it is also true that in relatively small groups, as here, it can work. For it to work, I imagine, the group must be homogenous and share a strong common culture; it probably also helps if there are significant external threats, and it likely only works with men, given the known tendency for women to strive far too much for agreeableness and consensus, fatal flaws in a democratic decision-making process. We have no examples of such democracy today, however; it is probably impossible in the modern world to organize a successful polity with anything remotely approaching actual democracy. *Anabasis* is sometimes ludicrously recommended as a guide to leadership and management of businesses in the modern world; the idea being, I suppose, that business leaders are running a type of democracy. Aside from that leadership cannot, in any way whatsoever, be taught (rather, inherent leadership talent can be developed, but never created where it does not already exist, and it does not exist in most people), the raw material of most modern businesses is not free men, but atomized serfs, from top to bottom, and *Anabasis* has nothing to say about how to lead and motivate slaves. In a free country, this book might have lessons beyond war; not in the America of 2022. Perhaps in the America of 2025.

Anyway, in response to the Greeks' demands, Cyrus dissembled, but promised to pay the men more. The men accepted this; they were there for money, not principle, and throughout the story promises of money were the most effective inducement to action, although the soldiers also responded to more abstract appeals to their pride as free men and Greeks. The men pushed through Anatolia and into Syria, through the Syrian Gates. Then they crossed much of Mesopotamia, around 1,500 miles in total. And then, at the climactic Battle of Cunaxa, near Babylon, Cyrus was killed when he recklessly, or splendidly, charged Artaxerxes.

After the battle, Artaxerxes mopped up and reformed his forces, but the Greeks had actually won all their portion of the fight, and were in perfect order. Thus, Artaxerxes had a problem. He could not defeat the heavily armed and very experienced Greek soldiers in a frontal assault. The Greeks had a problem too—they had no patron, or even friends, and were well over a thousand miles from any Greek city, or anybody likely to support them. Thus, like scorpions in a bottle, the two sides eyed each other for a few days. When the King sent heralds to demand the Greeks surrender their weapons, and thereby gain the good will of the King, Klearchos, the preeminent general, responded: “Well, that’s what you say. What you are to report back for us is that we think that, should it be necessary to be friends with the King, we would be more valuable friends if we had our weapons than if we had surrendered them to someone else; and we think that, should it be necessary to fight a war, we would likewise fight it better if we had our weapons than if we had surrendered them to someone else.” Ha ha. The Greeks had a wry sense of humor; the whole book is full of such pithy, sarcastic responses.

Klearchos then became acknowledged as supreme commander of the Greeks. Xenophon deftly sketches his character—a Spartan, prone to action, often gloomy and harsh, who loved war, but because he was honest and successful was popular with the men. (Such character sketches occur throughout *Anabasis*, especially as eulogies for the dead, and are alone worth reading the book.) Artaxerxes offered a truce, and to let the Greeks move a little north, to a location with provisions, which the Greeks accepted. Tissaphernes pretended to befriend the Greeks, to act as a go-between, and marched with them. In Xenophon’s telling, Klearchos was hoodwinked by Tissaphernes, in part because he saw no other options for the Greeks, though nor did he trust the Persians. Then Tissaphernes called a meeting of the Greek and Persian leaders—whereupon he seized, and Artaxerxes had executed, all the Greek generals, including Klearchos, and several Greek second-rank leaders.

This would have caused chaos and despair among lesser men, and no doubt there was a lot of uncertainty and fear. At this point, Xenophon, who had been serving apparently as a mid-level officer (probably he was in his late twenties), places himself at the center of the narrative. The men assembled, discussed, debated, and elected new generals, among them Xenophon. He portrays himself as coming to the fore (though

he was never the sole leader) largely because he was decisive when the men were uncertain. Waking after a dream (obtaining messages from the gods, whether through dreams or sacrificial divinization, was of supreme importance to the Greeks) he demanded of himself, "From what city am I expecting the general to come to take action here? What age am I waiting to reach? For I shall not grow any older if I hand myself over to the enemy today!"

Xenophon and the other new generals presented plans to the men, and multiple votes were held, both on the overall plan, and on administration and discipline. And off they marched, not back the way they came but north, toward the Black Sea, harassed on all sides by the Persians. *Anabasis* is remembered not only for its detailed historical narrative, but also for its descriptions of the land and peoples through which the Ten Thousand passed. Xenophon's keen eye discusses animals, plants, sights, local tribesmen, and much more, making the narrative far more compelling than a simple recitation of facts would be. These descriptions are interlinked with continual battles and skirmishes, where Xenophon relates how the Greeks adopted new tactics, from slingers to the hollow square, in response to attacks. Adaptability was key, and risk taking was necessary every day.

The march wasn't just a group of men in formation. Glimpses of a variety of camp followers, such as shield bearers and merchants, and including women as paid and unpaid companionship for the men, appear in the narrative. A central concern of the generals was that a market was available for the men to buy food. Sometimes this was provided by locals, usually by arrangement with whoever was in charge, and merchants in the camp acted as middlemen to some degree. Absent a market, the men had to live off the land, which was dangerous and difficult. Thus, it was not merely tactics that mattered, but the broader strategy of how to successfully pass through an area with a non-trivial amount of human baggage.

What most of all got them through was boldness—especially in mountain fighting, which became most of the fighting as they forged their way north. They reached the sea, viewing it from afar, evoking the once-famous cry "*Thalassa! Thalassa!*" ("The Sea! The Sea!") It wasn't over yet; various fights and debates continued, and arrangements were made with Spartan *harmosts* (powerful agents of the Spartan government

tasked with administering Greek colonies) to be paid to fight for Sparta. The survivors (maybe a third had died) fought in a complex struggle near the Greek colony of Byzantium, with and against the Thracians (on the European side of Byzantium)—where, as it happens, the famous Alcibiades had spent time not very long before. And, finally, before they dispersed, most of the Greeks ended up in Pergamum, where Xenophon tells us he made his fortune looting a rich man in a local war.

A fascinating story, and glimpse of a time where everything was different on the surface, yet the core essence of men was much the same. We have largely forgotten this time, and its lessons, because none of this is taught in schools, and nowhere in the popular media or popular entertainment can it be seen, except occasionally in ludicrous distortions. Nor, as I say, are most men free. Still, history is full of men of power who come to the fore as spectacular military leaders in difficult situations—even if sometimes they ultimately are defeated. Aside from obvious examples, such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon Bonaparte, we can place George Washington in this category; another, more recent, was Pyotr Wrangel, White leader in the Russian Civil War. It is not fashionable to point out that history is made, very often, by the reified will of unbreakable individual men. But the recurrence of this pattern is inevitable because average men, while they remain men (instead of mutating into soyboys or bugmen) recognize they need leaders. And while they are very loath to serve bad leaders, men are willing to risk all in the service of a certain kind of leader, who can inspire them to accomplish that which they did not know they could accomplish—with, today, the added benefit of making them free men.

Let's feed this truth into our situation today, and see what our Future Projection Machine tells us. The necessary consequence of this truth is that in any military organization that lacks such a preeminent leader of power, and even worse, lacks any leaders at all who are respected and honored by the men, is incompetent to fight and achieve. This remains true when the odds, on paper, whether by number of soldiers or possession of weapons and technology, appear wildly tilted in favor of such a defective organization. Thus, today's American military, whose upper ranks are nearly universally regime toadies, effete homosexuals and women and those dominated by them, holding far less than zero respect from nearly all members of the fighting military (as opposed

to the email military), is going to lose any actual conflict, just as they lost in Afghanistan, only much worse. That's bad. But when that happens, what is also the case, but less obvious, and probably good in the long run, is that the result is going to be fracture among the military, because men who actually fight aren't going to obey orders from those they despise, if there is any other choice—and events will create a choice. Maybe not immediately in the next war, but once we lose, fissures will open that will result in the current wholly illegitimate American regime directing the military to attack Americans. That's not going to go so well when the men who actually fight have nothing but contempt for those giving the orders. They'll find someone they don't have contempt for, and they also won't have any problem recruiting additional forces, regular and irregular.

This is heartening, but not surprising—it flows directly and necessarily from the realities portrayed in *Anabasis*. Xenophon would not have regarded his presentation as new in any way; rather, he no doubt saw it as practical application of well-known principles. There's a deeper message in *Anabasis*, however, beyond its straightforward discussion of how men lead and are led. Some more basic character of men lurks behind and drives how the Greeks saved their bacon, and explains why *Anabasis* resonates throughout history. Probably the best name for this character, this instinctive way of thinking and feeling, is vitalism—the search not just for survival, but for distinction and glory, which is natural to all men, but for some reason recurs again and again among the classical Greeks as the driving force of decisions in life. This was exemplified in real life perhaps most of all in the career of Alcibiades; if you want to get some sense of it in sculpture, examine the Riace bronzes.

Vitalism is a form of competition, but only in part competition with others—even more so competition with oneself, resulting in either case in the recognition of others, the type of undying glory sought by Achilles, which was, for these men, the ultimate goal. Sure, they liked money too, but when push came to shove, that was secondary. Such vitalism is what drives a truly successful society to astounding accomplishments, of the type that only the West has ever made in human history. True, a society does not necessarily need, or benefit from (though some may, in some times), unrestrained, full-bore, piratical vitalism of the type endorsed by Bronze Age Pervert and others on the growing

pagan Right. A channeled vitalism is enough to put fire in the veins of men, and thus it is no surprise that fear of this vitalism, of leaders who embody it, and what it would mean for them if widely adopted, is what dominates our ruling classes today. In a nobler time, Xenophon roused his men to action by demanding “let us not wait for other people to approach us and summon us to perform noble deeds—let us ourselves take the lead in rousing the others to reveal their worth.” Nobody talks to his men like this today. But my bet is that it’ll soon return to fashion, at least among those elements of our society who will decide its future.