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Xenophon and Sparta

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Review by

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Preview

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

Xenophon and Sparta is the first volume of a new series dedicated to the main classical sources on Sparta by the Classical Press of Wales. A publication on Thucydides shortly followed this book, and further volumes regarding individual authors and their perspectives on ancient Sparta (such as Herodotus and Plutarch) are in preparation. Most of the articles—seven out of twelve—were originally published (in French or Italian) in the Proceedings of the conference ‘Xenophon et Sparte’, convened by Nicolas Richer in 2006 at the *École Normale Supérieure de Lyon*. The present volume now offers an updated version and a translation in English of these contributions, enriched with five new additions. In the introduction, the editors emphasizing the dualistic and innovative approach of the collection, examining not only the value of Xenophon as a historical source but also the literary purposes of his texts.

Anton Powell, who died recently, provides the first and longest paper, which focuses on Xenophon’s truth-telling and attitude towards Sparta. His insightful analysis demonstrates that a noticeable number of Xenophon’s deviations from truthfulness and omissions are intended to reinforce Agesilaos’ positive image and promote Spartan political interests. For instance, in the *Agesilaos* Xenophon often overlooks the statesman’s strategic and political failures, sheltering him from criticisms. Powell demonstrates that several deceptive passages in the *Hellenika* benefit the Spartans’ reputation and highlights the frequent use of narrative distractions from matters highly controversial for the Laconian cause and Agesilaos’ reputation (e.g., Sphodrias’ acquittal). Furthermore, he sheds light on the treatment accorded to the Spartan commanders in the *Anabasis* and the noticeable concentration of ‘Lacedaemonian’ elements in Xenophon’s representation of Persia in the *Cyropaedia*. Lastly, Powell suggests a possible ‘hidden’ pattern common to these works: Xenophon’s attempt to support a new Spartan invasion of Asia Minor.

Nicolas Richer addresses Xenophon’s non-historical works, especially the *Memorabilia*. He explores the concept of *kalokagathia* as it was applied to Sparta—observing that Heracles, Lycurgus, and Agesilaos perfectly embodied the moral values of the Spartans—and stresses the relationship between the Socratic and the Lacedaemonian model of moral virtue. In addition to his contribution, Richer also provides an extremely valuable appendix regarding the chronology of Xenophon’s works; it offers a summary table based on Édouard Delebecque’s chronology (*Essai sur la vie de Xénophon*, Paris 1957) and adds other recent proposals on the dating of single compositions.

In the third article, Giovanna Daverio Rocchi investigates three different representations of Xenophon’s Sparta. While the *Lakedaimonion Politeia* focuses on the *polis* as a collective society, with its laws and institutions, and the *Agesilaos* is centred on the Spartan king, the *Hellenika* deals with a ‘plural’ Sparta, formed of different actors (kings, military commanders, navarchs) immersed in the complexities of the international relations of Xenophon’s time. In particular, she rightly points out that the Sparta of the *Hellenika* is open to interstate relations, both with the Greek and the Persian world. Thus, this representation contrasts with the conventional image of a closed *polis*, traditionally devoted to isolationism and *autarkeia*.

Vincent Azoulay returns to the *Cyropaedia*, focusing on the analogy between the Spartan and Persian systems and critically reviewing the most controversial interpretations of previous scholarship. While acknowledging that Xenophon has deliberately constructed analogies between Sparta and Persia, Azoulay warns against taking the similarities between the two regimes out of context and against attempts to assimilate the two models. In the *Cyropaedia*, he concludes, Xenophon is attempting to create not an ideal city but ‘an *ideal type* city’ (p. 148), only partly inspired by Sparta.

According to Gianluca Cuniberti, Xenophon employs various rhetorical strategies to control the reception of his works by the audience. The scholar concentrates on the use of rhetorical questions as fundamental tools to legitimate Spartan hegemony and guide the reader in the historical interpretation of events. Moreover, examining Xenophon’s attribution of the *Anabasis* to ‘Themistogenes’ (in the *Hellenika*), Cuniberti points out that the author aims not only to give objectivity to the *Anabasis* but also to prevent possible objections regarding the trustworthiness of the *Hellenika*—otherwise written by an author who also wrote an autobiography.

Vivienne Gray’s chapter offers a comparison between Xenophon’s presentation of Lycurgus’ laws (especially in the *Lak. Pol.*) and the epigraphic evidence for laws from other *poleis*. Despite the lack of comparative evidence and the difficulty of distinguishing historical legal reality from the *Spartan mirage*, the author is able to provide some parallels between Sparta and other Greek cities. For instance, she compares the Spartan law of unintentional homicide with a similar law in Athens and focuses on parallel decrees restricting monopolies on political office both in Sparta and Crete. Gray concludes that Lacedaemonian laws characterize ‘Spartan difference from other *poleis* within a normal range, which is what we expect of the authentic laws of an individual *polis*’ (p. 193).

The creator of the Spartan laws is also the main subject of the next paper. In recent decades, scholars’ attention has shifted from the problem of Lycurgus’s historicity to the construction and development of his political myth: in light of this approach, Ephraim David studies Xenophon’s contribution to Lycurgus’ image. The author correctly emphasizes the importance of Xenophon’s *Lakedaimonion Politeia* in developing this image, especially from a political and institutional point of view. Furthermore, the study offers an in-depth comparison with earlier and contemporary sources and an investigation of Xenophon’s silences regarding specific themes already attested in fifth- and fourth-century texts.

Returning to a theme briefly discussed by Powell, Ellen Millender spotlights the deceitful and self-serving Spartan commanders portrayed in the *Anabasis*, like Klearchos, Cheirisophos, Dexippos, and Anaxibios. In addition, she concentrates on specific patterns that create unfavourable descriptions: the bad leader puts his interest above the Panhellenic good and obstructs Xenophon’s plans for the *katabasis* of the Ten Thousand. Therefore, according to Millender, the *Anabasis* undermines the traditional understanding of Xenophon as an uncritical *Lakonophile*, showing his increasing disillusionment with Spartan hegemony.

Leaving aside Spartan leadership, Thomas Figueira investigates the Spartan economy. First, he observes that Xenophon’s works lack a general conceptualization of the economy in modern sense, even if Xenophon often registers economic behaviours and material transactions (especially in the *Oeconomicus* and the *Poroi*). Then, Figueira considers the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, pointing out that the focus of this text limits how much we can learn from it about the Spartan economy, since Xenophon does not consider the actual economic structures of Sparta but instead provides examples on the organization of its subsistence. In addition, Figueira suggests some hypotheses regarding the role of helotage—a controversial issue for the early fourth century—, although explicitly acknowledging that Xenophon does not mention the helots (and the *perioikoi*) anywhere in the *Lac. Pol.*

Next, the volume returns to Xenophon’s *encomium* of the Spartan king Agesilaos, presenting Noreen Humble and Pierre Pontier’s points of view. Humble explores the features of Xenophon’s encomiastic writing and his lack of concern for the truth in the *Agesilaos*, comparing his portrayals of the Spartan statesman in the latter work and the *Hellenika* (*Hell.* 3.3). She begins her analysis by critiquing the approaches adopted by several specialists, above all Guido Schepens, who considers the two representations as complementary and underlines Xenophon’s lack of awareness of the *topoi* of the *encomium*.^[1] In contrast, Humble successfully demonstrates how the eulogistic elements of the *Agesilaos* adequately explain the type of material included in the work, and emphasizes ‘the contrast between the virtuous, philhellenic Agesilaos of the *encomium* and the ambitious practitioner of *Realpolitik* of the *Hellenika*’ (p. 301). A well-known case discussed by Humble is the accession to the throne: while in the *Agesilaos*, the new king is preferred over Leotyichidas not only because of his birth but especially for his moral virtue (*Ages.* 1.5), in the *Hellenika*, the king takes advantage of better dynastic claims and the manipulation of Apollo’s oracle (*Hell.* 3.3.1-4).

On the other hand, Pontier studies two episodes regarding Sparta and the *polis* of Phleious, starting from relevant passages of the *Agesilaos* and the *Hellenika*. First, he analyses the siege of Phleious and the aggressive intervention of Agesilaos, following the Peace of Antalkidas, described in both works (*Hell.* 5.3.10-25; *Ages.* 2.21-22). In comparison with the *Hellenika*, the short account of the *encomium* accentuates the king’s pragmatic character, contrasting diplomacy and action, and justifies Agesilaos’ action by his *philetairia* (love of companions) towards the Phlisiasian group supporting him. In the second episode, Xenophon changes tone—both in the *Agesilaos* and the end of *Hellenika*—describing Phleious in epic and laudatory terms as a good ally of Sparta despite the Spartan disaster at Leuktra.

In the final chapter, Jean Ducat accurately examines the structure, the themes and the purpose of the section dedicated to the selection of the *hippeis* in the *Lakedaimonion Politeia* (*Lak. Pol.* 4.1-6). According to Ducat, Xenophon develops a structure ‘which alternates theoretical considerations on the good *erotes* and concrete examples’ (p. 345) and stresses the importance of the rivalry between *hebontes* for the sake of the city, following the Lycurgan ideology. Lastly, a brief comparison with the *Cyropaedia* suggests that Xenophon possibly did not approve of some aspects of the Spartan education.

Overall, although a good half of the papers were previously published, the contribution of this volume to the current scholarship is highly significant. The twelve essays, well-updated and written by leading classical scholars, offer diversified, solid, and sometimes pioneering treatments of topics ranging from Xenophon’s deviations from historical truthfulness to his representation of Spartan leaders to the Lacedaemonian economy. Therefore, the book successfully analyses the variety of literary genres in the *Xenophontic* corpus and provides an overview of the most significant research lines of the last two decades, representing an essential resource for future investigations of Xenophon’s treatment of Sparta.

Authors and titles

Anton Powell and Nicolas Richer: ‘Introductions and Acknowledgments’, ix-xvi

Anton Powell: ‘One little *skytale*’: Xenophon, truth-telling in his major works, and Spartan imperialism’, 1-64

Nicolas Richer: ‘The Lacedaemonian model in Xenophon’s non-historical works (excluding the *Cyropaedia*)’, 65-108

Giovanna Daverio Rocchi: ‘Xenophon’s portrayal of Sparta in the *Hellenika*, the *Lakedaimonion Politeia* and the *Agesilaos*’, 109-128

Vincent Azoulay: ‘Sparta and the *Cyropaedia*: the correct use of analogies’, 129-160

Gianluca Cuniberti: ‘The communication of history in Xenophon. The art of narration, The control of reception and happiness’, 161-178

Vivienne Gray: ‘Defining the difference: Xenophon and Spartan law’, 179-202

Ephraim David, ‘Xenophon and the myth of Lykourgos’, 203-222

Ellen Millender, ‘Foxes at home, lions abroad: Spartan commanders in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*’, 223-260

Thomas J. Figueira, ‘Xenophon and the Spartan economy’, 261-290

Noreen Humble, ‘True history: Xenophon’s *Agesilaos* and the encomiastic genre’, 291-318

Pierre Pontier: ‘Xenophon presenting Agesilaos: the case of Phleious’, 319-342

Jean Ducat: ‘Xenophon and the selection of the *hippeis* (*Lak. Pol.* 4.1-6)’, 343-360

Notes

^[1] See e.g. G. Schepens, À la recherche d’Agésilas: le roi de Sparte dans le jument des historiens du iv^e siècle av. J.-C., «Revue des Études Grecques» 118 (2005), pp. 43-62.

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