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Edited by Signe Isager and Inge Nielsen



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The cover illustration depicts the theatre of Delphi.
Photo by R. Frederiksen, see p. 135, Fig. 1.

The Utopia of Xenophon

Bodil Due

I have given my article the title Xenophon's Utopia to announce in advance the angle from which I intend to present the *Cyropaedia*. Utopia is – as so much of our literary, political or philosophical terminology – derived from Greek, although not a term actually used in Antiquity. We owe it to Thomas More who coined it in 1516 for his book describing an imaginary island with a perfect social and political system. It means a no-where land, from *ou* and *τοπος*, and is used to designate an idealized place or model-state, or the description of, or dream of, or plan to create such a place.

In my opinion it makes sense to use the term to describe Xenophon's work on the education of the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty in the same way as it makes sense to describe Plato's *Republic* as a Utopia. They both discuss many different subjects in these works, e.g. justice, marriage, slavery, the division of labour; but their main concern is how to establish a sound and stable human society. The two works are admittedly very different in form, in style, and in content, but I suggest regarding them as contributions to the lively debate in the 4th century BC on the ideal form of government, the ideal leader and the good society. There were other participants – Isocrates and Aristotle – in that debate, but I shall restrict myself here to Xenophon and Plato.

What I intend to do is first to justify such an interpretation of Xenophon's work; secondly to make a short comparison between Xenophon and Plato as regards their attempts to solve the problems they

were facing, and thirdly, to comment briefly on the present state of Xenophonic scholarship, especially as regards the *Cyropaedia*.

I. To make my first point, I shall begin by giving a short summary of the content of the book. The title means the upbringing and education of Cyrus; its subject is the life from cradle to grave so to speak, of Cyrus the Great. Thus the setting is Asia in the 6th century BC. The division into 8 books is not Xenophon's and cuts across the natural structure of contents, which is: A formal introduction where Xenophon speaks directly in the first person as the author to his reader (1.1), and as a complement to this an epilogue, again in the first person (8.8). These two chapters form a frame around the main story, which falls in three parts of very uneven length. The first part (1.2–1.6.46) deals with Cyrus' birth, his upbringing and education until his first military command. The second and by far the longest part (2.1–7.5.36) describes his adventures and conquests, among which Sardis and Babylon are the most important. The third part (7.5.37–8.7) gives an account of Cyrus' ideology and administration of his empire, ending with his death.

It has been argued that only the first book answers to the title,¹ but the description in that book of Persian education makes it clear that education is to be taken in a wider sense, meaning education as something which goes on all through life, something which only death brings to an end. Understood in this way, the title applies to the whole work and gives in itself a clue to Xenophon's intentions.²

But the most informative passage on the aim of Xenophon is the first chapter, which formed the first part of the frame. James Tatum very appropriately named it the Poetics of the work.³ There, Xenophon tells his readers about the circumstances and speculations that made him compose the work. He defines his subject as that of ruling and informs us that ruling over human beings seemed impossible, until he found it illustrated in a positive and even excellent way by Cyrus the Great. Therefore he wants to examine Cyrus' family, character and education. His point of departure is the sad reality of political instability in his own time as the very first sentence shows:

*The reflection once came to us how many democracies have been overthrown by people who preferred to live under any form of government other than a democracy; and again, how many monarchies and how many oligarchies in times past have been abolished by the people; and how many of those individuals who have aspired to tyranny have either been deposed of once and for all and then very quickly, or if they have continued in power, no matter how short a time, they are objects of wonder as having proved to be wise and happy men.*⁴

Xenophon proceeds to comment, not on tyrants or kings but on ordinary men and their relations to their household-slaves, thereby demonstrating that the problem of leadership exists on all levels of human life, in the family as in the state, in the *oikos* as in the *polis*. And he brings in analogies from husbandry, showing shepherds as having an easier task than politicians.

The subject is thus widened to encompass social relations in general; and the aim becomes to demonstrate what values and virtues are important to create a harmonious and stable society and how these can be acquired.

Xenophon gives his answer not in abstract instructions, but through the example of one well-known historical person. And he does not do so through an objective, his-

torically correct narrative. He selects and changes the historical facts to make them fit his purpose. Cyrus was a popular figure in Greek literature, and the Greek audience was presumably familiar with his life and career, for instance through the *Histories* of Herodotus and maybe also through the Persian history of Ctesias, the Greek physician and writer who lived at the court of Artaxerxes, the brother of Cyrus the Younger, and who wrote a *Persica*, which, as we can see from the preserved fragments, was full of gossip and scandals. Xenophon, on the contrary, erases all that might be obnoxious to the harmonious picture he wants to create. To give only one example; he changes the death of Cyrus from the violent one Herodotus gives us, to a peaceful one. In Herodotus 1.201ff. Cyrus dies on the battlefield and is even mocked in death by his conqueror, the queen of the Massagetae, who cuts off his head and drowns it in blood. In Xenophon's version he dies in old age, surrounded by his family and friends, telling them his last will as befits a monarch.⁵

It is therefore better to understand Xenophon's work as fiction, not history. Cicero understood this. In a famous letter to his brother, describing the perfect provincial governor, he writes that Xenophon described Cyrus not to provide a historically true picture, but a representation of a just empire.⁶

Throughout the books, Xenophon depicts Cyrus' actions and behaviour in different situations and towards different characters in order to show the qualities, which in his view were necessary to improve or redeem the sad, confusing conditions of human life. And these qualities are kindness, clemency and concern for other people combined with strength, discipline, especially self-discipline, and the capacity for moral as well as physical endurance. Xenophon describes his hero vis-à-vis his family, friends, enemies, allies, subordinates and slaves, men and women, thus covering the whole social spectre. He pictures him in war and peace, in serious and relaxed

surroundings, as a child, a young man, a grown-up and as an old man, thus covering all stages of human life. And he does so always in a paradigmatic and didactic way and always with the conditions of his own times in perspective. To give an example:

In book 2 Cyrus introduces a principle of reward according to merit to his army. The subject is brought up by one of his friends among the Persian aristocrats, but is advocated also by members of the rank and file. Cyrus' motives are reported in the following way:

Now Cyrus wished for the sake of the peers themselves that this measure should be passed, for he thought that they also would be better if they knew that they would be judged by their works and would receive rewards according to merits.⁷

He thus sees the principle as a stimulating and provocative tool and puts the matter to the vote in spite of the warnings of his aristocratic friend who asks:

And do you really believe that the common soldiers will adopt a resolution that each one shall not have an equal share, but that the best shall have preference both in honours and in gifts?⁸

His suspicion is proved ill advised; the rank and file support the proposal, confident of themselves and of their leader's justice and generosity. Later, at his court in Babylon, Cyrus sticks to this principle: recognizing special efforts with special privileges, but also withdrawing them again if people stop making an effort.⁹

Behind this principle it is easy to spot a reaction to the democratic principle of *ἰσομοιρία* or arithmetical equality to which democratic Athens was committed. Xenophon champions the opinion that people are not equal and therefore should not be treated as if they were. Total arithmetical equality meant to him that persons who were not equal from a moral point of view were given the same opportunities.

Accordingly, if morally inferior persons had the same rights as their betters, the outcome would be that injustice ruled.

Another point where the critique of his own times is evident is in the all-important theme of education. As stated earlier, Xenophon gives in book 1 a description of Persian education, contrasting it explicitly with education in most city-states. In our societies, he says,¹⁰ parents are left free to educate their children as they choose, and adults are left free to live as they please. Prohibitions are laid down only afterwards against certain forms of behaviour and certain punishments are prescribed for certain crimes. The Persian system, on the other hand, is directed towards prevention rather than cure. Education is a public matter, common to all, and goes on all through life with different programmes and functions according to age. In the programme for the boys – girls and, later in the programme for the adults, women being left out – he stresses the moral components. Justice is, he says, considered the most important basic element much as reading and writing in the Greek or Athenian system.

Self-control and obedience, too, are elements of central importance, best learned through the example of the elders. Another item is ascetic or abstemious living. Besides these moral accomplishments the boys are taught practical skills such as shooting or throwing a spear, to which hunting is added at a later stage, as a preparation for war.

The education thus covers both body and soul. This holistic attitude is also preserved for the grown-ups. Hard physical training is a must, even when Cyrus is later installed in Babylon, because the physical efforts are supposed to have a psychological aspect as well, preventing their newly won power from having a corruptive influence on him and on his friends. The purpose of life is *αρετή*, understood as the ability to resist temptations and upholding virtues such as justice, piety, respect for

others, loyalty, generosity and tolerance. The possession of these virtues justifies the possession of power. Only those who actually are the best, οἱ ἄριστοι, deserve to reign.

The truth of this is brought home in the last section of the work where Xenophon relates what happened after Cyrus' death. The passage in question, i. e. the last chapter, has been much discussed and some take it to be an interpolation. I hold the opinion that it is genuine, and interpret its meaning and function to be to stress once more the necessity of moral integrity in the leader. Cyrus possessed it, his sons did not, and therefore he was able to stay in power and was obeyed willingly by his subjects. His sons lost it all.

Apart from this ideal picture or dream of the perfect leader, who in a way is greater than life, as are the heroes in Greek tragedy, Xenophon is eager to stress the moral component in ordinary life, even in purely practical pursuits, because they, too, have a social implication. One example among many:

In describing the situation before the first battle (5.3.46ff.) he underlines as important Cyrus' ability to remember the names of his officers and soldiers, using analogies from the world of artisans, physicians and fathers of families, thereby making the point instructive for everyone who has to make decisions of social importance. And his conclusion with regard to the detrimental consequences of collective responsibility carries conviction on more than one level. Again it is easy to spot a connection to certain elements and episodes in Athenian society and history.¹¹ And again I find it reasonable to interpret Xenophon's aim as that of pointing to another and better human society than the one he and his contemporaries knew.

Against the background of the various and unsuccessful attempts to create a stable empire in the 5th and 4th century BC, – attempts made by Athens, Sparta and

Thessaly – Xenophon advocates a system built on tolerance and self-restraint instead of oppression and brutality. He recommends that the leader wins the loyalty of his subjects by affection and generosity, and that the vanquished nations be treated with kindness and clemency. The empire he envisages is a multi-ethnic one where the ruling class consists of people from many different nationalities, composed of individuals who each have attained their position by their personal merits and achievements, not by nationality, birth or riches. Thus Cyrus' friends are Persians, Medes, Armenians, Bactrians and others. Xenophon's Utopia has a strong affinity to the attempt later made by Alexander – or maybe it is more correct to interpret Alexander's dream of a fusion between Greeks and Persians as inspired by the ideology of Xenophon's Cyrus.¹² Alexander, however, did not succeed, whereas in Cyrus' world the fusion between the Persians and Medes is said to have occurred without any conflict at all.

II. Passing now to a short comparison with Plato: I said earlier that Cicero read the *Cyropaedia* as a representation of a just empire. To create such a state was also the ambition of Plato in the *Republic* and later in the *Laws*. In this article I shall restrict myself to the *Republic*. In this work Plato constructs a system divided in classes, which each has a specific function to fulfil. The kings and rulers are philosophers who have earned their right to rule by being the best. Different rights, duties and rewards are bestowed upon the different classes according to their function in society. There is therefore equality within the different classes, but not between them. As in Xenophon, this is a reaction against the arithmetical equality, which was advocated by Athenian democracy. And as in Xenophon's Utopia, education plays a dominant role in Plato's. In the *Republic* the upbringing and education of the guardians are described in great detail. Apart from justice, most importance is attached to obedience, training and abstemious living, as was the case in the *Cyropaedia*.

Luxury is likewise viewed as the road to decadence. Training is also seen as having a psychological effect and there is the same linking together of the health of body and mind. The idea that the leader has a moral obligation to be better than everyone else, and totally without flaws, is valid for the guardians and especially for the philosophers, as it was for Cyrus and his friends. And the ultimate and declared goal for both writers is stability.

Nevertheless the differences between them are obvious. Xenophon chose a hierarchic system based on the personal qualities of one individual. His ideal state is built on an analogy between *οἶκος* and *πόλις*. His leader feels responsible for all members of the community just as a father does for all the members of his *οἶκος*, and he is in return regarded as a father by his subjects. Stability is secured by personal bonds and emotions. The reign envisaged is not a Greek city-state, but an empire of huge proportions.

Plato stays within the framework of the city-state and within the Greek world. But in his Utopia private households are abolished and the traditional *οἶκος* is eliminated. Contrary to Xenophon, he does include women in education, at least in the class of the guardians; but marriage and children are not a private or personal matter, but a public affair arranged and controlled by the rulers. The purpose of this is to prevent the development of specific bonds or inclinations for specific persons. If parents do not know their children or children their parents, there will not be any paternal or filial love. The members of the different classes are supposed to identify themselves with the polis because they do not have any individuality, except as a member of their class and state. Individuality, personal bonds and especially personal property are seen as the root of conflict. Thus where Xenophon stressed the importance of the individual, Plato tried to minimize the individualistic element as much as possible.

To conclude: Xenophon gave a pseudo-historical reconstruction of the life and career of a character well established in Greek literature, using practical illustration and exemplification; Plato described an abstract ideal state analysing the problem systematically and in the abstract. Xenophon, apparently in nostalgia, looked to the past, although a fictitious past; Plato looked to the future, but actually they both had their own times in mind, trying to remedy what they agreed was far from perfect.

III. To pass now to my third and last item: Xenophonic scholarship especially as regards the *Cyropaedia*. Xenophon and his Utopia were much admired in earlier times from the Romans to the 18th century.¹³ But in this century he, and especially the *Cyropaedia*, fell out of fashion. Xenophon was considered a dull, second-rate author, and as late as in 1968 G. L. Cawkwell called the *Cyropaedia* one of the most tedious works from Antiquity.¹⁴ Since then Xenophonic scholarship has undergone not a renaissance, but a metamorphosis. These are the words used in the invitation to a forthcoming international conference with the title: *The world of Xenophon*. In the invitation, the organizers Christopher Tuplin and Graham Oliver speculate on the reason for this change of heart; and I shall end my article by doing so for the *Cyropaedia* in particular. During the last nine years, no less than four monographs have been dedicated to that particular work. In 1989 James Tatum published his *Xenophon's Imperial Fiction*, and in the same year came my own *The Cyropaedia, Xenophon's Aims and Methods*; in 1993 came Deborah Levine Gera's *Xenophon's Cyropaedia. Style, Genre and Literary Technique*, and in 1995 C. Müller-Goldingen published *Untersuchungen zu Xenophon's Kyropaedia*.¹⁵ In 1992 a new German-Greek edition was published by Rainer Nickel; in the same year came a Spanish-Greek edition by Alvarez Rosa de Santiago, and in 1996 Franco Ferrari published an edition with an Italian translation and notes. This new interest is based

on several trends in scholarship: 1. A literary interest in genre studies and in the Ancient Novel, 2. A new trend of socio-economic history, the so-called civic humanism or conceptual history, 3. The history of mentality, and 4. The remarkable development in Achaemenid Persian Studies. Xenophon knew more about Persia than most of his contemporaries and is not easily accused of having quite the simplified prejudices about East and West or Europeans and Orientals that Saïd's famous Book from 1975 succeeded in showing as inherent in the minds of so many Greek and European authors. St. Hirsch' book *The Friendship of the Barbarians* opened this line in 1985, and since then a number of contributions have been published in the *Achaemenid History*: the Proceedings of a number of conferences

held in Groningen and London since 1981.

The current discussion of multi-ethnic societies may, too, have tipped the scales in favour of the *Cyropaedia*. It has, undoubtedly, increased interest in the Hellenistic period in general; and Xenophon was in many ways a forerunner of Hellenistic values and conceptions. And last, but not least, the world-wide interest in moral questions, in ethical behaviour, in political correctness and in leadership or – to use a modern term, very appropriate for Xenophon – management may serve as an explanation. In 1985 Helene Sancisi-Weerdenburg stated: "In short, The *Cyropaedia* contains too much virtue for our age".¹⁶ That appears no longer to be the case.

Notes

NOTE 1

Breitenbach 1967, 1707a.

NOTE 2

See Higgins 1977, 54; Nickel 1989, 57; Tatum 1989, 90f. and Due 1989, 15.

NOTE 3

Tatum 1989, 37 ff.

NOTE 4

Cyr. 1.1. The translations are all W. Miller's from the Loeb-editions 1914 (London).

NOTE 5

In Ctesias he dies after having been wounded in battle, but surrounded by his sons.

NOTE 6

Cic. *Q. fr.* 1.1.23.

NOTE 7

Cyr. 2.2.21.

NOTE 8

Cyr. 2.2.20.

NOTE 9

Cyr. 8.4.3ff.

NOTE 10

Cyr. 1.2.2.

NOTE 11

Xenophon gave an example in his historical work, the *Hellenica*, with the description in 1.7 of the trial of the generals after the battle of Arginousai.

NOTE 12

See Due 1993, 53ff.

NOTE 13

See for this the excellent chapter, "The rise of a novel" in James Tatum 1989, 36 ff.

NOTE 14

G. L. Cawkwell, 1968, 50ff.

NOTE 15

In Princeton N.Y., Aarhus, Oxford and Stuttgart, respectively.

NOTE 16

H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1985, 459ff.

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