

BOOK REVIEW

Xenophon and the Athenian democracy: the education of an elite citizenry. By MATTHEW CHRIST. Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 215. Hardback, \$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-49576-9.

Matthew Christ has established himself as an expert in the field of Athenian institutions and the interaction between norms and regulations as well as the people who had to live by them, as evidenced by his *The Bad Citizen in Classical Athens* (2006) and *The Limits of Altruism in Democratic Athens* (2012). His most recent work, *Xenophon and the Democracy* (2020) takes him in an entirely different direction. It diagonally works through the Xenophontic corpus to understand how Xenophon engaged with the Athenian democracy and uses his writings as a mirror for his elite peers to establish themselves as capable leaders of the democracy by instilling the right set of values, knowledge and practical skills in them. This immediately signals the great insight Christ gathered from tackling the *oeuvre*: Xenophon was not the irreconcilable admirer of oligarchy and despiser of the populace, but was a more moderate oligarch who accepted that the democracy was the best form of governance for the Athenians. It was better for elites to accept this reality and work their way towards the top of the food chain by demonstrating the right capacities to lead the polis forward. It places Xenophon's insights in a different playing field, as it moves away from a monolithic interpretation of Xenophon as a cranky critic whose side has lost the battle for influence, but without pushing it towards the other end of the spectrum that views Xenophon as an admirer of democracy. In sum, Xenophon was a pragmatic patriot who realized his fellow elites needed to steer Athens into more prosperous waters.

The argument is a convincing one and Christ takes his reader through the whirlwind that is the Xenophontic corpus. He demonstrates that in each of the works treated – *Hellenica*, *Oeconomicus*, *Symposium*, *Hipparchicus*, *Poroi* and even the *Anabasis* – a poignant criticism of what constitutes the “elite” shines through. What Athens needs are gentlemen, not based on wealth and birth, but through merit and skills (*kalos kagathos*). Socrates plays the role of the initial guide of this

foray into character development by providing critical insights while conversant with interlocutors such as Callias, or by praising individuals such as Isomachos, who is a shining example of the right sort of men who evinces wisdom in the running of his *oikos*, which in turn prepares him for a leading role in a political function as he himself admits.

Xenophon takes over the role of philosophical guide in other writings. An interesting example of this comes from the *Anabasis*, where Xenophon is deceptively successful in his exhortations towards the assembled Cyrean soldiers. Here he emerges as a skilled democratic rhetor who knows to appeal effectively to a mass audience and even achieves overwhelming success by repeatedly receiving unanimity in all of his proposals brought to vote. Seemingly this minor incidence appears like boastful behavior on Xenophon's side, but in fact reinforces the notion that democratic institutions and norms pervade the *Anabasis*, as recent work by Mirko Canevaro (2018; 2020) has shown that unanimity was a key feature of the democratic decision-making progress. Arguably, Canevaro's work may have appeared too late for inclusion in this work.¹

Admittedly, there is room to grow with the subject of the book, as Christ himself admits: "A comprehensive history of elite Athenians and their place in the evolving democracy across the classical period remains to be written" (192). Yet I would add that Christ could have done more with the contextualization of Xenophon's writings. Although Christ rightly points out that Xenophon's insights grew from disenchantment with his involvement in the Thirty and its repercussions for Athenian democracy, an equally fruitful and rewarding direction could have been taken by placing Xenophon's works into conversation with the expansive world of everyday politics in Athens. The democracy was not limited to a small class of professional politicians, as our historical sources would have us believe. Political initiative was not the prerogative of a small clique and in fact was widespread across the populace, as detailed analyses of proposers of Athenian decrees has shown. The work by Mogens Herman Hansen (1989) and Francois Ruzé (1997) already suggested this and recent work by Stephen Lambert (2018)

¹ M. Canevaro, 2018. 'Majority Rule vs. Consensus: The Practice of Democratic Deliberation in the Greek Poleis', in: M. Canevaro, A. Erskine, B. Gray and J. Ober (eds.) *Ancient Greek History and Contemporary Social Science, Edinburgh Leventis Studies*. Edinburgh: 101-156 and 2020. 'La délibération démocratique à l'Assemblée athénienne: Procédures et stratégies de légitimation', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 74.2: 339-381.

has confirmed this for the period between 354/3 and 322/1 BCE.² An engagement with this material perhaps could have strengthened Christ's point that Xenophon saw the role of the elites as instrumental, but placed even more emphasis on the characteristics of leaders rather than wealth or birth. Stressing that the polis had benefitted from non-traditional elite leaders before could have helped anchor Xenophon's comments in a political reality that had *already* seen plenty of successful politicians whose skills put them in a leading position. This would have been a complement to Christ's remark that Xenophon "is no doubt elitist in identifying his elite peers as the natural pool from which the city's leaders will be drawn and in seeing the democracy as absolutely dependent on elite leadership ..." (188).

This comment, however, should only be viewed as a positive engagement with what is essentially an intriguing and excellent book that has certainly altered my view of Xenophon and his place within the democracy. It should convince many other readers of the complexity of Xenophon as an author.

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²M. H. Hansen, 1989. *Was Athens a Democracy? Popular Rule, Liberty and Equality in Ancient and Modern Political Thought*. Copenhagen; F. Ruzé, 1997. *Délibération et pouvoir dans la cité grecque. De Nestor à Socrate*. Paris; S. Lambert, 2018. *Inscribed Athenian Laws and Decrees in the Age of Demosthenes: Historical Essays*. Leiden and Boston.