

Xenophon and Epaminondas

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THE PRESENTATION of Epaminondas by Xenophon is very remarkable, even in a work so unmethodically and capriciously written as the *Hellenica*. Epaminondas is mentioned for the first time as leader of a Theban expedition to Achaëa in 366 B.C. (7.1.41)¹ when his achievements already included his celebrated defiance of Agesilaus at the Peace Congress of 371, his defeat of the Spartans at Leuctra, and his first two invasions of the Peloponnese, which resulted in the devastation of Laconia, the liberation of Messenia and the foundation of Messene and Megalopolis.² The suppression of his name up to that point has rightly been attributed to the notorious antipathy of Xenophon towards the Thebans, which causes him to deny to their principal leader the credit due for all these achievements.³ It is, therefore, astonishing to find that when Xenophon deals with the fourth Theban invasion of the Peloponnese culminating in the battle of Mantinea (7.5.4–27), Epaminondas dominates the narrative: the course of events is recorded almost exclusively from his point of view; his plans and motives are carefully analysed; he is credited with having shown foresight and boldness throughout the campaign; some of his actions are explicitly praised.

It is tempting to interpret the presentation of Epaminondas in the last pages of the *Hellenica* as a palinode; to conclude that Xenophon, conscious of having done him less than justice hitherto, now wishes to

¹ All references are to the *Hellenica* unless otherwise stated.

² The year in which Megalopolis was founded and the extent to which Epaminondas was responsible for its foundation are uncertain, cf. M. Fortina, *Epaminondas* (Turin 1958) 67–68.

³ Recently by G. L. Cawkwell, *CQ* 22 (1972) 255–57. It is interesting that Isocrates nowhere mentions Epaminondas by name. He began to write long before Epaminondas became famous, but there are plenty of references, in works published after the battle of Leuctra, to events in which he played a leading rôle, cf. 5 (*Philip*) 44, 47–48, 53; 6 (*Archidamus*) 10, 27–28, 47. Like Xenophon, Isocrates hated Thebes, and it was presumably for that reason that he ignored Epaminondas, whom he might well, if circumstances had been different, have considered to be a suitable leader for his cherished crusade against Persia. It is less noteworthy that Demosthenes nowhere refers to Epaminondas though he does occasionally mention the period of the Theban hegemony, cf. 18 (*De Cor.*) 18.

acknowledge the merits of his military leadership.⁴ There is, however, reason to doubt whether Xenophon should be credited with a fundamental change of heart. His assessment of Epaminondas, from the point where he at last allows himself to mention him, is less favourable than it appears to be. He has his own rather unenlightened criteria which he applies to military leaders,⁵ and the qualities here attributed to Epaminondas, which to modern readers indisputably entitle him to a place among the outstanding personalities of the age, were not viewed in quite the same light by Xenophon.

The narrative contains two groups of passages which, as will be shown below, betray a persistent tendency to present Epaminondas unfavourably. The first group unmistakably conveys the suggestion that his plans were frustrated by the will of the gods; in the second group his decisions are represented as having been forced upon him by adverse circumstances bringing him almost to desperation, whereas there is in fact reason to believe that he was in complete control of the situation. Thus Xenophon is not perhaps so inconsistent as first impressions suggest: from a closer study of his narrative the following pattern may be traced. Where Epaminondas undeniably gained outstanding successes, credit for them is withheld because his name is suppressed;⁶ but where he may be seen, occasionally with the aid of some distortion, to have failed to attain his major objectives, not necessarily through his own fault, he is allowed to dominate the narrative. Consequently, even though his leadership is shown to have been admirable in most respects, an overall impression is created that his achievements were modest, his influence upon the course of events relatively slight and brief.

While such a mode of presentation cannot be deemed to be at all subtle, it would be very rash to imagine that Xenophon consciously planned it in advance before he embarked on his account of the Theban hegemony. He was inclined to write as the spirit moved him, especially in the last books of the *Hellenica*, where, to a greater degree than elsewhere, he included such material as was easily accessible and

⁴ Such was my own conclusion, in a section on Epaminondas included in a general study of individual leaders in the *Hellenica*; see BRylands 49 (1966) 257–59 = *Essays on the Greek Historians and Greek History* (Manchester 1969) 214–16 [henceforward, *Essays*].

⁵ Cf. *Essays*, 206–13.

⁶ The phrases, ἀντὶ τῆς πρόθευς εὐκλείας (7.5.9) and τῇ ἑαυτοῦ δόξῃ (*ibid.* 18) to some extent acknowledge these achievements indirectly. Where Xenophon omits to mention Epaminondas, he tends to disparage the Thebans generally (cf. 6.5.23–25).

happened to appeal to him, imbuing it with his own brand of rather naïve convictions and prejudices. His presentation of Epaminondas is far more likely to owe its origin to his own unconscious reactions to successive stages of the events which he was recording as he came to deal with each stage. He was doubtless unaware that his presentation might be thought to be inconsistent or that it might create any problems for his readers.

In order to test the validity of this interpretation it is necessary to examine the brief report on the third expedition of Epaminondas to the Peloponnese and the much longer report on the fourth expedition. The purpose of the present investigation is historiographical not historical, namely to elucidate the method, or lack of method, of Xenophon as a historian and not to assess the military leadership of Epaminondas. Since, however, religious issues will have to be discussed, the examination of the narrative will be preceded by a brief consideration of what is known first about the views of Xenophon on the influence of the gods on human life, which emerge from his works, and then about those of Epaminondas on the same subject, which are somewhat obscure but have some relevance here because they are likely to have affected the attitude of Xenophon towards him.

Religion was important to Xenophon; his piety was both conventional and sincere. During his service with the Ten Thousand he frequently turned to the gods in times of danger or difficulty and made decisions in obedience to their guidance obtained through divination,⁷ which he believed to be infallible if correctly interpreted. Among the most prominent features of his writings is his conviction that the gods control human destiny. The *Hellenica* contains a substantial number of passages in which he suggests, explicitly or implicitly, that the course of events was the result of divine intervention.⁸ He also often refers with evident approval to actions, some of them

⁷ M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion I*³ (Munich 1967) 787–88, cites an impressive number of passages from the *Anabasis*. He also quotes *Hipparch.* 9.8–9, which sums up the views of Xenophon on the practical value of consulting and conciliating the gods (but cf. *Cyrop.* 1.6.2 on the possibility of being deliberately misled by seers). J. Luccioni, *Les idées sociales et politiques de Xénophon* (Paris 1948) 59, who also studies the piety of Xenophon but relies mainly on the evidence of the *Memorabilia*, points out how deeply it affected his opinions on politics. See also now J. K. Anderson, *Xenophon* (London 1974) 34–37.

⁸ M. Sordi, *Athenaeum* 29 (1951) 336–37, who gives a list. A remarkably high proportion of these references to divine intervention occur in the last few pages of the *Hellenica* devoted to the campaign of Mantinea, cf. H. R. Breitenbach, *RE* 9A (1967) 1698. These will be noted below.

trivial, which seem to him to betoken a proper respect for the gods. Conversely, impiety of any kind, even when committed by Sparta (cf. 5.4.1), is condemned, especially where it involves the violation of oaths sworn in the name of the gods.

Epaminondas does not seem to have had a reputation either for piety or for impiety. The uprightness of his character is well attested, but among the many virtues with which he is credited by ancient writers⁹ piety is nowhere included. He observed the normal practice of sacrifice and prayer before battle,¹⁰ but, like many other generals, he did not hesitate to suggest favourable interpretations of seemingly unfavourable portents and omens in order to hearten his troops and to dispel superstitious fears, and he even went so far as to contrive bogus portents and omens.¹¹ Such devices were not, however, thought to incur divine displeasure. There is in fact no recorded action of Epaminondas which could expose him to tolerably well-founded charges of impiety. To Xenophon piety was among the most important criteria in his presentation of leading personalities, and in this respect Epaminondas, while innocent of any impiety deserving punishment by the gods, had no special claim on their favour on the ground that he was conspicuously pious. Thus Xenophon adopted an attitude conditioned by his hostility towards Thebes: where Epaminondas, though displaying outstanding qualities of leadership, failed, wholly or partly, to achieve his aims, the outcome must have been due to the unwillingness of the gods to grant him complete success.

The Theban expedition to Achaëa in 366 was an unimportant episode. Its aim was to secure the allegiance of the Achaeans, which would reinforce Theban control over the Arcadians and other allies. When Xenophon attributes to Epaminondas the decision that a military force must be sent, the statement presumably means that Epaminondas secured acceptance of his proposal to take this action

⁹ Cf. Fortina, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 6–7 with references.

¹⁰ Cf. Paus. 9.13.5–6. This subject is discussed by W. K. Pritchett, *Ancient Greek Military Practices I* (Berkeley 1971) 109–15.

¹¹ Diod. 15.52.3–6 (where Epaminondas is stated to have incurred censure for ignoring unfavourable omens but is defended on the ground that he relied rather on logical reasoning derived from his philosophical training), cf. 53.4; Plut. *Mor.* (*Reg. et imp.apophth.*) 192F–193A; Polyæn. 2.3.4, 8 and 12; Front. *Strat.* 1.11.16 and 12.5–7. Xenophon himself (6.4.7) refers to rumours that portents were fabricated by Theban leaders but does not name Epaminondas.

(7.1.41). The only military problem was to gain access to the Peloponnese, since the mountainous route across the Isthmus was guarded by the enemy. After this obstacle had been overcome through the initiative of an Argive officer, the Achaeans submitted, apparently without resistance, and agreed to join the Theban alliance. Epaminondas was prevailed upon by Achaean aristocrats to use his personal authority on their behalf so that they should be left in control of the Achaean cities and should not be banished (7.1.42).¹² He then returned to Thebes, where his settlement was promptly revoked. The Arcadians and the Achaean democrats accused him of playing into the hands of Sparta and persuaded the Thebans to send harmosts to the Achaean cities, who with popular support expelled the aristocratic governments and established democracies. The harmosts were evidently sent without substantial bodies of troops, for the exiled aristocrats banded together and succeeded in regaining control of each city in turn. The result was that Achaea, which had hitherto remained neutral, now gave Sparta enthusiastic support (*ibid.* 43).¹³

Xenophon does not express any personal judgements on these developments. Modern scholars have inferred from his account that Epaminondas acted moderately and wisely in leaving the aristocrats in power, whereas the decision of the Thebans to insist on following their normal practice of imposing democracies upon their allies was both oppressive and misguided.¹⁴ This conclusion has much to recommend it, though the Achaean aristocrats may well have deceived Epaminondas when convincing him of their loyalty to Thebes; but it is evidently based to some extent upon knowledge of other conflicts between Epaminondas and his own government to which Xenophon nowhere makes any reference. He here names Epaminondas for the first time, at last breaking his long silence, and the reason may be that, although Epaminondas might be held to have been

¹² The verb used by Xenophon to define the action taken by Epaminondas (*ἐνδυναστεύει*) bears an implication of autocracy and oppression.

¹³ Diodorus in the single sentence which he devotes to this episode (15.75.2) mentions that Epaminondas liberated Dyme, Naupactus and Calydon, which had been garrisoned by the Achaeans (*cf.* Ephorus, *FGrHist* 70 F 84, for Dyme). This action, which might be deemed creditable to Epaminondas, is not mentioned by Xenophon.

¹⁴ E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums* V⁵ (Stuttgart 1969) 434; M. Cary, *CAH* VI (1927) 95; Cawkwell, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 268–69. P. Cloché, *REA* 46 (1944) 41–42, maintains that Xenophon is here influenced by his partiality for aristocratic government, and that, while he does not expressly praise Epaminondas, he becomes less unsympathetic towards him because he championed the cause of an aristocratic faction.

wiser than the Theban government, it was humiliating to have failed to secure the acceptance of the settlement which he had negotiated. Hitherto, Xenophon may have felt, the gods had crowned with success the enterprises for which he had been responsible,¹⁵ but now they withheld their favour from this enterprise, which after an auspicious beginning ended ignominiously both for him and for Thebes.

The fourth expedition of Epaminondas to the Peloponnese was undertaken because Theban influence there had been declining for some time¹⁶ and was in danger of collapse unless vigorous action was taken to restore it. The immediate cause of the invasion was an outbreak of discord in the Arcadian League, creating a complex situation of which only the essentials need to be stated here. A body of aristocrats, of whom Xenophon evidently approved since he credits them with a desire to serve the best interests of the Peloponnese (7.4.35, cf. 5.1), seemed likely to induce the Arcadians to abandon their dependence on Thebes and renew their traditional association with Sparta. The first step in this direction was the conclusion of a settlement with the Eleans, with whom the League had been at war (7.4.33–35). A gathering was then held at Tegea for the formal exchange of oaths, but during the ensuing celebrations, which were continued into the night, a faction hostile to the aristocrats proceeded to seize and imprison as many of them as could be caught. The Theban harmost at Tegea and his garrison acted in concert with the insurgents, although he had already taken the oath on behalf of Boeotia. Nevertheless, the *coup* miscarried to a large extent, mainly, it appears, through lack of local support. Many of the intended victims evaded arrest, and almost all those from Mantinea, where the aristocrats enjoyed most influence, had already gone home. The Theban har-

¹⁵ These are listed above p.23. The achievements of the second Theban expedition to the Peloponnese were admittedly not spectacular (7.1.18–22). Since, however, Epaminondas had only part of the Boeotian army with him (Pelopidas was campaigning in Thessaly at the same time), his aims in this invasion must have been limited and may have been largely attained despite his subsequent trial. Sicyon and Pellene, which were attacked (7.1.18), must have submitted (though Xenophon does not mention their submission) because both cities were soon afterwards involved in hostilities as allies of Thebes (7.1.22 and 44; 7.2.11–16). It may well have been during this summer (369 B.C.) that Epaminondas made arrangements for the foundation of Megalopolis, with which he is accredited by Pausanias (8.27.2; 9.14.4, cf. 15.6). Hence the expedition seems to have been instrumental in completing the destruction of Spartan hegemony over the Peloponnese.

¹⁶ P. Cloché, *Thèbes de Béotie* (Namur 1952) 152–60.

most, nonplussed by indignant protests from Mantinea, released all the prisoners, excusing himself by alleging that he had been deceived by a report of a plot to betray Tegea to the Spartans. Despite the patent falsity of this pretext he was allowed to withdraw, but Arcadian envoys followed him to Thebes, where they demanded his execution (7.4.36–39).

At this point Epaminondas, who held the office of Boeotarch at the time, became involved in the dispute. He was reputed (*ἔφασαν*)¹⁷ to have declared that the Theban harmost acted more correctly (*ὀρθότερον*) when he arrested the aristocrats than when he released them; that the Arcadians were guilty of treachery in concluding peace with Elis without consulting their Boeotian allies. He announced the intention of the Boeotians to invade the Peloponnese and with the support of their allies to make war on the Arcadian defectors (7.4.40).

This exchange of recriminations is characteristic of diplomatic relations between Greek states. The Arcadians were doubtless under some legal obligation to consult the Boeotians before making important decisions, but the Theban harmost had acted most improperly, and Epaminondas might be thought to be condoning treachery by a subordinate on grounds of expediency, namely because the resulting situation provided him with a welcome pretext to restore Theban authority in the Peloponnese. His behaviour was, however, not so high-handed as that of Agesilaus when, with less justification, he defended Phoebidas, who had committed the far greater crime of seizing the Cadmea (5.2.32). From the hostile attitude of Epaminondas the Mantineans and other Peloponnesian enemies of Thebes inferred that his intention was to instigate conflict in the Peloponnese in order that they might be so weakened as to be easily enslaved by the Thebans (7.5.1–2). The report of this reaction suggests that Xenophon, as might have been expected, was in substantial agreement with it. Military assistance against Theban aggression was sought from the Athenians and the Spartans (7.5.3), who were likely to feel their own interests threatened.

Meanwhile Epaminondas led his Boeotian army, with contingents from Euboea and Thessaly, into the Peloponnese, where he counted on support from Argos, Messenia and some Arcadian cities (7.5.4–5). From this point onwards the account of Xenophon records in some

¹⁷ The word suggests that Xenophon did not consider his information on this episode to be altogether reliable.

detail the plans of Epaminondas together with the calculations upon which they were based. These reports are not strictly authentic: they can only be inferences by Xenophon from his information about the action taken on the Theban side combined with his own knowledge of military leadership. It is very unlikely that he used Theban sources and almost impossible to believe that he can have consulted anyone so closely associated with Epaminondas as to have been aware of his plans and motives.¹⁸

After a rapid advance Epaminondas halted his army for a time at Nemea, expecting to intercept the Athenian expeditionary force known to be about to proceed to Arcadia. He calculated (*λογιζόμενος*)¹⁹ that success against the Athenians would be valuable to him for its effect upon the morale of both sides: his allies would be encouraged, his enemies disheartened. When, however, he learned that the Athenians had decided to transport their forces by sea, he advanced to Tegea, which he chose to be his headquarters. Meanwhile the enemy army was assembling at Mantinea (7.5.6–7).

At this point, where his account of the campaign in the Peloponnese begins, Xenophon inserts a personal comment which is of great importance for the study of his attitude towards Epaminondas: *εὐτυχῆ μὲν οὖν οὐκ ἂν ἔγωγε φήσαιμι τὴν στρατηγίαν αὐτῷ γενέσθαι· ὅσα μὲντοι προνοίας ἔργα καὶ τόλμης ἐστίν, οὐδὲν μοι δοκεῖ ἀνὴρ ἐλλιπεῖν* (7.5.8). Because there is a marked antithesis between the two parts of the sentence, *εὐτυχής* must here mean 'favoured by fortune' and not 'successful (through human effort)'.²⁰ Hereafter Xenophon develops a sort of antilogy in which the *πρόνοια* and *τόλμα* exhibited by Epaminondas at each stage of the campaign are in conflict with his ill-luck at critical moments. Like so many contemporaries, Xenophon tends to express his thoughts in the form of a debate between opposing points

¹⁸ *Essays* 215 (where I note that in these passages Xenophon shows a greater insight into the essence of military leadership at the highest level than in any other part of the *Hellenica*). Breitenbach, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) 1697, rightly points out that these passages are analogous to the speeches in historical works.

¹⁹ This is the first of many passages in which this and similar words are used.

²⁰ This point must be stressed because the word is often used rather illogically in the latter sense, although Socrates is reported in the *Memorabilia* (3.9.14) to have drawn a distinction between *εὐτυχία* and *εὐπραξία*. *στρατηγία* is also a word with various shades of meaning. It can denote the special skill exercised by a general in his professional capacity (*cf. Mem.* 3.1.5–6 and 5.22–23), but that is not its meaning in this passage. In the *Hellenica* it denotes the tenure of office by a general (5.2.3; 6.2.13), sometimes, as here, combined with the actions of the general during his tenure (1.7.2; 6.2.39).

of view. Here he says, in effect, "Yes, I acknowledge that he conducted this campaign admirably, as I demonstrate by my analysis of his plans and motives; but it ended inconclusively, and he failed to achieve any of his principal objectives, because he was dogged by misfortune, which must have been willed by the gods."

The decision of Epaminondas to encamp inside the walls of Tegea, which was contrary to the normal practice of encamping outside a walled town, is expressly praised by Xenophon, who defines at some length the advantages gained thereby. Here he is evidently drawing on his own military experience to explain a decision which was not of major importance and does not seem to have materially affected the course of the campaign. He implicitly commends a more important decision, namely the refusal of Epaminondas, though believing his army to be superior to that of his adversaries, to be drawn into attacking them when he saw that they held an advantage in the strength of the positions which they occupied (7.5.8).²¹

After paying these tributes to the generalship of Epaminondas, Xenophon proceeds to represent his next move as the outcome of feelings amounting almost to desperation. He is stated to have concluded that, since he was not winning new allies and the campaigning season was advancing, he must do something to avoid being utterly disgraced: hence his decision to commit himself to a surprise attack on Sparta (7.5.9). This is one of the passages²² in which Xenophon seems to be guilty of distortion in maintaining that Epaminondas took certain actions only because he was impelled by the need to extricate himself from precarious situations. In this instance, when he learned that Agesilaus had been summoned to Mantinea with the remainder of the Spartan army not already mustered there and was already on the march, his decision to make a dash for Sparta by a different route could, and surely should, be judged to be a brilliantly original stroke and not a desperate gamble. It is true that strategically the city was not a very valuable prize and that Sparta was no longer

²¹ According to Plut. *Mor. (de glor. Ath.)* 346B–C Epaminondas challenged his enemies to battle, but they refused because they were awaiting the arrival of their Athenian allies. This statement is highly suspect: it occurs in a rhetorical exercise in which every opportunity is sought to extol the military reputation of the Athenians. The account of Xenophon should undoubtedly be preferred.

²² See above p. 24. Polybius (9.8.2–13) takes a totally different view: he pays tribute to the strategy of Epaminondas, regarding the sudden attacks on Sparta and on Mantinea as masterly moves which failed only because of bad luck.

the leader of a powerful confederacy but merely one among a number of temporarily allied states.²³ Nevertheless, the capture of the city would have caused a sensation throughout the Greek world and probably put an end to all opposition to Theban domination of the Peloponnese. Thus Epaminondas would be able to bring his campaign to a triumphant conclusion without having to fight a pitched battle in which victory might have proved costly and defeat disastrous. If his attack on Sparta failed, the situation would not be greatly altered, and at least the Spartans would have to consider very seriously whether they should again send almost all their army to join the enemies of Thebes assembled at Mantinea. There is no doubt that Xenophon, consciously or unconsciously, here fails to grant to the generalship of Epaminondas the credit which it deserves.

The attack on Sparta very nearly succeeded. Setting out from Tegea in the evening, Epaminondas and his striking force²⁴ “would have captured the city like a nest totally bereft of its defenders,” as Xenophon acknowledges (7.5.10), if their forced march had remained undetected by the enemy.²⁵ News of it was, however, brought by a deserter to Agesilaus, who was able to return to Sparta in time to organise a makeshift defence. Xenophon attributes this accidental disclosure of vital information *θεία τινὶ μοίρα*, the first of his explicit references to divine intervention.²⁶ It was, he suggests, solely because the gods obstructed his plan that Epaminondas did not find the city undefended.

The narrative recording the course of events after his army reached Sparta is strangely vague and emotional. It is true that Epaminondas is given credit for having contrived that his assault should be launched from a position whence his troops could advance downhill into the city; they would thus be least exposed to missiles directed from buildings and best able to exploit their numerical superiority (7.5.11).

²³ Cf. J. Kromayer, *Antike Schlachtfelder I* (Berlin 1903) 39. His valuable discussion of the attack on Sparta (*ibid.* 37–42) has not been superseded.

²⁴ He evidently took with him only part of the Theban and allied army, amounting to more than 30,000 men (Diod. 15.84.4), which later fought at Mantinea. According to Justin (6.7.4) his force at Sparta numbered 15,000.

²⁵ Xenophon does not draw attention to their achievement, which is stressed by Kromayer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.23) 38–39, in traversing a long and difficult route with remarkable rapidity.

²⁶ Such phrases are conventionally used to denote any fortuitous occurrence, but later references to the gods, which are more specific (*ibid.* 12, 13, 26), certainly preclude that interpretation here.

Yet, although Xenophon must have been familiar with the topography of Sparta,²⁷ he fails to name a single local landmark whereby the direction of the attack could have been made clear;²⁸ and indeed when he refers to an obstacle which might have been expected to hamper the Spartan counterattack (7.5.12), he does not explain what it was. His whole account is designed to show that all the attendant circumstances seemed to be combining to make the fall of Sparta inevitable. Hence he concludes that the gods (τὸ θεῖον) might be deemed responsible for its unexpected preservation, his second reference to divine intervention, but he also offers an alternative explanation, namely that desperate men were irresistible (7.5.12). A charge by less than one hundred Spartans, led by Archidamus, drove the advancing Thebans back and inflicted casualties upon them, even though they were vastly superior in numbers and occupied superior positions. Gratified by this undignified rebuff of the hated Thebans, Xenophon refers ironically to them as 'fire breathers' (οἱ πῦρ πνέοντες, οἱ νενικηκότες τοὺς Λακεδαιμονίους). When the Spartans pursued the retreating enemy too far, they in their turn suffered losses. Here again Xenophon sees the operation of divine powers: he suggests that the limits of Spartan success may have been (ὡς ἔοικεν) prescribed by the gods.²⁹ This is the only passage in which he points to divine intervention which was favourable to Epaminondas. Perhaps he is making a naïve effort to show that the gods were impartial. At all events, the action was officially recognised as a victory for Archidamus and his Spartans (7.5.13).

After this setback Epaminondas at once withdrew from Sparta.³⁰

²⁷ Cf. Plut. *Ages.* 20.2.

²⁸ The topography of Sparta is such that it is not easy to understand how, if the Thebans were already ἐν τῇ πόλει (7.5.11) and were trying to reach its centre, their attack can have been launched downhill. Xenophon may merely be assuming that Epaminondas adopted tactics which would commend themselves to a skilled leader directing an attack in the streets of a city. Epaminondas would thus avoid the disadvantage experienced by the Thirty during the Athenian civil war when in street fighting at the Piraeus their troops had to advance uphill against the democrats under Thrasybulus (2.4.11 and 15).

²⁹ It is strange that he puts forward a supernatural explanation for a predictable, indeed almost inevitable, development. When the small force of Spartans came into contact with the main body of the enemy, the impetus of its advance must have been lost.

³⁰ There is reason to believe that he was not wholly unsuccessful. He undoubtedly intended to capture Sparta if he could, and in this respect his plan failed. On the other hand one result of his attack on Sparta was, as has been pointed out by J. K. Anderson, *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon* (Berkeley 1970) 222, that "Agesilaus himself and nine of the twelve Spartan *lochoi* were absent from the great battle that followed."

Xenophon once more claims to know his reasons for a strategic decision (*λογιζόμενος*): he had no wish, especially as he had already been defeated, to engage the entire Spartan army reinforced by Arcadian forces now on their way to Sparta (7.5.14). This is another of the passages in which he is pictured as having been forced to take action by the exigencies of an unfavourable situation, whereas there is no reason whatever to believe that he had lost the initiative. He promptly attempted another *coup*, which, if successful, would yield a rich reward. After taking elaborate measures to conceal his departure,³¹ he led his army back by night to Tegea as rapidly as on the outward march. He rested his infantry there but sent his cavalry on to Mantinea, urging them to endure additional fatigue in the expectation that they would catch the whole noncombatant population engaged in harvesting outside the city together with the livestock (7.5.14). The plan was foiled by the exploits of an Athenian cavalry force recorded by Xenophon in a highly coloured passage. He does not attribute the timely arrival of these Athenians to divine agency, but he may intend to suggest that it was fortuitous.³² Although they had ridden hard and far since leaving Attica and had not had time on arrival to feed themselves or their horses, they consented to go into action at once to protect the Mantinean noncombatants, who were stranded outside the walls, from the enemy cavalry now seen to be approaching. *ἐνταῦθα δὴ τούτων αὖ τὴν ἀρετὴν τίς οὐκ ἂν ἀγασθείη;* The Athenians were outnumbered and had to face Thebans and Thesalians, reputed to be the best cavalrymen in Greece,³³ but, inspired by patriotic devotion, they immediately charged the enemy, and after an engagement fought with determination on both sides they succeeded in rescuing the Mantinean harvesters and livestock (7.5.15–17).

Xenophon has here allowed his narrative to be coloured by a sense of

This result was predictable, since the Spartans were unlikely to endanger their city again by leaving it almost defenceless. Hence a secondary objective of the strategy which Epaminondas adopted may have been to divert a large part of the Spartan army from the main theatre of war in Arcadia. If so, it is easy to understand why he did not persevere in his attack on Sparta when its first onset had been checked.

³¹ These measures are not mentioned by Xenophon but are known from other sources, cf. Diod. 15.84.1; Plut. *Mor.* (*de glor. Ath.*) 346c; Front. *Strat.* 3.11.5.

³² In 7.5.15 *ἐτύγχανον προσιόντες* could mean merely 'were at the time approaching'. Xenophon often uses *τυγχάνω* in this sense, cf. 6.5.22 and 7.4.36; but in plenty of passages an element of chance is certainly implied, cf. 7.2.8; 7.4.3.

³³ Xenophon omits to mention that the Theban and Thessalian cavalrymen must have been at least as exhausted as the Athenians, cf. Kromayer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.23) 44.

personal involvement, a factor which might have been expected to have a beneficial effect in his historical works but more often proves positively harmful. His two sons, Gryllus and Diodorus, were serving with the Athenian expeditionary force and fought in the cavalry battle. Gryllus was killed,³⁴ and his gallantry was officially recognised by a memorial at Mantinea to him as "the bravest of the allies".³⁵ Xenophon does not mention that his sons were present, but justifiable pride in the heroic death of Gryllus has evidently caused him to describe the exploit of the Athenian cavalry in somewhat extravagant terms.

It may also be for the same reason that he fails to mention a further objective envisaged in the plan of Epaminondas in addition to the rounding up of the Mantineans and their livestock outside the walls by the Theban and Thessalian cavalry. This phase of the campaign is recorded by Polybius, Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch,³⁶ who apparently derive their material from Callisthenes or Ephorus. Although these three versions differ from one another on points of detail, they agree in maintaining that Epaminondas intended to capture Mantinea itself, which was more or less defenceless because its forces had been sent to Sparta with other Arcadians,³⁷ and that the city was saved by the timely arrival of the Athenians. These accounts also refer to, or at least assume, the presence of infantry forces, Theban and Athenian, at or near Mantinea, though there is no mention of any fighting between the two armies except for the cavalry engagement. While these reports contain some inaccuracies, there is no reason to believe that they are basically untrue. According to Xenophon, as has already been noted, Epaminondas rested his infantry at Tegea when he sent on his cavalry to Mantinea (7.5.14), and there is no mention of any subsequent movement by the infantry. It is, however, difficult to understand why Epaminondas imposed upon his whole army the severe strain of a second forced march, from Sparta back to Tegea, if his immediate plans had involved the use only of cavalry in

³⁴ Diog.Laert. 2.53-55, who cites Ephorus (*FGrHist* 70 F 85), provides some rather confused information about the sons of Xenophon. Not unnaturally Gryllus was believed to have met his death in the major battle at Mantinea which followed the cavalry engagement, and there was even a tradition that he struck the blow which mortally wounded Epaminondas (Paus. 8.11.6 and 9.15.5, though 1.3.4 refers to a cavalry battle).

³⁵ Paus. 8.9.5 and 10, who saw the memorial.

³⁶ Polyb. 9.8.7-12; Diod. 15.84.1-2; Plut. *Mor. (de glor.Ath.)* 346B-E.

³⁷ The account of Plutarch differs somewhat here from those of Polybius and Diodorus.

the vicinity of Mantinea. He must surely have intended to move his infantry forward to Mantinea after a brief pause for recovery, expecting to take the city by storm.³⁸ The fall of Mantinea, which was the centre of Peloponnesian opposition to Theban imperialism, would probably have been more valuable to Thebes than that of Sparta, though less spectacular. If the other authorities are to be believed, Epaminondas with his whole army did approach Mantinea, but the failure of his cavalry, combined with the knowledge that the Athenian infantry had now arrived³⁹ and that the Arcadian force sent to Sparta had returned, evidently caused him to withdraw without taking any further action.

Although Xenophon does not deny that the plan of Epaminondas envisaged the capture of Mantinea, no one reading his narrative in isolation would imagine that this plan was designed to achieve anything more ambitious than the limited objective assigned to the cavalry. The further aim of Epaminondas can hardly have been unknown to Xenophon, since it must have been clear to everyone at Mantinea at the time, including his surviving son Diodorus, who is likely to have supplied him with information on the later stages of his campaign.⁴⁰ His account of the cavalry battle is immediately followed by another passage in which he again exaggerates the extent to which Epaminondas was forced by adversity to take almost desperate action (7.5.18). Failure to take Mantinea could certainly be thought to be far more discreditable than failure to round up the Mantinean harvesters and their livestock outside the walls, so that it is very strange that Xenophon does not mention the former. His omissions are not in every instance easily explained; here his preoccupation with the gallant death of his elder son is probably responsible.

The passage in which Xenophon reports the alleged reactions of Epaminondas to the situation in which he now found himself is more detailed, and even more suspect, than the two similar passages discussed above.⁴¹ The considerations responsible for his decision to commit his forces to a major battle are stated to have been the following. The time limit prescribed for the duration of his expedition

³⁸ His cavalry alone would have had little prospect of capturing the walled city unless it had been betrayed.

³⁹ The Athenian expeditionary force numbered 6,000 (Diod. 15.84.2).

⁴⁰ E. Delebecque, *Essai sur la vie de Xénophon* (Paris 1957) 441.

⁴¹ See above pp.31 and 34.

had expired;⁴² withdrawal from the Peloponnese would leave his allies exposed to reprisals and would ruin his own reputation because of his defeats by inferior numbers at Sparta and in the cavalry engagement at Mantinea; his invasion had united the enemies of Thebes in a coalition between Sparta, Arcadia, Achaëa, Elis and Athens; if he were victorious in a pitched battle, his victory would atone for previous failures; if he were killed, his death in an attempt to win domination of the Peloponnese for his native city would bring him honour. Xenophon adds that sentiments of this kind were to be expected from anyone so ambitious as Epaminondas (7.5.18–19). The latter part of this survey is highly complimentary, and indeed Xenophon, in a passage parallel with many others in which he points to the virtues of ideal military commanders,⁴³ proceeds to commend Epaminondas for having trained his troops so well that they were willing to face any danger or hardship and now eagerly prepared for battle (7.5.19–20). On the other hand, the earlier part of the survey certainly does him an injustice in conveying the impression that he chose to fight a pitched battle solely because no honourable alternative was open to him.⁴⁴ It may be that, as has been suggested above,⁴⁵ his sudden forced marches to Sparta and back to Mantinea were undertaken in the hope of restoring Theban authority in the Peloponnese without incurring heavy losses in skilled manpower. He must, however, have felt confident that, unless he allowed himself to be outmanoeuvred, he could win a pitched battle against an army which included only three *lochoi* of Spartan hoplites and was inferior to his own both in numbers⁴⁶ and in quality. It was doubtless necessary for him to act without delay, but he was still in complete command of the situation.

The report of Xenophon on the preliminaries to the battle of Mantinea and on the battle itself is devoted almost exclusively to the tactics of Epaminondas and the effects which they produced (7.5.21–25). Xenophon fully understood these tactics because of his own military experience, and he evidently had the advantage of plentiful

⁴² The reasons for this time limit are not explained.

⁴³ Cf. *Essays* 206–07.

⁴⁴ G. Grote, *History of Greece* VIII (London 1888) 320–21, points out that the assessment of the situation attributed to Epaminondas is “not consistent with the facts narrated by Xenophon himself.”

⁴⁵ See above pp.32 and 36.

⁴⁶ The figures recorded by Diodorus (15.84.4), which are presumably derived from Ephorus, give him a superiority of three to two in both cavalry and infantry.

information from eyewitnesses, presumably including his younger son Diodorus.⁴⁷ Accordingly this account is superior to many battle narratives in the *Hellenica*,⁴⁸ notably that of Leuctra, though it provides little information about the development of the battle after the fighting began (7.5.24–25) and it leaves many questions unanswered. Xenophon is prepared to give Epaminondas full credit for a masterly display of *πρόνοια* and *τόλμα* (cf. 7.5.8) because he is able to point out, as will be seen below, that these qualities were not in themselves sufficient to command success. Such being the basic conclusion which he seeks to establish, his references here to the thoughts and intentions of Epaminondas,⁴⁹ though again mere inferences from his knowledge of the action taken, are more trustworthy than those noted in earlier passages.

Although this account of the battle is of great interest to military historians and has given rise to discussion on the topography of the battlefield,⁵⁰ it throws less light on his treatment of Epaminondas than the accounts of earlier phases in the campaign. It will, therefore, suffice to mention here only the salient features of the tactics whereby, as Xenophon shows, Epaminondas gained an initial advantage which nearly led to a decisive victory. At the outset Epaminondas deployed his army in battle formation in the plain but then moved it towards the hills on the western side as though intending to encamp. The enemy were deceived and, believing that he would not fight on that day, relaxed their vigilance. They were caught unprepared for action when, after rapidly massing a striking force on his left wing, he delivered a sudden attack with it against their right wing. He led this force himself and used it like the ram of a warship, intending to strike a decisive blow which would destroy the entire enemy army before his weaker contingents, held back on his right wing, became engaged in the action. He reinforced his cavalry with mobile infantry with the intention of breaking the enemy cavalry, which was without

⁴⁷ Delebecque, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.40). It is perhaps significant that the only contingent on either side to be mentioned by name is that of the Athenians (7.5.24–25). There is, however, no means of establishing with any confidence the source, or sources, upon which the account of Xenophon is based. Kromayer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.23) 91–92, takes a totally different view, maintaining that his informant was a Spartan.

⁴⁸ There is general agreement that his account is to be preferred to that of Diodorus (15.84.3–87), which is highly rhetorical and confused.

⁴⁹ *νομίζων . . . εἰδὼς . . . νομίζων . . . βουλόμενος* (7.5.23–24).

⁵⁰ Cf. W. K. Pritchett, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography* II (Berkeley 1969) 37–72, where the topography of all three battles fought at Mantinea is examined.

supporting infantry. At the same time he stationed troops on hilly ground on the eastern side of the plain in order to deter the Athenians on the left wing of the enemy from attacking the exposed flank of his striking force (7.5.22–24). The whole plan was at first so successful that the enemy phalanx was broken, but at this critical moment Epaminondas fell wounded. The impetus of the attack was at once lost; neither hoplites nor cavalry advanced beyond the point which they had now reached, nor did they inflict any more casualties upon the fleeing enemy. They thus signally failed to exploit the advantage which they had won. The light-armed troops which had supported the cavalry did make some attempt to complete the victory by attacking the left wing of the enemy, but they were there cut to pieces by the Athenians (7.5.24–25).

In the final sentences of the *Hellenica* Xenophon reviews the consequences of this battle for the Greek world and concludes that they were negligible. While everyone had expected it to settle the future by bestowing upon the victors complete domination over the vanquished, it had in fact settled nothing. Both sides claimed to have won, but neither now enjoyed a stronger position through the acquisition of territory, cities or power. Thus there was greater uncertainty and turmoil than before the battle was fought (7.5.26–27). The *Hellenica* ends without reporting the death of Epaminondas from the wound which he had received,⁵¹ and the passage reviewing the situation after the battle does not refer to him by name. It is, however, clear that Xenophon has his death in mind when expressing the opinion that ‘the god’ (ὁ θεός) was responsible for creating a paradoxical situation in which after the battle each side behaved as though it had both won and lost (7.5.26). Since Xenophon represents the wounding of Epaminondas as the turning point of the battle, probably exaggerating its consequences,⁵² he evidently attributes the fatal blow

⁵¹ Stories about his death after he had been carried from the battlefield are recorded by other authorities (Diod. 15.87.5–6; Nep. *Epam.* 9.3; Paus. 8.11.7; Ael. *VH* 12.3; Just. 6.8.11–13). The silence of Xenophon suggests that, despite his contribution to the development of biography, his interest in Epaminondas was not at all biographical.

⁵² In no other battle between Greeks about which information has been preserved in any detail is the death or wounding of a general in command of one side held to have influenced the outcome so profoundly. Neither the death of Brasidas at Amphipolis nor that of Pelopidas at Cynoscephalae produced the same effect. Xenophon may here be suspected of some distortion designed to support his conviction that the skilful planning of Epaminondas was thwarted by divine intervention. It is tempting to conclude that, while there is no palpable falsification, either the Thebans, at the moment when Epaminondas fell,

to the will of 'the god', who ordained that Epaminondas should be denied the total victory which his leadership had almost achieved and that the battle should end indecisively.

Xenophon was not a profound thinker. His judgement was more often governed by his heart than by his head, and his heart was not a wholly consistent guide. His presentation of Epaminondas is to some extent exceptional: it may indeed be deemed to be superior to his presentation of other leaders in one important respect, since it shows a better understanding of military strategy on a large scale. It is, however, deeply influenced by two distinctive characteristics of his mentality which are prominent elsewhere, namely his prejudices, political and personal, and his views on the relations between gods and men. These characteristics tended to operate in concert, because he normally regarded as deserving of divine favour only persons of whom his prejudices led him to approve. Epaminondas was not one of them.

WRESTLINGWORTH, BEDFORDSHIRE

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were not on the brink of inflicting a crushing defeat upon the enemy, or that the result of the battle was on balance a victory for Thebes, though not nearly so decisive as had at one time seemed probable. The latter conclusion is supported to a certain extent by some phrases in the muddled account of Diodorus (15.87.1-4).