Xenophon’s failed imperialists: the question of empire in the Hellenica

In Xenophon's Hellenica, or “Greek Affairs” from 404-362 BCE, both empire and its absence entail characteristic advantages and disadvantages. An international arrangement without empire is necessarily one of empire-seekers; and the quest for empire is, while impressive, also a risky and destabilizing enterprise. Xenophon illuminates these aspects of empire in the Hellenica by drawing our attention to the rise and fall of three empire-seekers, thereby revealing the considerable advantages that such human beings bring with them to political life. These advantages consist, above all, in dependable order, foresight regarding future contingencies, and the capacity on the part of rulers to anticipate such contingencies. By the same token, Xenophon reveals what political life lacks when empire is absent in the international sphere: A crucial cause of Greece's confusion and disorder is the absence of any single man or city capable of imposing stable rule through empire. More specifically, however, Xenophon depicts surpassingly capable potential rulers—most notably, Alcibiades, Thrasybulus, and Jason of Pherai—coming to premature ruin. One of the core questions of the Hellenica, then, concerns why all of Greece's empire-seekers fail in their ambitions, as well as how they achieve their successes initially. Is it by the “science of empire,” evinced most clearly by Cyrus the Great, the main character of Xenophon's historical novel, The Education of Cyrus? Or do chance, or providential deities, play a greater role in the initial successes, as well as in the ultimate failures, of Xenophon's failed imperialists than we might at first realize?

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In Xenophon’s Hellenica, or “Greek Affairs” from 404-362 BCE, both empire and its absence entail characteristic advantages and disadvantages. An international arrangement without empire is necessarily one of empire-seekers; and the quest for empire is, while impressive, also a risky and destabilizing enterprise. Xenophon illuminates these aspects of empire in the Hellenica by drawing our attention to the rise and fall of three empire-seekers, thereby revealing the considerable advantages that such human beings bring with them to political life. Or do chance, or providential deities, play a greater role in the initial successes, as well as in the ultimate failures, of Xenophon’s failed imperialists than we might at first realize? Department. Government. were all included in the empire, and formed into separate districts for the payment of tribute. The relations of Athens to the separate cities rested on separate treaties, and the degree of her interference in their internal affairs varied. In general, democracy was favored and oligarchical elements were suppressed. The aggressive policy of Athens and her rapid strides in power had made it but a question of time when she would come into final and decisive conflict with her rival, the traditional leader of Greece. Sparta’s jealousy and fear were the cause of the Peloponnesian war, the affairs at Corcyra and Potidaea were its occasions.