

*Clearchus the war-lover***BRUTALITY
AND DISCIPLINE**

What does it say about a man who was considered too extreme, even for Sparta? What does it say if his most dominant characteristic within the sources is his excessive love of war? And what does it say if this man, when recalled by Sparta to face charges, did not go back or run away, but instead attempted to make a stand and defeat them in battle?

By *Owen Rees*

Clearchus is the most colourful and fascinating figure within Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and yet he was only present in the first two books. He is mentioned in the writings of Thucydides, Diodorus Siculus, Ctesias, Plutarch, even Polynaenus. He became a symbolic beacon for Hellenic prowess and of barbarian subterfuge. Later, he came to epitomize how a general should act. But who was he, and how did he rise to this position of fame?

We know very little about Clearchus before his arrival in Byzantium in 410 BC. But, from the small pieces of information we do know, it is possible to piece together his background. Clearchus, born around 450 BC, was the son of Ramphias, a man held in very high regard within Sparta. Ramphias only appears twice within the writings of Thucydides, but the esteem in which he must have been held is self-evident. His first appearance, in 432–431 BC, was within a contingent of Spartan ambassadors sent to Athens who were sent to maintain a peaceful accord whilst demanding that the Athenians leave all of Hellas independent.

Ramphias is next seen at the head of reinforcements being sent to Brasidas on the eve of the Battle of Amphipolis (422 BC). But, due to Brasidas' death, Ramphias stopped his march in Thessaly and returned to Sparta as the common Spartan desire, so we are told, was for peace. Both appearances suggest that Ramphias was an important and respected figure, with a reputation that had sur-

vived over a decade which had seen huge Athenian successes at Sparta's expense.

It has been speculated that Clearchus may have had links with the Spartan King Agis. If this is true it would quite likely have been due to the reputation of Ramphias and, by proxy, Clearchus' position as his offspring. But one thing we can know, because Ramphias was not a king, and Clearchus was not an heir to the throne, it can be easily deduced that Clearchus entered and passed the Spartan educational system – the *agoge*.

It is in the *agoge* that Clearchus would have learnt the combat skills, survival skills, undergone the fitness regimes and especially became experienced in the harsh discipline that he became so famous for. It is tempting to imagine Clearchus as having undergone the mysterious rite of passage called the *krypteia* – going off into the wilderness with just a knife and his wits, hunting helots for months on end – but we just do not know. However, his eminent rise within the Spartan hierarchy does lend itself to speculation that he must have excelled within his peer group, and that maybe this occurred within the *agoge*. If so, he would have been a prime candidate for the *krypteia*.

Early career

Xenophon gives Clearchus' age at death as being about 50 years old, putting his birth at 451–450 BC and, more importantly in terms of trying to piece together his career – he turned 20 around 431–430 BC, meaning he became of military age around the time his father was being sent to Athens to prevent

war from breaking out. In other words, he became an active member of the Spartan army at the point when the Spartan army became most active. There is no question that he would have partaken in a lot of service in his 20s, unfortunately we do not know where and we do not know when. Xenophon's description of how Clearchus "stayed around while the Spartans were at war with the Athenians" is frustratingly vague.

It is known that by the time Clearchus was 28–29 years old, Brasidas was in the north fighting the most successful campaign of any Spartan general and was having to free helots and incorporate them fully into his army to maintain numbers. We know that the Spartans struggled to maintain the numbers of fully fledged Spartiates, we also know that the Spartans held this elite in the highest regard, so it is a fair assumption that as their numbers reduced, those few remaining would have been as ever-present as possible in the Spartan armies.

L. Tritle (2001) has tried to recreate Clearchus' early career, speculating about his presence at the disaster at Pylos and the victory at Mantinea. Both are, of course, possible but are pure speculation. The one area that Tritle is supported by the sources is in his supposition for Clearchus' early presence in the north; either under the command of Brasidas or Ramphias. Clearchus first appeared in Thucydides, when he was given command of a Peloponnesian fleet in the Hellespont in 412 BC. Clearchus would have been around 38 years old. He appears twice more in Thucydides, each time he was given a military command around the Hellespont.

Xenophon's first mention of Clearchus in his *Hellenika* describes him being given command in the Hellespont region, but it also reveals just how closely linked he was to the area:

“ [King Agis] said also it would be best to send Clearchus son of Ramphias and proxenos of the Byzantines to Chalcedon and Byzantium.”

Hellenica 1.1.35

A *proxenos* was an appointed citizen of one city whose role was to look after the interests of another city and their citizens, if they ever visited. Some *proxenos* positions were hereditary, such as Alcibiades as *proxenos* of Sparta. It is therefore possible that Clearchus inherited this position from his father or grandfather; it is also just as

possible that he was the first in his family to have this appointment. If this is the case then the city of Byzantium would have been the authority that appointed him. This implies a very strong tie between Clearchus and Byzantium, which may mean that he had spent more time in the north of Greece than the few meagre references in Thucydides give credence to, in some small part supporting Tritle's assertion that he spent some of his formative years in the area.

Byzantium

There is no reference to Clearchus between his journey to Byzantium in 410 BC and his next appearance in 408 when he is referred to as Byzantium's *harmost*, a Spartan term for a military governor who was put in charge of allied cities. In the case of Clearchus, his main duty was clear: to stop the transport of grain to Athens.

Alcibiades was sent to the Hellespont to free up the trade route, firstly defeating the Spartan army outside Chalcedon and then, with a treaty in place with the Chalcedonians, he turned his attention to Byzantium, laying it to siege. But, Clearchus had a strong force behind the city walls, including Lakonian *perioikoi* and *neodamodeis* as well as a force of Megarians, so the Athenian forces could not penetrate the defences:

“ Consequently, though they kept launching assaults for some time, they continued to inflict no notable damage on the defenders.”

Diodorus Siculus, Library 8.66.6

The only way that Alcibiades was going to succeed in his siege was through treachery, and Clearchus gave him the prime opportunity by leaving the city. He went in search of support from Pharnabazus, the leader of Chalcedon, by way of money for soldiers and to build a naval force. Whilst absent, the city was betrayed to the Athenians by five conspirators and Alcibiades' troops entered through an open gate leaving the defenders with no chance.

An interesting insight into Clearchus and his methods are present in Xenophon's account of one of the conspirator's defence in Sparta in which he states that:



Relief of a warrior from Sparta, confronting a snake. Part of a tombstone; dated to the fifth century BC. Currently on display in the Archaeological Museum of Sparta.

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“ [Anaxilaos] did not betray the city but, rather, saved it, for he saw the women and children perishing by famine, since Clearchus gave all the food in the city to the Spartan soldiers.”

Hellenica, 1.3.19

While Diodorus gives an even more damning review of Clearchus, saying that the betrayal was due to the conspirators hatred of “the severity of [Clearchus’] administration, for Clearchus was a harsh man” (*Library* 8.66.6).

After the fall of Byzantium, Clearchus becomes absent in the sources until a passing reference in Diodorus places him at the naval battle around the Arginousai Islands (406 BC) when he was named by the Spartan naval commander Callicratidas as his successor if he were to die. There is then no mention of him again until 403 BC when he was sent by Sparta to aid Byzantium against the Thracians. It is not unreasonable to assume that he had continued to have a presence in the northern sphere of the war, either on land or on sea. Perhaps the reason the Spartans sent him so willingly in 403 was because he had maintained his reputation for being an expert in the north. It is interesting that Byzantium were willing to take him back, especially if the reports of his behaviour in 408 are true and, if Diodorus is to be believed, Byzantium did come to regret the decision.

Xenophon and Diodorus give different accounts for what happened, but both agree that Clearchus was sent to Byzantium to fight the Thracians. Xenophon claims that Clearchus convinced the Spartan ephors to send him on this quest, to aid Greeks who were suffering at Thracian hands, whereas Diodorus states that the Byzantines were struggling with the Thracians and asked Sparta for help, they in turn sent Clearchus. These two stories are not incompatible; it is just a matter of who asked whom. If Clearchus still maintained his position as *proxenos* then it is not unreasonable that Byzantium made their request to him first and he then took it to the ephors, who in turn sent Clearchus to Byzantium.

It is here that the two accounts differ greatly. Xenophon claims that, before Clearchus even arrived, the ephors changed their mind and tried to recall him from the Corinthian Isthmus,

he refused and was condemned to death for his disobedience. Diodorus claims that Clearchus did arrive in Byzantium, with a mercenary army, under orders from Sparta, but that he set himself up as a tyrant in the city, putting prominent Byzantine officials to death and taking their wealth and property. Sparta sent a delegation to ask him to lay down his power, but he refused, resulting in an army being sent to confront him.

“ [Clearchus] advanced to meet them and joined battle with the troops of Panthoedas at the place called Porus (...) The struggle lasted a long while, but the Lacedaemonians fought splendidly and the forces of the tyrant were destroyed.”

Diodorus Siculus, 13.12.6–7

Serving Cyrus

As an exile, Clearchus joined the service of Cyrus and was given the funds to either wage war on the Thracians, or else have an easy life of luxury according to Xenophon – he chose the first option.

We know next to nothing regarding his wars with the Odrysian Thracians, but it seems clear that Clearchus defeated the Thracians in one large, open battle. His time in Thrace was part of his legend by the Roman period, with writers such as Frontinus and Polyanaeus relaying stories from his time there:

“ The Thracians sent envoys to Clearchus to sue for peace, after he had spread terror and devastation throughout their country (...) he ordered his cooks to cut into pieces two or three Thracian bodies, and hang them up. He told them, if any Thracians asked what this meant, to reply that they were being prepared for Clearchus’ supper.”

Polyanaeus, Stratagems 2.2.8

Clearchus first met Cyrus in 403, giving him just under two years of terrorising the Thracians before he was recalled by Cyrus to join his expedition. Clearchus took with him 1,000 hoplites, 800 Thracian peltasts, and 200 archers from Crete, who were all veterans of his Thracian conquests.

It is only after the looting of Tarsus that Clearchus really comes to the forefront of Xenophon's narrative. When Cyrus' army refused to move after 20 days of waiting in Tarsus, Clearchus tried to force those under his command to move; instead of moving his men threw stones at him, nearly killing him in the process. Seeing his authority being flaunted in such a manner he called an assembly and manipulated the fears of the men to not only make them see him as their leader but he actually incited 2000 hoplites, under the control of other commanders, to swap their allegiances to him. In a masterstroke of emotional exploitation Clearchus went from almost being killed in protest, to becoming the unofficial leader of the Greeks.

In a position of authority once more, taking into account that before now he was just one of many equal Greek commanders, his true personality came through. A dispute between one of Clearchus' men and one of Meno's was adjudged, by Clearchus, to have been the fault of Meno's man and thus had him flogged. This caused great discontent with Meno's camp, the issue of physical discipline was contentious and although it was something Clearchus became famous for, it was not a common practice within Greek armies. Whilst Clearchus walked through camp, Meno's men attacked him, barely escaping Clearchus went to his men and called them to arms. Taking 40 Thracians with him, and his hoplites ready for action, he advanced on Meno's camp causing terror as Meno's men ran to arm themselves.

Proxenos attempted to break up the fight before it started and was curtly dismissed by Clearchus who was overcome with a blood lust for what he conceived to be a great wrongdoing. Only the interjection of Cyrus was enough to stop the two sides fighting: "[Cyrus'] words brought Clearchus back to his senses" (*Anabasis* 1.5.17). His ability to lose all rational thought and act through an explosive, hotheadedness is perhaps why we are told by Xenophon that when danger was not present, some of his men would abandon him for other commanders due to his severity and savagery: "In other words,

men never followed him out of affection or loyalty" (*Anabasis* 2.6.12–13).

Clearchus, for all of his shortcomings, was seen by Cyrus and the Persians as the most highly regarded of the Greeks, and so was brought into Cyrus' inner circle as an advisor. By the battle of Cunaxa (401 BC), Clearchus had the position of prestige (for the Greeks anyway) by leading the right flank of the army.

A full account of the Battle of Cunaxa can be found in *Ancient Warfare* III.6, but Clearchus' role has been greatly debated from as early as Plutarch's writings up to modern day. He was ordered by Cyrus to remove his men from the right flank and attack the Persian king directly, in the centre of the Persian line. Clearchus refused to obey and had great success on the flank pushing through the Persian line and setting out in pursuit of the fleeing soldiers. For a great introduction to the debate surrounding the order, and Clearchus' refusal, start with Hewitt's article (1919).

After Cunaxa

After the battle and Cyrus' death we are told that Clearchus takes command of the mercenaries. He does this without batting an eyelid, and there is no account of even a discussion about his appointment – if it can even be called that. With Cyrus out of the way, Clearchus took to his natural position of authority:

“From then on, Clearchus took command and the rest obeyed – not because they had elected him to this position, but because he was plainly the only one with the mentality of a leader, while the rest were untried.”

Anabasis 2.2.5

His short time in command was filled with actions which support the rumours of his acts in Byzantium. He continued the manipulation of his men through staged stunts, like paying the herald to lie about the noises made by enemy forces at night. The man was ordered to say it was a donkey near their own weapons,



A bronze Corinthian helmet, dated to around 500 BC. By the time of Xenophon, helmets of this type were rare and may have been used mostly by officers, such as Clearchus. Currently on display in Munich.

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thus putting the mercenaries' minds at ease.

Clearchus continued to exact his own, unique, form of discipline with a "spear in his left hand and a stick in his right" ready to beat any man he believed was shirking from his duties (*Anabasis* 2.3.11). But he was prone to jumping in and getting his hands dirty, doing manual labour with his men, shaming them into working harder. He also exhibited distrust for his fellow Greeks, something that may well have been his undoing.

Clearchus' death

Clearchus was killed, with the other Greek generals, at the hands of the Persian satrap Tissaphernes. The sources disagree about Clearchus' role in the treachery; whether it was Tissaphernes' manipulation of Clearchus own self interests and distrust of others, as put forward by Xenophon; or that Clearchus distrusted Tissaphernes and advised the men not to go, as put forward by Ctesias, a Greek physician in the pay of the Persians. Either way, Clearchus was most likely taken to the Persian King and beheaded; but not before he struck up an unlikely friendship with Ctesias. Although not the most reliable of sources (Plutarch even accuses Ctesias of being both a Laconophile and a Clearchophile), Ctesias does present an image which suggests that Clearchus was held captive for quite a while. However, we do know that Meno was the last commander to be killed, so that puts Clearchus' imprisonment at under one year.

Whilst imprisoned, his Spartan upbringing was betrayed by his request for a comb, thus cementing his friendship with Ctesias, as relayed by Plutarch:

“ [Clearchus] asked him to provide him with a comb. And after he received it and dressed his hair, he was pleased at the service and gave Ctesias his ring as a sign of friendship to show to his family and friends in Sparta”

Plutarch, *Life of Artaxerxes* 18

It is indeterminable how true this tale of friendship was, nor too is the story that Clearchus asked Ctesias for a small knife to be hidden in some meat – whether this was to aid an escape or commit suicide is

not made clear. But the presence of such an account, combined with Ctesias' apparent admiration for Clearchus, does suggest that they met, and spent some time together. So, although the personal stories may not all be accurate portrayals, it is very probable that Clearchus was imprisoned and Ctesias spoke with him often. At the point of Clearchus' death his own myth was beginning to grow with immediacy:

“ After his execution, a marvellous thing happened. A strong wind sprang up and heaped a quantity of earth upon his body, which formed a natural tomb.”

Photius, *Bibliotheca* 72.44a20–b19

Clearchus lived a life consumed by war. As he perfected his arts – violence, discipline, fortitude and victory – he began to demand more of the men around him. As he was granted more power his standards became more exacting and his methods more extreme. He was a feared and loathed man but because of the attributes that attracted these feelings, he was admired and appreciated in a crisis. **AW**

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Further reading

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- T. Lenschau, 'Klearchos', in: A. Pauly et al. (eds.) *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* vol. 34 (1921), p. 11.
- L. Tritle, *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival* (London 2001).
- L. Tritle, *A New History of the Peloponnesian War* (Chichester 2010).