

Agesilaos' Abandoned Babies: 'Humane' Treatment of the Displaced?

Hans VAN WEES
University College London

War made many refugees in ancient Greece as in the modern world. Families might pack up and leave their cities rather than be caught by an invading enemy, or make their escape from a siege, or surrender and be allowed leave home with only the clothes on their backs. Once, when Athenian generals allowed the people of Potidaea to leave their besieged city with 'an agreed amount of money for the road' as well as one or two items of clothing, the Athenian assembly blamed them for agreeing such mild terms.¹

Often, however, a captured or surrendered community would not be driven into exile but seized and sold into slavery. Xenophon suggested that even this might create refugees, indeed give rise to a particularly acute refugee problem: the youngest, oldest and weakest captives might not find a buyer and simply be left by the roadside, without anywhere to live or anyone to look after them.² Xenophon mentioned this because in his opinion the way in which Agesilaos II of Sparta (c. 400-360) dealt with the problem was a prime example of the king's exceptional 'benevolence'.

Remarkably, modern translations and discussions of this passage in Xenophon have never rendered it entirely correctly and have made Agesilaos' humanitarian record sound much better than it was. A closer look at the text, and the context of Agesilaos' actions, raises questions about the extent of the problem of abandoned captives, and especially about the 'humanity' of Agesilaos' solution. The gap between Greek text and modern interpretations reveals just how difficult it is for us to accept the brutality of warfare and the fate of refugees in ancient Greece.

The context of Xenophon's remark about Agesilaos' kindness towards abandoned captives was the king's first ever military campaign, an invasion of Asia Minor in 396 BC, advertised as a war to liberate Greeks from the Persian Empire, but in effect a vast plundering expedition deep into Phrygia. Xenophon stressed that Agesilaos seized many unsuspecting cities and collected a great quantity of spoils.³ According to Diodoros the 'market mob'

1 Thuc. 2.70.3-4.

2 Xen. *Ages.* 1.21-22.

3 Xen. *Ages.* 1.16; *Hell.* 3.4.12.

(ἀγοραῖος ὄχλος) of traders who followed Agesilaos' army 'also for the sake of plunder' (καὶ τῆς ἀρπαγῆς χάριν) was as large as the army itself.⁴ Captives must have been a major part of these spoils: Phrygian slaves were in high demand at Athens, for example.⁵ The sheer volume of spoils produced a glut, and when the army's official 'booty-sellers' (*laphyropoloi*)⁶ sold off the plunder to traders on the spot 'everything was sold for next to nothing'. Agesilaos allowed his friends to buy at these minimal prices, on credit, so that they could sell at a large profit when the army returned to the Greek cities on the coast where the demand was much greater.⁷ Xenophon later adds that Agesilaos ordered male prisoners to be stripped naked when sold, so that his soldiers would see these 'barbarian' captives' untanned skins, their 'fat and inert' bodies, and despise them as opponents no more dangerous than women.⁸

Having explained how Agesilaos helped his friends on this campaign, Xenophon moves on to Agesilaos' treatment of his enemies: 'he took care not only to defeat his opponents by force but also to win them over by kindness' (πρότι προσάγεσθαι, 1.20), so that 'fortifications that were impossible to capture by force he brought under control by his humaneness' (τῇ φιλανθρωπίᾳ, 1.22). The first illustration of this approach is that

"often he publicly ordered his soldiers not to take revenge on those who were captured as people who had done wrong, but to guard them as human beings."⁹

'To guard' (φυλάττειν) is an ambiguous verb in Greek as in English, meaning both 'to guard against danger', i.e. to protect, to preserve safely, and 'to keep under guard', i.e. to hold prisoner. Xenophon's wording of Agesilaos' instructions suggests that the king was telling his soldiers not to maltreat their prisoners but preserve their dignity as human beings, and this is no doubt the message Xenophon wanted to convey.¹⁰

However, if we take 'guard' in its other sense, and accept that 'revenge on wrongdoers' would typically take the form of killing them, Agesilaos' announcement in essence amounts to an order not to kill those whom they captured but to keep them alive as prisoners. This interpretation is all the more likely since Agesilaos did not offer his views as informal advice or exhortation, but 'publicly ordered' (προηγόρευε) this course of action. The same verb is elsewhere used explicitly for a public announcement made by 'the commanders' and formally proclaimed on their behalf by a herald.¹¹ In that context, it seems likely that Agesilaos did not just tell his soldiers to be nice to prisoners of war but ordered them not to kill and instead take prisoners for sale into slavery. Since this campaign was a plundering raid, and since the revenue from spoils sold by the 'booty-sellers' flowed into the central treasury, it was very much in Agesilaos' own interest to issue such orders.

4 Diod. Sic. 14.79.2.

5 E.g. Hermippus, fr. 63 K-A; Lewis, 2015, p. 318; *id.*, 2011, p. 104-105, 109-110; Vlassopoulos, 2010.

6 Pritchett, 1991, p. 404-416, collects the evidence for sale of spoils in Spartan armies.

7 Xen. *Ages.* 1.18.

8 Xen. *Ages.* 1.28; *Hell.* 3.4.19.

9 Xen. *Ages.* 1.21.

10 See e.g. Azoulay, 2004, p. 320 (= 2018, p. 192-193) on the importance of 'benevolence' in Xenophon's portrayal of Agesilaos; cf. Ducrey, 1968, p. 330.

11 Xen. *Anab.* 2.2.20.

Xenophon thus puts a humanitarian spin on an action that was not particularly humane or unusual at all. He uses the same technique again in the next sentence, when he turns to Agesilaos' handling of captives too young to be sold:

“Often when he moved camp, if he became aware that little children belonging to traders had been left behind, whom many offered for sale because they thought they would not be able to carry and feed them, he took care of them, too, ensuring that they would be gathered together somewhere.”

Πολλάκις δὲ ὅποτε μεταστρατοπεδεύοιτο, εἰ αἴσθοιτο καταλειμμένα παιδάκια μικρὰ ἐμπόρων, ἃ πολλοὶ ἐπώλουσαν διὰ τὸ νομίζειν μὴ δύνασθαι ἄν φέρειν αὐτὰ καὶ τρέφειν, ἐπεμέλετο καὶ τούτων ὅπως συγκομιζοῖντό ποι.¹²

What exactly was the problem that Agesilaos noticed, and what kind of 'care' did he bestow on these abandoned babies and toddlers?¹³

Evidently, the slave traders who bought captives acquired some small children, whom they tried to sell when the army moved camp, but left behind when they could not find a buyer. By implication, these traders did not do the same to adult captives: normal practice was not to sell slaves on immediately, but to keep them under guard and bring them along, buy more as the march continued, and finally sell them at the end of the campaign in a market where demand was high, i.e. in a Greek coastal city. Agesilaos encouraged his friends to do the same. But the traders evidently did not feel this was a viable procedure for the small children, so the question arises why they bought child captives at all. The answer must be that the booty-sellers sold families together,¹⁴ or at least sold women together with their children.

This practice is implied by an entry in the Attic Stelae, where three Thracian slaves are auctioned off for a single large sum, evidently a mother with her son and daughter.¹⁵ The same custom is hinted at in a description of a group of 30 'women and little children', taken captive in the sack of Olynthos in 348 BC, following their new master on foot.¹⁶ It is now also explicitly attested in a new fragment of Hypereides' *Against Timandros*¹⁷, which denounces as evil the forced separation of siblings from one another:

“Even those who acquire control over slaves in war do not do this, but they sell them as a family as much as possible. Merchants and retail traders in slaves, who do all sorts of [outrageous] things for the sake of profit, if they sell little siblings or a mother with her children... they sell them for less and accept a loss because it is the right thing to do.”

As well as being 'the right thing', this principle had the practical advantage that the army would sell all its prisoners, rather than be left with the less commercially viable captives, and thus maximise its revenue. At the same time, traders had a financial as well as moral incentive not to abandon the children, since they had after all had to pay for them.

The idea that slave dealers kept children and their mothers together 'as much as possible' implies that in some circumstances they might nevertheless break up families, and there were

12 Xen. *Ages.* 1.21.

13 A very young age is implied by the fact that they still needed to be carried.

14 As suggested by Krentz, 2007, p. 153; Hunt, 2018, p. 63.

15 *IG* I³ 422 ll. 195-197, as convincingly explained by Schmitz, 2011.

16 Dem. 19.305-306.

17 Tchernetzka *et al.*, 2007.

indeed special circumstances which account for the scale of abandonment during Agesilaos' campaign of 396 BC. This expedition was unusually long, lasting 'most of the summer' until 'the start of autumn', and marched deep inland, into 'Phrygia and adjoining regions';¹⁸ Xenophon specifies that the army got as far as Dascyleion in north of Phrygia before returning to Ephesos,¹⁹ a trek of nearly 200 miles each way as the crow flies and in practice of course much longer still. Transporting large numbers of slaves over such distances for such a long time posed a particular challenge.²⁰

One reason for abandoning the little children may have been simply in order to keep up with the army, which would be harder with infants and toddlers in tow to 'slow and distract their parents'.²¹ But Xenophon's reference to the difficulty of 'feeding' the children suggests an additional and perhaps even more compelling reason. On a very long campaign the cost of feeding slaves until they could be sold would be unusually high, while the sheer numbers of slaves for sale meant that profit margins would be unusually low, so that the less valuable slaves were simply not worth keeping. A merchant who wanted to buy an adult female slave had no choice but to buy her children as well, but would abandon them if their maintenance threatened to cost more than what they could be expected to fetch eventually when sold. The same cost-benefit analysis underlies Agesilaos' scheme for enabling his friends to make large profits on the sale of slaves and other spoils: he not only let them buy on credit, but also 'told them that he would be going down to the coast soon with the army',²² i.e. he provided them with insider information that so that they could carefully time their purchases and make sure that they did not have to feed their newly bought slaves for any longer than strictly necessary.

On shorter campaigns which brought fewer slaves to the market, profit margins might have been good enough for traders not to abandon slave children, and the problem need not generally have been as widespread as it was under Agesilaos' command in 396.²³ However, abandonment was evidently at the discretion of the slave trader, and economic considerations might very well override any moral qualms about such a course of action.

What, then, was Agesilaos' solution to the problem? 'He took care of them, ensuring that they would be gathered together somewhere.' Several modern translations try to make sense of this elliptic statement by adding something that does not feature in the Greek. 'He would show concern in behalf of these poor waifs and have them conveyed to some place of *safety*' (Dakyns, 1890-7), 'some place of *refuge*' (Marchant, 1925; Azoulay, 2018, p. 208), 'quelque endroit *sûr*' (Azoulay, 2004, p. 341). The assumption is that the children were somehow

18 Diod. Sic. 14.79.3.

19 Xen. *Hell.* 3.4.13, 26; cf. 4.1.1, 15.

20 See e.g. Lewis, 2018, p. 276-277.

21 Hunt, 2018, p. 63. Cf. Lewis, 2015, p. 331-333, for overland transport of slaves in 'coffles', strings of people roped or chained together by the neck. Note that it is male captives and slaves who are bound in this way, while women and children (as in his fig. 14.1e) follow along without chains.

22 Xen. *Ages.* 1.18.

23 One of the referees for *Pallas* notes the evidence for children being sold as slaves (e.g. Xen. *Anab.* 4.8.4-8, an adult Macronian evidently brought to Greece as a child), but at relatively low prices (e.g. *IG* I³ 421, a Carian boy auctioned off for 72 dr.).

'rescued' (Krentz, 2007, p. 153) or 'taken into care' (Gray, 2011, p. 32). Yet the verb used by Xenophon, συγκομίζω, does not elsewhere have any connotation of 'conveying to safety': it simply means bringing together in one place things that had previously been dispersed, and it is regularly used of 'gathering in the harvest', for example (see *LSJ* s.v.). Nor does the verb mean 'to bring along', as seems to be assumed in a recent Italian translation,²⁴ and in an unusual interpretation of the passage which envisages Agesilaos' soldiers picking up abandoned children encountered during the march (Pritchett, 1991, p. 411).

Instead, the children were merely 'gathered together somewhere'.²⁵ When the army left camp, and the merchants packed up their own tents and booths, babies and toddlers were left behind here and there, and when Agesilaos noticed this – one imagines that he heard their mothers screaming and crying – he had them collected in a single place. Note that he did not order the merchants to take these children along with their parents and older siblings until they could eventually be sold – as I assumed in a brief previous discussion of the passage²⁶ – which would have been an obvious and relatively humane thing to do. Instead, he apparently merely arranged for their collection.

In fact, Xenophon's very next sentence tells us what the purpose of this collection was, a point overlooked by almost all translators and historians, myself included:

"He ordered those captives who, in turn, were being left behind on account of their old age to take care of them, so that they would not be killed by dogs or wolves."

τοῖς δ' αὖ διὰ γῆρας καταλειπομένοις αἰχμαλώτοις προσέταττεν ἐπιμελεῖσθαι αὐτῶν, ὡς μήτε ὑπὸ κυνῶν μήθ' ὑπὸ λύκων διαφθεῖροντο.²⁷

The translation I have offered is grammatically straightforward²⁸ and its meaning is clear: Agesilaos gave an order to elderly captives, who were also abandoned by the slave traders as insufficiently valuable wares, to look after the abandoned children and protect them from dogs and wolves. In other words, Agesilaos' intervention was limited to collecting together all the abandoned prisoners and telling them to look after one another: the old and infirm were ordered to protect the young and defenceless from predators.

This sounds to us more like a cruel joke than an example of humanity, which is no doubt why previous translations and discussions have strained to find different interpretations. Most separate the sentence about elderly captives from the sentence about children, as if Agesilaos made distinct arrangements for each group:

24 Funari, 2013: *portati con loro da qualche parte*, 'carried with them somewhere', which presumably envisages the army taking the children along on the march.

25 Similarly, Waterfield, 1997 ('rounded up and taken somewhere'); Bartlett, 2018 ('conveyed somewhere together').

26 Van Wees, 2004, p. 149.

27 Xen. *Ages.* 1.22.

28 The main verb προστάσσω + dative and infinitive means 'to give an order to someone to do something' (*LSJ* s.v. προστάσσω II.2); the infinitive ἐπιμελεῖσθαι + genitive means 'to take care of someone or something' (*LSJ* s.v. ἐπιμελέομαι A.1). Translators generally take δ' αὖ, 'in turn' or 'on the other hand', as an indication that the *treatment* of the elderly is contrasted with that of the infants, but it seems clear that the contrast lies in the *reasons* for their abandonment: 'because they could not be carried and fed' v. 'because of old age'.

“Again, he arranged that prisoners of war who were too old to accompany the army were to be looked after, that they might not fall a prey to dogs or wolves.” (Marchant 1925)

“He also gave orders that any prisoners who were abandoned because of their old age were to be provided for, to prevent their being killed by dogs or wolves.” (Waterfield 1997)

“Quant aux prisonniers qu’on abandonnait pour cause de vieillesse, il ordonnait qu’on s’en occupât et qu’on ne les laissât point dévorer par des chiens ou des loups.” (Azoulay, 2004, p. 341 n. 80)²⁹

“Dava ordine, invece, di curarsi dei prigionieri lasciati indietro per la loro vecchiaia, affinché non fossero uccisi dai cani né dai lupi” (*Conversely, he gave orders to look after the prisoners left behind on account of their old age, so that they would not be killed by dogs or wolves.*) (Funari, 2013)

“As for those prisoners in turn who were captured in battle on account of their old age [*sic*], he gave orders for them to be cared for, so that they would be destroyed by neither dogs nor wolves.” (Bartlett, 2018)

These translations take the first seven words as a separate clause, ‘as for the old...’, and leave the main verb without an object, ‘he ordered to take care of them’, which is grammatically strained, and leaves Xenophon’s text completely vague in both sentences about the nature of the ‘care’ provided.

Much nearer the correct interpretation is the oldest English translation I have found, which says that children were ‘conveyed to some place of safety; or he would entrust them to the care of fellow-prisoners also left behind on account of old age; in no case must they be left to ravening dogs and wolves’ (Dakyns 1890-7). This introduces a contrast between two ways of helping the children when the Greek has only one, but is otherwise right. Also nearly correct is a paraphrase in W.K. Pritchett’s *The Greek State at War*, which has the army on the march picking up children abandoned by the roadside who are then ‘given over to the charge of those elderly natives whom age and feebleness had spared from being sold’.³⁰ The suggestion seems to be that the children were left with the few remaining inhabitants of local villages, whom the soldiers had left alone. That cannot be right, because the elderly were also ‘captives’ who were ‘left behind’, i.e. by traders who had previously bought them. That aside, Pritchett did see the main point: Agesilaos provided no care for the elderly, but on the contrary added to their cares by making them look after the children.

In sum, Agesilaos’ campaign in Phrygia caused huge displacement across the region as he made slaves everywhere,³¹ ordering his soldiers to make prisoners rather than kill, while

29 Azoulay (ibid.) adds that ‘in sum, Agesilaos gave the young something to eat while preventing the old from being eaten...’, a little joke sadly omitted from the English translation, which instead sums up the passage as ‘Agesilaos as protector of the elderly’ (2018, p. 335 n. 1108); cf. Gray, 2011, p. 32 (‘that children be taken into care if they were abandoned, and that arrangements be made for the care of the elderly’); Ducrey, 1968, p. 330 (‘l’attention qu’il portait à ses captifs sans défense, vieillards et enfants’).

30 Pritchett, 1991, p. 411.

31 This campaign thus supports the argument of Lewis, 2018, p. 284-286, that Greek demand for slaves

giving his friends the opportunity to make a killing on the slave market. A side-effect of his extensive raiding was that slave traders, seeing their profit margins shrink, overcame whatever qualms they might have had about separating mothers and children, and left infants and toddlers behind, along with elderly slaves too old and weak to keep up. Agesilaos made no attempt to stop traders from doing this, but did go so far as to have soldiers search his abandoned camps and round up all those left behind, then leaving each newly formed group on the spot to try and survive as refugees, with nothing but the exhortation to look after one another and not to let the babies be eaten by wild animals.

If food, clothes or shelter had been provided, Xenophon would surely have made a point of mentioning this, but he does not. Incredible as it may seem, the mere gesture of bringing refugees together before leaving them in the lurch is what constitutes Agesilaos' 'humanity', which, Xenophon insists, was so exceptional that 'not only people who heard about this but even the captives themselves took a liking to him' (καὶ αὐτοὶ οἱ ἀλισκόμενοι εὐμενεῖς αὐτῷ ἐγίνοντο, *Ages.* 1.22). This jaw-dropping claim may be taken by some as evidence that Xenophon's seemingly straightforward work is to be understood as deeply ironic throughout, and his apparent eulogy of Agesilaos as a sarcastic indictment.³² But most of those in antiquity who escaped slavery only to end up living as refugees would not even have enjoyed the relative safety of being part of a group, and I would argue that Xenophon's words were genuinely intended as flattery. Such was the brutality of Greek warfare that even a token gesture of concern by a general for those whom he had made slaves or refugees could legitimately be praised as notable proof of humane 'benevolence'.³³

References

- AZOULAY, V., 2004, *Xénophon et les grâces du pouvoir: de la charis au charisma*, Paris.
- AZOULAY, V., 2018, *Xenophon and the Graces of Power*, Swansea.
- BARTLETT, R., 2018, *Agesilaos* and Introduction to *Agesilaos*, in G.A. McBrayer (ed.), *Xenophon. The Shorter Writings*, Ithaca - London, p. 51-78 and 79-106.
- DAKYNS, H.G., 1890-7, *The Works of Xenophon*, London.
- DUCREY, P., 1968, *Le traitement des prisonniers de guerre dans la Grèce antique: des origines à la conquête romaine*, Paris.
- FUNARI, R., 2013, *Senofonte. Agesilao*, Roma.
- GRAY, V.J., 2011, *Xenophon's Mirror of Princes: Reading the Reflections*, Oxford - New York.
- HUNT, P., 2018, *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery*, Hoboken - Chichester.
- KRENTZ, P., 2007, War, in P. Sabin, H. van Wees, and M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare, Vol. I*, Cambridge, p. 147-185.
- LEWIS, D.M., 2011, Near Eastern Slaves in Classical Attica and the Slave Trade with Persian Territories, *CQ*, 61.1, p. 91-113.

caused severe destabilisation within Phrygia and prevented state-formation.

32 So most recently, with specific regard to *Agesilaos*, Bartlett, 2018, p. 79-106.

33 This paper has benefited from the helpful comments of Laura Loddo and two referees for *Pallas*; any remaining mistakes, omissions and misjudgements are my own.

- LEWIS, D.M., 2015, The Market for Slaves in the Fifth- and Fourth-century Aegean, in E.M. Harris, D.M. Lewis, and M. Woolmer (eds.), *The Ancient Greek Economy: Markets, Households and City-States*, Cambridge, p. 316-336.
- LEWIS, D.M., 2018, *Greek Slave Systems in Their Eastern Mediterranean Context, c. 800-146 BC*, Oxford.
- MARCHANT, E.C., 1925, Xenophon, *Scripta Minora*, Cambridge - London.
- PRITCHETT, W.K., 1991, *The Greek State at War, Volume V*, Princeton.
- SCHMITZ, W., 2011, Der Verkauf einer Sklavenfamilie, *ZPE*, 179, p. 53-55.
- TCHERNETSKA, N., HANDLEY, E., AUSTIN, C., and HORVÁTH, L., 2007, New Readings in the Fragment of Hyperides' *Against Timandros* from the Archimedes Palimpsest', *ZPE*, 62, p. 1-4.
- VAN WEES, H., 2004, *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities*, London.
- VLISSOPOULOS, K., 2010, Athenian Slave Names and Athenian Social History, *ZPE*, 175, p. 113-144.
- WATERFIELD, R., 1997, Xenophon, *Hiero the Tyrant and Other Treatises*, translated by R. Waterfield.