Lewis Helfand , Lalit Kumar Singh

400 BC. The Story of the Ten Thousand

India (2010)

TAGS: Architecture Athens Graeco-Persian Wars Greek Art Greek History Socrates Xenophon

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

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Creators

Lewis Helfand , b. 1978
(Author)

Lewis Helfand (27 April 1978) was brought-up in Philadelphia in the USA. He studied political science at Haverford College, but had a long-time interest in writing, drawing, and creating comics. He now works as a freelance journalist and comic-book writer for publishing houses including Campfire Graphic Novels and Yellow Nightmares Press. Many of his publications are comic-book biographies or adaptations of classic literature, such as *The Time Machine* (2010), *Muhammad Ali: The King of the Ring* (2012), and *Kim* (2011).

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Lalit Kumar Singh (Illustrator)

Lalit Kumar Singh is a comic book artist based in New Delhi, India. He has illustrated a number of graphic novels which adapt classic works of literature.

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Additional information

Summary

400 is a graphic novel retelling of the March of the Ten Thousand, a historical event which took place at the beginning of the fourth century BCE. Greek mercenaries found themselves stranded in what is now Iraq after the failure of a coup by Cyrus the Younger who was attempting to seize the Persian throne. The event is known to history largely because of the thorough account written by a participant in the events, the philosopher-historian Xenophon. His *Anabasis*, or journey up country, was written many years later. It is part historical account, part apologia, part philosophical exploration of panhellenism and leadership. *400*, like the many other retellings of this story, is based on Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

400 opens on a page of *dramatis personae*, with labelled images of Cyrus the Younger, Artaxerxes II, Aeneas, Eustachius, and Xenophon. The novel itself then begins with the narrator introducing the two rivals, Cyrus the Younger, a born leader, and Artaxerxes II, a man so lacking in good reputation that few support him despite his crown. The narrator explains that even Artaxerxes' mother did not support him, so that when his father was dying, he "needed to act quickly." The next page reveals a double-page map of the Persian Empire and explains the political situation at the beginning of Artaxerxes' reign: how many were loyal to Cyrus because of his generosity and good leadership and how many therefore backed Cyrus when the governor, Tissaphernes, began encroaching into Persian lands. Cyrus built such a following that he had many to take with him into the heart of Persia. The reader then learns that the narrator is one Eustachius, who "was there as a witness to it all."

The action then moves to Cunaxa, near Babylon. The Greeks are fighting amongst themselves, some are enraged at having been deceived and finding themselves unwittingly engaged in a revolt. Aeneas considers it a bad omen and notes to Eustachius that he has seen Xenophon talking to the generals. Xenophon is introduced via the rumours around him: that he was a student of Socrates, that he was invited on the expedition, that he is not wealthy but has influential friends and the generals talk to him although he has no officer's rank. Further gossip confirms the earlier rumours – Cyrus has brought them to fight the king, Artaxerxes II. General Menon persuades the army to stand by Cyrus despite massive anxiety about Persian numbers. The Battle of Cunaxa is over quickly, with the Greek contingent successful

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but the battle lost with the death of Cyrus in combat against his brother. Artaxerxes resolves to make Cyrus' army suffer. After the battle, the Greeks' generals are deceived and murdered by the Persians. The Greek troops resist the Persians urging them to surrender. Xenophon manages to organise them to begin the march towards the Black Sea. The narrator notes that they were putting a lot of trust in him.

The scene shifts back to Athens in a time just before the campaign. Aeneas tried to persuade Eustachius to campaign with him with promises of riches. Eustachius' pregnant wife, Melaina, overhears from her quarters and later cautions him against going, but he is concerned about their failing farm. Eustachius soon sees his father, who has heard that people from all over Greece are flocking to Cyrus. His father tells him that his mother will not approve of him going, but he implies his own encouragement. Eustachius visits his farm; his slaves ask if he is really going to war. He confirms that he is and promises one long-serving slave that he will free him on his return. Eustachius' mother weeps and asks him not to go, reminding him that he is responsible for two families since his brother's death. Eustachius angrily answers that this is why he must go. His elderly father gives him his own shield and tells him to bring it back with him.

The scene cuts to the thick of battle. Skull-headed soldiers fight Eustachius. His dead brother is run through and calls out to him. He wakes in bed, horrified. In the morning, he prepares to depart. His young son helps him to dress and asks about the death of Eustachius' brother, who, the reader learns, died at the battle of Aegospotami. Eustachius bids farewell to his son and wife and departs. He calls on Aeneas, who is firmly telling his teenage son that he may not join him on the campaign. Eustachius promises the boy that he will look after his father.

The scene shifts back to the army, a week after Cunaxa. The Greeks are fighting their way along the route. Many have died and their living conditions are poor. The Greeks choose the difficult pass through the mountains. Xenophon keeps things together as chaos begins to unfold. He forbids the soldiers to leave each other in the snow, saying that they will make it back as brothers or not at all. The soldiers think of home; they chafe each other with talk of each other's wives remarrying. The soldiers come to a mountain fortress and batter their way in. They are horrified when the defenders turn out to be peasants who throw themselves over the cliffs edge rather than succumb to the

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Greek attack. Eustachius' friend, Aeneas, dies when he is dragged over the edge while trying to stop the peasants' leap. Xenophon grants time to find and bury the body. Eustachius resolves to return Aeneas' sword to Aeneas' son.

The Greeks reach the sea. They cry out, "Thalatta! Thalatta!" – "The sea. The sea!" There is relief in the camp, marked by eating, drinking, boasting, and wrestling. Conflict looks to emerge soon, as the man sent to seek ships has failed to return and supplies are running low. The ships arrive just in time and the Greeks sail across the Black Sea. There they divide, 6000 going with Cheirisophus, 2000 with Xenophon. While politely accepting provisions from some locals, Xenophon hears that Cheirisophus' group is being massacred by Thracians. Xenophon's group charge to the rescue, saving some of the others from the attack of the red-headed Thracians. They continue to fight their way across Thrace, but internal conflict emerges again when Xenophon wishes to take the group to join the Spartans under Thibron, while Sisyphus argues for campaigning under the Thracian leader, Seuthes II. Xenophon explains the conundrum to Eustachius, but insists that he will not compel the men to do anything. He calls a meeting to discuss it. The army vote to fight for the Thracians so that they earn at least something to take home. Seuthes betrays them and they continue with nothing despite the loss of 500 of their number. The army turns on Xenophon, blaming him. Eustachius angrily reminds them that this is unjust, but they berate him and insist that Xenophon should be exiled from Athens for what he has done to them. Xenophon and Eustachius leave to search for Seuthes. They find him alone, threaten him, and return to the army with the pay they were promised. Xenophon prepares to leave alone, but the army humbly ask him to lead them to Greece.

Eustachius reflects on the massive loss of life he has witnessed, counting down the diminishing numbers atop images of combat. There are now 6000. They reach Thibron in Macedon. Thibron will continue the fight against Tissaphernes, but Eustachius wants no part in it. The scene moves to Athens. Eustachius finds his sons training at sword-fighting. He greets them, and then the slave to whom he has promised freedom. Eustachius returns the shield to his father and hugs his mother. His wife approaches; she introduces him to the daughter, Hypatia, born in his absence. He visits Aeneas' son and hands over Aeneas' sword. The boy grips it with grim resolve. In the final moment of the novel, Eustachius reflects: "They say that if you live by the sword, you will die by the sword. Is that how I will meet my end if I go

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to war again?"

There is a page of adverts from the publisher, then a historical summary of the Spartans, the Athenians, the Persians, and Xenophon, and an activity inviting readers to design their own shield decorations.

Analysis

400 immerses the reader as if in a play with its striking illustrated *dramatis personae* and opening page featuring the heads of Cyrus and Artaxerxes in close-up facing away from each other. The opening section of the book then concentrates on getting readers up to speed with the situation, so readers who are not familiar with this period can swiftly understand what is happening. The narrator follows the character dichotomy found in ancient sources (esp. Xenophon), that depicts Cyrus the Younger as a charismatic and able young man and his brother Artaxerxes II as a less popular figure (at least amongst the Greeks). It is apparent that the author worked closely with Xenophon's *Anabasis* in order to create the narrative. The story does not significantly diverge; changes to the plot of the story simplify the narrative rather than altering it very much. The suspicion about what they are there for, the events at the battle, the betrayal of the generals, Xenophon taking on responsibility, the march through the plains and into the mountains, the divisions and difficulties which beset the group, and the prospect of fighting for Seuthes are all recognisable from the *Anabasis*. Further key historical figures feature: Tissaphernes their nemesis, Clearchus and Menon, the doomed generals, Cheirisophus leading the van (front), and so on. Until recent decades, the *Anabasis* was required reading in the UK and elsewhere for enormous numbers of young people, mostly boys, learning Greek. 400 works as an illustrated history of the Ten Thousand (as the subtitle – *The Story of the Ten Thousand* - suggests), continuing the tradition of the March as a heroic story for the young to enjoy and learn from. Nonetheless, the changes made to the *Anabasis* in areas beyond plot are telling in terms of the communication of different cultural values.

There is, for example, enormous emphasis on swords in *400*. Greek heavy infantry - hoplites – are represented describing themselves as having, "nothing but our swords, shields, fists, and sweat" (p. 9), when it is well-established that hoplites fought with spears and that few had swords at all. Similarly, Greeks can be seen going into battle with swords akin to those wielded in the high medieval period and similar weapons stick out of abandoned corpses. A refusal to surrender is

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phrased as a refusal to give up "our swords"; swords are put to throats and backs during arguments; a man preparing to go on campaign must get his "sword sharpened"; there is an elaborate sub-plot about ensuring that a man's sword is delivered to his son; the front page depicts a soldier wielding a giant two-handed sword. The Greeks are also depicted using spears, but this recurrent emphasis on the sword is an incongruent anachronism which gives a false impression of combat in this area in this period. It perhaps owes more to the iconography of modern fantasy, included as a means of making the ancient past more "fantastic". Other references to hoplite warfare are similar. There is reference to an "unstoppable wall" of overlapping shields, which becomes vulnerable "if a single soldier loses his formation" (p. 14); this would have been as impractical as it sounds and does not represent a realistic version of hoplite combat despite the other indicators of realism in the book.

A further element of military (mis)representation has broader implications. Most of the Greek soldiers are depicted with a letter "A" embossed upon their shield; the Greeks have a fairly uniform look of A-shield, red cloak, matching helmets, and similar armour – jointed plate mail. Perhaps it would be churlish to observe that Greeks of this period did not use helmets or armour of this sort, as that is a fairly detailed point that arguably does little to alter the story. However, the uniform use of equipment, particularly the shields and cloaks, does change the tenor of the story. First it must be noted that the "A" functions as an indicator of "Athenian", in a fictional imitation of the Lacedaemonian (essentially, "Spartan") practice of using "L" on their shields. The Lacedaemonians also used red cloaks. The Athenians are therefore being dressed as alternative Spartans, presumably in an attempt to benefit from the recognisability of Spartans achieved through Frank Miller's *300* (which would also seem to have inspired the name of *400*). More significantly, the use of the "A" shield indicates a wider pattern in *400*, namely the tendency to conflate "Greek" with "Athenian". Although it is noted early on that "soldiers from all over Greece are signing up to fight for Cyrus", the Ten Thousand are represented as Athenians. Even a historical character who is worked in to the action, Aeneas, has his city reassigned, changing him from a citizen of Stymphalus to an Athenian. While this simplifies the narrative, potentially making it more easily digested, it also removes what was, in antiquity and for most writers in later generations, one of the most significant aspects of the March of the Ten Thousand, namely the panhellenic cooperation of people from all over Greece. The story

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ceases to be about disparate people working together and learning to focus on what they have in common and becomes a much more simplistic "us and them" narrative.

400's narrator is a fictional participant-narrator, Eustachius. He was perhaps regarded as a more relatable figure than the famous Xenophon. There is a sub-plot about Eustachius' motivation for going on the expedition, and that sub-plot reflects a typical motive for historical mercenaries of the period (including Xenophon) – the desire for wealth, although nothing is said of the additionally important desire to escape Greece during a politically volatile period. Eustachius wants only to "return home with enough money to save [his] farm" (p. 13, with 23). Eustachius is persuaded to go by Aeneas in a manner reminiscent of Xenophon's account of being persuaded by his friend, Proxenos, the Boeotian (*Anabasis*, 3.1.5). Eustachius' motive is therefore realistic, with a lean towards the sympathetic – an understandable combination to arouse sympathy for the protagonist.

It can be a challenge to a modern author to represent the violence of those who are intended to be the figures that the reader identifies with. For the Battle of Cunaxa, this is achieved by presenting images depicting the battle accompanied by text describing things that one cannot think about during battle (p. 15). This allows for the acknowledgement of violent events while negating the need to recount them realistically and focusing on aspects which make the protagonists seem normal and vulnerable (such as caring about one's family, enjoying sleeping in one's own bed, missing the sound of one's children's laughter). Later, during the actual march, the army's need to obtain provisions is not disguised and there are some violent incidents. Not least of these occurs amongst the Taochians, an episode which does not reflect well on the Ten Thousand. The Greeks approach the Taochians' stronghold. They force their way in. They find that there are few supplies there and the terrified inhabitants are throwing themselves off the cliffs. Aeneas, distressed by what he sees, dies slipping from the cliff crying "We are not your enemies..." in a vain attempt to rescue someone who is falling. This becomes a pivotal moment for Eustachius who grieves heavily for his friend and persuades Xenophon to allow time for burial and retrieval of Aeneas' sword. This episode comes direct from Xenophon's *Anabasis* (4.7.1–4), but with a few interpretative differences. Xenophon agrees that this was a bad business and calls the suicides at the cliff a "terrible scene". Beyond that he is more pragmatic. Aeneas dies because he tries to take a valuable cloak off a man who is falling to his death and ends up

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being dragged off too. He is certainly not claiming that they come in peace. Xenophon also notes that the Ten Thousand obtained a great deal of cattle and asses from the strong-hold and there are frequent references to them eating or otherwise using the animals for much of the subsequent march. For Xenophon, this was a miserable but successful episode; in *400* it is a tragic failure in which both sides lose painfully yet with dignity – a microcosm of the poignant horrors of war. There is occasional interpersonal violence between members of the Ten Thousand, but these are generally linked to the defence of key values, such as an occasion when Xenophon strikes someone for preparing to leave an invalid in the snow.

Xenophon's staunch defence of the invalid is typical of the emphasis on brotherhood and group loyalty. To a great extent this replicates the atmosphere of the *Anabasis*, which to some extent idealises the camaraderie of the group. On the other hand, the term "brotherhood" is significant here, as *400* entirely erases the women and children who travelled with the army. Xenophon tells us that there were so many young people travelling with the army that when they held games to celebrate reaching the sea a boys' race was included amongst the events (*Anabasis*, 4.8.27). The boys, he explains, were mostly the sons of the captive women traveling with them; none of these women are depicted or mentioned in *400*. Xenophon tells the story of how one of the boys ended up on the march (*Anabasis*, 4.6.1–3). The army captured a village chief whom they meant to use as a guide; they brought one of his sons along. During an argument at some point later, Cheirisophus struck the village chief, who then fled in the night, leaving his son behind. The man who had been looking after the son decided to keep him with him as his lover. *400* does include the coercion of a local to act as a guide (p. 36-37), but avoids reference to the guide's children or the fate of children amongst the soldiers. Children are rather idealised in the text, depicted through Eustachius' memories of home and his fond arrival amongst his sons. While the women on the march are edited out of the story, women do appear in domestic scenes in Athens in the form of Eustachius' wife and mother, both of whom attempt to dissuade him from going. Eustachius' relationship with his wife is depicted as affectionate if strained by economic distress. Eustachius is nonetheless a slave-owner, but, as is common in modern fictional accounts of classical Athens, he is well-liked by his slaves and promises to free one of them on his return – a promise he keeps. References to the gods and to religious practice occur throughout *400*, although they occur only a tiny fraction of the amount

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what they do in the Anabasis, a work with a pronounced interest in religious matters.

Overall *400* tells the story of the Ten Thousand, celebrating it as a hyper-masculine vision of endurance and muscles combined with anxieties about death and disappointing those who rely on you. It makes a good introduction to some of the events and major figures of this period while softening several aspects of warfare and life in the ancient world more generally in order to target the work towards a young, modern audience.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Architecture Athens Graeco-Persian Wars Greek Art Greek History Socrates Xenophon
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Adversity Boys Conflict Death Expectations Family Gender expectations/construction Gender, male Heroism Historical figures History Homesickness Intertextuality Journeys Loss Masculinity Parents (and children) Peers Resilience Survival Travel Violence War

Further Reading

Flower, Michael, A., *Xenophon's Anabasis or The Expedition of Cyrus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012

Lane-Fox, Robin, *The Long March: Xenophon and the Ten Thousand*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004

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