



Summary :

The March of the Ten Thousand is one of most glorious chapters of Greek military history. It contains the long march home of the Greek mercenaries who had participated in the military operations of Cyrus II against Artaxerxes II in 401 BC. The march from Babylon to the Black Sea lasted from September 401 until May 399 BC. Xenophon, who had accompanied the force, described this march in a most vivid way in his work Anabasis.

Date

401-399 BC

Geographical Location

From Babylon as far as the Pontus, Asia Minor.

1. Concentration of Mercenary Troops

The ascension of [Artaxerxes](#) to the Persian throne in 404 BC did not have the consent of his brother [Cyrus](#),¹ who started concentrating barbarian and Greek troops in order to attack Artaxerxes and gain the throne. Not before long, he gathered an army of 70,000 to 100,000 either by using reasonable excuses or secretly, with the help of trustworthy Greeks to whom he sent money. Among them were about 13,000 Greek mercenaries from all around Greece recruited by Proxenus of Boeotia, Menon and Aristippus from Larissa, Clearchus from Sparta and Agias from Arcadia. Cyrus also contacted the Spartans, hiding his intention to turn against his brother. In order to return the help he had offered them during the last years of the Peloponnesian War, the Spartan authorities sent 25-30 ships under the command of admiral Pythagoras or Samios and about 700-800 mercenaries under Cheirisophus. When the Greek mercenaries were informed that they would fight against the royal army of Artaxerxes, they reacted strongly. However, Cyrus reassured them and his promises about generous remunerations dispelled their doubts.²

2. The Battle at Cunaxa and its Consequences

In the spring of 401 BC, Cyrus and his army³ started from [Sardis](#) and after crossing [Cilicia](#) and Mesopotamia, arrived at Cunaxa, a village in the area of Babylon, in September of the same year. The royal army of Artaxerxes awaited him there.⁴ In the ensuing battle, Cyrus lost his life. His death scared the Asians he had brought with him and they fled from the battlefield. Only the Greeks, led by Clearchus, managed to keep their positions, without knowing about Cyrus' death. When they were informed about it the next day, they decided to take the way back home. Tissaphernes offered to help them go back to Greece. With his tempting promises, he managed to get the troops to cross the Tigris River. When they reached the shores of the river Zabatus, he invited the Greek officers to his tent. Those who responded to his invitation, encouraged by Clearchus, fell into his trap and had a tragic death.⁵

3. Organisation and Preparation for the Journey

After these dramatic events, [Xenophon](#) was the first to react, as he had followed the mercenary troops not as a soldier but at an invitation of general Proxenus, who had been murdered by Tissaphernes. He suggested that they should elect new generals and officers to replace the victims as soon as possible. This idea was accepted and was soon realised. Xenophon himself succeeded Proxenus. Cheirisophus the Lacedaemonian was assigned with the general command, as Sparta dominated Greece at the time. Without any further delay, the small army was prepared to embark on one of the most daring military operations in history. The return of the 8600 Greek mercenaries is one of the most glorious chapters in Greek military history. It lasted from September 401 until May 399 BC.



4. The Anabasis

The military and moral superiority of the Greeks was shown most clearly in the famous march from Babylon to the Black Sea. This route is described most vividly by Xenophon in his work *Anabasis*. The Anabasis (ascent), that is, the route towards mainland Asia Minor, is narrated only in the first six chapters of the first book. Then follows the description of the battle at Cunaxa, while the main part of the work includes the narration of the daring march towards the Black Sea, through hostile mainland and impassable mountains until the troops were united with the Spartan forces led by [Thibron](#). The Anabasis holds a special place among historical works thanks to the direct narration of the events Xenophon witnessed and to the rich geographical and cultural information provided.

5. The Route and the Events of the March of the Ten Thousand

The Ten Thousand, after crossing the River Zabatus, started moving north, following the course of the Tigris. Tissaphernes continued to follow them and attack or ambush them. Nevertheless, the Greeks repelled his attacks. When they reached Carduchia (now Bohtan),⁶ the local captives informed them that if they moved to the right, they would reach [Lydia](#) and [Ionia](#) crossing all upper Mesopotamia, [Armenia](#) and Asia Minor, while if they continued to move north, they would easily reach a region that was not under Persian control. They decided to move north, through impassable mountains controlled by the Carduchians, in order to escape the Persian threat, but also because they would have much less distance to cover until they reached the coasts and regions inhabited by Greeks. The route through the land of the Carduchians was the most gruelling and difficult part of the march of the Ten Thousand. The Carduchians, one of the most warlike people of Asia Minor, were accustomed to living and moving in the high and gnarled mountains of their region. They constantly attacked the Greek soldiers, who advanced painfully through frosted paths, turbulent winds and cliffs, having the constant fear of avalanches.

In December 400 BC, they left the inhospitable land of the Carduchians and camped at some villages in the plain of the Centrites (Bohtan Su) River, feeder of the Tigris, the border between Armenia and Carduchia. Nevertheless, hardship awaited them there as well, as Armenian infantry and cavalry waited for them across the river to stop them from crossing it, while behind them the Carduchians were ready to attack. The Greeks tricked the troops of satrap Orontes waiting for them on the opposite bank and escaped the Carduchians.

After crossing the Centrites River, they crossed Armenia without being seriously bothered by the royal army. Nevertheless, they had to deal with the tough climate, the impassable mountains and hunger. While crossing the Phasis (modern Riuni) River, which is identified with the Araxes (now Aras, or Araks) River flowing into the Caspian Sea, and not with the river flowing into the Black Sea, they saw the tribes of Chalybes, Taochi and Phasians, rebellious and wild peoples, ranked across the mountains. Following the plan of Xenophon, the Greeks defeated the barbarian tribes and drove them from the field.

Then they invaded the land of the Taochians and got the necessary supplies after occupying a fortified village. Then they turned southwest and crossed the land of the Chalibians without taking anything from there before they reached the Harpassus River. All contemporary historians identify Harpassus with the modern Coruh River. After crossing the river, they entered the country of the Scythini, where they found food. After a march of four days, they reached the city Gymnias, the first big and rich city of that area which welcomed them. The majority of scholars identify the city of Gymnias with present day Bayburt. The locals informed the Ten Thousand that they were only a few days away from Trebizond.

Indeed, after five days they climbed Mount Theches and could finally see the sea. When they caught a glimpse of the Black Sea, the men hollered the famous phrase 'the sea! the sea!' ('thalatta, thalatta'). They reached a narrow plot overlooking the Black Sea and started hugging each other in tears, without being able to believe they had finally made it. They heaped up wood and stones, on top of which they placed offerings, such as animal skins and some shields they had looted during their adventure, in order to celebrate the happy ending of their troubles. Only a few years ago, a British researcher, T. Mitford, argued that he located the point from where the Greeks saw the sea. This point is 30 miles away from Trebizond, at a small flat place of the mountain called Deveboynu. The place was until recently used by caravans trafficking goods between Trebizond and Erzurum. T. Mitford located the circular base of a huge pile of rocks, about 12-13 metres in diameter.⁷



In May 400 BC, the Greeks reached [Trapezus](#), the first Greek city they found in their way. The city welcomed them warmly and the Greeks stayed there for a month, celebrating their success, making sacrifices to the gods and organising games. The great adventure that had started on the day after the battle at Cunaxa ended in Trebizond. During the long march back numerous casualties were caused because of the enemy attacks, the cold, the famine and the diseases. About 4400 men were lost out of a total number of 13,000 that had joined forces with Cyrus. Only 8600 made it to the [Pontus](#).



In the course of their journey they did not avoid either the conflicts with the Greek cities of the Pontus or disputes between them. They left for Kerasous, while the journey to [Heraclea](#) was made mostly by ship. In order to find food, they conducted rapacious raids. Many of them, nevertheless, did not want to advance. The foundation of a colony designed by Xenophon in the Pontus and [Bithynia](#) was not made possible due to the reactions of the satrap [Pharnabazus](#).

When they reached the Bosphorus, Anaxibius, the Lacedaemonian admiral of the Propontis, did not know what to do with them. After he helped them reach Byzantium, he invited them outside the walls, pretending he would give them money and food, and abandoned them. The Ten Thousand then served a dethroned Thracian tribe leader, Seuthes, and spent the winter of 400-399 BC fighting against other Thracian enemies of their employer. Finally, they were invited to reinforce the Lacedaemonians against the Persians in Asia Minor. The army went from Thrace to [Lampsacus](#) and through the [Troad](#) and [Mysia](#) they reached [Pergamon](#). There, Xenophon handed over the army to Thibron, leader of the Spartan forces.

That was the end of an operation that shook the foundation of the vast Persian Empire and renewed the feeling of supremacy of the Greeks over the Persians and the other eastern populations.

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1. Artaxerxes had arrested Cyrus in order to assassinate him, but he did not implement his plan thanks to the intervention of their mother. *IEE*, vol. Γ1, p. 334.
 2. Xen., *An.* A.VI.7.
 3. Xenophon reports that when the army was reviewed, there were 10,400 Greek hoplites, 2500 targeteers, 10 thousand barbarians and 200 scythed chariots. (Xen., *An.* A.VII.10). That is, out of a total of 14,000 Greeks mentioned in A.II.9, there are 1100 fewer men; some of them escaped and some lost their lives because of illnesses or fighting.
 4. According to Xenophon, it included the excessive number of 1,120,000 men (Xen., *An.* A.VII.11), while Diodorus of Sicily mentions 400,000 men.
 5. They were the generals Proxenus, Menon, Agias, Clearchus and Socrates.
 6. Carduchia is identified with modern Bohtan. Some researchers consider modern Kurds their descendants.
 7. Mitford, T., 'Thalatta, Thalatta. Xenophon's view of the Black Sea', *AnatSt* 50 (2000), pp. 127-131.

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Chronological Table

March 401 BC: Cyrus leaves Sardis.

September 401 BC: Battle at Cunaxa.

October 401 BC: Arrest of the generals.

November 401 BC: March and stay in the plain of the Tigris, in Carduchia, crossing of the Centritis River (Bohtan Su).

December 401 BC: March in the plain of Armenia.

January 400 BC: March on the mountains of the Taochians, in the land of the Chalybes and the country of the Scythini.

February 400 BC: In the land of the Makronon and the Colchians, stay in Trapezus.

March 400 BC: Stay in Kerasous.

May 400 BC: Arrival in Heraclea.

October 400 BC: Crossing of the Bosphorus in Byzantium.

Winter 400-399 BC: Arrival in Perinthus (modern Marmara Ereğlisi).

March 399 BC: The army arrives in Thibron.