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Proleptic Moves in Xenophon's Narrative of Mantinea (*Hellenica* 7.5)

The Fog of War

Luuk Huitink

1 Introduction: History in Search of a Plot

Xenophon famously ends the *Hellenica* after the inconclusive Battle of Mantinea, fought in 362 BCE between on the one hand Thebes and its allies, led by Epaminondas, and on the other hand Sparta, led by Agesilaus, with support of Elea, Athens, and Mantinea itself:

τούτων δὲ πραχθέντων τούναντίον ἐγεγένητο οὐ ἐνόμισαν πάντες ἄνθρωποι ἔσεσθαι. συνελθλυθείας γὰρ σχεδὸν ἀπάσης τῆς Ἑλλάδος καὶ ἀντιτεταγμένων, οὐδείς ἦν ὅστις οὐκ ᾔετο, εἰ μάχη ἔσοιτο, τοὺς μὲν κρατήσαντας ἄρξειν, τοὺς δὲ κρατηθέντας ὑπηκόους ἔσεσθαι· ὁ δὲ θεὸς οὕτως ἐποίησεν ὥστε ἀμφοτέροι μὲν τροπαῖον ὡς νενικηκότες ἐστήσαντο, τοὺς δὲ ἰσταμένους οὐδέτεροι ἐκώλυον, νεκροὺς δὲ ἀμφοτέροι μὲν ὡς νενικηκότες ὑποσπόνδους ἀπέδοσαν, ἀμφοτέροι δὲ ὡς ἡττημένοι ὑποσπόνδους ἀπελάμβανον, νενικηκέναι δὲ φάσκοντες ἐκάτεροι οὔτε χῶρα οὔτε πόλει οὔτ' ἀρχὴ οὐδέτεροι οὐδὲν πλέον ἔχοντες ἐφάνησαν ἢ πρὶν τὴν μάχην γενέσθαι· ἀκρισία δὲ καὶ ταραχὴ ἔτι πλείων μετὰ τὴν μάχην ἐγένετο ἢ πρόσθεν ἐν τῇ Ἑλλάδι. ἐμοὶ μὲν δὴ μέχρι τούτου γραφῆσθω· τὰ δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα ἴσως ἄλλω μελήσει. (7.5.26–27)

When the battle was over, the result was the opposite of what everyone had expected. Given that nearly all of Greece was gathered there and had stood with one side or the other, everyone thought that if a battle occurred, the victor would rule over the defeated and the defeated would be subject to the victor. But the god so arranged it that each side set up a trophy as if victorious, and each was not prevented by the enemy; each gave back the dead under truce as if victorious, and both received back their dead under truce as if defeated. And although each side claimed the victory, neither side was seen to have gained anything—no city, territory or increased rule—that they did not have prior to the battle. In Greece as a whole there was more uncertainty and disorder after the bat-

tle than there had been before. To this point, then, let it be written by me. Perhaps someone else will be concerned with what happened after this.¹

Although all people (πάντες ἄνθρωποι) thought that Mantinea would be an epoch-making battle, which would definitively establish or abolish Theban hegemony, it turned out to be nothing of the sort, and Xenophon turns the task of writing about subsequent events to another, future historian, with an 'almost personal sense of frustration and anxiety'.² But there is more to it than that. Xenophon appears to have chosen the Battle of Mantinea to conclude his work in order to articulate a specific view of history.³ More specifically, the epilogue to the *Hellenica* appears to weigh up two conceptualisations of history, and to reject one in favour of the other.

The people who thought that Mantinea would be a decisive battle bought into a common conceptualisation of history, according to which historical events—and perhaps especially wars and military campaigns—are essentially *stories*, that is, imbued with a plot and explicable in terms of a trajectory of causally and temporally linked events, with a clear beginning ('the first shot rang out') and end ('the cannons fell silent'), and containing a satisfactory resolution in the shape of hopes fulfilled (in the case of the victors) or dashed (in the case of the defeated).⁴ This view deals with the fact that history obviously does *not* actually come to an end by dividing it up into successive epochs or periods (effectively a series of complete narrative arcs of variable size); for Thucydides, for instance, there was a clear κρίσις ('decisive resolution') of the Persian Wars, which separated that epoch from the period which he himself treated.⁵ This is a view of history which Xenophon rejects, nowhere more forcefully than in his

1 All references are to Xenophon's *Hellenica*, unless indicated otherwise. Translations follow Marincola's rendering in *The Landmark Hellenica* (Strassler 2009), with adaptations.

2 Dillery 1995: 19–20.

3 The fourth-century BCE historian Anaximenes of Lampsacus (*BNJ* 72 T 14) also brought down his history to Mantinea and the death of Epaminondas—with what closural effect we do not know. Diodorus Siculus (15.89.1) states that the battle was indecisive, but provides closure by reporting that a general truce was established soon after. Demosthenes in *On the Crown* from 330 BCE (19.18) shares Xenophon's view of this time as marked by 'indiscriminate strife and confusion' (ἀκριτος ... ἔρις καὶ ταραχή).

4 See Faust 2011: 7–8 on the human tendency to talk about war in such narrative terms.

5 Thuc. 1.23.1. One feature which reinforces the sense of a clean break is that Thucydides (at least in his first seven books) gets rid almost completely of one of the main protagonists of the Persian Wars, namely the Persians—even though modern historians agree that they continued to exert an important influence on the course of events during the Peloponnesian Wars; cf. Munson 2012.

account of Mantinea. He denies that historical events neatly congeal into discrete narratives: he started his work *medias in res*, with the words *μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα* (1.1.1), and now he ends it by pointing to a lack of closure.⁶ His use of the term *ἀχρισία* (the word occurs here first in classical Greek) can be seen as a direct response to Thucydides' notion of *χρῖσις*.⁷

Since the meaning and purpose of history often cannot be found in the human sphere, Xenophon appears to have turned instead to an alternative conceptualisation of historical processes and to have looked at the realm of the divine 'as the last place to situate order'.⁸ Thus, in the epilogue to the *Hellenica* he ultimately holds 'the god' (ὁ θεός) responsible for the indecisive outcome of Mantinea. Now, the questions of whether this view amounts to an actual theory of historical causation and, if so, what that theory looks like, are not easy to answer: Xenophon at times appears to suggest that 'the god' actively interferes in history by punishing the impious and the wicked (especially in his description of the fall of Sparta in Book 5), but at other times he seems to maintain a more abstract conceptualization of the divine as vaguely upholding a certain balance of power among rivalling individuals and states.⁹ So, appeals to 'the god' or 'the divine' do not necessarily bring easy transparency. In fact, it seems that divine order will often manifest itself on the human plane as *disorder*, such as the widely experienced *ταραχή* after Mantinea—perhaps a nod to the Herodotean Solon's understanding of τὸ θεῖον as πᾶν φθονερόν τε καὶ ταραχῶδες ('entirely grudging and given to sowing confusion', 1.32.1).¹⁰ I do not think that Xenophon subscribes to the view that history, once it is contemplated from a divine instead of a human perspective, suddenly *does* amount to a coherent story and bring closure: *divine* logic, that is, is not necessarily the same as *narrative* logic.

These considerations are relevant, I think, in assessing scholarly claims about the 'disjointed nature of the narrative' of the *Hellenica* and about the way

6 See Rood 2004: 349, with further bibliography. Note that the (no doubt deliberately disorienting) start of the *Hellenica* is not a good fit with the end of Thucydides' *History*, increasing the sense of randomness (one could start anywhere); cf. Krentz 1989: 86. For Xenophon's continuing 'destabilization' of temporal boundaries in the *Hellenica*, see Dillery 1995: 22–27.

7 Tsakmakis 2013: 107.

8 Dillery 1995: 180.

9 See Dillery 1995: 179–237; for the role of the divine in the decline of Sparta, see also Tuplin 1993: 125–146. An excellent account of Xenophon's views of divine justice and human philanthropy as central forces in the historical process (at least in the *Cyropaedia*) can be found in Ellis 2016.

10 Tsakmakis 2013: 107.

in which the work 'weaves together a set of seemingly disparate events into a labyrinthine' structure.¹¹ In my view, such perceptions of the texture of the *Hellenica* can at least in part be explained on the assumption that Xenophon, one of the most avid experimenters of new narrative forms in antiquity, consciously floats different explanatory models for how and why things happen ('history in search of a plot') and plays those off against each other, whilst leaving it largely up to the readers to draw their own conclusions.¹² In my contribution, I wish to demonstrate this by considering (mostly in the form of a running commentary) the final section of the *Hellenica*, which leads up to the epilogue cited above, namely the final incursion of the Theban general Epaminondas into the Peloponnese and the Battle of Mantinea which ensued (7.5.4–25). In particular, I intend to show how Xenophon continually raises certain possibilities for how the Mantinea narrative might develop in a logical and explicable fashion—only to make clear that these possibilities were not (or at best only partially) realized. In this way he carefully prepares readers for the epilogue and its intimation of divine intervention.

2 Prolepsis and Anticipation

My reading of Xenophon's Mantinea narrative is informed by cognitively inflected reinterpretations of the narratological concept of 'prolepsis'. As described in the Introduction to this volume, such reinterpretations focus not so much on objective disruptions of the chronology of the story by narratorial announcements or actorial predictions of what is to come, as on how readers infer from the text the likely trajectory of the narrative, gradually supplementing, narrowing, and if necessary modifying their mental model of the plot.¹³ For example, Kukkonen has recently described the reading process as involving probabilistic weightings of narrative possibilities and as being especially attentive to shifts of 'probability transformations' in the plot; according to her, readers' emotional investment in the story crucially depends on such shifts.¹⁴ Similarly, Ryan suggests that one of the main ways by which narratives engage

11 Pownall 2018: 348 n. 5 (specifically on 1.1.1–1.2.3) and Gish 2009: 341 (specifically on 3.11–4.28), respectively. See also in general Rood 2007.

12 For Xenophon's awareness of different 'genres' of historiographical prose, see Bradley 2001, Harman 2021, Huitink 2022.

13 See Schomber and Tagliabue's Introduction to this volume, especially Section 4. For a good narratological introduction on standard forms of prolepsis, see De Jong 2007.

14 Kukkonen 2014; 2020.

readers is by intimating alternative developments of the plot (which she calls ‘virtual’ or ‘embedded narratives’) and making readers consider ‘side-branches’ of possibility (‘roads not taken’) embedded into the narrative of events which actually transpire: ‘[S]ome events make better stories than others because they project a wider variety of forking paths on the narrative map. Even though the story can follow only one path, the understanding of these events involves a consideration of the “virtual narratives” of the unrealised sequences that branch out of the event.’¹⁵ For Bridgeman, we can speak about ‘prolepsis’, when the text somehow triggers (by what I will in this chapter call a ‘proleptic move’) ‘anticipatory and speculative activities’ on the part of the reader about what will happen in the story.¹⁶

An emphasis on the inferences of readers and their developing discernment of what is likely to happen in a narrative necessitates a somewhat broader formal definition of prolepsis than is usually maintained in narratological studies. Ryan considers all ‘strategic points’ where the reader’s anticipation is triggered and expectations are manipulated.¹⁷ In practice, those strategic points are actually often embedded within characters’ future-directed thoughts and intentions (and therefore essentially standard-issue actorial prolepsis); as we will see, in Xenophon’s Mantinea narrative, character focalization, especially centred on Epaminondas’ calculations and plans, is particularly important.¹⁸ However, also relevant are techniques of what Grethlein, following Morson, has called ‘sideshadowing’, which entice readers to contemplate alternative, but ultimately unrealized scenarios, for example the explicit statement of what did *not* happen or *would have* happened, *if only* ...¹⁹ As we shall see, such techniques also play an important role in Xenophon’s narrative.

Grethlein applies the notion of ‘sideshadowing’ to historiographical narratives, arguing that they are one way that historians can counter the reader’s

15 Ryan 2005: 590; for a more elaborate account, see Ryan 1991: 148–174.

16 Bridgeman 2005: 130 (also cited in the Introduction of Schomber and Tagliabue in this volume).

17 Ryan 1991: 153.

18 See also the more general analysis of selected passages of the *Hellenica* by Baragwanath 2016, which convincingly shows that the work’s narrative energy derives in no small part from how ‘by depicting people’s perceptions and expectations in tension with outcomes Xenophon generates irony, irony that is not empty, but a productive irony that invites his readers to engage in deeper interpretation’ (p. 33).

19 Grethlein 2013: 14–24, following Morson 1994; cf. Ryan’s ‘side-branches’. Cf. Hau 2013: 77–82 on three types of ‘sideshadowing’ in Thucydides and Xenophon: counterfactual statement, i.e. explicit mention of a potentially different outcome; the expression of unfulfilled expectations; and the reporting of advice that was ignored.

knowledge of the outcome of a specific episode and mentally transport the reader back to a moment when the past lay wide open and everything was still to play for (prompting readers to ask, for instance, 'what if Epaminondas had attacked then?'). This reminds us of the fact that in the case of historiography, readers are not reliant on the narrative alone for forming a mental model of the plot as it moves forward, but also bring to bear their knowledge of history. Some of this knowledge is quite generic: we know, for example, that in a proper work of history, battles will likely be decided by tactics, numbers or superb generalship and not by—say—flying unicorns suddenly arriving on the scene to save the day (though ancient Greek audiences will have been more prepared than many modern audiences to countenance things like divine intervention in the course of events). Other knowledge is more specific. While it is impossible to know exactly how much knowledge first-time readers of Xenophon's *Hellenica* possessed (and different readers may well have had different levels of knowledge, of course), I take it to be plausible that they at least knew that the Battle of Mantinea had taken place and that the famous Theban general Epaminondas had lost his life on that occasion.²⁰ I also take it to be plausible, however, that many readers may have been less sure exactly when and how the final showdown there came about—ancient historiographical narratives vary widely in such matters—and how to analyse the result (which was clearly disputed and subject to partisan interpretations).²¹ As we shall see, taking the (partial) prior knowledge of the reader into account can give rise to the postulation of further 'proleptic moves', that is, moments at which the reader is made to contemplate the probabilities of certain events taking place.

Before I present my running commentary on Xenophon's Mantinea narrative, however, it will be useful to set that episode in its wider context.

20 An interesting indication of the fact that Xenophon counted on his readers being familiar with Epaminondas' death at Mantinea is the perfunctory way in which Epaminondas' death is described: ἐπεὶ γὰρ μὴν ἐκεῖνος ἔπεσεν ... (7.5.25: 'when that man had fallen, ...'). A subordinate clause headed by ἐπεὶ does not usually introduce new information, but is a so-called presupposition-trigger: it indicates that Epaminondas' death belongs to the common ground (generally known information) between Xenophon and his readers; cf. Rijksbaron 1976: 74–75; Buijs 2005: 17–21.

21 There were no doubt other historiographical versions in circulation (see n. 3 above); in addition, Athenians may have known Euphranor's famous painting of the battle in the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios (for which see Humble 2008), which probably made the battle seem a resounding victory for Athens. On the tension between *Wie-* and *Was-Spannung* in ancient historiography in general, see the sensible remarks of Pausch 2018: 235–236 (also citing psycholinguistic studies which indicate that temporary uncertainty about the outcome of a story is induced even in readers who in principle know how it ends).

3 Setting up the Narrative

The wider historical context of Epaminondas' expedition is one of precarious instability. In 371 BCE Thebes scored a surprise victory over Sparta on the battlefield at Leuctra and became the dominant power in Greece. As Xenophon tells the story in the *Hellenica*, however, the years of the so-called 'Theban hegemony' are hardly a stable period.²² Immediately after Leuctra the Thebans wish to follow up on their victory and call on the Athenians and Jason of Pherae to join them in a coalition to deal the Spartans a final and fatal blow (6.4.19–24). The Athenians, however, demur, and Jason has the following words of wisdom for the Thebans:

ἀπέτρεπεν αὐτοὺς ὁ Ἰάσων, διδάσκων ὡς καλοῦ ἔργου γεγενημένου οὐκ ἄξιον αὐτοῖς εἶη διακινδυνεύσαι, ὥστε ἢ ἔτι μείζω καταπράξαι ἢ στερηθῆναι καὶ τῆς γεγενημένης νίκης. οὐχ ὁράτε, ἔφη, ὅτι καὶ ὑμεῖς, ἐπεὶ ἐν ἀνάγκῃ ἐγένεσθε, ἐκρατήσατε; οἴεσθαι οὖν χρὴ καὶ Λακεδαιμονίους ἂν, εἰ ἀναγκάζοιντο, [ἐκγενέσθαι]²³ τοῦ ζῆν ἀπονοηθέντας διαμάχεσθαι. καὶ ὁ θεὸς δέ, ὡς ἔοικε, πολλάκις χαίρει τοὺς μὲν μικροὺς μεγάλους ποιῶν, τοὺς δὲ μεγάλους μικροῦς. (6.4.22–23)

Jason sought to dissuade them, pointing out that since they had done a good work, it was not worthwhile for them to venture a decisive engagement in which they would either accomplish yet greater things or would be deprived of the victory already gained. 'Do you not see', he said, 'that you were victorious because you were in desperate straits? So you should think that the Spartans, too, if they were in such straits, would fight it out with utter disregard for their lives. And the god, it seems, often delights in making the small great, and the great small'.

As Christopher Tuplin remarks, we are given to understand that '[t]he victory at Leuctra was devastating, but Thebes needed outside help to make it total', and the Thebans' failure to obtain such help at once takes the wind out of their sails.²⁴ One of the questions raised by the whole sequence is what attitude Athens and Pherae—two major power blocks—will now adopt towards the Theban search for ἀρχή at the cost of Sparta. The question of remaining Athenian influence will indeed continue to hang over the narrative till the end, and

²² Tuplin 1993: 149.

²³ I follow the punctuation and deletion of Underhill 1900: ad loc.

²⁴ Tuplin 1993: 150.

we will return to it below. Jason, however, is about to be murdered by his fellow citizens soon after the events described above (6.4.27–34). Still, if anything, his imminent death lends his warning to the Thebans more weight; even though he spoke in his own political interest, as Xenophon makes clear (6.4.25), men who are about to die do tend to speak important truths. Xenophon highlights the main points of Jason's speech through a shift from indirect to direct speech.²⁵ In ringing, memorable phrases, the ruler of Pherae invokes human psychology and divine will as possible factors which may yet prove to be Thebes' undoing.²⁶ As we shall see, Jason's words will come back to haunt Epaminondas—and the narrative.

4 The Mantinea Campaign: A Running Commentary

The final sequence of events narrated in the *Hellenica* starts when Thebes intervenes in the Peloponnese in support of certain Arcadians who—impiously—have been plundering the sacred funds of Olympia. To protect themselves against the Theban threat, several members of the Arcadian Federation call upon Athens and Sparta to come to the rescue.²⁷

From the preparations made by the Peloponnesian opponents of Thebes, Xenophon now 'cuts' to the other side. With only two significant exceptions (at 10 and 15–17; see below), he will keep the focus firmly on the Theban army and especially on their general, Epaminondas, as he lays his plans and makes his preparations. The one-sidedness of the narrative on the one hand means that much information is withheld, for example about the plans and preparations of the Spartans and Athenians; as we shall see below, the actions of the latter will for that reason assume an uncanny, ominous complexion. On the other hand, it means that readers get a wealth of information about Epaminondas; they are given privileged access to his mind through many instances of embedded focal-

25 A characteristic feature of Xenophon's handling of speech representation, 'typically marking a turning-point in a speech or a climactic rhetorical move' (Huitink and Rood 2022: 255).

26 The *sententia* about the divine is of course reminiscent of Herodotus (1.5.4). Huitink and Rood 2019: *ad An.* 3.2.10 list further parallels from Xenophon's own works, adding that Xenophon often explicitly states that it is a lack of human piety which makes the gods turn what is great into something small—he does not do so here, allowing for a wider range of interpretations.

27 7.4.38–7.5.1–3, with Tuplin 1993: 155. From now on, all references to the *Hellenica* will be to Chapter 7.5, unless stated otherwise.

ization (printed in red throughout).²⁸ If, as I stated above, the account of the Mantinea campaign refuses to become an entirely coherent story, it above all refuses to become the story which Epaminondas wants it to become.

(4) While these preparations were being made, Epaminondas started out with all Boeotians, Euboeans and many Thessalians, both from Alexander and from Alexander's opponents. The Phocians, however, did not accompany him (Φωκείς μέντοι οὐκ ἠκολούθουν), saying that their treaty with Thebes called for them to assist if someone attacked the Thebans, but there was no provision to assist in a campaign against other cities. (5) Epaminondas, however, calculated (ἐλογίζετο) that he would receive support in the Peloponnese, too, from the Argives, the Messenians and those Arcadians who favoured the Theban cause (Ἀργείους τε καὶ Μεσσηνίους καὶ Ἀρκάδων τοὺς τὰ σφέτερα φρονούντας) (these were the Tegeans, the Megalopolitans, the Aseans and the Pallantians (Τεγεᾶται καὶ Μεγαλοπολίται καὶ Ἀσεᾶται καὶ Παλλαντιεῖς)), as well as any others that would be forced to take his side because they were small towns and were located between the cities just mentioned. (7.5.4–5)

The first thing which Xenophon reports is that, from among Thebes' allies in northern Greece, the Phocians did *not* join Epaminondas' expedition to the Peloponnese. This explicit denial of expectation (reinforced by μέντοι)²⁹ first and foremost targets the idea, which readers may well have formed on the basis of 6.5.23, that the newly subjected Phocians will certainly join any expedition which Thebes may wish to start; in that sense, the statement is retrospective rather than prospective. Still, it does briefly prompt the reader to ponder a scenario in which Thebes would be accompanied by the Phocians. Even if that scenario cannot be worked out with any great precision, it does raise the question of unity among Thebes and its allies. That question becomes more urgent in the next proleptic move, the first of what will turn out to be four instances in which Epaminondas' 'calculations' about the campaign are given using the verb λογίζομαι: regardless of the Phocians, Epaminondas thinks that he can count on massive support in the Peloponnese itself; two elaborate, polysyndetic phrases of three and four limbs, respectively, underline the strength of the support which Epaminondas believes he will be able to muster. Will strength really lie in numbers?

28 See now Harman 2023: 63–65 on readers' potential identification with Epaminondas (up to a point).

29 See CGCG 59.27.

(6) Now Epaminondas had departed quickly from Thebes, but when he arrived in Nemea, he delayed there, *fancying that he would catch* (ἐλπίζων ... λήψεσθαι) the Athenians as they came by and calculating that this would be a great achievement (λογιζόμενος μέγα ἂν τοῦτο γενέσθαι), one that would both encourage his own allies and bring despair to his opponents: in short, defeating the Athenians would be altogether beneficial to the Thebans. (7) But as he was delaying there, all the coalition forces were concentrating at Mantinea. When Epaminondas *heard that the Athenians had abandoned their decision to march by land* (ἤκουσε ... ἀπεργνωκέσαι) and were instead preparing to go by sea and march through Spartan territory to aid the Arcadians, he left Nemea and reached (ἀφικνεῖται) Tegea.

We next come to a brief interlude (a mini-episode of sorts), which is entirely structured around Epaminondas' hope to catch the Athenian forces off-guard and the dashing of that hope soon after. The verb ἐλπίζω, which introduces Epaminondas' plan, denotes a very different sort of assumption than the rational and in itself reasonable calculation denoted by λογίζομαι. In my view, ἐλπίζω denotes a speculative, wishful thinking, and is even a so-called contrafactive verb, which presupposes that the complement ('that he would catch the Athenians') is false: the choice of verb alerts the reader to the fact that Epaminondas will *not* in fact catch the Athenians when they come by.³⁰ It is therefore all the more remarkable—ironical even—that Xenophon goes on to spell out what, in Epaminondas' calculation (λογιζόμενος, the second occurrence of λογίζομαι in connection with the Theban general), would be the great benefit of a victory over the Athenians. It is not clear whether Epaminondas acts on the basis of reliable information: the verb ἀκούω ('be told') with infinitive leaves unclear whether the complement (that the Athenians would not come by land, but by sea) is true or false.³¹ One possibility is that Epaminondas may be mistaken—perhaps leading readers to think that, *if only* he had waited a little longer, he *could* have caught the Athenians before they would be able to join their allies. But it all remains to be seen: the reader is left wondering whether the Athenians will enter the Peloponnese and, if so, how they will do so and what role they will play in the denouement.

30 I hope to show this more clearly in a future publication. Cf. Powell 1938 s.v. ἐλπίζω: 'implying error' (correctly, in my view); for contrafactive verbs, see Dik 1997: 11.108–109. English verbs which belong to that class of predicates are 'fancy' (with which I translated ἐλπίζω here), 'imagine' or 'dream' (in 'John fancies/imagines/dreams that he is rich', it is presupposed that John is not in fact rich).

31 CGCG 51.19.

There is one other way in which this (in itself nicely rounded off) little episode increases suspense: it is the first time that the name of ‘Mantineia’ (printed **bold**, here and in the following passages) is mentioned. If, as I suggested in Section 2 above, readers knew that at some point Epaminondas’ expedition to the Peloponnese will culminate in the Battle of Mantineia, the mention of the name of the town here may elicit the expectation that the battle will in fact be imminent (it will not be). It may also raise the question whether Epaminondas, by not heading there directly and so allowing his enemies to gather there unopposed, has not forfeited his numerical advantage when the battle does come. In any case, in the next sentence the narrative takes a different turn as Epaminondas heads to Tegea (a move highlighted as potentially decisive by the historical present, ἀφικνεῖται).³²

(8) Now I would not claim that this campaign of Epaminondas was fortunate, but in terms of forethought and boldness, the man seems to me to have left nothing undone (εὐτυχῆ μὲν οὖν οὐκ ἂν ἔγωγε φήσαιμι τὴν στρατηγίαν αὐτῷ γενέσθαι· ὅσα μέντοι προνοίας ἔργα καὶ τόλμης ἐστίν, οὐδέν μοι δοκεῖ ἀνὴρ ἔλλιπεῖν). I praise (ἔπαινω) him first of all for making his camp inside the wall of Tegea: here he had greater security than if he had camped outside the walls, and his enemies were less certain of what his plans might be. In addition, if he needed to make any preparations, there was a greater supply of provisions within the city walls. Finally, when the enemy camped outside the city, it was possible to see whether they were doing things correctly or making mistakes. Moreover (καὶ μὴν), although **he thought (οἰόμενος) that his forces were superior over those of the enemy**, he nonetheless refused to lead his army out from the city when he saw his opponents taking superior positions.

Xenophon now interrupts the narrative to deliver a heavy-handed narratorial comment (printed in blue throughout)—a rarity in the *Hellenica* as a whole, but the first of several in this episode leading up to the epilogue (the most explicit narratorial comment in the entire work).³³ The claim that Epaminondas’ expedition was not ‘fortunate’ (εὐτυχῆ) clearly points to the end of the story; to an audience aware of the fact that Epaminondas lost his life at Mantineia, the insertion of the comment about Epaminondas’ bad luck will come

32 For the historical present and the notion of ‘decisiveness’ see Rijksbaron 2007: 22–24.

33 Baragwanath 2016: 33, remarking on the *Hellenica*’s ‘great reduction in authorial commentary, whereas his predecessors allowed readers a far greater sense of security in their author’s interpretative assistance and authorial reliability’.

naturally after the mention of the name 'Mantineia' in the immediately preceding context. However, as Xenophon emphasizes, Epaminondas' 'foresight' (πρόνοια) and 'guts' (τόλμη) were not to blame for his misfortune—a first indication that readers should weigh human factors influencing the outcome of military expeditions against 'higher' explanations. Meanwhile, the scope of Xenophon's praise seems oddly limited. To be sure, Xenophon regards the ability to choose and arrange a good camp as one of the main duties of a good general, and in that sense his praise is certainly not empty.³⁴ But the very fact that Epaminondas has to lock himself up in Tegea whilst waiting to see whether any of the many expected allies will turn up hardly seems to be a hallmark of 'foresight' and 'guts'. Furthermore, it is only now, apparently, that Epaminondas starts to realise that numbers alone will not be enough, but that the terrain also matters.

(9) Finally, however, when he saw that no city was coming over to him (ὄρων δὲ οὔτε πόλιν αὐτῷ προσχωροῦσαν οὐδεμίαν) and that time was passing on, he believed that he had to take some action (ἐνόμισε πρακτέον τι εἶναι); otherwise he would utterly lose his reputation, which previously had been so glorious. Therefore, when he learned that his opponents had occupied a strong fortified position around Mantineia and had sent for Agesilaus and the entire Spartan force (κατεμάνθανε ... πεφυλαγμένους ... μεταπεμπομένους δὲ ...), and also that Agesilaus was on the march and already at Pellana, he ordered dinner and then gave marching orders and led his army straight to Sparta.

This section leads the narrative in new thematic and geographical directions. Theban expectations that they would be joined by many allies are now definitively disappointed, and the reason for the expedition no longer seems to involve them and their interests to any great extent. Its purpose narrows (ominously, as it will turn out) to Epaminondas' private concerns to safeguard his reputation.³⁵ Having allowed his opponents to unite at Mantineia and occupy a strong position there (now a reason *not* to fight), Epaminondas, this time relying on solid information (the construction of κατεμάνθανε with the participle presupposed the truth of the complement)³⁶ turns his attention to Sparta.

34 Cf. e.g. *Cyr.* 1.6.16.

35 An increased focus on individuals and their ambitions is a hallmark of Xenophonic historiography; see Dillery 1995: 236. Here the shift is gradual and salient.

36 *CGCG* 52.10.

(10) And if a Cretan had not by some divine chance met up with Agesilaus and informed him that the Theban army was on the march, Epaminondas would have taken the city like a nest empty of defenders (καὶ εἰ μὴ Κρήσ θεία τινὶ μοίρα προσελθὼν ἐξήγγειλε τῷ Ἀγησιλάῳ προσιὼν τὸ στράτευμα, ἔλαβεν ἂν τὴν πόλιν ὡσπερ νεοττιὰν παντάπασιν ἔρημον τῶν ἀμυνομένων). But since he was informed in advance, Agesilaus managed to return to Sparta first and to deploy the Spartans at their positions of defense, even if his numbers were very small indeed (καὶ μάλα ὀλίγοι ὄντες). For all of his cavalry, his entire force of mercenaries and three of the twelve battalions were away in Arcadia.

The narrator intervenes again and, turning his ‘camera’ on Sparta and Agesilaus, presents readers with an explicit counterfactual, in the form of a so-called *if not*-situation (one of Grethlein’s ‘sideshadowing’ devices):³⁷ but for the appearance of an unnamed ‘Cretan’, Epaminondas would have taken Sparta there and then, like a predator descending on an undefended nest. The use of the device in itself highlights the danger of the present crisis; indeed, as the sequence will make clear, Xenophon seems to have found this moment at least as important as the battle of Mantinea itself.

As Pelling has recently argued, such explicitly mentioned counterfactual scenarios in historiography can receive two conflicting interpretations.³⁸ On the one hand, they may emphasize the openness of the past, the moment in which history might *easily* have gone the other way; in the present case, the striking image of Sparta as an unprotected ‘nest’ ready for the taking does, at least for a moment, vividly conjure up the clear and present danger in which Sparta found itself.³⁹ On the other hand, *if not*-situations can emphasize, not so much the openness of the past, as its inevitability: after all, a Cretan *did* forewarn Agesilaus and Sparta was *not* like an unprotected nest. The inevitability of Epaminondas’ failure ultimately to take Sparta is suggested by the mention of ‘divine chance’ (θεία τινὶ μοίρα), which after the earlier reference to τύχη (by way of εὐτυχῆ at 8) is a more concrete indication that history here follows a ‘higher’

37 See Grethlein 2010: 248–252; 2013: 242–243.

38 Pelling 2013.

39 It is difficult not to think of that earlier Spartan, Menelaus, who according to Aeschylus (*Ag.* 48–52) together with his brother Agamemnon, ‘cried out with all their hearts for War’ (μεγάλ’ ἐκ θυμοῦ κλάζοντες Ἄρη) after Helen’s abduction, ‘like vultures that out of maddening distress for their children wheel eddying around high above their nest’ (τρόπον αἰγυπιῶν οἷτ’ ἐκπατίοις / ἄλγεσι παίδων ὕπατοι λεχέων / στροφοδινοῦνται). If this is indeed an intertext we are meant to think of, it may help underline that it is dangerous to try and plunder a Spartan’s ‘nest’.

plan which is not easily accessible to the historical actors themselves.⁴⁰ The sense of uncanniness is reinforced by Xenophon's refusal to give more information about the mysterious 'Cretan'.⁴¹

After the *if not*-statement, which intimates alternative scenarios to the reader ('roads not taken'), Xenophon proceeds to unfold the actual course of events, starting with an emphasis on Agesilaus' small numbers, renewing the question whether strength will prove to lie in numbers or in something else (e.g. the terrain).

(11) When Epaminondas arrived at the city of Sparta, he did not enter at the place where they would have to fight on level ground and would be pelted from the houses nor at any place where they would find no advantage fighting few men with great numbers (ὄπου μὲν ἔμελλον ἔν τε ἰσοπέδῳ μαχεῖσθαι καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν οἰκιῶν βληθήσεσθαι, οὐδ' ὄπου γε μηδὲν †πλέονες μαχεῖσθαι τῶν ὀλίγων πολλοὶ ὄντες). Rather, after taking up a position where he thought he would have the advantage (πλεονεκτεῖν ἂν ἐνόμιζε) he made so as to descend rather than go up into the city. (12) For what happened next, one can say that the divinity was responsible, and one can say that no one can withstand desperate men (τό γε μὴν ἐντεῦθεν γενόμενον ἕξεστι μὲν τὸ θεῖον αἰτιάσθαι, ἕξεστι δὲ λέγειν ὡς τοῖς ἀπονενοημένοις οὐδεὶς ἂν ὑποσταίη). For when Archidamus, with not even a hundred men (οὐδὲ ἑκατὸν ἔχων ἄνδρας), led the way from the city and crossed over difficult ground which gave the impression that it would give him trouble, he marched straight against the adversaries. And then those men—those breathers of fire (οἱ πύρρ πνέοντες), those soldiers who had been victorious over the Spartans, who had a vast superiority in forces and in addition occupied the higher ground—those men did not withstand Archidamus and his troops, but gave way. (13) Those in the first ranks of Epaminondas' army were killed (ἀποθνήσκουσι), but when the Spartans from the city, elated at their victory, pursued the enemy further than was appropriate, they in turn were killed (αὐὸ ἀποθνήσκουσι). For it had been foreordained, it seems, by the god to what extent victory would be granted to them (περιεγέγρα-

40 De Jong 2004: 68–81 discusses comparable *if not*-situations in the *Iliad*, in which references to fate also figure (e.g. 2.155 ὑπέμωρα, 20.302 μόριμον). See also Grethlein 2013: 69, contrasting a Xenophonic counterfactual (*An.* 4.1.11) involving a conditional ('a forceful reminder that history did *not* take the alternative course') with the more experiential *Beinahe*-episodes one finds in Thucydides.

41 By contrast, Diodorus Siculus (15.82.6) speaks of 'Cretan runners' in the plural; cf. Tuplin 1979: 350.

πτο γάρ, ὡς ἔοικεν, ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ μέχρι ὅσου νίκη ἐδέδοτο αὐτοῖς). Archidamus set up a trophy where he had won and gave back the enemy dead under truce.

Epaminondas plans his attack on Sparta meticulously, and he is especially careful to try and exploit his superior numbers on suitable terrain—as we have seen, this is a running motif throughout this part of the *Hellenica*, which here receives its most elaborate articulation. But Epaminondas' strategizing is all in vain: here, if anywhere, is the moment when the Theban general's 'virtual narrative' (his plans, intentions and thoughts, pointing to a different plot shape) runs into the harsh reality of history's conformity to higher truths: although Archidamus (Agesilaus' son) has fewer men and occupies a worse tactical position than his adversary, he beats off the Thebans. To underline the futility of the Theban effort, Xenophon uses a startlingly poetic expression to designate the Thebans ('those breathers of fire'), which is both bitterly ironic and eerily uncanny:⁴² are the gods no longer on Epaminondas' side?

The moment is further marked by narratorial comments, which (no doubt deliberately) recall Jason of Pherae's words, with which the entire strand of the story of Thebes' uncertain search for pre-eminence (and a plot that would lead to that pre-eminence) started. The first narratorial comment echoes Jason's statements that desperate men are not to be underestimated (ἀπονενοημένοις ~ τοῦ ζῆν ἀπονοηθέντας) and that god interferes to keep things balanced (τὸ θεῖον ~ ὁ θεός). The second comment suggests that 'the divine' gave very concrete shape to that balance, namely by ensuring that the Spartans could not exploit their victory and deal Epaminondas' army a final and fatal blow. Xenophon even suggests (tentatively: ὡς ἔοικεν) that the divine keeps a written document (περιεγέγραπτο) in which the outcome had already been recorded. Incidentally, the present tenses, ἀποθνήσκουσιν ... αὖ ἀποθνήσκουσι, reinforce the idea that we are dealing with a 'scenario' to which the historical events are made to conform.⁴³

42 The phrase πῦρ πνέω and variants are used of abhorrent creatures like the Erinyes (Eur. *IT* 288), the Chimaera (Hom. *Il.* 6.182; Hes. *Theog.* 319, fr. 43a.87; Pind. *Ol.* 13.91; Eur. *Ion* 203), Helios' horses (Pind. *Ol.* 7.71; cf. Eur. *Alc.* 493, of Diomedes' horses, more or less in jest) and Aietes' oxen (Pind. *Pyth.* 4.225), or of the uncanny phenomenon of lightning (Pind. fr. 146.2 Snell-Maehler; Soph. *Ant.* 1146). (As for prose, Aen. *Tact.* 32.1 seems to use the expression of fires that 'fan the flame up high' *vel sim.*, but the text is uncertain and the use obviously not parallel to that of Xenophon).

43 See Nijk 2022: 162 n. 22 on how the use of what he calls 'registering' presents 'depends upon the assumption that the future is somehow "scheduled"'

(14) Epaminondas, calculating that the Arcadians would soon be coming to assist the Spartans (λογιζόμενος ὅτι βοηθήσοιεν ...), had no wish to fight against a united Lacedaemonian force, especially as they had just won a victory, while his own troops had been defeated. He marched back to Tegea as quickly as he could, and there rested his hoplites, while he sent his cavalry to **Mantineia**, entreating them to make a special effort and pointing out that it was likely (διδάσκων ὡς ... εἰκὸς ...) that **Mantineia's** livestock, and all its people, were outside the walls, particularly because it was harvest time. (15) So they set out.

This section moves forward the narrative, by focussing on Epaminondas' new plans. He will soon turn out to be right about Mantineia's livestock and people being outside the walls, while the narrative does not explicitly confirm nor deny that he was right in 'calculating' (the third instance of embedded focalization introduced by the verb λογίζομαι) that the Arcadians would come to assist the Spartans.⁴⁴ Readers are also left to wonder whether it is or is not wise to withdraw his battle-weary troops away from Sparta and back to Tegea. However that may be, Epaminondas seeks to exploit the fact that Arcadian eyes are in all likelihood focused on Sparta by sending cavalry to Mantineia (the mention of the name raises the expectation that the battle is now close at hand) to score an easy victory.

However, the Athenian cavalry, having set out from Eleusis, took their dinner at the Isthmus and, having passed through Kleonai, happened to be arriving at **Mantineia** (ἐτύγχανον προσιόντες εἰς τὴν Μαντίνειαν) and to have taken up quarters in the houses inside the wall. When it was clear that the enemy was approaching, the Mantineans asked the Athenian cavalry to help them if they could. For, they said, all their cattle and their slaves and a good many children and old men from among the free citizens were outside the walls. The Athenians listened and came to the rescue (ἐκβοηθοῦσιν) even though their horses and they themselves had not yet had anything to eat that morning. (16) *Who could fail to admire their bravery at that moment (ἐνταῦθα δὴ τούτων αὖ τὴν ἀρετὴν τίς οὐκ ἂν ἀγασθείη);*? For though they saw that the enemy were much more numerous, and though the cavalry had suffered a misfortune in Corinth, they gave no thought

44 Cf. Tuplin 1993: 157, claiming that, in contrast to Epaminondas' two previous 'calculations', this one 'is evidently correct', though also calling it 'ironic' that 'his attempted exploitation of it to create mayhem among Mantinean agricultural workers is thwarted by the arrival of Athenian cavalry'.

to this, nor to the fact that they were about to fight Thebans and Thesalians, men who had the highest reputation for horsemanship. Instead, they felt a sense of shame at the thought of being on the spot but failing to assist their allies. As soon as they caught sight of the enemy, they charged at them, feeling a deep desire to win back their ancestral reputation. (17) And engaging the enemy they became responsible for saving everything that the Mantineans had outside their walls. *Brave were the men among them who died, and, clearly, so were the men they killed.* For no one had a weapon so short that he did not reach the enemy with it. And the Athenians did not abandon the corpses of their own men, and they returned some of the enemy dead under truce.

The focus of the narrative abruptly turns from the Thebans to the Athenians. In itself, the skirmish described here hardly seems to matter much; and it is not implausible, also given the laudatory narratorial comments, that Xenophon devoted so much attention to it as an implicit tribute to his son, Gryllus, who died during this fight on the side of the Athenians.⁴⁵ Yet, that is not all there is to it. Near the start of the expedition, Epaminondas received information that the Athenians would enter the Peloponnese by sea from the South, while it was left uncertain whether that information was correct or not. Now it is revealed that it was not. All of a sudden, the Athenian cavalry appears at Mantinea, arriving by land from the North, having crossed the Isthmus. Xenophon's deadpan, matter-of-fact assertion of their arrival, without any reference to Epaminondas' earlier misapprehension (was the information he was fed part of a deliberate ruse on the part of the Athenians?) makes the event appear all the more shocking; the statement that just at that moment Athenian cavalry 'happened' (ἐτύγχανον) to be arriving at Mantinea even makes it seem a little uncanny, as if fortune or god had a hand in it.⁴⁶ Their intervention wins the day (note the decisive historical present ἐχβονθησιν). In close succession, Thebes suffers defeat at the hands of the Spartans and of the Athenians—though neither defeat is decisive (the comment that both the Athenians and Thebans who fell were 'brave' can perhaps be taken as another expression of the balance of things).⁴⁷

45 Cf. Dillery 1995: 20, 253.

46 To get a 'feel' for how sudden the Athenian arrival is, one may compare the arrival of Aragorn with the Army of the Dead at the Battle of Minas Tirith in Peter Jackson's 2003 Tolkien adaptation *The Return of the King*—though even that event has been better prepared for, because we already know that Aragorn persuaded the Dead to follow him. By contrast, we do not even know whether the Athenians set out for the Peloponnese or not (see above, at 6–7).

47 Incidentally, the Athenians help the Mantineans, 'even though the cavalry had suffered

(18) Epaminondas now considered (ἐνθυμούμενος) that within a few days he would be forced to depart because the time for the campaign was running out, and that if he were to abandon those to whom he had come as an ally, they would be left under siege from their enemies and his reputation would be completely destroyed: he had been defeated at Sparta with a large force by a few men, and defeated in a cavalry engagement at **Mantineia**, and become responsible by invading the Peloponnese for uniting the Spartans, Arcadians, Achaeans, Elians and Athenians (Λακεδαιμονίους καὶ Ἀρκάδας καὶ Ἀχαιοὺς καὶ Ἠλείους καὶ Ἀθηναίους). So it seemed impossible to him (οὐκ ἐδόκει αὐτῷ δυνατὸν εἶναι) to withdraw without a battle, calculating (λογιζομένῳ) that, if he won, he would make up for all those things, and if he died, he deemed (ἡγήσατο) such a death glorious inasmuch as he was attempting to win dominion over the Peloponnese for his own country.

Epaminondas' worries about his personal reputation, which were introduced earlier, now come to dominate the narrative, and they come completely to coincide with the interests of the *polis* of Thebes—at least in Epaminondas' own perception. His earlier plans have largely failed and have even had the opposite effect from what he intended: the earlier, long and polysyndetic list of allies on which he thought he could count (5) contrasts sharply with the equally impressive and polysyndetic list of allies on which his opponents can *actually* count.⁴⁸ Epaminondas' final 'calculation' (λογιζομένῳ) no longer deals with practical and strategic issues, but is concerned chiefly with his own future reputation.

(19) And it does not seem unusual to me that he should have calculated in this way; for such are the thoughts of ambitious men. But the fact that he prepared his army in such a way that they shrank from no labour night or day, did not flinch from any danger, and, although provisions were in short supply, still willingly obeyed him—that I find more remarkable (ταῦτά μοι δοκεῖ θαυμαστότερα εἶναι). (20) When he at last gave the order to his men to get ready in the conviction that battle was imminent (ὡς μάχης ἐσομένης),

a misfortune at Corinth'—nothing is known about this misfortune, and this seems one of those moments where Xenophon's narrative borders on incoherence. But I think that readers are at least intended to contrast Epaminondas, who just a few paragraphs ago refused to fight the Spartans, 'after his own troops had been defeated'.

48 Epaminondas' professed hesitation 'to abandon those to whom he had come as an ally' near the beginning of the passage (18) is wearing thin: they rather seem to have abandoned *him*.

the cavalry were eagerly whitening their helmets—as he had commanded them to do—and the Arcadian hoplites were painting the Theban clubs on their shields, just as if they were Thebans, and all were sharpening their spears and swords and polishing their shields.

A final narratorial comment introduces a common Xenophontic theme, namely that of ‘willing obedience’: a successful commander, Xenophon maintains at several points throughout his *oeuvre*, inspires his troops in such a way that they wish to imitate him and loyally follow him in every situation.⁴⁹ But here Xenophon gives an interesting twist to a favourite motif: whereas earlier the goal of the expedition had already narrowed from a desire to expand Theban power and defend Thebes’ Peloponnesian allies to Epaminondas’ private concerns about his personal reputation, here the fate of the army (those numerous ‘breathers of fire’—one recalls) also becomes closely linked with the fate of Epaminondas himself, and this final proleptic move raises the disquieting question of how the army will fare if Epaminondas is no longer there to inspire it, especially (once more) for readers who know that Epaminondas will not survive the Battle of Mantinea.

5 Inconclusive Conclusions

There is no need to go into the final preparations for battle, except to note that Epaminondas’ planning is again meticulous and seemingly sensible. His strategy aims to break through the enemy line with his infantry and cavalry, in the conviction that that would be sufficient to turn the enemy to flight. Xenophon describes the result as follows:

And so he made his charge, and he was not disappointed in his expectation (καὶ οὐκ ἐψεύσθη τῆς ἐλπίδος). For by defeating the troops where he had concentrated his attack, he put the entire enemy force to flight. (25) But when he had fallen (ἐπεὶ γε μὴν ἐκεῖνος ἔπεσεν), the rest of his forces could not properly exploit their victory. Although the enemy phalanx was in flight, the hoplites killed no one and did not advance one step from where they had fought the battle. And while the cavalry was also put to flight, the horsemen did not pursue and kill any cavalrists or hoplites, but as if they had been defeated (ὥσπερ δὲ ἡττημένοι), they timidly slipped

49 On ‘willing obedience’ as a recurring preoccupation of Xenophon, see Gray 2011: 15–18.

away through the lines of the fleeing enemy. Both the hoplites and the infantry that had been stationed among the cavalry shared in the cavalry's victory, and hit upon the left wing in the belief they were winning (ὡς κρατοῦντες). There, most of them were slain by the Athenians.

Epaminondas' hopes and expectations (the 'virtual narratives' which he has built for himself) have continually clashed with reality, which seems to be governed by some sort of vaguely adumbrated principle (most precisely articulated by Jason of Pherae) that no single major power can have the upper hand for too long or be put in a position in which it can deliver a fatal blow to another one. If neither Thebes nor Sparta can deal such a blow, Xenophon can, and does, deliver a *coup de grâce* to the idea that the course of history can be controlled by human agency. It is not just the plans that did *not* work which stand in the way, but also the plans that *did* work: for once, Epaminondas 'was not deceived in his hope' (οὐκ ἐψεύσθη τῆς ἐλπίδος), but it did not matter. It turns out that the (in itself positive) leadership trait of a close symbiosis between a general and his troops in this case did have detrimental consequences: just as the Spartans had failed to exploit their victory after they pushed the Thebans back from Sparta, now the death of Epaminondas leaves the Thebans so rudderless that they do the same. In the earlier incident, the hand of god was explicitly mentioned as a possible explanation for Spartan failures, but in the present instance the reader is left to ponder the paradoxical question of whether the divine made Epaminondas too good a general to ... succeed.

The shape of the narrative and its proleptic moves (those moments where the reader is made to ponder alternative trajectories for Epaminondas and the Thebans) has carefully led readers to this moment. The narrative has progressed from suggesting a certain 'openness' of events to an increasing narrowing of that openness, when the past is made to conform to a (not altogether transparent) divine scheme characterized by a sense of inevitability. Perhaps this conclusion sounds too pessimistic to some, and seems to stand in opposition to Xenophon's evident praise of Epaminondas' qualities as a leader and general in these sections. But I would say that one way of reading the *Hellenica* is as a work showing how some people managed to lead a worthwhile life and do noteworthy things on a historical stage where chaos (or a badly understood divine order) reigned supreme. That, however, is a different story, to be explored somewhere else.⁵⁰

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