



CUNAXA

CUNAXA, the Greek form (attested only in Plutarch, *Artoxerxes* 8) of the name (< Aram. *keništa* “synagogue”; Barnett, p. 16) of a village located some 50 miles north of Babylon, where a decisive battle was fought on 3 September 401 b.c.e. between [Cyrus the Younger](#) and his brother [Artaxerxes II](#) (for discussion of ancient sources on the battle, see Pancritius; Kromayer; Lendle; Gugel). It was witnessed by both Ctesias, the great king’s Greek physician, whose garbled account was reported by Plutarch (*Artoxerxes* 9-16), and by Xenophon, who fought on the side of Cyrus and whose narrative (*Anabasis* 1.8) is the main source for the battle. The site was traditionally identified with Tell ‘Aqar Konaysa (Kanīsa, Konayša), about 57 miles north of Babylon on the left bank of the Euphrates, but Richard Barnett made strong arguments (pp. 16-17) for locating it at Nasiffiyāt (< [*Kū]neise-safyat[ib]), about 50 miles north of Babylon and on the right bank of the ancient course of the Euphrates, a location that accords with the testimony of Xenophon (*Anabasis* 1.8.4, 1.8.14).

Cyrus had marched very swiftly from Sardis to central Mesopotamia, with 10,600 Greek hoplite mercenaries, 2,500 Greek peltasts (light-armed infantrymen), 2,600 horsemen (600 of whom were armored), and some 10,000 Persian infantry under his command (see below; the figures 100,000 mentioned by Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.7.10ff., and 70,000 by Diodorus Siculus, 14.19.7, are stereotyped exaggerations; see [army i](#), p. 492). Twenty scythe chariots were also said to be present (*Anabasis* 1.8.11), but they were not mentioned again. Cyrus’ rapid march had left Artaxerxes little time to gather all his imperial levies. According to Xenophon (*Anabasis* 1.8.11-13), Persian deserters and



prisoners reported that Artaxerxes had collected an army of 1,200,000 and 200 scythe chariots, under four commanders: Tissaphernes (see [čirθafarnah](#)), Gobryas (satrap of Babylonia), [Abrocomas](#) (satrap of Trans-Euphrates [Syria]), and [Arbaces](#) (satrap of Media), as well as a guard of 6,000 horsemen under Artagereses. Xenophon added that, because Abrocomas arrived five days too late, Artaxerxes went into battle with only 900,000 men, 150 chariots, and his cavalry guard. Ctesias (apud Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 13) and Diodorus Siculus (14.19.9, 14.22.5-6) set the king's army at 400,000 men, but these figures are absurd. It is clear that Xenophon simply multiplied Cyrus' forces (more than 12,000 mercenaries, 600 horsemen of the guard, and 20 chariots) by 100 to obtain the figures for their opponents. Eduard Meyer's estimate (p. 185) of nearly 40,000 is nearer the truth, for each of the satraps present could have commanded a Persian "army corps" of 10,000. It is thus not unlikely that [Ariaeus](#), Cyrus' one Asian general, was commanding a similar number (Shahbazi, p. 123; for Cyrus' mercenaries see Parke, pp. 23-42; Perlman; Roy; for the best assessment of the two armies and additional references, see Rahe).

The dispositions of the two armies were as follows. Knowing that Artaxerxes would take the center, following Persian tradition, Cyrus positioned himself on the right bank of the Euphrates, with himself at the head of his main tactical force, his 600 armored horsemen, in the center, flanked by the Persian infantry under Ariaeus on the left and the Greek mercenaries under the veteran Spartan commander [Clearchus](#) on the right. The Greeks were protected on their left by Cretan archers and on their right by 1,000 Paphlagonian horse, while a comparable number of cavalry supported Ariaeus on the left. The baggage train and women accompanying the army were stationed behind the Persian infantry. The use of cavalry in combination with the hoplites was a fairly recent tactical innovation of the Persian satraps, which Cyrus perfected with his heavy cavalry (Rahe, pp. 79-90). He hoped to capture or kill Artaxerxes by first routing his lines with the hoplites and then dashing into the center with the cavalry guard (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.7.10ff.). Artaxerxes occupied the center with a strong cavalry guard, as Cyrus had predicted; his left wing consisted of Asian bowmen, Egyptian footmen, and Persian cavalry under Tissaphernes. Some scythe chariots were stationed in front of the line but proved ineffective (*Anabasis* 1.8.8-10). The two armies met at about 2:30 p.m. and fought for nearly four hours, until sunset (Pancritius, p. 31).

Cyrus ordered Clearchus to shift to the left, come directly opposite Artaxerxes'



center, and attack the king's position (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.8.12-13). It was a "bold and wise plan," but Clearchus "ruined the cause of his master by pedantically or timorously adhering to the precepts of Greek drill-sergeants, that it is fatal for the right wing to allow itself to be outflanked" (Bury, p. 507, based on Xenophon's account; cf. Tarn, pp. 7-8, who misunderstood the situation and reconstructed the battle in a version that contradicts the sources, especially Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.8.13ff., and Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 9-10). The Persian forces marched forward, and the Greeks met their onslaught quickly and firmly and pressed them back. Then, instead of wheeling and attacking Artaxerxes' position, as Cyrus had planned, Clearchus pushed ahead and pursued the Persian left for 4 miles (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.8.17-18), thus opening a gap in Cyrus' center, into which Tissaphernes threw his own cavalry while another Persian cavalry force wheeled to take Ariaeus in the rear and a third group passed through the Paphlagonian cavalry and came up behind Cyrus' right. Seeing the danger, Cyrus gallantly charged the king's position with his armored horsemen, broke through the royal guard, personally killed Artaxerxes' guard commander, wounded the great king with a javelin, and came near to deciding the day: Some of Artaxerxes' men even saluted Cyrus as the victor and the new great king (Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 16). But he was himself struck in the temple with a javelin and killed instantly. His cause was thus lost, and, although the Greeks had won the battle, the war was decided (for details, see Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.8.17ff.; for discussion of topographical problems, see Barnett, especially pp. 15-18). Most of Cyrus' Persian infantry was pardoned and incorporated into the royal army; Ariaeus was given a senior post.

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(A. Shapur Shahbazi)