

## CASUALTY FIGURES IN THE BATTLE DESCRIPTIONS OF THUCYDIDES

CATHERINE RUBINCAM

*Erindale College, University of Toronto*

Ancient historians were not like modern historians, especially in their handling of numbers. It is easy to laugh at the 1,700,000 men and the 1207 ships that Herodotos assigned to Xerxes, and to dismiss this as the epic exaggeration of a pioneer historiographer; more difficult to keep constantly in mind how hard it was for any ancient historian, however high-principled and painstaking, to obtain accurate, up-to-date numerical information. We take for granted the easy accessibility of accurate maps with measurements expressed in standard units, the convenience of a generally accepted calendric system, the availability of statistics of all kinds, the lightning speed of electronic communications, and the sophistication of modern record-keeping technology. None of these norms of twentieth-century historical research existed for classical Greek historical writers.

Thucydides' reputation stands justly high compared with other ancient historians. Some scholars have even claimed for him a spirit akin to that of modern 'scientific' historiography. It is too easy to assume therefore that he defined his task in the same terms as a modern historian, and followed essentially the same research methods. In this paper I wish to consider the validity of these assumptions with regard to one particular kind of numerical detail often supplied by Thucydides, namely, the casualty figures included in his battle descriptions. I believe an analysis of these figures as a group can shed new light on our understanding of his narrative. Like certain other kinds of detail frequently included in Thucydides' battle descriptions, casualty figures are not given with consistent regularity wherever one might expect them;<sup>1</sup> and there is some variation in the precision with which Thucydides reports them (they are often qualified in various ways). What caused these fluctuations? Was it simply the chance of what information Thucydides could get regarding each battle or campaign? Or did his own judgment of what was important sometimes determine the amount and the form of the reports he gave?

<sup>1</sup> See the observations of W. K. Pritchett, *The Greek State at War*, 4 vols. (Berkeley 1971–1985; hereafter *GSW*), 2.270–71, on the irregularity of Thucydides' reporting of the erection of battlefield trophies, and 2.193, on the infrequency with which he sets out the order of battle for each side. Irregularity in Thucydides' reporting of casualty figures was noted by Gertrude Smith, "Athenian Casualty Lists," *CP* 14 (1919) 351–64, at 361. The Appendix (below, pp. 194–98) lists all the casualty figures in Thucydides.

Graph 1 tabulates all the casualty figures in Thucydides.<sup>2</sup> The horizontal axis is divided into four sections, which are to be imagined as forming a continuous numerical scale from 0 to 8000, with the horizontal value of a square in each section diminishing as the numbers increase. On this axis each open triangle or solid triangle or square indicates a single figure from Thucydides. The vertical axis indicates the number of times that each figure is found. The different symbols refer to the different kinds of qualification that are attached to some numbers. Those not qualified are represented by an open triangle; those qualified by a word expressing approximation (e.g., περί, μάλιστα) are represented by a solid triangle; those qualified by a comparative expression (e.g., οὐκ ἐλάσσους, ὀλίγω πλείους) are represented by an open square;<sup>3</sup> the single alternative number ("5 or 6") is shown by a horizontal arrow joining the two squares that represent these numbers.

This diagramming of the figures facilitates the search for patterns among them. Since the notorious caprice of war hardly mowed down its victims in regular swaths, any obvious patterns in these casualty figures demand explanation, and may constitute *prima facie* evidence of regularizing action by someone (Thucydides and/or his informants). The 49 figures range from 1 to 7000, and are so distributed that approximately half (51%) fall between 101 and 500, while the remainder fall in more or less equal divisions below 100 and above 500. The median figure is 250.

This tabulation shows first that most of the figures must be somewhat rounded, since 41 of the 45 figures greater than 10 are multiples of 10, which can hardly reflect the literal truth. We may perhaps go further, assuming a greater degree of rounding as the figures grow larger. Of the 25 numbers between 101 and 500, 15 (= 60%) are multiples of 100, while three more, to a total of 18 (= 72%), are multiples of 50, and four of the remaining seven (= 88% in all) are multiples of 20. Between 501 and 1100, eight of ten figures (= 80%) are multiples of 100; and between 1101 and 7000, two of the three figures (= 66%) are multiples of 1000. This analysis, on a sliding scale of roundness,

<sup>2</sup> The passages concerned, with summary details of context, are listed in the Appendix (below, pp. 194–98). In this paper "casualty figures" means human (or on one occasion animal) casualties among fighting forces (thus neither civilian casualties nor ships lost in battle are included). Thucydides does not always make it perfectly clear by what means and in what degree these people were incapacitated from further fighting. Certain groups are distinguished on occasion as having been captured (see notes 9 and 10 below), and one would expect these to have been ransomed or exchanged, and thus restored to their home state at some later date (exchange of prisoners is mentioned, e.g., at 2.103.1); but whether the totals of those killed represent only soldiers who died on the battlefield, or include also some who were wounded but went home to die later, we cannot tell.

<sup>3</sup> In my article, "Qualification of Numerals in Thucydides," *AJAH* 4 (1979) 77–95, I defined these two major types of qualifying expression as follows: "'Approximating' expressions...[are] those that indicate some unspecified degree of uncertainty and/or imprecision felt by the writer or speaker concerning the number mentioned; ...'comparative' expressions...[are] those that imply a comparison between a real figure, which is not specified, and another figure which does not claim to be exact but is said to lie at some distance above or below the real figure" (78).

as it were, thus shows up ten among the 45 figures above 10 (= 22%) as having a greater degree of exactness than most within their numerical range.<sup>4</sup> Some of these figures (such as the 212 Corinthian hoplites killed at Solygeia [4.44.6], and the 292 Lakedaimonians captured on Sphakteria [4.38.5]) would strike even the casual reader as obviously unrounded; their exceptional nature is merely confirmed. But it is useful to know which of the less obviously unrounded figures are less rounded than most in their range (as, e.g., the 430 Athenian hoplites killed near Spartolos [2.79.7]).

Secondly, let us look at qualification. A qualified figure is likely to be rounded to some degree, for the numbers most naturally chosen to point out a general range within which a figure falls are nodal points on the numerical scale (in other words, one does not usually find qualifiers used with obviously odd figures, such as, "about 247 men were killed," or "more than 2538 men were captured").<sup>5</sup> Of the 49 casualty figures 28 (= 57%) are qualified: one is an alternative number; 15 have approximating qualifiers (= 30%); and 12 have comparative qualifiers (= 24%). Apart from the one alternative number ("5 or 6")—Thucydides uses this kind of qualification only with numbers under 10<sup>6</sup>—all the figures qualified are multiples of 10, and within each range on the numerical scale, most of the qualified figures are among those rounded to the largest unit for that range. The four exceptions to this are: in the range from 101 to 500, three multiples of 20 (rather than of 50 or 100),<sup>7</sup> and in the range from 1101 to 7000, one multiple of 100 (rather than of 1000).<sup>8</sup>

The tendency of certain figures to recur with special frequency in estimates of casualties is another regularity that should be significant. The figures 200 and 300 each occur seven times,<sup>9</sup> while 1000 is found four times,<sup>10</sup> 120 three

<sup>4</sup> The ten figures that stand out as unusually unrounded are: 180 Thebans captured and killed by Plataians after invasion of Plataia (2.5.7); 1050 Athenian hoplites killed by plague out of Hagnon's force of 4000 in approximately 40 days (2.58.3); 430 Athenian hoplites killed in battle near Spartolos (2.79.7); 25 Athenians killed out of garrison at Plataia (3.68.3); οὐκ ἐλάσσους 4400 Athenian hoplites ἐκ τῶν τάξεων killed by plague (3.87.3); περί 120 μάλιστα Athenian hoplites killed in Aitolia (3.98.4); 292 Lakedaimonian hoplites captured on Sphakteria (4.38.5); περί 120 Spartiate hoplites captured on Sphakteria (4.38.5); 212 Corinthian hoplites killed in battle near Solygeia (4.44.6); περί 120 Syracusan and allied troops killed in first battle at Syracuse (6.71.1).

<sup>5</sup> See my article cited above, note 3.

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides uses an alternative number as the sole means of qualifying a casualty figure only once (the five or six τοξόται killed out of a group under Lamachos' command at Syracuse—6.101.6). Eleven other instances occur of alternative numbers relating to other types of information: measures of time (2.86.5, 3.76.1, 4.124.4, 8.99.1), or distance (3.24.2, 4.8.6, 6.97.1, 7.2.4, 7.79.6), ships captured (7.38.1), or prisoners taken (8.74.2).

<sup>7</sup> These are: περί 120 μάλιστα Athenian hoplites killed in Aitolia (3.98.4); περί 120 Spartiate hoplites captured on Sphakteria (4.38.5); and περί 120 Syracusan and allied troops killed in first battle at Syracuse (6.71.1).

<sup>8</sup> οὐκ ἐλάσσους 4400 Athenian hoplites ἐκ τῶν τάξεων killed by the plague.

<sup>9</sup> Instances of 200 are: ἐς 200 τινὰς Peloponnesians and Amprakians lost in attack by Akarnanians (3.111.4); this same group referred to twice more in *oratio recta* as μάλιστα 200 (3.113.3) and simply 200 (3.113.4); 200 Athenian cavalry captured by Boiotians from a garrison at Delion (4.100.5); 200 Mantineians lost

times,<sup>11</sup> and 50, 700, and 800 occur twice each.<sup>12</sup> One can hardly draw firm statistical conclusions from so small a body of data; but the striking frequency of 200 and 300 at least seems to demand some explanation. When we find that 300 and 1000, and to a slightly lesser extent 200, are very frequently qualified numbers,<sup>13</sup> the suspicion increases that these numbers have a certain conventional quality.

A comparison between casualty figures and figures for troops going into battle is interesting. This is presented in Graph 2, where the casualty figures are represented by the bars descending from the horizontal axis, while the ascending bars show the figures for troops going out on a campaign or into a battle. This second group is much larger (220 in all), and extends over a larger range (from 3 to 150,000): naturally enough, for numbers of troops going out to fight are likely to be easier to discover than casualty figures, and casualties usually represent only a small fraction of any army. Among troop numbers above 10, about 10% fewer in each range are exceptionally unrounded than among the casualty figures.<sup>14</sup> If this difference is significant, it should reflect the fact that human decisions determine the size of units going out to fight, but not the number of those killed, and that the former are conventionally expressed in terms of round paper figures. More striking is the difference in the rate of qualification: only 17% of the troop numbers are qualified, as against 57% of the casualty figures, even though the troop numbers are larger on average, and larger figures are as a rule more highly qualified.<sup>15</sup> I would take this to mean that Thucydides and/or

in Battle of Mantinea (5.74.2); 200 Athenians and Aiginetans lost in Battle of Mantinea (5.74.2); οὐκ ἐλάσσους 200 Plataians put to death by Peloponnesians after surrendering (3.68.3). Instances of 300 are: ὀλίγῳ ἐλάσσους 300 Poteidaians and allies lost in battle near Poteidaia (1.63.3); οὐκ ἐλάσσους 300 Athenian cavalry killed by plague (3.87.3); μάλιστα 300 Athenians lost by Demosthenes in battle against Peloponnesians and Aitolians in Aitolia (3.109.2); περί 300 Lakedaimonians lost in Battle of Mantinea (5.74.2); ὥς 300 Syracusan hoplites lost from force guarding Epipolai (6.97.4); 300 Athenians captured by Syracusans separate from main troop with Nikias (7.85.2); οὐκ ἐλάσσους 300 Argive hoplites lost in battle near Miletos (8.25.3).

<sup>10</sup> Instances of 1000 are: οὐκ ἐλάσσους 1000 Kerkyraians captured by Corinthians (1.54.2); πλέον 1000 Peloponnesians and Amprakians conjectured by Amprakian herald to have been killed (3.113.4); ὑπέρ 1000 Messinians killed by Naxians and barbarian allies (4.25.9); ὀλίγῳ ἐλάσσους 1000 Athenians lost in Battle of Delion (4.101.2).

<sup>11</sup> Instances of 120: περί 120 μάλιστα Athenian hoplites killed in Aitolia (3.98.4); περί 120 Spartiate hoplites captured on Sphakteria (4.38.5); περί 120 Syracusan and allied troops killed in first battle at Syracuse (6.71.1).

<sup>12</sup> Instances of 50: ὀλίγῳ ἐλάσσους 50 Athenian hoplites killed at Solygeia (4.44.6); ὥς 50 Athenians and allies lost in first battle at Syracuse (6.71.1). Instances of 700: ἐς 700 Peloponnesians, Toronaians, and Chalkidians captured by Athenians in Torone (5.3.4); 700 Argives, Orneatai, and Kleonaians lost in Battle of Mantinea (5.74.2). Instances of 800: 800 Kerkyraian δοῦλοι captured at Sybota and sold by Korinthians (1.55.1); ἐς 800 μάλιστα Sikeliotai lost from force of reinforcements on way to Syracuse.

<sup>13</sup> Thus all four cases of 1000 are qualified, as are all but one of the seven cases of 300, and three out of the seven cases of 200: see notes 9 and 10 above.

<sup>14</sup> See my article cited above (note 3), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Thus only six of the 22 numbers from 300 up referring to casualties are unqualified, as compared to 15 of the 27 numbers below 300.

his informants (we usually cannot be sure who introduced the qualification) felt less certainty regarding casualty figures. The difference in the proportion of comparative to approximating qualification may also be significant: for troops on their way to battle 24% of the figures qualified have comparative qualifiers, as compared to 43% for casualty figures. Here again one would expect the larger numbers to have the higher proportion of comparative qualification. Why is this not the case? Comparative qualifiers appear to be used sometimes to emphasize rhetorically the largeness or smallness of the figure qualified.<sup>16</sup> Thucydides' more frequent use of this kind of qualification with casualty figures may indicate, therefore, that he or his informants were sometimes inclined (like modern reporters and newscasters) to use this means of emphasizing the magnitude of the loss suffered by a city in a battle or campaign.

As regards the clustering of numbers, all seven figures that occur more than once referring to casualties are found among the 22 figures that occur three times or more referring to troops entering battle, and the two figures that stand out strikingly in the second list (300 and 1000, each found 35 times) are among the three most frequent figures used of casualties. This might suggest that when estimating casualties Thucydides and/or his informants thought in terms of some of the same conventional numbers as determined the size of units sent out on campaign; e.g., if detachments of 300 men were common in Greek armies, this figure would naturally suggest itself as a round figure in estimates of casualties.<sup>17</sup>

Does Thucydides supply significantly more casualty figures or more precise ones for one side or the other in the war? A breakdown of the figures along these lines shows that nearly twice as many are given for Athens and her allies as for the Peloponnesian states (32:17). Clearly, either Thucydides took a greater interest in the details of losses to his own side, or he had access to better information, or perhaps both. The fact that about 70% of the Peloponnesian figures are qualified, as compared to only about 50% of the Athenian figures, points to a similar conclusion. The rate of comparative qualification, by contrast, is somewhat higher for the Athenian than for the Peloponnesian alliance (c. 25%: c. 11–18%). This might suggest that Thucydides cared more to emphasize the magnitude of Athens' losses than her enemies'.<sup>18</sup> However, six of the 14 cases of unusually unrounded figures refer to Peloponnesian losses. Thus the picture is not a simple one. That more figures are given for the Athenian than for the Peloponnesian alliance, and that a higher proportion of

<sup>16</sup> This is the thesis of the article cited above, note 3.

<sup>17</sup> Thus Gomme commented, *à propos* of Thucydides' report (2.25.3) of a force of 300 Eleian *λογάδες*, that 300 is "a common number for such select troops for special missions; cf. in Thucydides, iii.22.7, iv.70.2, 125.3 (Classen)" (A. W. Gomme, A. Andrewes, and K. J. Dover, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, 5 vols. [Oxford 1945–1981; hereafter *HCT*] 2.84). Pritchett, *GSW* 2.221–25, sets out evidence for selected corps of citizen troops. Of the seven such corps included in his list, five number either 300 or 1000. On such select troops in fifth-century Greek warfare, see now Lawrence Tritle, "Epilektoi at Athens," *AHB* 3 (1989) 54–59. I hope to investigate this question more fully elsewhere.

<sup>18</sup> This would be in accord with the rhetorical emphasis suggested as one of the purposes of comparative qualification in Thucydides in the article cited above, note 3.

the latter are qualified might be due simply to Thucydides' having had better information about his own side than about the enemy. On the other hand, the fact that he used the comparative type of qualification to qualify more of his own side's casualty figures seems likely to reflect something of his own interests or sympathies, while the unusually unrounded nature of some of his Peloponnesian figures must surely mean that on occasion he got information of an unusually precise kind from the other side.

If Thucydides reported more casualty figures for his own side simply because his information was better, does the picture change after 424, when he was exiled from Athens? A comparative analysis of the figures in books 1–4 and those in books 5–8 finds essentially the same preponderance on the Athenian side.<sup>19</sup> This might incline one to favor an explanation in terms of where Thucydides' sympathies lay rather than simply the quality of his information. One might remember, however, that many indications have been found in the battle descriptions of books 5–8 that Thucydides continued to get information from the Athenian side.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the fact that in the second half of the *History* no less than in the first Thucydides qualifies enemy losses more heavily calls to mind his complaints about the difficulty of getting precise troop numbers or casualty figures for the Peloponnesian forces in the Battle of Mantinea (5.68.2 and 74.3). Although, as he says (5.26.5), the opportunity afforded by his exile to get information from the enemy side was invaluable, his inquiries were not always successful.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to analyzing the casualty figures themselves, one can also profitably look at the figures in the context of Thucydides' battle descriptions to see how far he followed a regular custom in the amount, type, and precision of the information that he supplied. This investigation discovers considerable fluctuations in the casualty information reported by Thucydides for different kinds of troops; and there are signs that these may well be due as much to the historian's own judgment of the relative significance of different details for the understanding of a battle or of the whole war, as to the chance of his access to different

<sup>19</sup> The figures for books 1–4 are: Athenian alliance 19; Peloponnesian alliance 10. For books 5–8 the ratio is: Athenian alliance 13; Peloponnesian alliance 7. The problem remains, of course, that, since we cannot suppose Thucydides to have finished writing the narrative of any event within some fixed period of time after the event's occurrence, it is impossible to be sure that he collected all the information concerning events that preceded his exile before he left Athens. Thus, most obviously, certain passages that fall quite early in the narration of the Archidamian War (e.g., the obituary of Perikles, at 2.65) received their final form only after the surrender of Athens in 404 (see Simon Hornblower, *Thucydides* [Baltimore 1987] 136ff.). But the historian's statement (at 1.1) that he began the process of composing his history as soon as the war started surely suggests that he tried to compile some sort of record of events, even if only in the form of rough notes, as closely as possible on the heels of their happening, however long it took him to produce the often considerably revised and polished narrative that survives.

<sup>20</sup> See Gomme-Andrewes-Dover's notes *ad* 4.89.1, 4.101.2, 5.68.3 (*HCT* 3.558 and 571–72, 4.110–17, and also 5.251–54 and 386).

<sup>21</sup> The fact that c. 70% of the casualty figures for the Peloponnesian alliance are qualified, compared with only 50% of those for the Athenian alliance, supports this.

sorts of information. For in a considerable number of cases his statement of casualties contributes significantly to the particular picture his narrative paints of the engagement in question.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, for example, at 2.79.2 he reports that 430 Athenians and all three of their generals were killed in a battle near Spartolos; but for their opponents, the Chalkidians and Bottiaians, although he mentions their taking up of their dead after the battle, he gives no figure. His narrative makes it plain that the enemy losses came early in the battle and did not significantly affect its outcome, which was a serious defeat for the Athenians. In addition, the Athenian loss was both a high proportion of the original force (430 of 2000 = c. 21%) and a fairly high number relative to other casualty figures reported in Thucydides' *History* (the median figure is 250). These various factors suggest that the lopsidedness of Thucydides' report of casualties here was due primarily to his perception of the relatively much greater importance of the Athenian losses rather than to a simple lack of information concerning the enemy's losses.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in describing a defeat inflicted on Demosthenes by the Aitolians, at 3.98.4, Thucydides says only that πολλοί of Demosthenes' allied troops died, while he gives the Athenian losses as περὶ 120 μάλιστα. Now he does not as a rule give separate figures for losses of Athens' allies (the figures for Argives, etc., in the Battle of Mantinea [5.74.3] are exceptional); and this might, of course, be due to a generally greater difficulty in obtaining allied figures, although it might equally result from a lack of interest in allied losses. However, in this particular case it is quite clear that Thucydides attached a special significance to the loss of these particular Athenian hoplites, for he goes on to make a most puzzling 'hyperbolic' claim regarding their exceptional quality. This strong feeling would be quite sufficient to motivate the much more precise Athenian figure.<sup>24</sup>

Another interesting point is that where Thucydides chooses to specify, his reports of casualty figures refer almost exclusively to cavalry, hoplites, and (in a

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Gomme's comments on the subordination of topographical detail to Thucydides' more general purposes in the narrative of Brasidas' seizure of Torone (4.113.2): "Note...how Thucydides introduces topographical detail only as it becomes immediately relevant to the story, as the actors in the story, or some of them, become aware of it" (*HCT* 3.590-91). See also the general observations of Hornblower (above, note 19), ch. 2, 13-33.

<sup>23</sup> Pritchett, *GSW* 4.187, emphasizes the magnitude of the Athenian losses: "nearly one third of the whole force, together with all three generals."

<sup>24</sup> Hornblower (above, note 19), 158-59, notes that this battle and that at Spartolos particularly interested Thucydides because they showed the potential effectiveness of light-armed troops, of which a few generals, such as Demosthenes, were just becoming aware. What Thucydides meant by saying that this particular group of 120 men βέλτιστοι δὴ ἄνδρες ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ τῷδε ἐκ τῆς Ἀθηναίων πόλεως διεφθάρησαν has puzzled all the commentators (see, e.g., Gomme, *HCT* 2.407-8, *ad loc.*, pointing out the unusually high proportion of the casualties—120 out of 300, or 40%—as one reason for Thucydides' emphasis, but admitting that he cannot satisfactorily explain the insistence on the unusual quality of these men). On Thucydides' tendency to make 'hyperbolic' claims see John R. Grant, "Toward knowing Thucydides," *Phoenix* 28 (1974) 81-94.

few cases) other specially equipped troops, such as archers and peltasts.<sup>25</sup> He rarely even mentions in general terms the death in battle of *ψιλοί*.<sup>26</sup> The notice regarding the Battle of Delion (4.101.2) is unusual in this respect in mentioning, in addition to the specific figures for hoplites who died on both sides, the death of “a large number” of light-armed men and baggage carriers. The reason for Thucydides’ general failure to mention deaths of *ψιλοί* may be partly that, as he insists *à propos* of Delion (4.94.1), Athens used no equipped and trained light-armed troops in her land army (doubtless because those who might have constituted such a troop served instead in the fleet), so that few *ψιλοί* will have been present in most battles, at least on the Athenian side.<sup>27</sup> Because the army that fought at Delion had gone first to build a fort in Boiotian territory,<sup>28</sup> it included an unusually high number of *ψιλοί*.

However, a similar lack of numerical precision about deaths of *ψιλοί* is found in Thucydides’ statement of the ravages of the plague among Athens’ armed forces (3.87.3). It is true, of course, as Gomme notes (*ad loc.*),<sup>29</sup> that ὁ ἄλλος ὄχλος here probably includes not only thetes, but also metics, foreigners, slaves, women, and children, and that, as no tally would have been kept of the last four of these groups for military purposes, no one could have known how many of them had died of the plague. But there must have been records kept for military purposes of thetes, who served in the fleet, and of metics, who served in the reserve, from which Thucydides could surely have drawn an estimate of their respective losses in the plague to report separately. That he did not do this, but lumped these groups in with the non-combatants, among whom indeed the number who died could not be discovered, must reflect his notions of what was important. Thus the form of this notice was most probably influenced by Thucydides’ judgment of the relative importance of different kinds of troops. Note also that, just as he often gives casualty notices for

<sup>25</sup> Of the 49 casualty figures, 34 carry no specification of the kind of troops involved; the remaining 15 divide as follows: hoplites 8, cavalry 3, archers 2, peltasts 1, slaves 1. Gomme’s note *ad* 2.13.8 (*HCT* 2.41–42) collects Thucydides’ references to archers, both Athenian and from other states.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the report of the invasion of the Megarid in late summer 431 (2.31.2), where, having enumerated the hoplites, both citizen and metic, Thucydides adds *χωρίς δὲ ὁ ἄλλος ὄμιλος ψιλῶν οὐκ ὀλίγος*. Gomme comments: “As usual, Thucydides gives no figures for these troops..., because, although the number of thetes at Athens was known, or could be inferred from the total citizen lists, many of them were serving in the fleet, and there would be many foreigners, and doubtless some slaves, among the light-armed with the army” (*HCT* 2.93). I am not sure that Gomme is right in his automatic assumption that if a piece of information was potentially ascertainable by someone living in Athens in the 420s, then Thucydides must necessarily have ascertained it. Obviously, the still hotly debated questions of whether the Athenians kept a single comprehensive *κατάλογος* of all hoplites, and what kind of list or lists they maintained of thetes liable to military service, bear on how easily a historian could have obtained the kind of information at issue here. See most recently M. H. Hansen, *Demography and Democracy* (Herning 1985), citing earlier contributions on both sides of the argument.

<sup>27</sup> See Gomme’s notes *ad* 4.94.1, and also 2.13.8 and 3.87.3 (*HCT* 3.565, 2.40–42 and 388–89).

<sup>28</sup> This is described at 4.90. See also Gomme’s note *ad loc.* (*HCT* 3.558).

<sup>29</sup> See also his note *ad* 2.32.2, quoted above, note 27.



battles in connection with some particular aspect of the fighting or its aftermath (i.e., for a very specific and immediate purpose, rather than from any general custom of always listing casualties in any battle), so also this statement of Athens' losses in the plague is very specifically motivated: the numbers are introduced to back up a general statement that "there was nothing which constricted and damaged the power of Athens more than the plague" (3.87.2).<sup>30</sup>

The frequent observations he makes throughout his narrative of the Sicilian Expedition on the presence or absence of cavalry on both sides stem from his judgment that cavalry forces played a particularly important role in that campaign.<sup>31</sup> But this particular judgment regarding the tactics used in these battles is very much in keeping with his generally strong interest in the action of cavalry forces all through the war, which is, after all, only to be expected from one whose family belonged to the socio-economic class from which Athens recruited her cavalymen.<sup>32</sup> The most striking example of this special interest in the cavalry in the Sicilian campaign is the casualty list at 7.51.2 for a skirmish of cavalry and infantry just outside the Athenian camp: the Athenians lost 70 horses and τῶν ὀπιτιῶν οὐ πολλούς. Note also, however, that this report of casualties is connected directly with some topographical details in the narrative: many horses, but few men, were lost because the entrance to the camp was narrow (so that, presumably, the cavalymen, unable to ride through fast enough to escape the pursuit, jumped off their horses and saved themselves on foot).

Other examples abound of casualty figures for which the motivation can be clearly discerned. At 2.58.3 Thucydides is not simply reporting judiciously the casualties caused by the plague among Hagnon's force in Chalkidike. Rather he is emphasizing the exceptionally high death rate from this non-military cause within a short period (1050 out of 4000 men in μάλιστα 40 days, or 26%, dying at an average rate of about 26 men a day) as the reason why this expedition achieved none of its goals. Again, Thucydides reports the extraordinarily unbalanced losses of the two sides in the Battle of Amphipolis (5.11.2), namely περί 600 Athenians, but only 7 Peloponnesians, chiefly in order to emphasize the unorthodox nature of the engagement: there was no regular παράταξις, he explains, but simply a φυγή of the Athenian right wing. Thirdly, after the Battle of Solygeia in Corinthia (4.44.5–6), Thucydides notes the small detail that the Athenians, being forced to evacuate the field of their victory, had to leave behind the bodies of two of their dead, which they could not find, and

<sup>30</sup> See the discussion of this passage in my article cited above (note 3), 84–85.

<sup>31</sup> I have counted 53 references to cavalry in the narrative of the Sicilian expedition, starting at 6.21.1. This count was made using E. A. Bétant's *Lexicon Thucydideum* (Hildesheim 1969), s.v. ἵππης, τὸ ἵππικόν, ἡ ἵππος. This represents 59% of the total of 90 such references in the whole work.

<sup>32</sup> The large number of references to cavalry forces made by Thucydides in the course of his work (90 altogether: see note 31) amply testifies to his great interest in this element of the Greek military. On Thucydides' family and its connections, see J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families 600–300 B.C.* (Oxford 1971), #7267. The socio-economic background of the Athenian cavalry in the fifth century is discussed by Glen Bugh, *The Horsemen of Athens* (Princeton 1988) 39–119.

which they subsequently begged back from the Corinthians under a truce. Pritchett has argued that the reason for all these details was that the Athenian general Nikias' religious request for these last two bodies to be returned under a truce was "tantamount to an admission of defeat";<sup>33</sup> in other words, the details regarding the casualties in this battle seemed to Thucydides to affect significantly the evaluation of its outcome. Finally, the notices of casualties for the Battle of Mantinea (5.74.2–3) are exceptionally full, including separate figures for Athens and all her allies, and for the Lakedaimonians (suitably qualified, because of the special difficulty Thucydides says he experienced in getting this information<sup>34</sup>), and even a note that the lack of figures for the allies of Sparta is due to the negligible scale of their losses. This exceptionally full detail regarding the casualties accords well with the 'full-dress' treatment which Thucydides gives to every aspect of this battle, which he justifies by stating that it was "certainly the greatest battle that had taken place for a very long time among Hellenic states, and it was fought by the most renowned cities in Hellas" (5.74.1). In fact, this battle was really the only set battle fought on land between the two protagonists, each supported by allies, in the whole Peloponnesian War. The full and careful casualty report on all contingents is one of the means by which Thucydides emphasizes the special significance of this battle.<sup>35</sup>

In this paper an attempt has been made to recommend the slightly heretical idea that, although his standards of accuracy and care in historical research were far more scrupulous than those of any other surviving ancient historian, still Thucydides' handling of casualty figures differs in several respects from what one would expect of one of his modern descendants. He did not, of course, indulge in the kind of wild and absurd inflation of numbers that so besmirched the reputation of some other ancient historians, but he was nonetheless limited necessarily by the primitive state of fifth-century BC 'information science,' and there are some grounds for believing that Thucydides' casualty figures may not always be a straightforward product of what one recent writer has called "Thucydides the tape-recorder."<sup>36</sup> For he supplies figures fairly selectively, often to illuminate some aspect of the battle narrative which he judges particularly

<sup>33</sup> See Pritchett, *GSW* 4.190–91, 236, and 248; the quotation is from page 236. Gomme (*HCT* 3.492), on the other hand, who cites the contrast between Thuc. 4.44.5–6 and Plut. *Nic.* 6.5–7 as showing the difference between the historian's and the biographer's interests, apparently missed this point.

<sup>34</sup> At 5.68.2 he complains that the secretiveness of the Spartan state and the boastfulness of allied spokesmen made it impossible for him to get reliable figures for the size of each contingent going into the battle on the Peloponnesian side. At 5.74.3 he mentions the negligible losses of the Peloponnesian allies, and gives his very hesitant estimate of the Lakedaimonian loss (αὐτῶν δὲ χαλεπὸν μὲν ἦν τὴν ἀλήθειαν πυθέσθαι, ἐλέγοντο δὲ περὶ τριακοσίους ἀποθανεῖν).

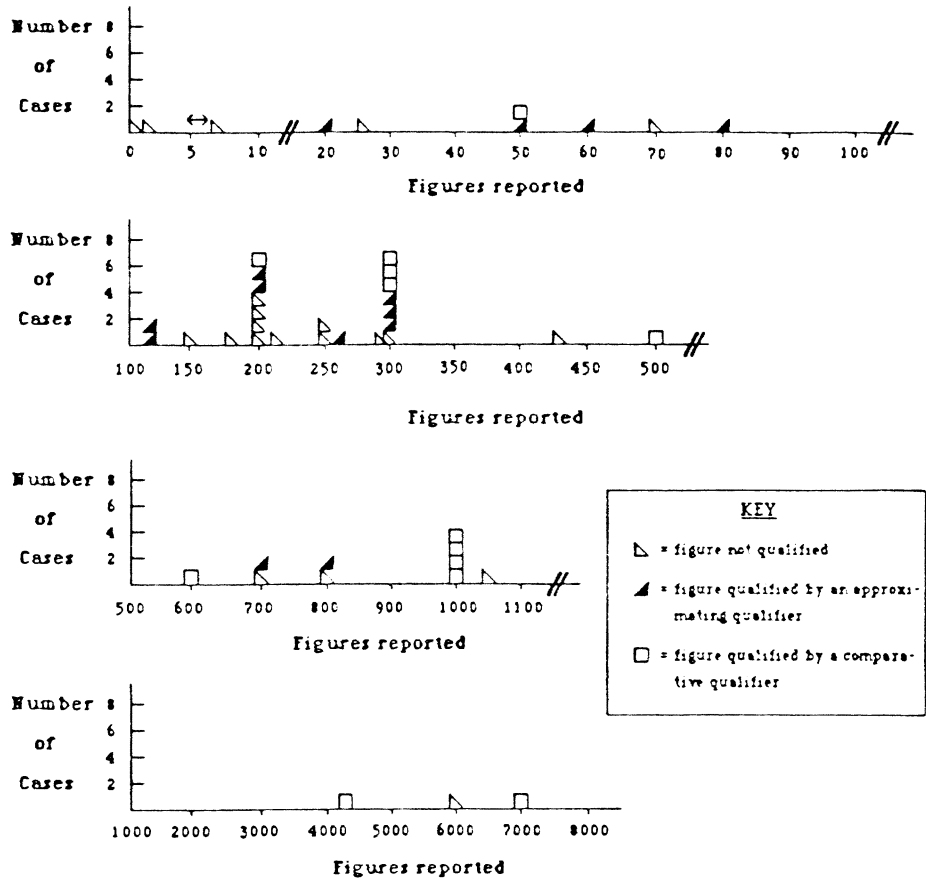
<sup>35</sup> Pritchett (*GSW* 2.193) comments that Thucydides gives a complete battle order for only six battles in the whole of his *History*, of which Mantinea is one.

<sup>36</sup> The phrase is Hornblower's (above, note 19), 43. Smith (above, note 1), 361, who noted and commented on some of the oddities in Thucydides' casualty reports with which this article is concerned, concluded, "Thucydides looked upon his history as a piece of literature, and although he is accurate in stating facts, he did not care enough about minute details to give exact numbers of the dead, probably because he considered such details relatively unimportant and inartistic."

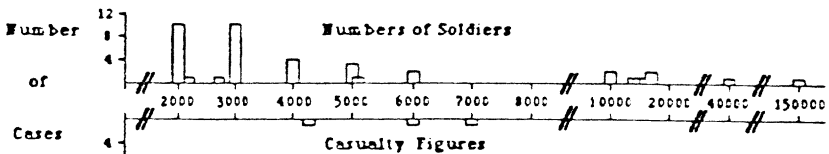
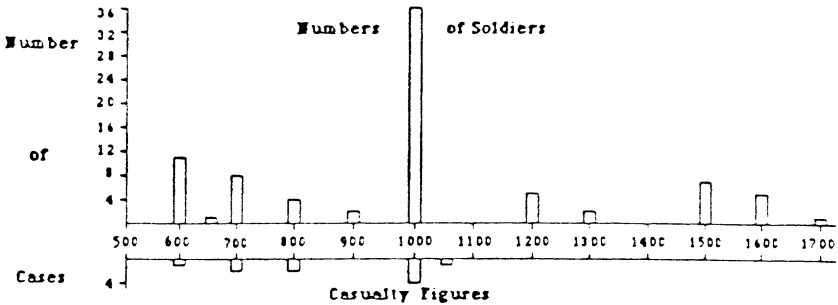
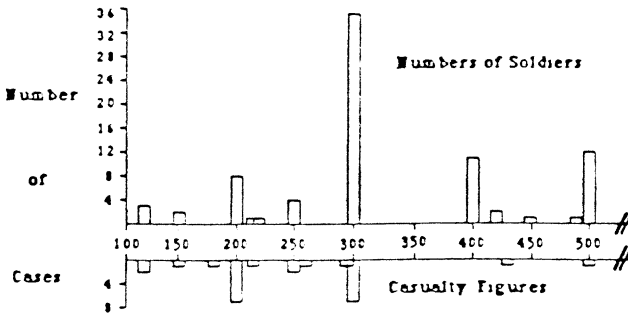
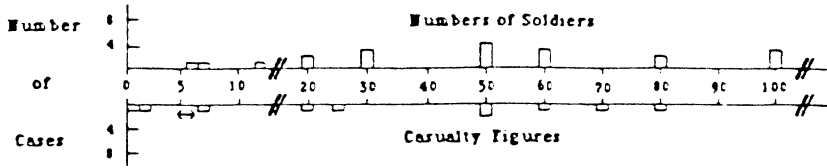
significant, and I doubt very much whether he regularly consulted official records to obtain them<sup>37</sup>—many of his figures have the appearance of estimates made by participants, rather than final official counts. These un-modern aspects of Thucydides' casualty reports need to be taken into consideration whenever we make use of this information.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> As suggested, tentatively, by Smith (above, note 1), 361, and R Stupperich, *Staatsbegräbnis und Privatgrabmal im klassischen Athen* (Dissertation Münster 1977), 7 and note 5, citing J. Mälzer, *Verluste und Verlustlisten im Griechischen Altertum bis auf die Zeit Alexanders des Grossen* (Diss. Jena 1912), 58 ff., as well as Smith.

<sup>38</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the meeting of the APA in Atlanta in December 1977. I am grateful to those who responded with helpful comments on that occasion, as well as to my Toronto colleagues Joan Bigwood and Malcolm Wallace for comments and discussion of subsequent drafts, and to my husband, Irvin Rubincam, for much useful discussion and invaluable assistance with the graphs.



1. Casualty Figures in Thucydides



## 2. Numbers of Soldiers and Numbers of Casualties in Thucydides

Appendix  
Military Casualties Numbered by Thucydides

Ref.	Context	Qualifier	No. and unit	Remarks
1.54.2	Kerkyraians captured by Corinthians in sea battle at Sybota	οὐκ ἐλάσσους	1000 Kerk. ἄνδρες αἰχμαλῶτοι	<i>oratio obliqua</i> ; = next 2 groups
1.55.1	Kerkyraian prisoners sold by Corinthians		800 Kerk. δοῦλοι	Incl'd in figure at 1.54.2
1.55.1	Kerkyraian prisoners kept under guard by Corinthians		250 Kerk. non-δοῦλοι	Incl'd in figure at 1.54.2
1.63.3	Poteidaians + allies lost in battle nr. Poteidaia	ὀλίγῳ ἐλάσσους	300 Pot. + allied troops	
1.63.3	Athenians killed in battle nr. Poteidaia		150 Ath. hoplites + general, Kallias	Orig. force 3000 hoplites
2.5.7	Thebans captured by Plataians after invasion of Plataia		180 Thebans	Orig. force ὀλίγῳ πλείους 300
2.58.3	Athenians killed by plague from Hagnon's force in Chalkidike in c.40 days		1050 Ath. hoplites	Orig. force 4000
2.79.2	Athenians killed in battle in Chalkidike		430 Ath. hoplites	Orig. force 2000
3.24.2	Plataian captured by Peloponnesian besieging force		1 Plat. archer	Orig. force ἐς 220 μάλιστα
3.68.3	Plataians put to death after surrender to Peloponnesians at Plataia	οὐκ ἐλάσσους	200 Plataians	Orig. force 400

3.68.3	Athenians put to death after surrender to Peloponnesians at Plataia		25 Athenians	Orig. force 80
3.87.3	Athenian hoplites ἐκ τῶν τάξεων killed by plague	οὐκ ἐλάσσους	4400 Ath. hoplites	Orig. force 13000 + 16000
3.87.3	Athenian cavalry killed by plague	οὐκ ἐλάσσους	300 Ath. cavalry	Orig. force 1200
3.98.4	Athenians killed in battle nr. Aigion (Aitolia)	περὶ... μάλιστα	120 Ath. hoplites + general, Prokles	Orig. force 300 ἐπιβάται τῶν νεῶν
3.109.2	Athenians + allies killed in battle vs. Peloponnesians + Aitolians in Aitolia	μάλιστα	300 Ath. + allies	Orig. force 200 Mess. hopl. + 60 Ath. archers + Akarn. + Amphil.
3.111.4	Peloponnesians + Amprakians killed in retreat after Akarnanian attack	ἐς...τινας	200 Pelop. + Amprak.	= next 3 groups
3.113.3	Pelop. + Amprak. said by Amprak. herald to have been killed	μάλιστα	200 Pelop. + Amprak	As at 3.111.4; here <i>oratio recta</i>
3.113.4	No. denied by Amprak. herald to match spoils from battle		200 (Pelop. + Amprak.)	As at 3.111.4; <i>oratio recta</i> again
3.113.4	No. conjectured by Amprak. herald to match spoils from battle	πλέον	1000 (Pelop. + Amprak.)	As at 3.111.4; <i>oratio recta</i> again; NB Thuc.'s incred. 3.113.6
4.25.9	Messinians killed in battle nr. Naxos by Ath. + allies	ὑπέρ	1000 Messinians	
4.38.5	Lakedaimonian garrison captured on Sphakteria		292 Laked. hopl.	Orig. force 420 hopl.

4.38.5	Spartiates captured on Sphakteria	περί	120 Spart. hoplites	
4.44.5	Athenians killed in battle nr. Solygeia and left on field		2 Ath. hoplites	Incl'd in fig. at 4.44.6
4.44.6	Athenians killed in battle nr. Solygeia	ὀλίγω ἐλάσσους	50 Ath. hoplites	
4.44.6	Korinthians killed in battle nr. Solygeia		212 Kor. hoplites	
4.48.1	Kerkyraian oligarchs killed by democrats after leaving sanctuary		60 Kerkyraians	
4.100.5	Athenians captured by Boiotians from garrison at Delion		200 Ath. cavalry	
4.101.2	Boiotians killed in battle of Delion	ὀλίγω ἐλάσσους	500 Boiotians	
4.101.2	Athenians killed in battle of Delion	ὀλίγω ἐλάσσους	1000 Ath. + general, Hippokrates	
5.3.4	Peloponnesians + Toronaians + Chalkidians captured by Athenians at Torone	ἐς	700 Pelop. + Tor.	No fig. given for those killed in fighting
5.11.2	Athenians killed in battle at Amphipolis	περί	600 Ath. hoplites	
5.11.2	Peloponnesians + Chalkidians killed in battle at Amphipolis		7 Pelop. + Chalkid.	
5.74.2	Argives + Orneans + Kleonaians killed in battle of Mantinea		700 Arg. + Orn. + Kleon.	Only 1000 Arg λογάδες numbered of orig. force



5.74.2	Mantineians killed in battle of Mantinea		200 Mant.	
5.74.2	Athenians + Aiginetans killed in battle of Mantinea		200 Ath. + Aig. hopl. + cav. + both generals	Orig. Ath. force 1000 hopl. + 300 cav.
5.74.2	Lakedaimonians killed in battle of Mantinea	περί	300 Laked. hopl. + cav.	Allied losses said negligible; Thuc. doubtful re Laked. figure
5.115.1	Argives killed in ambush during invasion of Phleious	ὥς	800 Arg.	
6.71.1	Syracusans + allies killed in battle nr. Olympieion (Syrac.)	περί	260 Syrac. + allies	
6.71.1	Athenians + allies killed in battle nr. Olympieion (Syrac.)	ὥς	50 Ath. + allies	
6.97.4	Syracusans of select force guarding Epipolai killed	ὥς	300 Syrac. hopl.	Orig. force 600 λογάδες τῶν ὀπλιτῶν
6.101.6	Athenian archers + Argives from detachment of Lamachos	alternat.	5 or 6 Ath. arch. + Arg. + general, Lamachos	Orig. force οὐ πολλοί archers + Arg.
7.30.2	Thrakian peltasts killed by Boiotians in revenge for sack of Mykalessos		250 Thrak. pelt.	Orig. force 1300
7.30.3	Boiotians killed by Thrakians nr. Mykalessos	ἐς... μάλιστα	20 Theb. + other Boi. cav. + hopl.	
7.32.2	Sicilians of reinforcing troop killed in ambush by Sikels	ἐς... μάλιστα	800 Sicilians	

7.51.2	Athenian horses lost in Syracusan attack on raiding party of cavalry + hoplites		70 Ath. horses	οὐ πολλοί hopl. also lost
7.82.3	Athenians with Demosthenes who surrendered to Syracusans		6000 Ath.	
7.85.2	Athenians captured by Syracusans apart from main troop with Nikias		300 Ath. ἄνδρες	Orig. force μάλιστα 300
7.87.4	Athenians + allies captured by Syracusans finally	οὐκ ἐλάσσους	7000 Ath. + allies	Orig. οὐκ ἐλάσσους 40000 left camp, but many killed or enslaved; Thuc. doubtful re figure
8.25.3	Argives killed fighting with Athenians nr. Miletos	οὐκ ἐλάσσους	300 Arg. hoplites	Orig. force 1500 Arg. (incl. 500 armed by Ath.)