

Casualties in Hoplite Battles

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HOW MUCH RISK did a Greek hoplite run of losing his life in a set battle? The consensus of recent writers on Greek warfare is that casualties were light unless and until one side retreated.¹ “Greek armour gave reasonably good protection,” explains G. Cawkwell, “hence the small number of casualties on the victorious side in set battles—there were a mere 159 on the Greek side at Plataea in 479 B.C.” Oswyn Murray finds the battle of Plataea illustrative of hoplite battles in general: “It is typical of the nature of hoplite warfare that in this greatest of hoplite battles the Greeks lost only 159 men.” A. J. Holladay also cites Plataea, along with Mantinea, Delium, and Marathon—where 6,400 Persians died, but only 192 Athenians—to support his contention that “the total casualties in hoplite battles where we have reliable figures are remarkably light.” But Plataea and Marathon were not battles between two hoplite armies. Were their casualties typical or exceptional?

An answer may lie in the casualty figures supplied by our sources for set hoplite battles in the classical period between Plataea and Leuctra (479–371).² There are good grounds for taking these data seriously. For religious reasons, the Greeks regularly retrieved corpses and saw to their proper burial. In classical Athens the names of the dead were normally inscribed on stone; the custom is known in other Greek cities as well. Many fragments of these lists survive.³ They cannot be completely accurate, but we ought to remember Nicias, who

¹ The quotations that follow are from Cawkwell’s notes to his Penguin edition of Xenophon, *The Persian Expedition* (1979) 166; Murray, *Early Greece* (Atlantic Highlands [N.J.] 1980) 278; and Holladay, “Hoplites and Heresies,” *JHS* 102 (1982) 97.

² Excluded therefore is the fighting at Spartolus (429), Aegitium (426), Sphacteria (425), Amphipolis (422), Mycalessus (413), Haliartus (395), Lechaeum (393, 392), Aegina (388), Olynthus (381), and Orchomenus (369). Pitched battles were obviously not the only danger hoplites had to face. Most of this evidence was assembled by Johannes Mälzer, *Verluste und Verlustlisten im griechischen Altertum bis auf die Zeit Alexanders des Grossen* (Diss.Jena 1912), who also treats losses in naval battles, from disease, etc. Mälzer concluded (unobjectionably but weakly) that “Es ist eine allbekannte Tatsache, dass der Sieger im allgemeinen geringere Verluste hatte als der Besiegte” (60). He cites Marathon and Plataea in support.

³ See Christoph W. Clairmont, *Patrios Nomos: Public Burial in Athens During the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.* (Oxford 1983).

realized at Solygea that two bodies were missing after the battle and sent a herald to recover them.⁴ The information, then, was available to contemporaries; and while it may be unlikely that any historian consulted the inscriptions themselves, Thucydides clearly had the capacity and the interest to talk to people who knew the (approximate) truth. He does not hesitate to let his reader know when he can only estimate, as in his discussion of the size of the Spartan army at Mantinea (5.68), and in at least one case he refuses to give the number killed because he did not believe the large number given him by his sources (3.113.6). When he gives a specific figure, I believe he has satisfied himself that it is correct to the extent indicated by attached qualifiers (provided always that we remember his tendency to round numbers, especially large ones).⁵ Later authors are more problematical. Unlike Thucydides, Xenophon does not customarily give specific figures for the losses on each side in a battle. Diodorus gives numbers more frequently, but their reliability is questionable. Where we have Thucydides to compare, Diodorus often seems guilty of exaggeration. Where we do not have Thucydides, it is difficult to know how much to rely on Diodorus: where his source is ultimately the Oxyrhynchus historian, he may preserve sound evidence. If he is capable of citing fantastic numbers for the size of armies (*cf.*, in addition to Mantinea, the battle between Croton with 100,000 soldiers and Sybaris with 300,000: Diod. 12.9–10), his casualty figures in our period are usually in the believable range. One point I would stress: the broader picture would remain unchanged if we discarded Diodorus altogether (though our sample would be considerably smaller). If someone was guessing on the results of the battles of Acragas, Himera River, Naryx, Nemea River, *etc.*, he knew what a reasonable guess was.

I give a brief discussion of the evidence. The results are summarized in the accompanying table.

ACRAGAS (472). According to Diodorus 11.53.4–5, a great many died because Greeks were fighting Greeks. The Acragantines and their

⁴ Thuc. 4.44.5; Plut. *Nic.* 6.5–6.

⁵ See Catherine Reid Rubincam, “Qualification of Numerals in Thucydides,” *AJAH* 4 (1979) 77–95. Her approach makes sense, but I can see only one instance involving casualty figures where Thucydides’ choice of expression may be intended to influence our interpretation: the statement that a few less (ὀλίγω ἐλάσσους, 4.44.6) than fifty Athenians died at Solygea. Thucydides probably knew the precise number, since he notes that the Athenians initially failed to find two bodies and had to ask for them under a truce. His point may be to stress the low number of Athenians killed in relation to Corinthian losses, given precisely as 212. We would then have an example of what Rubincam calls an “emphatic comparative qualification” (p. 85). But the same expression is used elsewhere without this sense (*e.g.* Thuc. 4.93.3).

allies lost more than 4,000 out of more than 20,000 cavalry and infantry, or about 20%. On the Syracusan side about 2,000 died, or about 10% if the two armies were equal in size. The ratio of winner's losses to loser's losses was approximately 1 : 2.

TANAGRA (457). Some 11,500 Peloponnesians and Boeotians faced 13,000 Athenians plus 1,000 Argives. Thucydides says only that there was "great slaughter on both sides" (*φόνος ἐγένετο ἀμφοτέρων πολὺς*, 1.108). The broken inscription found in Athens listing the Argive dead originally contained, Meritt estimated, as many as 400 names.⁶ The Argives probably faced the Spartan right wing and suffered heavier casualties than their allies. The battle of Tanagra may lie behind the comment in Aristotle *Ath. Pol.* 26.1 on the death of 2,000–3,000 hoplites in each campaign during this period. But an estimate of losses for each side seems hazardous, and I omit Tanagra from the table below. I do not think anything can be gleaned from Plutarch's statement that 100 of Cimon's *hetairoi* fell (*Cim.* 17.3–6), other than general support for the high cost of the battle, on which all sources agree.

HIMERA RIVER (446). Here the Syracusans defeated the Acragantines again, killing more than 1,000 (Diod. 12.8.4). The size of neither army is given, nor are Syracusan casualties.

POTIDAEA (432). The Athenians lost 150 of their 3,000 hoplites (Thuc. 1.61.4 and 63.3, who reports only that "many" allied troops were present and does not give their casualties), or 5%. The Corinthians had sent 1,600 hoplites and 400 light-armed (Thuc. 1.60.1) and had an unspecified number of Potidaeans on their side; in all they lost a few less than 300 (Thuc. 1.63.3; Diod. 12.34.4 has "more than 300"). If the Potidaeans supplied 300 hoplites as they had at Plataea in 479 (Hdt. 9.28), and if we assume that the light-armed escaped, the Corinthian-Potidaean casualties were about 15.8%. (Probably, however, the Potidaeans turned out in greater force than they had in 479, and therefore this percentage may be too high). The ratio of winner's losses to loser's losses was 1 : 2.

OLPAE (426/5). The victorious Demosthenes and the Acarnanians lost about 300 men (Thuc. 3.109.2), but we do not know the size of their army, only that it was outnumbered (Thuc. 3.107.3). The Peloponnesian army included 3,000 hoplites sent with Eurylochus (3.100.2) plus an uncertain number of Ambraciots. The Ambraciots had originally sent 3,000 to besiege Argos (3.105.1). In the battle, the Ambraciots

⁶ Meiggs/Lewis 35, published by Benjamin D. Meritt, "The Argives at Tanagra," *Hesperia* 14 (1945) 134–47, esp. 146; cf. "Greek Inscriptions," *Hesperia* 21 (1952) 341–55, esp. 351ff.

themselves emerged victorious, only to find that the greater part of their side had lost (*τὸ πλεόν νευικημένον*, 3.108.3). A. W. Gomme may therefore have been right in suggesting that some Ambraciots were still at Argos.⁷ We would probably be safe in setting a maximum for the Peloponnesian forces at 6,000. Demosthenes lost, then, something more than 5%. While Thucydides does not give a number for casualties on the losing side, Diodorus claims that Demosthenes killed almost all 1,000 Ambraciots (12.60.4), but he says nothing of the Peloponnesian presence. There may be something salvable here, though it is clear from Thuc. 3.111.4 that many more than 200 Ambraciots survived the initial battle. Diodorus may be using a figure for the total losses on the losing side: 1,000 out of 6,000 (16.7%) would fit Thucydides' statement that "many" Ambraciots died (3.108.3)—to say nothing of the major part of the army defeated first. The ratio of winner's losses to loser's losses would then be 1 : 3.3.

SOLYGEA (425). A few less than 50 Athenians died (Thuc. 4.44.6; Diod. 12.65.6 says 8) out of 2,000 (Thuc. 4.42.1), or about 2.5%. Of the Corinthians, 212 died (more than 300 according to Diodorus) out of a force of uncertain size (half the army in the field, which was not the full levy; it lacked 500 away on garrison duty, those who lived north of the isthmus, and the older men: Thuc. 4.42). If Beloch's estimate of 3,000–4,000 young Corinthian hoplites at this time is correct,⁸ there were less than 1,750 present at Solygea (but probably not many less, since they withstood the 2,000 Athenians for some time). Therefore the Corinthians lost approximately 12.1%, and the ratio of winner's losses to loser's losses was 1 : 4.2.

DELIUM (424). The Boeotians lost a few less than 500 (Thuc. 4.101.2) out of 7,000 hoplites (4.93.3), or 7.1% (Diod. 12.70.4 reports a loss of not more than 500 out of almost 20,000!). The Athenians lost a few less than 1,000 out of 7,000, or 14.3% (Diodorus says many times 500—*πολλαπλάσιοι τούτων*—out of more than 20,000). Thucydides' figures do not seem to be low, as best we can tell from two casualty lists, which list 101 Thespians (Clairmont estimates there were originally ± 300) and 63 Tanagrans and Eretrians.⁹ The ratio of winner's losses to loser's losses was 1 : 2.

MANTINEA (418). The Argives and their allies lost 1,100 (Thuc. 5.74.2) out of some 8,000 men, or about 13.8%; the victorious Lacedaemonians lost about 300 of perhaps 9,000, or about 3.3%. The ratio

⁷ *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides III* (Oxford 1956) ad 3.108.2, with other possibilities that seem less likely to me.

⁸ K. J. Beloch, *Die Bevölkerung der griechisch-römischen Welt* (Leipzig 1886) 120.

⁹ *IG VII 585 and 1888*, with Clairmont (*supra* n.3) I 233.

of losses by winners and losers was 1 : 3.7. Thucydides expresses some hesitation about the number of Lacedaemonian dead here: it was difficult to learn the truth, he says, and he does not vouch for the figure he gives, but reports it as ἐλέγοντο. This may be a hint that he suspected the figure was low. For what it is worth, Diod. 12.79.4 reports that the 1,000 select Argive troops “made great slaughter” (πολὺν ἐποίουν φόνον).

LOCRIS (418). The Phocians killed more than 1,000 Locrians, according to Diod. 12.80.4. We do not have a figure for the total forces engaged on either side, but Diodorus’ number seems too high for the size of Locris.¹⁰

SYRACUSE (415). Apparently only half (Thuc. 6.67.1) of the 5,100 Athenian and allied hoplites (Thuc. 6.43) fought, and of these about 50 died (Thuc. 6.71.1), or 2%. The size of the Syracusan army is not given; it formed up twice as deep as the Athenian (Thuc. 6.67.2), and presumably its line was roughly equal to the Athenian in length: perhaps 5,000 men in all, then, of whom about 260 died (Thuc. 6.71.1; 400 according to Diod. 13.6.5), about 5.2%. The ratio of losses by winners and losers was 1 : 5.2.

SYRACUSE (413). Fighting at night, the Athenians lost “not few” (Thuc. 7.45.2), 2,500 (Diod. 13.11.5), or 2,000 (Plut. *Nic.* 21.11), *i.e.*, 20–25% of what must have been a total of roughly 10,000 hoplites after the arrival of Demosthenes (Thuc. 7.42.1).

MILETUS (412). Here 1,000 Athenian, 1,500 Argive, and 1,000 allied hoplites fought 800 Milesians plus an unspecified number of Peloponnesians and mercenaries. In this battle, as Thucydides notes, Ionians on both sides beat the Dorians opposed to them. The only casualty figure he gives is for the (defeated) Argives, who lost a few less than 300 (8.25.3), or slightly less than 20%.

EPHESUS (409). Tissaphernes’ troops defeated and killed about 100 (Xen. *Hell.* 1.2.6) of Thrasyllus’ 1,000 hoplites (*Hell.* 1.1.34), or 10%. Diodorus’ report that 400 died (13.64.1) agrees with Xenophon’s statement that about 300 peltasts and others were killed on the opposite side of the city.

TA KERATA (409). According to Diod. 13.65.1–2, 1,000 Athenians under Leotrophides and Timarchus defeated the Megarians who came out against them πανδημεί, killing very many (παμπληθεῖς) Megarians and 20 Lacedaemonians.

NARYX (395/4). Ismenias led 6,000 Boeotians in a victory against the Phocians, losing about 500, or 8.3% (Diod. 14.82.7–9). The Phocians

¹⁰ Beloch (*supra* n.8) 175f.

lost almost 1,000, or—if we assume their army was roughly equal in size—about 16.7%. The ratio of winner's losses to loser's losses was 1 : 2.

NEMEA RIVER (394). According to Diod. 14.83.1, the victorious Spartans and their allies lost 1,100 (according to Xen. *Hell.* 4.3.1 and *Ages.* 7.5, only eight were Lacedaemonians) of perhaps 22,500,¹¹ or 4.9%; the confederates lost 2,800 of some 24,000, or 11.7%. The ratio of winner's losses to loser's was 1 : 2.6.

CORONEA (394). Agesilaus lost 350 while killing 600 of the confederates (Diod. 14.84). Both sides had probably 20,000 men,¹² so the Spartans lost 1.8%, the confederates 3%. The ratio of winner's losses to loser's was 1 : 1.7.

PHLIUS (374). Mercenaries and exiles defeated the citizens, killing more than 300 (Diod. 15.40.5).

LEUCTRA (371). There are some unsettling discrepancies in the figures recorded for this most famous of Theban victories. Xenophon says that almost 1,000 Lacedaemonians died (*Hell.* 6.4.15), Pausanias more than 1,000 (9.13.12), and Plutarch 1,000 (*Ages.* 28.5). Yet Diodorus has "not less than 4,000," an incredible figure, as comparison with casualty rates for other battles shows. On the other hand, Diodorus' "about 300" for the number of Boeotian dead seems much more likely than Pausanias' 47. Of 6,000 Boeotians, then, 300 died, or 5%; of 10,000 Peloponnesians, 1,000 died, or 10%.¹³ The ratio of winner's losses to loser's losses was 1 : 3.3.

Estimates are involved in a number of places, and the results should not be taken as precise. But with all due allowance for a proper margin of error in individual cases, the table reveals a clear overall pattern. The defeated army rarely lost more than 20%: typical is 10–20%, the average approximately 14%. The winning side never lost more than 10%: typical is 3–10%, the average approximately 5%. Only two of the battles fall significantly outside this pattern. Casualties at Syracuse in 415 and at Coronea in 394 were unusually low. In the first case fighting took place during a thunderstorm, and pursuit was prevented by the unchallenged Syracusan cavalry, as Thucydides notes (6.70.3). These two atypical conditions explain the light casualties. Xenophon says that Coronea was like no other battle in his day (*Hell.* 4.3.16). Agesilaus' forces on the right did not even come to

¹¹ W. Kendrick Pritchett, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography II* (Berkeley 1969) 73f.

¹² Pritchett (*supra* n.11) 93.

¹³ J. K. Anderson, *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon* (Berkeley 1970) 196ff.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Battle</i>	<i>Winner</i>	<i>Loser</i>	<i>W : L</i>
472	Acragas	2,000 (10%)	4,000 (20%)	1 : 2
446	Himera River		1,000	
432	Potidaea	150 (5%)	300 (15.8%)	1 : 2
426/5	Olpae	300 (5%)	1,000 (16.7%)	1 : 3.3
425	Solygea	50 (2.5%)	212 (12.1%)	1 : 4.2
424	Delium	500 (7.1%)	1,000 (14.3%)	1 : 2
418	Mantineia	300 (3.3%)	1,100 (13.8%)	1 : 3.7
418	Locris		1,000	
415	Syracuse	50 (2%)	260 (5.2%)	1 : 5.2
413	Syracuse		2,000–2,500 (20–25%)	
412	Miletus		300 (20%)	
409	Ephesus		100 (10%)	
395/4	Naryx	500 (8.3%)	1,000 (16.7%)	1 : 2
394	Nemea River	1,100 (4.9%)	2,800 (11.7%)	1 : 2.6
394	Coronea	350 (1.7%)	600 (3%)	1 : 1.7
374	Phlius		300	
371	Leuctra	<u>300 (5%)</u>	<u>1,000 (10%)</u>	<u>1 : 3.3</u>
Approximate Average		5%	14%	1 : 2.9

TABLE: Casualties in Battle

blows with the Argives, who fled; his troops in the center quickly routed their opponents. On the left the Thebans cut through the Orchomenians, apparently with equal ease. There were probably few deaths until Agesilaus led his soldiers directly against the Thebans, a decision that aroused Xenophon's simultaneous admiration and criticism. Now came the hard fighting that led to the highest ratio of winner's losses to loser's losses in our sample. Unfortunately we do not know how many men met in this last engagement, but though the overall casualty rate was low, it must have been much higher in this part of the fighting to result in the scene described by Xenophon (*Ages.* 2.14):

When the battle ended, one could see, where it had taken place, the ground stained with blood, the bodies of friends and enemies lying together, shields broken in pieces, spears smashed to bits, daggers out of their sheaths, some on the ground, some in a body, some still held in the hands.

Because the average ratio of winner's losses to loser's losses was 1 : 2.9, Plataea and Marathon were not at all typical of hoplite battle casualties. To find something similar in Thucydides, we have to turn to the 'battle' of Amphipolis (422). Thucydides makes a point of explaining the large discrepancy between Athenian and enemy casu-

alties (about 600 : 7): the fighting did not take place in the usual formation (it was not *ἐκ παρατάξεως*, 5.11.2; *cf.* his comment explaining the low number of Athenian losses at Sphacteria: *ἡ γὰρ μάχη οὐ σταδία ἦν*, 4.38.5). Set hoplite battles were much more costly for the winners than Amphipolis, Plataea, or Marathon—unless the opponents did not stand and fight at all (which was the Spartans' good fortune later in the “tearless” battle of 367). On the other hand, the Greeks (as Thucydides says specifically of the Lacedaemonians) did not usually pursue far once a battle was decided.¹⁴ This reluctance to go too far in killing enemy soldiers once their line had broken stemmed as much from the fear of a reversal if the troops dispersed as from a gentlemanly hesitation to kill fellow Greeks; but it did mean that the losers' losses, while twice or three times as heavy as those of the winners, were rarely more than a fifth of their engaged forces.

Were losses in the truly typical battles, such as Delium and Mantinea, “remarkably light”? Modern opinions may vary, but what we really want to know is what the Greeks thought. I suspect that, in the small world of the Greek polis, the death of even 5% of the hoplites sent out to fight would seem a significant loss. The standard rhetorical description of a battle included a statement that “not a few” or “many” fell on both sides, as we can see from Diodorus.¹⁵ Such expressions are not confined to these rhetorical set-pieces: Thucydides states that “many” died in the minor engagements at Laodiceum (4.134.2) and Boliscus (8.24.3). Finally, there is the exaggerated but clear description of Greek warfare put by Herodotus into the mouth of Mardonius, who describes the Greek method of fighting to Xerxes as follows (7.9): “When they have declared war on each other, they fight on the best and most level ground they can find, so that the winners go away with great losses; I will not say anything about the losers, for they are utterly destroyed (*ἐξώλεες*).” Pericles' strategy in the Peloponnesian War has received some deserved criticism, but he realized that casualties in a battle with the Spartans would not be considered light by his fellow Athenians, even if they won.

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¹⁴ 5.73.4. Later tradition considered “limited pursuit of a defeated foe” to be an aphorism of Lycurgus; see Everett L. Wheeler, “The *Hoplomachoi* and Vegetius' Spartan Drillmasters,” *Chiron* 13 (1983) 17 n.84.

¹⁵ See Pritchett (*supra* n.11) 71. Examples include Diod. 11.76.2, 80.6, 86.2, 91.3, 12.29.3, 74.1, 79.4–5, and 13.8.1.