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Thucydides and War

It is a privilege to have Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Even unfinished, his text is invaluable, not just because of its author's impressive intellect,[1] but because Thucydides, unlike his predecessor, Herodotus, or the later tacticians, like Asclepiodotus, married those impressive intellectual qualities to the authority he brought to his subject not just as a mere participant,[2] but as a participant with senior command experience.[3]

As he himself explains, he was elected as one of Athens' ten *stratēgoi* for 424 BCE[4] when he was in his mid-thirties.[5] Autobiography, however, was not Thucydides' aim, and this appointment is merely the visible apex of a military career that is impossible to reconstruct. Nevertheless, given the propensity of the Athenian *dēmos* to elect and re-elect commanders with extensive experience and proven competency, it seems likely that, at the time of his appointment, Thucydides satisfied both criteria.[6] His elevated socio-economic status[7] suggests he may have served aboard ship as *trierarchos* or on horseback in Athens' semi-professionalized cavalry corps.[8] Hoplite service, however, was attractive to the Athenian elite,[9] and given the ideological

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[1] Hornblower 1994b: 136–90, 191–250; Hunt 2006: 385–413; see also n. 17.

[2] For the military limitations of Herodotus, see Lazenby 1993: 68–70; Hornblower 1994b: 198–204; Vela Tejada 2004: 136–7; Hunt 2006: 389; and for those of Asclepiodotus, see Hornblower 1994b: 191–250; Oldfather 1923: 229–43.

[3] For Thucydides as soldier, see Hornblower 1994b: 73–109, 191–205; Hunt 2006: 385–413.

[4] Thuc. 4.104.4; cf. Cawkwell 1987: 1–19.

[5] Thuc. 5.26.5; Hansen 1980: 167–9, 1999: 88–90, 227–8.

[6] Hamel 1998: 14–23, with Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 22.2, 61.1–2, 64.4; Plato *Gorgias* 455b–c; [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.3; Xen. *Ap.* 20, *Oec.* 20.6–9, *Mem.* 1.7.3; cf. Plato *Laws* 6.755b–756b; Thuc. 6.72.1–2; Xen. *Mem.* 2.1.28.

[7] Thuc. 4.105.1; Hornblower 1994b: 1–6.

[8] For this division of labour, see, e.g., Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 7.3–4 (on the connection between wealth and cavalry service); Lys. 21.5–10 (on trierarchies).

[9] Lys. 14.4–10, 16.13; Crowley 2012: 23–4, 124.

and military primacy of the phalanx,[10] it seems unlikely that the *dēmos* would elect Thucydides to the *strategeia* if he had never served in the ranks as a hoplite or a subordinate commander.[11]

Certainly, to be an effective *stratēgos*, Thucydides had to be able to command on both land and sea,[12] and at the high point of his military career, when he was assigned to an area of operations around Amphipolis,[13] he was doing just that.[14] The apex of Thucydides' career, of course, was also its conclusion,[15] but his subsequent exile not only allowed him to devote himself fully to his account of the war; it also allowed him to interrogate the Spartans and their allies, and therefore offer a view of the conflict from both 'sides of the hill'.[16]

The Autonomy of War

Thucydides' view of the war, then, was inclusive, but it was not impartial. By carefully selecting the events he presents, their emphasis, order, content, context and collocation, and by manipulating his reader's emotional engagement with his text, Thucydides attempts to guide his reader's interpretation, and ensure that interpretation is sympathetic to his main aim, which is to provide a timeless understanding of human conflict.[17] In doing so, Thucydides envisions a war that is not merely a bellicose state that exists in opposition to peace, but one that functions like an autonomous third force that imposes upon its human creators its own dark dynamic in which chance

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[10] Karavites 1984: 185–9; Connor 1988: 21–9; Hanson 1996: 289–312, 2005: 198; Cartledge 1998b: 62–3; Pritchard 1998: 44–52; Runciman 1998: 733; Strauss 2000: 292–7; Roisman 2002: 136–41, 2005: 106–7, 109, 111; Crowley 2012: 100–4.

[11] Crowley 2012: 35, 117, 123–4, with progression through the ranks envisaged and contravened in Xen. *Mem.* 3.4.1; cf. Xen. *Eq. Mag.* 2.1–7.

[12] Since commands and the forces allocated to them were mission-orientated (Thuc. 3.91.1–2, 4.2.1–4, 27.5–28.3, 90.1, 5.2.1, 6.8.1–26.2, 7.16.1–17.1, with Hamel 1998: 14–23), combined operations were common (Thuc. 4.3.1–40.2, 89.1–101.4, 6.25.1–26.2, 31.1–32.2, 43.1–44.1, 94.4, 98.1–4, 7.33.3–6, 42.1–2), as was coordination with naval assets (Thuc. 4.3.1–40.2, 6.25.1–26.1, 36.1–41.4). See also Lazenby 2004: 1–15; Hunt 2006: 385–413; Wheeler 2007: 186–223.

[13] Thuc. 4.105.1. It seems likely that Thucydides' connections in this area made him particularly suitable for this assignment. For further discussion, see Sears 2013: 74–89, and for other evidence of Thucydides' particular interest in and knowledge of Thrace, see Fragoulaki (Chapter 11).

[14] Thuc. 4.104.1–7.3.   [15] Thuc. 5.26.5; Ellis 1978: 28–35.

[16] Thuc. 4.104.1–107.2, 5.26.5; Westlake 1980: 333–9; cf. Liddell Hart 1948, which demonstrates the problems entailed by such access.

[17] Thuc. 1.22.1–4, 3.82.2; Hunter 1973: 177–84; Connor 1984b: 3–19, 231–50; Hornblower 1994a: 59–99, 1994c: 34–44; Rood 1998b: 3–23, 285–93; Dewald 2005: 1–22, 155–63; Raaflaub 2013: 3–21.

reigns supreme.[18] In this unpredictable environment, men cannot control their own destinies, and, subject to capriciously changing circumstances, they suffer reversals of fortune and undeserved denouement.[19]

Thucydides' war is also the realm of both continuity and change: war itself remains a constant force, but because the environment it creates is morally and culturally corrosive, those who operate under its influence become progressively brutalized.[20] This is not, however, to say that, for Thucydides, war was without a certain glory, or that, subject to its dark dictates, men were entirely impotent.[21] By the time Thucydides was writing, the art of war was highly advanced, and in the furtherance of their operational aims, commanders could rely on a range of military specialisms, as well as the combined arms tactics required for their coordination.[22]

The Art of War

As Thucydides reveals, such military forces were task-dependent, and although their strength and composition reflected the aims for which they were mobilized, they were normally formed around a core of hoplites[23] whose primary role was to engage the enemy in close-quarters combat.[24] Unfortunately, whilst the role of hoplites is understood, how exactly they discharged it remains the subject of an ongoing debate for which Thucydides is partially to blame.

He wrote for a militarily informed audience who did not require a description of interpersonal combat, and so he left this aspect of warfare undescribed.[25] Consequently, whilst it is clear that hoplites offset their lack of tactical mobility by adopting a rank-and-file formation called a phalanx,

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[18] Thuc. 1.78.1, 122.1, 140.1, 2.11.4, 3.30.4, 4.17.4–5, 18.1–5, 55.1–4, 62.3–4, 5.14.3–4, 7.61.1–3; Hornblower 1994b: 155–90.

[19] Consider, for instance, the Thebans at Plataea in 431 BCE, who were killed when their relief force was delayed by unexpected rain (Thuc. 2.2.1–5.7; cf. 5.26.5, 7.86.1–5). See also Adkins 1975: 379–92; Roisman 1993: 11–22; Golfin 2011: 213–39.

[20] Thuc. 3.82.2; Lateiner 1977a; Connor 1984b: 79–107; Pritchett 1991: 218–19; Hornblower 1994b: 155–90; Luce 1997: 86–98; Kallet 2001; Hanson 2005: 65–121, 163–99, 271–314; Hunt 2006: 402–3; Strauss 2007: 240–7; Nevin 2008: 99–120.

[21] Consider Thucydides' portrayals of Brasidas, Demosthenes and Themistocles (see ns. 96 and 112).

[22] See n. 12.

[23] Thuc. 2.13.6–9, 31.1–3, 54.1–4, 4.89.1–101.4, 5.61.1–5, 66.1–74.3; Lazenby 1985: 16–17; Hunt 2007: 108–46; Crowley 2012: 22–6.

[24] Hanson 1991: 63–84; Lazenby 1991: 87–109; Schwartz 2009: 79–95.

[25] Grundy 1911: 240–2; Gomme et al. 1945–81: vol. I, 10–24; Hunt 2006: 385–13; Whitby 2007: 54–81; Rhodes 2008: 83–8; Crowley 2012: 40–1.

it is not clear how this formation operated whilst in contact with the enemy.[26]

Naturally, this problem has attracted significant scholarship, yet interpretation is so underdetermined by evidence that two mutually exclusive models of hoplite combat currently coexist. Orthodox scholars argue that the phalanx was a close-order formation in which all ranks pushed forward whilst the front rank engaged the enemy in weaponized combat,[27] whereas others envisage a less rigid system in which the front rank engaged their opponents in relatively open-order combat whilst those to their rear replaced casualties and provided protective depth and moral support.[28]

Thankfully, despite this ambiguity, the reason why composite forces were formed around a core of hoplites remains obvious: in main force encounters, the outcome of battle is decided by opposing phalanxes.[29] Such engagements thus formed the *schwerpunkt* of battle, and since this encouraged concentration of force, Greek armies usually fought without the benefit of a tactical reserve.[30] The amateur nature of most Greek hoplites also encouraged tactical simplicity,[31] and during Thucydides' time there were only three main approaches to battle: the professionals of Sparta preferred flanking manoeuvres,[32] the Thebans favoured the deepened column[33] and the Athenians, and presumably the rest of the Greeks, were limited to linear battle, in which phalanx met phalanx in a brutal trial of strength.[34] Each approach, whilst distinct, relies on the same foundation, which Thucydides and other Greek authors call *eutaxia*.

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[26] Consider Kagan and Viggiano 2013: xi–xxi.
[27] See Grundy 1911: 267–73; Hanson 1991: 63–84, 2000: 171–84; Luginbill 1994: 51–61; Schwartz 2009: 187–94; Crowley 2012: 57–66.
[28] See van Wees 2004: 172–91, with similar views in Cawkwell 1978: 150–3, 1989: 375–89; Krentz 1985: 50–61; Goldsworthy 1997: 5–25; Rawlings 2000: 233–59; Matthew 2009: 395–415.
[29] Consider the battles of Delium, 424 BCE (Thuc. 4.89.1–101.4), Mantinea, 418 BCE (5.66.1–74.3), and Syracuse, 415 BCE (6.67.1–70.4).
[30] For an exception, see Thuc. 6.67.1–70.4 (Syracuse, 415 BCE).
[31] Hence the need for professional units like the Theban Sacred Band (Plut. *Pel.* 17–19; Xen. *Hell.* 7.1.19) and the one thousand men the Argives maintained at state expense (Thuc. 5.67.2). For Spartan professionalism, see Arist. *Pol.* 8.1338b; Plato *Laches* 182e–183a; Thuc. 2.39.1–4; Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 7.1–6, 11.1–8. For military training generally, see Pritchett 1974: 208–31; Tritle 1989: 54–9; Hunt 2007: 108–46; van Wees 2007: 273–99; Crowley 2012: 2–3, 25–6, 34, 50, 64, 70, 81, 117, 123–4.
[32] Consider the battles of 1st Mantinea, 418 BCE (Thuc. 5.66.1–74.3) and Nemea, 394 BCE (Xen. *Hell.* 4.2.13–23).
[33] Consider the battles of Delium, 424 BCE (Thuc. 4.89.1–101.1), and Leuctra, 371 BCE (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.8–15).
[34] Consider the Battle of Syracuse, 415 BCE (Thuc. 6.67.1–70.4).

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Sadly, beyond a sense of 'good order', the precise meaning of this term is not clear. However, since the root of the word relates to arrangement, and since the phalanx is an arrangement of men by rank and file, the term most likely describes a formation whose constituent hoplites are successfully maintaining their assigned positions, which was vital for three reasons.[35] Firstly, the lateral deployment of files, and the serried ranks this produces, results in a deep formation naturally resistant to penetration. Secondly, the first rank, by presenting a wall of shields and spear points facing the enemy, provides the phalanx with its capacity for both attack and defence. Thirdly, casualties sustained in this front rank can be replaced by surviving members of each damaged file, who move forward to take the place of the fallen, thereby maintaining the continuity of the shield wall and the phalanx's concomitant capacity for combat.[36]

Eutaxia, then, is the difference between an army and an armed mob. As such, it functions in Thucydidean battle narratives as a precondition, if not an actual guarantee, of victory, whereas the loss of *eutaxia*, and the progressive descent into its antonymic condition, *ataxia*, is the precursor of inevitable defeat.[37] For Thucydides, therefore, battles were won by well-ordered hoplites, but they are not the only type of warrior to appear in his narrative.

Cavalry, of course, also had an important part to play, albeit one limited by the underdeveloped nature of Greek equestrianism. This restricted Greek horsemen to the role of light cavalry, in which the horse acted as a mobile weapons platform from which the rider discharged a missile, usually a javelin, at an oblique angle as he moved past his target.[38] In addition, Thucydides describes another type of cavalryman, armed with a bow, although it is not clear from his narrative whether the horse archer possessed the requisite skills to engage his enemy on the move or whether he did so merely at the halt or after dismounting.[39]

Light infantry, who rely primarily on missiles in combat, also appear in Thucydides' narrative. Beyond the baggage carriers, who merely threw

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[35] Crowley 2012: 49–53, see also Pritchett 1985: 44–93; Wheeler 2007: 186–223.

[36] Crowley 2012: 53.

[37] Consider how Thucydides depicts the Battle of Syracuse, 415 BCE (6.67.1–70.4), as a clash between Athenian *eutaxia* and Syracusan *ataxia*, with the contrast determining the course and the outcome of the battle (Crowley 2012: 49–52). For this concept generally, see Thuc. 2.11.9, 84.2, 3.108.1, 4.126.5, 8.25.3; and for naval applications, see 2.84.2, 91.4, 92.1, 3.77.2–3, 7.40.3, 68.1, 8.105.2; see also n. 64.

[38] Xen. *Anab.* 3.2.18, *Eq. Mag.* 1.21, *Eq.* 12.11–13; Spence 1993: 34–163; Worley 1994: 59–122; Hyland 2013a: 493–511, 2013b: 512–26.

[39] Thuc. 2.13.8, 5.84.1, 6.94.4; Xen. *Mem.* 3.3.1; cf. Aristophanes *Birds* 1178–85, also Spence 1993: 56–60; Worley 1994: 32, 70, 81.

stones,[40] and the rarely mentioned *hamhippoi*, lightly equipped warriors who coordinated closely with cavalry,[41] Thucydides' narrative features three main types of light infantry. The first two, namely archers and slingers, whilst effective against light infantry and cavalry, were otherwise of limited value against hoplites in formation.[42] However, the weapon deployed by the third, namely the javelin, was deadly, especially when deployed by the javelin thrower *par excellence*: the peltast, whose skirmishing skills made him the most lethal light infantryman on the Greek battlefield.[43]

Naturally, given their mobility, both cavalry and light infantry could operate autonomously. In 426 BCE, for instance, Aetolian light infantry ambushed a small force of Athenian marines and their allies in broken terrain near Aegitium, and having fixed them in place and dispersed their protective screen of archers, they wore them down with javelins until the survivors broke ranks and fled.[44] Similarly, during the Archidamian War, the Athenian cavalry conducted a mobile defence of Attica to restrict the activities of enemy ravagers and limit their impact on Athenian territory.[45]

In main force encounters, however, this autonomy did not extend to forcing a decision on the enemy.[46] Consequently, both cavalry and light infantry were militarily subordinate to the hoplite phalanx and were relegated to auxiliary roles focusing primarily on force protection. Accordingly, they appear in Thucydides' narrative protecting hoplites as they deploy,[47] defending them from the hostile attentions of enemy light infantry,[48] guarding their flanks[49] and covering them as they retire.[50] However, if sufficient forces were available, cavalry and light infantry could also be used offensively. Cavalry was often deployed against the flanks of enemy formations;[51] light infantry, when protected by hoplites, could wear down

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[40] Pritchett 1991: 65–7; van Wees 2004: 61–5, 68–71.

[41] Thuc. 5.57.2; cf. Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 49.1; Xen. *Hell.* 7.5.23, with Spence 1993: 58–60; Lazenby 2004: 114.

[42] Thuc. 2.81.8, 100.1–5; cf. Xen. *Anab.* 3.4.1–6, with McLeod 1965: 1–14, 1972: 78–82; Pritchett 1991: 1–65; Trundle 2010: 139–60.

[43] See Thuc. 3.94.1–98.5 (Aetolia, 426 BCE), 4.3.1–6.2, 8.1–23.2, 26.1–40.2 (Sphacteria, 425 BCE) and Xen. *Hell.* 4.5.7–8, 11–17 (Lechaeum, 390 BCE), with Best 1969; Trundle 2010 139–60.

[44] Thuc. 3.94.1–98.5.

[45] Ibid., 4.95.1–3, also 2.19.2, 22.2–3, 3.1.1–2, 7.27.5, 8.71.2; Hanson 2005: 35–64, 201–23; Spence 2010: 111–38.

[46] Grundy 1911: 274–81; Gomme et al. 1945–81: vol. I, 10–24; Hanson 2001: 201–32; Hunt 2007: 108–46, with n. 29 in this chapter.

[47] Thuc. 6.67.1–70.4 (Syracuse, 415 BCE).   [48] Thuc. 3.94.1–98.5 (Aetolia, 426 BCE).

[49] Thuc. 4.89.1–101.1 (Delium, 424 BCE) and 5.66.1–74.3 (1st Mantinea, 418 BCE).

[50] Thuc. 6.67.1–70.4 (Syracuse, 415 BCE) and 5.66.1–74.3 (1st Mantinea, 418 BCE).

[51] Thuc. 4.89.1–101.1 (Delium, 424 BCE).

opposing troops[52] or ambush them from cover;[53] and the mobility offered by both of these auxiliary arms made them ideal for the pursuit of routed troops.[54]

This utility, however, did not camouflage the subordination of cavalry and light infantry, and their marginalization was reinforced further by prevailing norms and values.[55] As sociologists recognize, in belligerent geopolitical environments, masculinity tends to be defined militarily,[56] and in classical Greece, a man's claim to manhood largely depended on the extent to which he took and passed the test of combat.[57] This disadvantaged both light infantry and cavalry, who relied on missiles and mobility and sought to avoid direct engagement with their enemies,[58] since their style of fighting did not seem, to the Greeks, to provide a test as severe as that faced by the hoplite.[59] The hoplite engaged his enemy directly in close-quarters combat, and since this offered the most demanding test a man could face, the hoplite not only fully earned his status as a man, but was also accorded a level of prestige that eclipsed that of his auxiliaries, whose claim to masculinity was much less secure.[60]

This prejudice was, for light infantrymen, further reinforced by snobbery. They, of course, were too poor to afford the expense of mounted warfare or hoplite service,[61] and consequently their military and ideological subordination was compounded by the fact that they were the social inferiors of those members of the socio-political elite, like Thucydides, who produced the historical accounts of the battles they helped fight.[62]

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[52] Thuc. 4.3.1–6.2, 8.1–23.2, 26.1–40.2 (Sphacteria, 425 BCE).

[53] Thuc. 3.105.1–109.1 (Olpae, 426/5 BCE); cf. Xen. *Hell.* 5.1.10–13.

[54] Thuc. 2.79.6 (Spartolus, 429 BCE), 3.98.1–5 (Aetolia, 426 BCE), 5.10.9–10 (Amphipolis, 422 BCE). See also Xen. *Anab.* 3.1.2.

[55] Adkins 1960: 73, 249; Hunt 1998: 1–3; Roisman 2002: 128, 2005: 1–2, 84–101, 105; Christ 2006: 88–142; Crowley 2012: 86–8.

[56] Adkins 1960: 73; Andreski 1968: 20–74; Hunt 1998: 1–3; Berent 2000: 258; Roisman 2005: 1–2, 105; cf. Bransby 1992: 232–3.

[57] Thuc. 4.126.1–5; Crowley 2012: 88–96.

[58] Thuc. 2.13.8, 4.3.1–6.2, 5.84.1, 6.94.4, 8.1–23.2, 26.1–40.2, 126.1–5; Xen. *Anab.* 3.2.18, *Eq. Mag.* 1.21, *Eq.* 12.11–13.

[59] Anderson 1991: 15–37; Lazenby 1991: 87–109; Hanson 2000: 55–88, 135–93; Crowley 2012: 103–4.

[60] Garlan 1975: 78–133; Connor 1988: 21–9; Runciman 1998: 733; Hanson 1996: 289–312; Pritchard 1998: 52; Strauss 2000: 292–7; Roisman 2002: 130, 2005: 106–7; Crowley 2012: 103–4.

[61] See n. 8.

[62] For Thucydides' status, see 4.105.1–2; Hornblower 1994b: 1–6; Dewald 2005: 13; and for his affinity for hoplites, see Dover 1973: 37–8; Hornblower 1994b: 160–8; Hanson 2005: 123–61; Rhodes 2011: 21–2.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Thucydides' battle narratives focus on hoplites, whose actions consequently overshadow those of their auxiliaries. In his description of the Battle of Syracuse (415 BCE), for instance, Thucydides acknowledges the presence of slingers, javelin throwers, stone throwers and archers, as well as a squadron of Syracusan cavalry. Despite this, he not only dismisses the light infantry engagement that preceded the clash of hoplites as typically indecisive, but also ignores the Syracusan cavalry until the battle is decided, after which they suddenly appear in order to prevent pursuit of the beaten Syracusan hoplites.[63] Similar patterns are observable in Thucydides' accounts of naval engagements, which are often narrated with terms and concepts derived from hoplite combat, in which sailors – typically men of low status who met their enemies indirectly – were occluded by the glamorous triremes they crewed.[64]

Such vessels were so familiar to Thucydides' readers that he did not feel the need to describe their operational characteristics,[65] but, whilst he clearly considered the trireme a Panhellenic constant, his narrative reveals three divergent approaches to naval combat, each requiring differently configured ships.[66] The first, admired by Thucydides, involved stripped-down ships engaging in elegant manoeuvres designed to enable an attacking vessel to strike its opponent in the rear quarter with its ram.[67] The second, which Thucydides considered old-fashioned, involved sturdy ships packed with infantry who grappled and then boarded their adversaries – a tactic that, to Thucydides, made naval engagements resemble battles on land.[68] The third involved the redesigning of the trireme's prow to provide the frontal strength required for head-to-head ramming, a technique most suited to enclosed waters that precluded manoeuvre.[69]

This naval sophistication, together with the complex character of terrestrial warfare, demonstrates that the Greek art of war was, in most respects,

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[63] Thuc. 6.67.1–70.4. For the occlusion of other arms, see Gomme et al. 1945–81: vol. I, 10–24; Pritchett 1985: 44–93; Hunt 2006: 385–413; Hornblower 2007: 22–53; Trundle 2010: 139–60; Brice 2013: 623–41; Rawlings 2013: 46–73.

[64] Cartledge 1998b: 63–4; Pritchard 1998: 44–9; Roisman 2002: 128–31, 136–41, 2005: 109, 111; Strauss 2007: 223–36, with Miller 2010: 304–38.

[65] Morrison and Williams 1968: 244–325; Casson 1971: 77–96; Wallinga 1992: 130–64; Morrison et al. 2000: 35–46; Strauss 2007: 223–36; de Souza 2013: 369–94.

[66] Morrison and Williams 1968: 313–25; Hirshfield 1996: 608–13; Hanson 2005: 235–69; Strauss 2007: 223–36; de Souza 2013: 369–94.

[67] Thuc. 2.83.1–84.5, 86.1–92.7, 89.1–11 (Naupactus, 429/8 BCE); Lazenby 1987: 169–77; Whitehead 1987: 178–85.

[68] Thuc. 1.45.1–55.2 (Sybota, 433 BCE).

[69] Thuc. 7.34.1–8 (Naupactus, 413 BCE), 36.1–38.2, 39.1–41.5, 52.1–54.4 (Syracuse, 413 BCE).

highly advanced, and yet, as Thucydides reveals, siege warfare remained stubbornly underdeveloped. The Greeks deployed citizen warriors, so they were unwilling to accept the casualties entailed by storming enemy defences, and without torsion-based artillery they were unable to reduce those defences from a distance.[70] Technological innovation, of course, was not entirely absent. Thucydides was fascinated by the primitive flamethrower the Boeotians deployed against the Athenian fortifications at Delium in 424 BCE,[71] as well as by the range of measures and countermeasures, such as battering rams and the gravity-powered engines used to destroy them, at Plataea in 429 BCE.[72] His fascination, however, reflects the novelty of such techniques,[73] and it is telling that Plataea fell to neither breach nor storm, but instead to the most basic method of all: circumvallation.[74] This denied the targeted community both reinforcement and resupply and led, if terms were not negotiated, to the failure of the defence through the physical incapacity of the defenders.[75] Circumvallation, therefore, was reliable, but it was also slow and expensive, and if it was used against a coastal community it had to be augmented by naval blockade.[76]

Opposing Forces

Thucydides, then, envisages a Panhellenic art of war, and he situates in the differing capacities each of the protagonists possessed in its three major aspects – namely land, sea and siege warfare – an explanation for the dreadful nature of the Peloponnesian War. Athens, naturally, could not use her fleet against Sparta, which was located many miles from the sea, and her army was incapable of taking that peculiar *polis*, even though it was famously unfortified, because it would have to defeat the Spartans in open combat first.[77]

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[70] On siege warfare in the Peloponnesian War, see esp. Seaman 2013: 642–56. Other useful studies of aspects of siege warfare in the classical period are Grundy 1911: 245–6, 261–2, 282–91; Marsden 1969: 5–173; Lawrence 1979: 39–66; Lazenby 2004: 31–48; Hanson 2005: 163–99; Strauss 2007: 237–47; Chaniotis 2013: 438–56.

[71] Thuc. 4.100.1–5; cf. 4.110.1–116.3.   [72] Thuc. 2.71.1–78.4, 3.20.1–24.3, 52.1–68.5.

[73] Grundy 1911: 282–91; Hanson 2005: 163.   [74] Thuc. 2.78.1, 3.52.1.

[75] Thuc. 1.115.2–117.1 (Samos, 440 BCE), 1.63.1–67.1, 2.58.1–3, 68.1–9, 70.1–4, 3.17.2–3 (Potidaea 432–430 BCE), 2.69.1–2, 3.52.1 (Plataea, 429–427 BCE), 3.2.1–6.2, 8.1–18.5, 25.1–30.4, 35.1–50.3, 4.52.1–3 (Mytilene, 428–427 BCE), 5.84.1–115.4, 116.2–4 (Melos, 415 BCE).

[76] Consider the sieges of Samos, 440 BCE (8.38.2–4, 40.1–3, 55.2–56.1, 60.2–3, 61.1–3, 63.1–2), and Syracuse, 415–13 BCE (6.75.1–7.16.2, 21.1–26.3, 31.1–33.6, 35.1–72.4).

[77] Hence Pericles' 'island strategy' (Thuc. 1.143.3–5, 2.13.1–9, 22.1–24.1, 55.2, 60.1–65.13; see also ns. 67, 81). For the capabilities of the Athenian and Spartan armies, see Lazenby 1985; Crowley 2012.

This was not a realistic proposition for amateur Athenian troops, who, despite their impressive levels of experience and veterancy, were no match for the professionals of Sparta. Spartan hoplites enjoyed the twin advantages entailed by the exploitation of the helots, namely a militarized system of education and the ability to live, essentially, as a parasitical military elite, free to practise and develop the tactical skills learnt in their youth.[78] This ensured that Spartan hoplites were more psychologically resilient and tactically aware than those fielded by other Greek *poleis*, and their unmatched ability to maintain their *eutaxia* under pressure and manoeuvre whilst in contact with the enemy allowed them to approach battle in a way that was simply beyond their Athenian counterparts.[79]

The Athenians, following the advice of Pericles, refused to engage the Spartan army and instead retired behind their fortifications, which the Spartans could not breach and would not storm. Moreover, because Athens was connected to the Piraeus by the Long Walls, the Athenians were able to receive seaborne supplies funded by imperial revenue and could therefore withstand siege indefinitely.[80] To defeat Athens, then, Sparta had to control the sea, yet this would require her underfunded and amateur navy to meet an imperially funded and professional Athenian war fleet whose ability to engage in the most sophisticated style of naval combat, in which manoeuvre preceded ramming, ensured such a contest was unwinnable.[81] Neither side could, therefore, defeat the other. Athens could not win until she produced an army superior to that of Sparta, and Sparta could not win until she produced a fleet superior to that of Athens.[82] Naturally, such a momentous transition was unattractive to both parties, and other, more traditional, ways were sought to break the stalemate that ensued.

Sparta and her allies regularly ravaged the territory of Attica.[83] In 424 BCE, they dispatched a small force of helots and mercenaries under the command of Brasidas to attack Athenian interests in the Thraceward region.[84] The Spartans even established a fort at Decelea in 413 BCE, after

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[78] For helotage, see Hodkinson 2000: 113–49 (with further references), and for the *agōgē*, see Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 2.1–4.7; Hodkinson 1983: 245–51; Kennell 1995; Ducat 2006.

[79] See n. 31.

[80] Thuc. 2.13.2–14.2, 2.16.2–17.3; Cawkwell 1987: 40–55; Pritchard 2010: 1–62.

[81] For the contrast Thucydides draws between 'naval' Athens and 'hoplite' Sparta, see 1.73.1–86.5, 93.3–8, 120.2, 121.2–5, 141.2–4, 2.10.1–3, 11.1–9, 13.2–14.2, 16.2–17.3, 63.2–5, 85.1–3, 86.1–92.7, 4.12.3, 14.3, 40.1–2, 5.72.2–4, 75.3, 6.11.6, 83.1, 7.21.1–5, 34.7, 66.1–3, 8.96.1–5; Hanson 2005: 3–34; Pritchard 2010: 1–62.

[82] Kagan 1974: 17–42, 1987: 413–26; Lazenby 2004: 1–15, 31–48, 251–7; Hanson 2005: 35–64, 88–121.

[83] Thuc. 2.11.6, 19.2, 22.1–24.31, 47.2, 71.1, 3.1.1–3, 26.1–4, 4.2.1, 5.14.3.

[84] Thuc. 4.78.1, 80.1–5, 103.1–106.4, 5.6.2–11.3.

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which the Athenians were denied access to Attica for the rest of the war.[85] The Athenians were more proactive. They launched amphibious raids around the Peloponnesian coast,[86] which succeeded in the defeat and capture of the Spartan garrison stationed on Sphacteria in 425 BCE,[87] and they conducted punitive operations against Megara,[88] which culminated in the near capture of that city in 424 BCE.[89] In the same year, their overly ambitious attempt to knock Thebes out of the war ended in decisive failure at the Battle of Delium,[90] and six years later, their even more ambitious plan to build an anti-Spartan coalition in the Peloponnese ended in decisive failure at the Battle of Mantinea.[91] As if incapable of learning from their mistakes, the Athenians then compounded these two famous failures in 415 BCE when they launched a huge expedition against Syracuse, which not only failed spectacularly in 413 BCE, but also resulted in the loss of the entire expeditionary force.[92]

The Cost of Conflict

These operations, and others like them, did not break the deadlock, but, as Thucydides reveals, they did produce an abundance of human suffering.[93] This, for the Greeks, was a recognized consequence of conflict, albeit one overshadowed by the prestige of war,[94] reflected in Thucydides' own choice of subject.[95] It is striking, then, that although his narrative contains examples of heroism,[96] the glory of combat burns brightest in Pericles'

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[85] Thuc. 6.91.6–93.3, 7.19.1–20.1, 27.2–28.4, 8.69.1–3; Xen. *Hell.* 1.1.35.

[86] Thuc. 2.23.1–3, 25.1–26.2, 30.1–2, 54.1–6, 3.7.1–6, 16.1–4, 91.1, 94.1–3, 4.42.1–44.6, 53.1–54.4, 56.1–57.4, 101.3–4, 6.105.1–3, 7.26.1–3. For amphibious operations, see Lazenby 2004: 31–48; Strauss 2007: 223–36; de Souza 2013: 369–94.

[87] Thuc. 4.3.1–6.2, 8.1–23.2, 26.1–40.2.

[88] Thuc. 2.31.1–3, 3.51.1–4, 4.66.1–74.4, 109.1. [89] Thuc. 4.66.1–74.4, 109.1.

[90] Thuc. 4.89.1–101.1. [91] Thuc. 5.44.1–47.12, 66.1–74.3 [92] See n. 37.

[93] Thuc. 1.23.1–3; Gomme 1937: 116–24; Connor 1984b: 231–50; Hanson 2005: xxiii–xviii, 65–88, 289–314.

[94] Thuc. 1.76.1–4, 120.3, 2.41.4, 61.1, 63.1–3, 64.2–6, 4.59.2, 62.2; Plato *Laws* 1.641a–b, 3.690b, *Resp.* 1.338c; Xen. *Eq. Mag.* 8.7, *Mem.* 2.1.28; Hunt 1998: 153–4; Low 2007: 161–73; Crowley 2012: 89–92; Rawlings 2013: 46–73.

[95] Thuc. 1.1.1–3; Garlan 1975: 15–51; Hornblower 1994b: 191–205; Vela Tejada 2004: 138–9.

[96] Consider his portrayal of Brasidas at Methone, 431 BCE (Thuc. 2.23.1–3, 25.1–3), Pylos, 425 BCE (4.11.1–12.2), Lyncus, 423 BCE (4.124.1–128.5), and Amphipolis, 422 BCE (5.6.2–11.3), with Westlake 1980: 333–9; Connor 1984b: 108–40; Hornblower 1994b: 155–68; Hunt 2006: 385–413. For analogous admiration of Demosthenes and Themistocles, see Connor 1984b: 191; Hornblower 1991–2008 vol. II, 38–61, 1994b: 155–68; Hunt 2006: 385–413; Rhodes 2011: 20.

funeral oration for the dead, whereas, for the living, the experience of war is portrayed as a grim and fearful ordeal.[97]

He depicts the Battle of Delium in 424 BCE as a claustrophobic crush of struggling men in which the Athenian left is driven back by the Theban deepened column, whilst on the right the Thespians are enveloped and almost annihilated by the encircling Athenians, who become so confused that they start to kill each other.[98] Similarly chaotic scenes dominate his description of the Athenian night assault on Epipolae in 413 BCE, in which isolated groups of attackers are simultaneously fighting the enemy, killing each other, fleeing and falling from cliffs, whilst others march blindly into the unfolding disaster.[99]

Such narratives are undeniably brutal, but they are not unrepresentative, and others are even more appalling. His description of the defeat of a small force of Athenian marines and their allies in Aetolia in 426 BCE is particularly grim: they were surrounded by Aetolian light infantry who deluged their opponents with javelins until their nerve broke, and when the Athenians and their allies turned and tried to flee, they were subjected to a running massacre in which most of the exhausted, lost and confused men who survived the initial rout blundered into an exitless woodland that the Aetolians simply burned around them.[100] Thucydides' account of the Spartan disaster on Sphacteria in 425 BCE is equally evocative. This describes how an isolated unit of Spartan hoplites was overwhelmed by a much larger Athenian assault force, yet, despite their hopeless situation, the dust, their thirst and their mounting losses, they fought desperately until their acting commander, whose original predecessor had been killed, and whose replacement had been so badly wounded that he lay amongst the collected corpses, finally surrendered to stop the pointless slaughter of his exhausted men.[101]

Luckily, the surviving Spartans were too valuable to mistreat, but others were not so fortunate. After the Battle of Sybota in 433 BCE, the Corinthians were so keen to slaughter enemy sailors struggling in the water that they rowed repeatedly amongst the wreckage, not realizing that some of the helpless men they were killing with javelins and archery were actually their allies.[102] The Thebans were also victims of vengeance. In 431 BCE, after the troops they had sent to seize Plataea had been defeated and the survivors

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[97] Thuc. 2.42.3, also 1.80.1–2, 2.8.1, 11.1, 20.2, 21.2, 6.24.3; Gomme 1937: 116–24; Lazenby 1991: 87–109; Hornblower 1994b: 110–35; Yoshitake 2010: 359–77; Crowley 2012: 86–8.
[98] Thuc. 4.89.1–101.2.   [99] Thuc. 7.43.2–45.2.   [100] Thuc. 3.94.1–98.5.
[101] Thuc. 4.3.1–6.2, 8.1–23.2, 26.1–40.2.   [102] Thuc. 1.45.1–55.2.

captured, the refusal of those men to round up leading Plataeans was rewarded by their swift execution at the hands of very people this act of clemency had been intended to impress.[103] This brutality was then repaid in 427 BCE, when the defenders of Plataea were captured and executed by the Spartans to please their Theban allies.[104] Not even the Athenians were immune. After their expeditionary force was defeated on Sicily in 413 BCE, those who survived the retreat to and massacre at the Assinarus were herded into an abandoned quarry by the Syracusans, where many died of thirst, hunger, exposure and disease.[105]

Thucydides also emphasizes the human cost of the war by revealing its effect on the living. In his account of Athenian-led operations in Amphilochia in 426/5 BCE, he describes the confusion of the Ambraciot herald who, while attempting to negotiate the return of the bodies of those Ambraciots killed after the Battle of Olpae, was instead presented with the arms and armour stripped from over a thousand corpses, and when he belatedly realized that this signified the massacre of the Ambraciot relief force at Idomene, he was so overcome by grief that he left the enemy camp having forgotten his original mission.[106] An analogous reaction amongst the surviving Athenians also highlights the tragic nature of the retreat from Syracuse in 413 BCE, during which the abandoned sick and the wounded crawled pitifully after the able-bodied, who wept as they left their helpless comrades to the tender mercies of the vengeful Syracusans.[107]

Communities, of course, did not just suffer casualties in combat: many *poleis*, like Melos in 415 BCE, experienced the horrors of andrapodization after succumbing to siege;[108] others, like Corcyra, descended into murderous *stasis*;[109] the coastal settlements of the Peloponnese were terrorized by Athenian amphibious raids that had no military purpose beyond the misery they caused; and Mycalessus was destroyed in 413 BCE by Athenian-led Thracian mercenaries in an attack that, judging by the emphasis placed on the unnecessary nature of the assault, the helplessness of the town and the gratuitous slaughter of its inhabitants, seems to have particularly disgusted Thucydides.[110]

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[103] Thuc. 2.2.1–5.7.   [104] Thuc. 3.52.1–68.5.   [105] Thuc. 7.77.5–87.6.
[106] Thuc. 3.105.1–113.6; cf. 7.71.1–7.   [107] Thuc. 7.75.2–5.
[108] The process of turning people into *andrapoda* (literally, 'man-footed things'), a term used by the Greeks to denote slaves. Notable instances of andrapodization include Torone, 422 BCE (Thuc. 5.3.2), Scione, 421 BCE (5.32.1), and Melos, 415 BCE (5.116.4). For further discussion, see Gaca 2010: 117–61.
[109] Thuc. 3.69.1–85.3, 4.44.1–48.6.
[110] Thuc. 7.27.1–30.3; Dover 1973: 41; Connor 1984b: 7; Hanson 2005: 3–34, 77; Hornblower 2007: 27.

The fate of individuals also lends pathos to Thucydides' melancholy narrative.[111] Each is different: Pericles is wise; Brasidas is brave; Cleon is corrupt; Lamachus is steady; Demosthenes is reckless; Nicias is pious. Yet, despite their differences, they all share the same fate: they are unable to control the war that rages around them, and in the end they are consumed by that omnivorous conflict, which devours the good and the bad with equal enthusiasm.[112]

Thankfully, the Peloponnesian War, like all wars, eventually came to an end – ironically, when conservative Sparta seized control of the sea and starved ostensibly innovative Athens into submission. By this time, however, the war had spread death and misery across the Hellenic world for twenty-seven years.[113] Naturally, Thucydides was not unmoved by this, and while he may manipulate his readers' emotions for his own authorial purposes,[114] by charting the impact of the Peloponnesian War on the lives of those who lived through it, he offers, in addition to a political, strategic and tactical analysis of that conflict, an invaluable insight into the human experience of war.

Further Reading

The best introduction to the nature of war in the Greek world is van Wees 2004; Sabin et al. 2007 contains more detailed discussions of many aspects of Greek warfare (including its representation in contemporary historiography). On the 'experience' of hoplite battle, the work of Hanson (esp. 1991, 2000) remains fundamental, even though (as we have seen) his conclusions are not universally accepted.

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[111] Adkins 1975: 379–92; Hanson 2005: 65–88.
[112] Pericles (Thuc. 1.111.1–3, 114.1–117.3, 139.4–145.1, 2.12.1–14.2, 34.1–46.2, 55.2–56.6, 59.1–65.13); Cleon (3.36.1–50.3, 4.3.1–6.2, 8.1–23.2, 26.1–40.2, 5.2.1–3.6, 6.1–12.2); Lamachus (4.75.1–2, 5.19.1–2, 24.1–2, 6.8.2); Nicias (3.51.1–4, 4.27.1–28.5, 42.1–4, 53.1–54.4, 117.1–119.3, 129.1–131.3, 5.15.1–19.2, 23.1–24.1, 46.1–5, 6.8.1–26.2, 44.1–7.87.6); Demosthenes (3.94.1–98.5, 102.3–7, 105.1–114.4, 4.3.1–6.2, 8.1–23.2, 26.1–40.2, 66.1–74.4, 101.1–4, 5.80.1, 7.16.1–17.1, 26.1–3, 31.1–5, 33.1–6, 35.1–2, 42.1–86.3, with n. 96).
[113] Thuc. 1.6.1–6, 1.10.1–3, 1.69.1–71.7, 2.37.1–46.2, 5.107.1, 8.96.1–5; Connor 1984b: 108–40, 174; Kagan 1987: 413–26; Hanson 2005: 271–87.
[114] See n. 17.