

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON PROCOPIUS' USE OF NUMBERS
IN DESCRIPTIONS OF COMBAT IN *WARS* BOOKS 1–7

CONOR WHATELY

SCHOLARS OF CLASSICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY have been interested for some time in the estimates of numbers in combat used by ancient historians.¹ While little work has been done on such numbers in Procopius,² Catherine Rubincam has made a thorough study of casualty figures in Thucydides. She notes, in particular, that where Thucydides provides an uneven account of casualties in a battle, it is because of his desire to emphasize the gravity of the losses on one side;³ that while his figures are not as straightforward as they at first seem, he is usually free of the exaggeration prevalent among other ancient historians;⁴ that his employment of exact figures is selective and used only when he wants to focus on some feature of a particular battle.⁵ In a more general paper on numbers in Greek historiography, Rubincam further notes that rounded figures—for example, 200, 300, 1,000—suggest that these are little more than estimates made by participants,⁶ and that verbal qualifiers such as “more than,” “less than,” and “about” might be restricted to cases where there were concerns about the numbers used, or to emphasize a given figure.⁷

An examination of a historian's use of numbers reveals a great deal about research methods, writing practices, and processes of selection. Given that Procopius is our only source for many of the events he describes⁸ and that his numbers are regularly used to illustrate matters such as the size of sixth-century armies, we must understand fully how he uses them.⁹ In what follows I propose discuss whether Procopius' literary strategies concerning numbers are comparable, especially with regards to precision and consistency, to those employed by

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¹Note, for example, Rubincam 1979; Macve 1985; Hornblower 1994: 26–28; Morpeth 2006.

²For the *Gothic Wars*, see Hannestad 1960; Thompson 1982: 77–91; Liebeschuetz 1996. While Feissel (2002) and Treadgold (2007: 218–221) looked at Procopius' numbers throughout his works, including the *Wars*, the *Buildings*, and the *Secret History*, Feissel limited himself to distances and Treadgold devoted little space to the topic. Much work remains to be done to take scholarship beyond Treadgold's (2007: 218) assessment that Procopius' numbers are “statistics” and Liebeschuetz's (1996: 232) assertion that “Procopius' numbers are incomplete and in part certainly unreliable.”

³Rubincam 1991: 187.

⁴Rubincam 1991: 190.

⁵Rubincam 1991: 190.

⁶Missing ref. to “more general paper” here. Cf. Rubincam 1991: 457.

⁷Rubincam 2003: 460.

⁸I will not discuss whether there is a perceptible difference between the numbers used in those episodes in which Procopius was present, and those in which he was absent.

⁹See, for example, Treadgold 1995: 59–64.

classical historians. In particular I will be applying Rubincam's conclusions on number use among classical historians to Procopius, bearing in mind that Procopius was known to be a careful reader of Thucydides and Herodotus, whose impact on his writing has long been recognized.¹⁰ Although Procopius and the classical historians operated in different worlds and used different sets of data, the striking commonalities between the two groups make such an undertaking worthwhile. I will return to this issue in the final section.

To keep the discussion manageable, this paper will centre on the figures that Procopius uses in descriptions of combat. In the first half of this paper I discuss these issues (precision, vagueness, consistency in number presentation) in the *Persian Wars* and the *Vandal Wars*. In the second half, I look at the degree of precision in Procopius' use of numbers in the *Gothic Wars*. Discussion has been restricted to books 1 through 7, which were published as a unit in 550/551,¹¹ and excludes Book 8, which was published three or four years later (553/554), as well as the *Secret History* and the *Buildings*.¹²

PROCOPIUS' BACKGROUND

Before we start with the *Persian Wars*, however, a few comments on Procopius' background are required in order to consider the type of information and numbers to which he would have had access. We know that Procopius was in a position to get accurate information; Procopius became Belisarius' *assessor* ("secretary") in 527,¹³ and campaigned with the Roman army in the east from 527 to 531; Procopius also accompanied Belisarius on his expedition against the Vandals in 533.¹⁴ After returning to Constantinople to celebrate Belisarius' triumph,¹⁵ Procopius headed west again for the war against the Goths in 535. He remained in Italy for some time, witnessing important military operations, including the siege of Rome in 537–538 and the siege of Auximum in the summer and autumn of 539, and he went to Ravenna in May of 540 when the Roman army entered the city.¹⁶ Procopius might have travelled with Belisarius back to the east, and then back to the west in later years, but we are less certain about this.¹⁷

¹⁰ See Braun 1885; Moore 2014: 54–80; and Pazdernik 1997, 2000, and 2015.

¹¹ Rubin 1957: 354; Cameron 1985: 9; Börm 2007: 50–52; Treadgold 2007: 189.

¹² Rubin 1957: 354; Greatrex 2003: 55–56; Brodka 2004: 17; Treadgold 2007: 189–190. Book 8 and the *Secret History* should probably be discussed as one unit; see Cameron 1985: 34, n. 7, 52. I have excluded Book 8, as well as the *Secret History* and *Buildings*, because they are separate works, or in the case of Book 8 read that way.

¹³ Procop. *Wars* 1.12.24. On Procopius' career as an *assessor*, see Martindale 1992: 1060–62. Cf. Rubin 1957: 296–297; Börm 2007: 47; Treadgold 2007: 179.

¹⁴ Treadgold (2007: 181) suggests that Procopius was present at the war council in Constantinople that convened in discuss the possible invasion of Africa.

¹⁵ Procop. *Wars* 4.8.3–14; Martindale 1992: 1061; Börm 2007: 47; Treadgold 2007: 181.

¹⁶ Procop. *Wars* 6.4.14; Rubin 1957: 298; Martindale 1992: 1061–62; Börm 2007: 48; Treadgold 2007: 182–183.

¹⁷ See Cameron 1985: 188.

While we know something of Procopius' background and position, we know less than we would like to about the record-keeping of the sixth-century military, especially in relation to the detailed and comparably well-documented record-keeping of the earlier imperial army, which is illustrated in, for instance, the papyri collected by Fink.¹⁸ Instead we have traces in the rather precise numbers from other texts for military matters, notably the totals given by John the Lydian and Agathias, as well as the figures given for unit sizes by Maurice,¹⁹ not to mention the earlier *Notitia Dignitatum*.²⁰ There is even good reason to think that Roman troop numbers in the age of Justinian were standardized, as they had been for centuries,²¹ which would have made a good part of Procopius' task—collecting reliable figures—much easier. Procopius might well have been informed about Roman troop numbers; indeed, it might even have been part of his job as *assessor* to keep accurate records of the numbers involved (Procop. *Wars* 1.12.24), and then compose official reports of the outcomes—and details—of battles.²²

THE PERSIAN WARS

I begin with the *Persian Wars* and its most detailed battle. In the Battle of Dara, Procopius' is varied, detailed, and informative: his description is at places precise, at others vague and incomplete.²³ Early on in this battle, he describes the disposition of the armies and, beginning with the Roman army, claims that Buzes was placed on the far left with many horsemen along with Pharas the Herul and 300 fellow countrymen (Procop. *Wars* 1.13.19); on the right of those men were Sunicas and Aigan with 600 horsemen (1.13.20); on the far side there were many horsemen under John, Cyril, Marcellus, and Dorotheus (1.13.21); and at an angle to those men were 600 horsemen under Simmas and Ascan (1.13.21). Next, Procopius tells us that “the men with Belisarius and Hermogenes” stood at the back in the centre, providing us with no hint of the number of troops arrayed at that position, let alone the types of troops they were (1.13.22). Having described the deployment of Roman forces, Procopius then tells us the totals for the two armies: 25,000 troops in the Roman army, 40,000 troops in the Persian army (1.13.23). A skirmish opens the battle and in the *mélée* seven Persians fall (1.13.28). We are not told the number of troops involved, and there is no way of knowing how significant that loss was even if

¹⁸Fink 1971.

¹⁹John Lydus *Mens.* 1.27; Agathias 5.13.7–8; Maur. *Strat.* 3.8.

²⁰Note the comments of Treadgold (1995: 44–49) and Whately (2015).

²¹Treadgold 2005; Elton 2007: 284–286.

²²On sixth-century combat reports, see Colvin 2013 and Sinclair 2013: 152–208. Unfortunately, although we know that the Romans created combat reports, none survive. Malalas (18.6), for instance, alludes to one such report without providing details.

²³For an overview of the Battle of Dara, see Syv anne 2004: 461–462. For a more detailed treatment, see Greatrex 1998: 169–185.

it seems self-evident. All we learn is that “a certain detachment of horsemen who held the right wing” (τίς τῶν ἰπέων, οἱ κέρας τὸ δεξιὸν εἶχον) left the collected Persian forces and attacked “the men under Buzes and Pharas” (τοῖς ἀμφὶ Βούζην τε καὶ Φάραν, 1.13.25). The next part of the battle includes the two single combats won by Andreas, which brings the first half of the narrative to a close.

Procopius tells us that on the following day the Persians were bolstered by an additional 10,000 troops (*Wars* 1.14.1), but once the main phase of the fighting on the second day begins we learn that the *mibran* arrayed only half of the Persian forces against the Romans, at least at first—they were intended to be used in rotation (1.14.29). Our next indication of the numbers involved comes when “many Cadiseni” attack the Roman line opposite them, and kill quite a few men (συχνούς, 1.14.38). In response, the “men with Sunicas and Aigan charge against them at top speed” (οἱ ξὺν τῷ Σουνίκα τε καὶ Ἀϊγάν, δρόμῳ πολλῶ ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς ἤεσαν, 1.14.39). In the next line Procopius tells us that the 300 Heruls with Pharas slipped behind the enemy (1.14.39). In this part of the fighting we learn that “no fewer than 3,000 died in this struggle” (οὐχ ἥσσους ἢ τρισχίλιοι ἐν τούτῳ τῷ πόνῳ ἀπέθανον, 1.14.42). The *mibran* now sends in the Immortals, in addition to “many others” (1.14.44). Belisarius and Hermogenes spot this charge and order “the 600 men under Sunicas and Aigan” to go against them on the right (τοὺς ἀμφὶ Σουνίκαν τε καὶ Ἀϊγάν ἐξακοσίους, 1.14.44). In addition, “they positioned at the back many of Belisarius’ men” (καὶ αὐτῶν ὀπισθεν τῶν Βελισαρίῳ ἐπομένων πολλοὺς ἔστησαν, 1.14.44). This attack divides the Persian force in two so that most were on the right, while some were on the left (1.14.47). By the end of this second phase of the battle, after the *mibran* has sent in the Immortals, we get our last figure. We learn that the Romans killed “around 5,000” (1.14.51).

In sum, what we find with Dara is a mixture of vague and specific figures, with a particular emphasis on precise Roman troop numbers and precise Persian casualty figures. In other words, Procopius has given us, in many instances, the sorts of figures we would expect him to give based on the information to which we would expect him to have access: more particular figures for Roman troops, less detailed ones for Persians. The troop totals too seem reasonable, based on what we know about sixth-century armies in the east; the abundant multiples of ten do imply the use of rounded estimates.²⁴

Procopius is selective in his use of numbers, not only within specific battles such as Dara, but also throughout the *Persian Wars*. Focusing on casualties, Procopius writes that seven men died in the opening phase of the battle, that two single combatants died at the hands of Andreas, that no less than 3,000 Persians died in the first of the two main phases of the fighting, and that by the

²⁴ See Treadgold 1995: 74 on Roman army numbers, and Börm 2007: 159–163 on Persian army numbers.

end of the fighting with the Immortals the Romans had killed “around 5,000” (Procop. *Wars* 1.14.51). He provides no information for Roman casualties. By contrast, for the Battle of Callinicum, Procopius writes that “they found that the number of their own dead bodies was no less than that of the enemy’s” (οὐ μὴν τοὺς σφετέρους νεκροὺς τῶν πολεμίων ἐλάσσους εἶδρον, 1.18.50), which tells us the only comparative magnitude of the casualties, and not the number.²⁵ In the Battle of Anglon he tells us that the Persians killed a large number of Romans with ease (2.25.26). In the Battle of Nisibis, Procopius does give us the number of some Roman casualties, for we learn that the Persians killed fifty men and took the standard of Peter (2.18.22). The Romans, however, won the battle and, in the counterattack, a combined force of Romans and Goths killed 150 Persians (2.18.25). In the Battle of the Phasis River we learn that most of a Persian advance force of 1,000 men was killed, while some were taken captive (2.30.39). This left 4,000 Persian men in the marching camp of the initial 5,000-strong expeditionary force, and by the end we learn that a significant number of Persians were killed in the dawn raid (2.30.45).

Procopius tells us at the end of the Battle of Dara that a Roman victory was something that had not happened for a long time (*Wars* 1.14.54), which shows that his approach echoes Thucydides’ when it comes to the prevalence of uneven numbers reflecting the perceived gravity of a battle. As a point of comparison, in a battle where the Athenians suffered significant losses near Spartalus, Thucydides reports the number of Athenian casualties, but not the number of Chalcidian or Bottiaian casualties.²⁶ Conversely, in the battles of Callinicum and Anglon, the Romans were defeated. Although Procopius has not misled us on the two defeats, he appears reluctant to discuss the number of Romans killed, in spite of the fact that there were heavy losses on both sides in these Persian Pyrrhic victories. In the Battle of Nisibis the Romans were victorious and, as the battle was not described in as much detail as the Battle of Dara, he provided much less information, which included leaving out the number of Romans killed. In the heat of battle it would have been difficult for Procopius to keep track of the numbers lost on the Roman side, let alone the Persian side, unless an official tally of Roman casualties was made.

Besides underlining the battles themselves, Procopius seeks to emphasize the heroics of Belisarius in many of these battles, for it was his actions that rescued the Romans from certain defeat. Had Belisarius not stepped in and snatched

²⁵ Despite the defeat, however, it turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory for the Persians. In fact, the difference in the relative importance of the two major battles of the *Persian Wars*, the Battle of Dara, a Roman victory, and the Battle of Callinicum, a Roman defeat, is probably exaggerated; although the Romans won the former battle, the Persians immediately followed it up with yet another invasion, while in the latter battle, even though the Romans were defeated, the Persians suffered heavy losses, which had a major impact on their ability to continue the war. For a detailed discussion of this battle and its outcome, see Greatrex 1998: 195–212.

²⁶ Thuc. 2.79.2.

victory from defeat, that total of fifty Romans killed at Nisibis would have been significantly higher. Furthermore, this figure is substantially lower than the number of Persian casualties reported only a few lines later.²⁷ If we look back at the Battle of Dara, we find that Procopius is trying to emphasize this victory, a crucial moment in the narrative and something unique in his eyes in contemporary Roman history. Undoubtedly there were losses on the Roman side, but the Romans had followed Belisarius' instructions and, as a result, had defeated the Persians against what seemed like incredible odds. By contrast, Belisarius had lost the Battle of Callinicum, and the best way to minimize the impact was to underscore the magnitude of the casualties suffered by the victorious Persians and to downplay Roman losses, as was the practice of Herodotus and Thucydides.

Before we turn to the *Vandal Wars*, there remains one last point to make. Overall, Procopius' combat figures in the *Persian Wars*, not to mention the *Vandal Wars* and *Gothic Wars*, as we will see, are reliable, and generally free of fabrication. This is what we should expect, given that in the preface to the *Wars* he emphasized the importance of truth, and argued that everything and everyone would be described as accurately as possible (Procop. *Wars* 1.1.4–6). Although we cannot always compare Procopius' figures in his combat descriptions with other sources to see whether he did aim for truthfulness, there are exceptions, particularly when it comes to the battles described in the *Persian Wars*. There we find instances where we can compare Procopius' figures with those used by other contemporary or near-contemporary historians. For example, Procopius, Malalas, and Pseudo-Zachariah all describe the Battle of Callinicum in some detail, and while they might agree on some points, they disagree on others. Both Procopius and Malalas include figures, and the totals Malalas and Procopius provide for the Romans are comparable: Procopius assigns the Romans around 20,000 men,²⁸ and the Persians 15,000;²⁹ Malalas gives Belisarius a force of 8,000 men, Arethas 4,000 men, Sunicas 5,000 men, and Stephanus, Apscal, and Simmas 4,000 men (21,000 total).³⁰ Malalas excludes the Persian numbers, while Pseudo-Zachariah does not mention any figures, Roman or Persian. If we assume that Malalas was using official documents, whatever they might have been,³¹ and that his figures are therefore accurate, this would give some weight to Procopius' figures: Procopius' total for the Roman army (20,000) is similar to Malalas' (21,000). On the other hand, his figure falls short of Malalas', which in turn suggests some rounding, even if it is minimal in nature. This discrepancy

²⁷It is worth pointing out that casualty figures in a battle could vary widely between two sides, with the side that turns in flight most likely to suffer heavy casualty figures. Note Procopius' comments at 4.17.14–15.

²⁸Procop. *Wars* 1.18.5.

²⁹Procop. *Wars* 1.18.1.

³⁰Malalas 18.60.

³¹On the sources used by Malalas and Procopius, see Greatrex 1998: 194–195.

is unlikely the result of wilful intent on Procopius' part, however; historians in classical antiquity used rounding just as in the present we sometimes do. In a paper on Herodotus, Rubincam noted the modern tendency to avoid specifics in our conversations.³² We might use phrases such as "I have to mark 170 essays," rather than, "I have to mark 172 essays." It seems that Herodotus and his contemporaries also had a high tolerance for such estimates.³³

THE VANDAL WARS

I now turn to the *Vandal Wars*, and my focus will remain on the numbers included in descriptions of combat, though I will occasionally look at the figures used in the larger campaigns. We will find that the numbers tend to be less precise here than those in the *Persian Wars*, and that they serve roles in the narrative beyond their function as pieces of data.

The first set of figures that has some bearing on combat comes near the beginning, and it is the numbers given for the size of Roman expeditionary armies, from Basiliscus' 100,000 strong force in 468 (Procop. *Wars* 3.6.1) to Belisarius' force that included 10,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry (3.11.2), not to mention 30,000 sailors (3.11.14), in 533. Shifting to combat, there is a skirmish at the beginning of the Battle of Ad Decimum, and, in the *mélée*, Procopius tells us that John killed twelve of Ammatas' men (3.18.6). After Ammatas' defeat we learn the following about the Vandals: "For they were travelling in no order and were not arranged for battle, but in squadrons, and these were small; for they marched in [squadrons of] 20 or 30" (3.18.8).³⁴ At 3.18.12 we learn that 2,000 came with Gibamundus to Pedion Halon. Some lines later Procopius tells us that "there was a certain man among the Massagetae . . . who led a few men" (3.18.13).³⁵ Following the skirmish between the Massagetae and the Vandals, Procopius simply states that "they were all disgracefully destroyed" (ἅπαντες αἰσχρῶς διεφθάρησαν, 3.18.19) without telling us how many soldiers were present. Instead, we learn only that Belisarius gave his exhortation to "the whole army" (ἅπαν . . . τὸ στράτευμα, 3.19.1). Following the exhortation, numbers continue to be absent, replaced by descriptors such as "all the horsemen" (τῶν ἰππέων ἀπάντων, 3.19.11), "the whole army" (τῶ παντὶ . . . στρατῶ, 3.19.12), "the rest of the army" (τῶ ἄλλῳ στρατῶ, 3.19.13), and "a great many Vandal horsemen" (Βανδύλων ἰππέων πάμπολυ, 3.19.15). In the only instance in this episode where Procopius gives a figure, we read: "Uliaris the bodyguard of Belisarius happened to be there with 800 guards" (Οὐλίαν τὸν Βελισσαρίου δορυφόρον ξὺν ὑπασπισταῖς ὀκτακοσίαις τετύχηκεν εἶναι, 3.19.23). Then, at the end of the battle, and in regard to casualties, specific

³²Rubincam 2008: 99–100.

³³Rubincam 2008: 100.

³⁴ἐπορεύοντο γὰρ οὐδενὶ κόσμῳ οὐδὲ ὡς ἐς μάχην ξυντεταγμένοι, ἀλλὰ κατὰ συμμορίας, καὶ ταύτας βραχείας· κατὰ τριάκοντα γὰρ ἢ εἴκοσιν ἦσαν.

³⁵ἦν δέ τις ἐν τοῖς Μασσαγέταις ἀνήρ . . . ὀλίγων δὲ ἡγούμενος ἀνδρῶν.

Procop. <i>Wars</i>	Relevant Text in Passage
4.1.12	“the whole army”
4.2.1	“After such words of exhortation Belisarius sent all the horsemen, except [πλήν] for 500”
4.2.	“with the infantry and the 500 horsemen”
4.3.4	“Martinus and Valerian and John and Cyprian and Althias and Marcellus held the left flank and as many others [ἄλλοι] who were leading the <i>foederati</i> ”
4.3.4	“and the right by Pappas and Barbatus and Aigan and as many [ἄλλοι] led the cavalry units”
4.3.6	500 horsemen with Belisarius
4.3.7	“with the rest of the army”
4.3.10	“John selected a few of those under him”
4.3.12	“John again led out more [πλείους] of Belisarius’ guardsmen”
4.3.12	“with almost all [πᾶσι σχεδόν] of Belisarius’ guards and spearmen”
4.3.15	“then the whole Roman army”
4.3.18	“fewer than [ἤσσους ἤ] 50 of the Romans died in this battle, but of the Vandals about [μάλιστα] 800”

Table 1

numbers are again omitted, for Procopius simply states that they “lost many there” (πολλοὺς ἐνταῦθα ἀποβαλόντες, 3.19.31).

The first reference to the size of the army comes in the Battle of Tricamarum, one of the most detailed accounts of combat in the *Vandal Wars*, and throughout Procopius offers a range of different figures (Table 1). In his description of the confusion that follows the battle, and after the brief interlude when he supplies us with seemingly definite figures for casualties, Procopius again uses vague descriptors when he describes the action, before finishing with something more definite. So we get “some few domestics” (τῶν οἰκετῶν ὀλίγοι τινές, 4.3.21), and “killing all men upon whom they happened” (ἄνδρας μὲν ὅσοις ἐντύχοιεν ἔκτεινον, 4.3.24). The emerging pattern is that Procopius shies away from referring to the size of both Roman and Vandal forces involved in combat in the *Vandal Wars*, which is very much in keeping with the larger narrative. Too much attention to the precise figures would detract from his efforts to craft a dramatic, surprising, and brilliant victory in this contest, at least if the number of participants—the size of the respective Roman and Vandal armies—was similar. This might well explain the absence of numbers for the size of the participating forces. With that said, what we find is that Procopius does not exaggerate, and that his selectivity is best understood in terms of his literary intentions.

Though not a complete list, the compilation in Table 2 gives some indication of the sorts of figures Procopius uses in descriptions of combat elsewhere in the *Vandal Wars*. Overall, he is less inclined to use definite figures in the *Vandal Wars* in comparison to the *Persian Wars*. In the Battle of Dara, as we saw,

Procop. <i>Wars</i>	Battle	Relevant Text in Passage
4.11.14	Mammes	Solomon decides to lead his “whole army” against the Berbers after he reads a letter
4.11.23	Mammes	“around 50,000 [κατὰ μυριάδας πέντε] Berbers have gathered and already defeated 500 Romans”
4.11.51	Mammes	“no fewer than [οὐχ ἦσσον ἦ] 500”
4.11.55	Mammes	“it is said that 10,000 Berbers died in this struggle”
4.12.2	Mt Bourgaon	Solomon marches off with his whole army against the Berbers
4.12.17	Mt Bourgaon	Solomon’s orders Theodorus to lead 1,000 foot soldiers
4.12.25	Mt Bourgaon	“50,000 Berbers died in this encounter”
4.12.25	Mt Bourgaon	“but not one of the Romans” (died in this encounter)
4.15.9	Mt Aurasium	Belisarius “chose 100 of his spearmen and guards”
4.15.11	Mt Aurasium	“Belisarius gathered about [ἀμφὶ] 2,000 of his army”
4.15.46	Mt Aurasium	“the army being much too small” (λίαν τοῦ στρατεύματος βραχέος ὄντος)
4.17.2	Scalae Veteres	Germanus arrives with his whole army
4.17.4	Scalae Veteres	Germanus then lines up his army and places all the infantry along the wagons
4.17.5	Scalae Veteres	Germanus places the best of the horsemen on the left of the infantry, and all the rest on the right flank
4.17.8	Scalae Veteres	arrangement of the opposing forces including many myriads (μυριάδες πολλαί) of Berbers
4.17.24	Scalae Veteres	Stotzas managed to escape with a few men
4.17.26	Scalae Veteres	Germanus sends some of his followers to attack one side
4.17.28	Scalae Veteres	Germanus rushes in with all the rest of the army
4.17.31	Scalae Veteres	Many of the Berbers pursue the mutineers
4.17.33	Scalae Veteres	Stotzas flees with 100 men

Table 2

there was a wide variety of different figures. Procopius tells us how many troops the Romans and Persians had at Dara,³⁶ the number of reinforcements brought by the Persians,³⁷ and, on two separate occasions, the number of troops under specific Roman or allied commanders.³⁸ He also provides specific casualty figures.³⁹ In what is arguably the centrepiece battle of the *Vandal Wars*, the Battle of Ad Decimum, Procopius is less clear about the numbers involved. We might assume that the total size of the Roman force participating in the battle equalled the total given at the beginning of the narrative,⁴⁰ and phrases

³⁶ Procop. *Wars* 1.13.23.

³⁷ Procop. *Wars* 1.14.1.

³⁸ Procop. *Wars* 1.3.19, 1.3.20.

³⁹ Procop. *Wars* 1.14.41, 1.14.51.

⁴⁰ Procop. *Wars* 3.11.1.

like “the whole army” and “all the horsemen/cavalry” suggest as much. This latter battle took place four years after the original invasion and we have no way of knowing what happened to the many soldiers and units involved after Belisarius' initial conquest, at least based on Procopius' narrative. Thus, it is hard to reconstruct the numbers involved in the many battles from Procopius' account.⁴¹ The seeming preponderance of figures for Romans over Vandals might be due to lack of information: Procopius was ill-informed about the Vandals. On the other hand, given the readiness with which he provided Persian casualty figures, as we saw above (397), such an explanation is insufficient.

Comparing the numbers used in the *Persian Wars* with the numbers used in the *Vandal Wars*, we find subtle differences. Most notably, the *Vandal Wars* is rife with qualifiers such as “about.” Procopius' sparse usage of definite figures serves to highlight the accuracy of those he does use: the reader might believe that if he did not know the figures involved, he would not use them.⁴² Thus, through his lack of exaggeration and his use of qualifiers where needed, Procopius demonstrates that his account can be trusted.⁴³

Procopius, on occasion, juxtaposes figures that he claims are accurate with figures that are nearly accurate. In the Battle of Mt Aurasium, for example, we get “100 of his spearmen and guards” (τῶν αὐτοῦ δορυφόρων τε καὶ ὑπασπιστῶν ἑκατὸν, Procop. *Wars* 4.15.9), “about [ἄμφι] 2,000 of his army” (4.15.11), and “350 stades distant from Carthage” (πεντήκοντα καὶ τριακοσίοις σταδίοις Καρχηδόνοϛ διέχουσαν, 4.15.12–13). The reader is likely to assume that the middle figure is a definite number, regardless of the qualifier “about,” because of its proximity to two other figures where no such qualifier is given. Conversely, the inclusion of one qualifier, such as “about,” in a set of figures in close succession persuades the reader that the two definite figures are accurate, for if they were not, the reader would expect Procopius to have included a qualifier as he did with the 2,000.⁴⁴ Even when the qualifiers are used with numbers that stand alone, they often have the same effect. So, when Procopius makes statements such as “no fewer than [οὐχ ἧσσον ἢ] 500” (4.11.51), “it is said that 10,000 Berbers died in this struggle” (καὶ λέγονται Μαυρουσίων μύριοι ἐν τούτῳ τῷ πόνῳ ἀποθανεῖν, 4.11.55), and “fewer than [ἧσσους ἢ] 50 of the Romans died in this battle, but of the Vandals about [μάάλιστα] 800” (4.3.18), readers are more likely to believe his figures because of his use of the qualifier. This acceptance, however, is conditional on the use of precise figures at other points in the text. If the text were full of qualifiers, though short of precision, Procopius' authority would be undermined. In other words, Procopius

⁴¹ See Treadgold 1995: 60; 2007: 219–220.

⁴² See Hornblower 1994: 150–152 on Thucydides and numbers.

⁴³ See Marincola 1997; Dewald 2007.

⁴⁴ For example, Procop. *Wars* 4.11.23: “around [κατὰ] 50,000 Berbers have gathered and already defeated 500 Romans.”

uses precise figures regularly and qualifiers infrequently, which suggests that he strove to provide the most accurate data possible.

Procopius' numbers in the *Vandal Wars* serve a number of purposes. He is much less precise than he is in the *Persian Wars*, a feature which helps him to highlight the events that he describes while not drawing the readers' attention to the two forces, Roman and Vandal, that were likely similar in size, which would have served to undermine the perceived magnitude of the Roman victory. In addition, his extended use of qualifiers and selective use of precise figures, often juxtaposed, emphasized the authority, and trustworthiness, of Procopius the historian and narrator. His use of qualifiers may point to the difficulties he had in getting accurate numbers, at least for the Vandals, and might also explain the few figures in the "myriad" range that he used for the Berbers as well (4.11.55, 4.12.25).⁴⁵ Indeed, at the end of this section it is worth remembering that Procopius stressed Belisarius' concern over the Romans' lack of information about the Vandals (3.14.1), which was in marked contrast to the situation in the east, for they had long established means of getting good information about their Persian foes.⁴⁶

PRECISION IN THE *GOTHIC WARS*

One aspect of Procopius' use of numbers in the *Gothic Wars* that has attracted the attention of scholars such as Hannestad, Thompson, and Cameron is Procopius' precision.⁴⁷ These scholars have posited a change in Procopius' presentation of numbers in the second half of the Gothic Wars, suggesting that the numbers became much more precise. They have also argued that Procopius tended to exaggerate the number of enemy (especially Gothic) forces, particularly at the onset of the war; and, that he inflated these Gothic numbers for the sake of glorifying Belisarius.⁴⁸

Accuracy and precision are not synonymous, though they are related. Where a reported figure of 1,000 for a troop total may be said to be accurate if there really were, in any historical sense, 1,000 troops involved in the situation in question, the expression of "1,000 troops" is more precise than "no fewer than 1,000 troops," regardless of how accurate the 1,000 figure is, because the former is exact, while the latter is not. In the *Wars* the numbers used for people, whether troops or casualties, tend to be round figures. In the *Gothic Wars*, as with the

⁴⁵ For a thorough discussion of the peculiarities of the Berbers in their conflict with the Romans, see Modéran 2003: 607–633.

⁴⁶ See Lee 1993: 109–128; Nechaeva 2014. Cf. Börm 2007: 52–69.

⁴⁷ Hannestad 1960; Thompson 1982: 77–91; Cameron 1985: 147–150. Liebeschuetz (1996: 232), like Thompson and Cameron, agrees with Hannestad and argues that Procopius' numbers are incomplete and unreliable.

⁴⁸ Evans (1972: 74, 143, n. 82) was one of the first to raise doubts about this second conclusion. Note too that Procopius claimed in the preface that he would provide a balanced account of leading figures (Procop. *Wars* 1.1.4).

rest of the text, numbers for troops are given in multiples of ten.⁴⁹ As a result we find phrases such as: “having selected 300 men from an infantry division” (Procop. *Wars* 5.14.1); “no fewer than 1,000 Goths fell” (5.18.14); “he sent 600 horsemen” (6.2.9); “around 2,000 men from the Herulian nation followed him” (6.13.18); and “no more than 1,000 men following him” (7.1.27).⁵⁰ Procopius also uses qualifiers like “about,” “around,” “no more than,” and “no less than.” Generally, when numbers are reported, they are not always precise, particularly with respect to troop totals, whether it is for casualties, or units assigned a particular task.

What is probably the best marker of precision is the presence, or absence, of expressions such as “about,” “around,” “more than,” “no more than,” “fewer than,” and “no fewer than.” The evidence from the table in the appendix (see below, 409–411) shows that these terms are fairly evenly distributed throughout Books 5 through 7. There are thirty figures from the list that are from Book 5, thirty-three from Book 6, and fifty-two from Book 7. Of those, in Book 5 Procopius uses an imprecise phrase like “around” 27% of the time; in Book 6 he uses such a phrase 30% of the time; and in Book 7, 23% of the time. Based on this criterion, Procopius seems to get less precise as the narrative moves towards the centre of the *Gothic Wars*, and then more precise as it heads into Book 7, which has a much greater total number of figures. It is worth stressing that the differences in percentages are slight, however. Book 7 also has many more pages than the previous two books: 185 in the Teubner edition. As a point of comparison, Book 5 takes up 142 Teubner pages, and Book 6, 143 pages. If we stay with the division into halves that Hannestad originally advocated, and so divide those page totals into two sections, the mid-point of the *Gothic Wars* comes at 6.26. The new tallies are sixty figures for the first half, with the use of an imprecise qualifier 28% of the time; and, fifty-five figures for the second half, with the use of an imprecise qualifier 24% of the time. Hannestad and the others are vindicated, but only by the slimmest of margins, though again it should be pointed out that the siege of Rome, which is the longest description, falls in the first half. The conclusions of those previous scholars, then, need modification. Rather, Procopius is slightly more precise in the second half of the *Gothic Wars*, though he also uses slightly fewer figures.

Another criterion for measuring precision is the number of times adjectives are used instead of specific figures, keeping in mind that an adjective is certainly vaguer than a number. A typical example is found at 5.7.1, where Procopius writes: “the Goths, who were being led by Asinaris and Gripas among others, had come to Dalmatia with a great army [στρατῶ πολλῶ].” Instances where

⁴⁹The abundance of multiples of ten might in part be due to the size of the unit in Procopius' day, at least for Roman soldiers. See Treadgold 2005: 14.

⁵⁰5.14.1: ἀπολέχας οὐκ ἄνδρας ἐκ καταλόγου πεζικοῦ τριακοσίου; 5.18.14: ἐν τούτῳ τῷ πόνῳ πίπτουσι μὲν Γότθοι οὐχ ἥσσους ἢ χίλιοι; 6.2.9: ἰππίας ἑξακοσίους . . . ἔστελλεν; 6.13.18: εἶποντο δὲ οἱ καὶ τοῦ Ἐπούλων ἔθνους δισχιλίοι μάλιστα; 7.1.27: οὐ πλέον ἢ χίλιοι αὐτῷ εἶποντο.

Procopius describes an army or division in this manner in the *Gothic Wars* abound; the same holds true for when he describes the number of casualties following an engagement. So, at 6.23.35 we read: “the soldiers, while looking down on the enemy in the field, went against them on the run, so killing some of them [τινάς τε αὐτῶν] in the first rush.”⁵¹ What is important, however, is their distribution; if one accepts the conclusions reached by Hannestad and others about the increase in precision in the second half of the text, with the low mark being around the siege of Rome, then one should expect to find more general descriptors in the first half of the *Gothic Wars*. A close examination reveals, however, that this is not the case.

The table in the appendix (below, 409–411) includes all of those instances where Procopius uses adjectives instead of specific figures when discussing a troop contingent, whether he is referring to its size or its casualty totals. As one would expect given the lengths of Books 5 and 6, the total number of adjectives used in these instances is roughly the same. The number of places where adjectives are used in Book 7 is greater, which is unsurprising given that the seventh book is longer than the previous two. With that said, Book 7 is only about 30% longer than Book 5, and about 31% longer than Book 6, while adjectives are used 65% more often in Book 7 than Book 5, and 60% more often than Book 6. Turning from adjectives to numbers, if one divides the *Gothic Wars* into halves, and then compares the totals, the results are striking, at least in view of the theory that there is an increase in precision in the second half: my tentative total for the first half includes 101 cases, while my total for the second half contains 102 cases. At the end of these analyses for numbers and for adjectives, then, there is no evidence that the second half of the text is more precise than the first.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of this analysis of combat figures in the *Persian Wars* and *Vandal Wars*, Rubincam’s observations on the use of numbers by classical historians, from their presentation of uneven casualty figures to the use of qualifiers in cases of doubtful information, hold true for Procopius, who appears to adopt the practices employed by classical historians such as Thucydides. In the second half of this paper, contrary to some earlier research, Procopius is shown to have been more consistent in his use of figures in the *Gothic Wars* than he is usually given credit for.

Although this essay on Procopius’ use of numbers reveals that he manipulated his material a great deal, he did so in order to pursue literary ends,⁵² which

⁵¹ οἱ δὲ στρατιῶται ἀμφὶ τὴν πόαν κατιδόντες τοὺς πολεμίους, δρόμῳ ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς ἦσαν, τινάς τε αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ ὁδῷ ἔκτεινον.

⁵² On the importance of careful arrangement in ancient history, see Lucian *Hist. Conscr.* 39–44.

could include, for instance, a desire to improve readability, as in the case of his description of the Battle of Callinicum. The manipulation should not be taken to mean that he fabricated his materials. Rather, Procopius was being selective, as was his prerogative, and in that respect, as in so many others, he was following in the grand tradition of classical historiography.

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APPENDIX: NUMBERS USED IN THE *GOthic WARS*

Procop. <i>Wars</i>	Side	Numbers reported
5.5.2	Roman	4,000 <i>foederati</i> , around 3,000 Isaurians
5.5.4	Roman	200 allied Huns, 300 Moors
5.6.2	Gothic	3,000 Gothic warlike men
5.7.34	Roman	500 men from the army
5.10.1	Roman	Selecting around 400 men
5.10.3	Roman	The 400 men
5.10.8	Roman	200 of the men around him
5.10.37	Gothic	No fewer than 800 Goths were captured
5.11.26	Gothic	No fewer than 4,000 men
5.12.51	Gothic	Around 2,000 soldiers
5.14.1	Roman	300 men from an infantry division
5.16.11	Gothic	Cavalry and infantry numbering no fewer than 150,000
5.17.17	Gothic	22 deserters came to them, barbarian by nation, but Roman soldiers
5.17.17	Roman	1,000 horsemen
5.18.14	Gothic	no fewer than 1,000 Goths
5.22.17	Roman	amounted to about 5,000
5.23.26	Gothic	30,000 of the Goths
5.24.2	Roman, Gothic	although the army has been reduced to 5,000 men. But the enemy, having gathered 150,000 men
5. 26.19	Roman	1,600 military horsemen
5.27.6	Roman	with the 200 men
5.27.11	Gothic	no fewer than 1,000 Goths
5.27.11	Roman	with 300 guardsmen
5.27.13	Roman	with 300 horsemen
5.27.16	Gothic	500 horsemen
5.27.18	Roman	selected 1,000 men
5.27.22	Roman	1,500 troops
5.29.44	Roman	hacked to pieces, fell there, along with 42 infantrymen
6.2.9	Roman	600 horsemen
6.3.7	Gothic	no fewer than around 7,000 men
6.4.6	Roman	With 1,000 men
6.4.7	Roman	with around 500 men
6.4.19	Roman	no fewer than 500 soldiers
6.5.1	Roman	with around 3,000 Isaurians . . . and 800 horsemen . . . and with them 1,000 other soldiers from a division of horsemen
6.5.2	Roman	with 300 horsemen arrived . . . they were mixed with 500 men who had been collected

(continued)

Procop. <i>Wars</i>	Side	Numbers reported
6.7.3	Roman	with 100 horsemen
6.10.1	Roman	with 2,000 horsemen
6.11.1	Gothic	1,000 men . . . and such a number
6.11.2	Gothic	500 men in the garrison of . . . he left behind 4,000 Goths . . . 2,000 men in the city of
6.11.3	Gothic	no fewer than 500 men
6.11.4	Roman	with 1,000 horsemen
6.11.22	Roman	with the 400
6.12.26	Roman	1,000 Isaurians and Thracians
6.12.40	Roman	with around 300 men
6.13.17	Roman	5,000 soldiers followed with him
6.13.18	Roman	around 2,000 men from the Herulian nation
6.16.18	Roman	there with 1,000 men
6.18.6	Roman	Heruls and spearmen and his guards . . . along with those with . . . and the followers of . . . he asserted were no fewer than 10,000 men
6.20.21	General populace	no fewer than 50,000 people
6.21.39	General populace	totalling no fewer than 300,000
6.23.2	Roman	along with 500 foot-soldiers from a division
6.23.5	Roman	with 11,000 men
6.25.2	Frankish	100,000 men
6.27.16	Roman	7 Armenian men who were deployed
6.28.10	German/Frankish	our army of no fewer than 500,000 warlike men
6.28.31	Gothic	4,000 Ligurians and men from the fortresses in the Alps
7.1.27	Gothic	no more than 1,000 men following him
7.3.4	Roman	army of Romans numbering 12,000 was gathered
7.4.12	Gothic, Roman	for going from 200,000 men to 5,000 . . . the number that you happened to live with was no more than 1,000
7.4.19	Gothic	300 of his followers
7.10.3	Roman	having collected 4,000 men
7.10.11	Roman	170
7.11.19	Roman	3 of his spearmen . . . with 1,000 men
7.11.28	Gothic	2,000 men
7.11.30	Gothic	200 of them
7.15.3	Roman	with 500 men
7.18.29	Gothic	they were 300
7.19.19	Gothic	all of the Goths, who numbered around 200
7.19.25	Roman	100 horsemen

(continued)

Procop. <i>Wars</i>	Side	Numbers reported
7.20.19	General populace	500 men
7.20.23	General populace, Roman	26 of the soldiers died, as well as 60 members of the public
7.21.4	Gothic, Roman	earlier we had collected 200,000 of the most warlike soldiers . . . we were defeated at the hands of 7,000 Greek men
7.21.5	Roman	more than 20,000 men from the enemy
7.22.3	Roman	300 Antae
7.22.21	Roman	the 300 Antae
7.23.7	Roman	he came with an army . . . with the 15 soldiers
7.23.8	Roman	1,000 of the soldiers
7.23.18	Gothic	a garrison that numbered no fewer than 400 men
7.26.6	Gothic	the army . . . and these same 400 barbarians
7.26.10	Gothic	no fewer than 70 Roman soldiers
7.26.16	Roman	with those under him numbered 1,000
7.27.3	Roman	300 Heruls . . . with 800 Armenians . . . and guards who numbered no more than 1,000
7.27.9	Roman	more than 200
7.27.15	Roman	300 of his followers
7.27.16	Roman	gathered 900 valorous men, 700 horsemen, 200 foot-soldiers
7.28.10	Gothic	more than 200
7.28.13	Gothic	3,000 horsemen from his entire expeditionary force
7.29.3	Roman?	commanders of the Illyrians having an army of 15,000
7.30.1	Roman	no fewer than 2,000 foot-soldiers
7.30.6	Roman	army of the Romans was 300 Illyrian horsemen . . . 100 foot-soldiers
7.30.18	Roman	2,000 horsemen from the expeditionary force
7.30.23	Roman	80 men from the army of Romans
7.34.40	Roman (sent to Lombards)	more than 10,000 horsemen
7.34.42	Roman	1,500 allied Heruls followed them