

TACTICAL ANALYSIS

Contrasts in Roman and Macedonian Tactics

BY CARL GRUBER

The two greatest tactical systems of the ancient world, the Roman legion and the Macedonian phalanx, are richly portrayed in the various scenarios in **SPQR** and its modules. Given the great number of encounters found between these two systems in the **SPQR** scenarios, it is worth taking a closer look at their character, structure, and action on the battlefield.

To avoid confusion and limit the intrusion of exceptions you will find any time you try to analyze the clash of arms and personalities on the battlefield, it might be useful to define what is meant by *Roman legion* and *Macedonian phalanx*. The Roman legion being examined in this article is the manipular legion of the Roman Republic up to the rise of Scipio Africanus. My discussion does not extend past Scipio because he so radically changed battlefield deployments and tactics, that the Roman army and its organization was never quite the same after him. The Macedonian phalanx refers not only to Macedonian armies but to their descendants, the armies of the Diadochoi, Pyrrhus and the Carthaginian armies of the Punic Wars.

In the briefest possible contrast of Roman and Macedonian armies, it could be said that the Macedonians relied on maneuver and flanking attacks while the Romans strove to break the enemy center by immediate and direct shock action by heavy infantry. These principles are reflected not only by the composition of those armies but were also dictated by geography: the Macedonian system reached its zenith on the level plains of its Persian battlefields, whereas the Roman army developed a flexible manipular infantry-heavy system to fight the surrounding hill tribes in its early wars to conquer central Italy.

The Macedonian Model

The clearest contrast between the two systems is found in their method of attack. The Macedonian-style army relied on maneuver and flank attacks. A bristling center of pike-armed heavy infantry (the phalanx itself) provided a solid base of maneuver for the army's flanking elements of cavalry and lighter infantry. An enemy facing a Macedonian-style force could expect to face a solid,

advancing, and nearly-impenetrable wall of shields and spear points while his flanks were being attacked by the Macedonian cavalry. The later Zulu model of Bull Chest, Loins and Horns is strangely reminiscent of this type of fighting. With the enemy's front pinned by the infantry phalanx, the Macedonian cavalry could turn the flanks and then fall on the side or rear of the enemy to pin them against the phalanx. In short, the Macedonian model is a combined arms style which places the enemy between a solid shock force (the phalanx) and a maneuver element (the cavalry), neither of which can be ignored as both are powerful threats to his line. The most famous example of this method of attack was Hannibal's spectacularly-successful double-encirclement and destruction of 8 Roman legions at Cannae, a battle which has been studied and emulated up to the present day, most notably by the Germans in their Schlieffen plan for invading France in World War I and to some extent, by their later *Blitzkrieg* tactics in World War II. The schematics (Figures 1 and 2) offer a simplified view of a Macedonian deployment and attack.

As seen in Figure 2, the phalanx advances to threaten and pin the enemy center while the cavalry, supported by lighter infantry, worries the flanks. Once the flanks have been turned, the cavalry turns on the flanks or rear of the main enemy force to pin it up against the phalanx where it is then destroyed. There are, of course, variations of this method. A double encirclement was not always either planned or achieved and a battle could be won by turning a single flank (as at Issus or the Hydaspes). Nor must the center always advance against the enemy front. At Cannae, Hannibal deliberately placed his least reliable troops in the

center, allowing the Romans to push it back before he then set his heavy African infantry and cavalry loose on the flanks and rear of Varro's main body which had worked itself deeply into the Carthaginian lines. Whatever course the actual battle might take, the Macedonian model tries to provide a solid infantry base from which cavalry and light troops can maneuver to get at the enemy's weak points (usually the flanks).

Every system has its weaknesses and the Macedonian system was no exception. First of all (and in strong contrast to the Roman model), the Macedonian-style army required an exceptional leader to coordinate the fighting and properly time the cavalry attack. There are many battles (like Metaurus or Magnesia) where a Macedonian combined-arms force not led by an Alexander or Hannibal was cut to pieces. Furthermore, the cavalry had to be well armed and disciplined and in the ancient world, good cavalry was expensive and hard to train. A proper phalanx with its heavy panoply of armor and weapons was also expensive and required strong discipline. Another weakness of the Macedonian system emerged when it was up against an enemy who had *caught on* and did not allow their flanks to be turned. At Zama, Scipio had a solid center in his hastati line and had reinforced his own mediocre and small Roman cavalry contingent with a strong force of Numidians which turned the tables on Hannibal. One further weakness of the Macedonian model was that the infantry phalanx was a rigid, slow-moving and not very maneuverable body which could not perform very effectively on uneven ground or react to sudden changes of front. Should the Macedonian cavalry attack fail for one reason or another, the Macedonian center was usually doomed. The victory therefore always relied on rapid and decisive cavalry action.

The Roman Model

In contrast to the typical Macedonian-style army, a Roman army's emphasis is on its infantry. A Roman commander would rely on his infantry to attack and break the center of the enemy line. At the same time, typical Roman armies were

Analysis of Two Great Tactical Systems in SPQR

poor in cavalry and in those rare instances where cavalry was abundant, it was provided by an allied nation. A Roman attack was therefore neither aimed nor suited for turning flanks, but for immediate and direct attack on the enemy center. The Roman infantry was admirably suited for this task.

First of all, the Roman legionary had the aptitude and stamina for heavy fighting. In the Republican period, the Roman armies were national armies made up of citizen soldiers, usually farmers used to hardship. This stands in contrast to the Macedonian-style armies whose infantry was formed from a core of professionals fleshed out with mercenaries and allies whose loyalty might sometimes be questionable. Second, the Romans had the equipment and organization for effective infantry battle. The legionaries were lightly armored not only for greater mobility but to reduce fatigue that heavier armor would cause them. They were armed with short thrusting swords (as opposed to the long swords of Hannibal's Celtic auxiliaries who required more room to swing these blades) so that they could fight in denser and more cohesive units. The Roman legionaries also carried two pila which they would discharge against the enemy to disrupt him just before charging in with their swords. The manipular legion could therefore combine fire and shock in one attack.

The greatest Roman advantages were in their unit organization, deployment and battle drill. The typical Roman consular army consisted of two double legions. The double legion itself was made up of a legion of Roman citizens paired with a legion of Italian allies, deployed side by side. The two double legions were arranged with the Roman s (the main strike force) in the center and the allied legions on the wings. Small cavalry contingents were deployed on the two flanks.

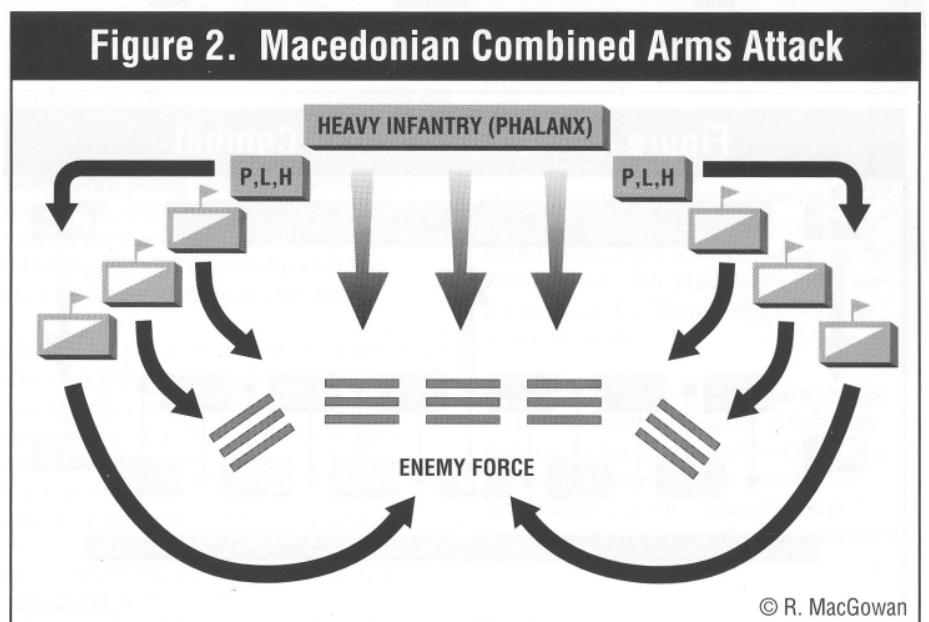
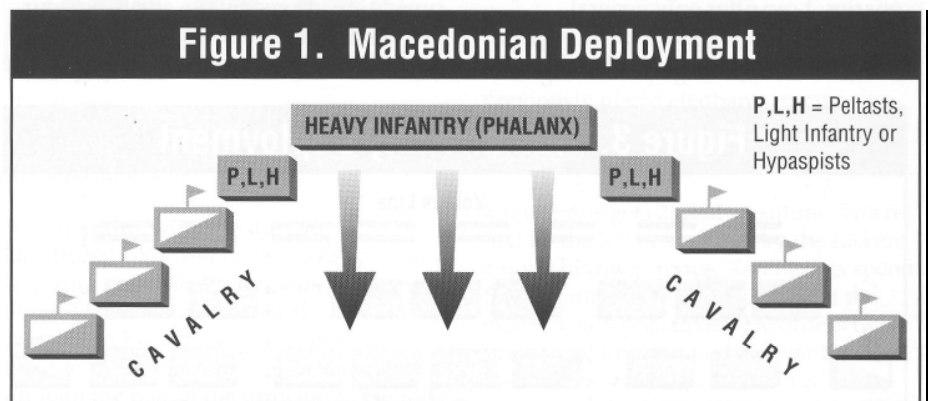
The battle line was echeloned with javelin-armed velites in front followed by two lines of sword and pilum-armed hastati and principes and a third reserve line of triarii in a standard phalanx formation. In addition, the hastati and principes deployed in a checkerboard formation with gaps between them. This allowed the line before them to withdraw and reform while the second fresh line would re-engage the enemy. Where the enemy might have all of his infantry bearing the brunt of all of the fighting all

the time, the Romans could disengage a fatigued line and bring up a fresh one. The echeloned Roman infantry not only allowed reserve lines, but could, under a skillful commander, be used to extend a line or face threats from different directions. Another Roman advantage was the organization of its infantry into smaller units, the maniples, which had the effect of articulating the whole line. The Macedonian phalanx was composed of a long line of heavy infantry with overlapping shields and encumbered with long pikes that prevented any organized change of front. The Roman army, by virtue of being broken up into smaller units, could march faster, maintain cohesion over rougher ground, and could if necessary change front quite rapidly. The superior Roman infantry organization combined with the excellent lower-level leadership provided by centurions (analogous to the tactical advantages World War II German infantry enjoyed due to the high quality of their NCO's)

meant that even under mediocre and even poor generals, a Roman army could put up a stubborn fight and even in defeat, inflict a *Pyrrhic victory* on their opponents.

As seen in Figure 4, a Roman army can maintain constant and fierce pressure on the enemy front to finally break it. The echeloned deployment of the army also gives it some chance of countering flank attacks by enemy cavalry if the Roman's own cavalry has, as was often the case, been driven off.

Any system has its shortcomings and the Romans can be justly accused of being overly conservative. Until Scipio Africanus, a Roman army almost always deployed in the manner described above with a predictability that Hannibal took full advantage of. The Romans also gave very short shrift to the cavalry arm so that without the help of allied horse such as Numidians, they did not have a chance of holding out against a concerted charge.



Perhaps the Romans greatest military shortcoming was their consular system. Army leaders were really politicians for whom army command was an essential stepping stone in their career. With the exception of a few, none of them were military professionals in any sense at all; they had to rely on the natural strength and resiliency of their legions to see them through the day. Saddled with especially bad leaders like Varro or Regulus, men who fought *by the book* and failed to exploit any of the legion's inherent flexibility, the army would be marched lemming-like directly into the jaws of disaster. Still, the Roman army prevailed in nearly every war it fought and eventually gave Rome her massive empire. Given reasonable if not especially talented leadership, a Roman army could win, even outnumbered. Perhaps the greatest compliment that could be paid the Roman system is that it usually took a genius like Hannibal to defeat a fool like Varro.

As to how all of the above applies to handling your armies in the SPQR scenarios, I can offer only general principles. First of all, flexibility is of paramount importance to both sides.

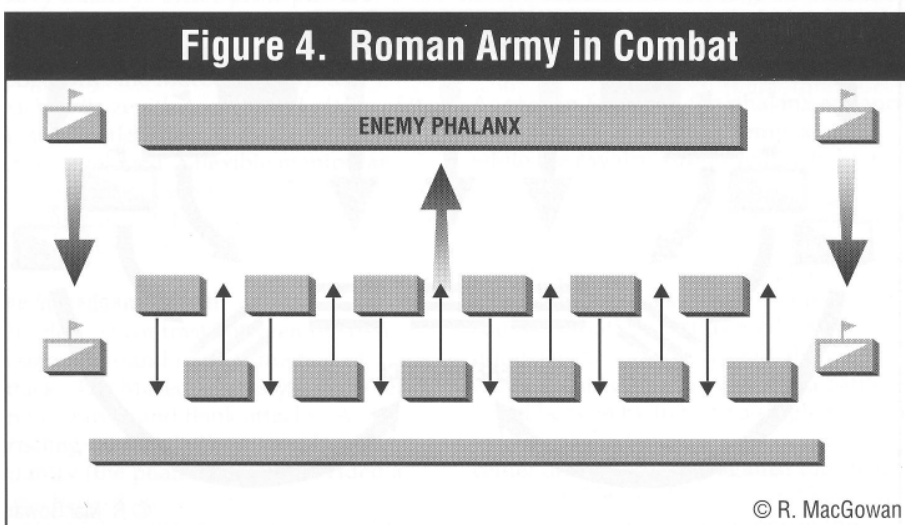
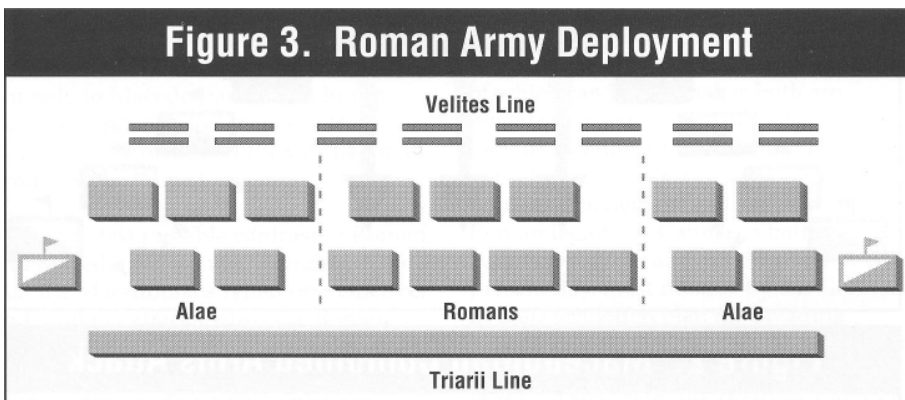
Unless you have a meeting engagement, your battle lines are already drawn and it is foolhardy to try to redeploy within striking range of the enemy. An army's deployment is what determines where and how it will strike, but it's an old maxim that tactical plans almost never survive the first shock of combat. As you maneuver your troops, be prepared for sudden changes.

Commanding a Macedonian-style army, you must handle your phalanx with great care. Advance it either in a straight line or obliquely to engage and pin the enemy front. If the troops are available, back it up with a second line. Phalanxes are cumbersome; when one advances in combat, its flanks can become exposed. Should a phalanx unit rout, it opens a big hole in your line which in turn exposes the flanks of adjacent units. It is not a good idea to engage your phalanx until your cavalry has managed to turn the enemy flanks. As the phalanxes are not as articulated or flexible as the Roman units, they tire quickly and if the cavalry has not already turned the enemy's flanks, a premature or precipitous attack by your phalanx may result in its rout and the destruction of the center of your line. The

proper role of the phalanx is to provide the anvil for the cavalry's hammer. The phalanx crowds and presses the enemy while the cavalry takes him apart. Macedonian cavalry should open the battle as quickly and aggressively as possible. Even where the enemy possesses a large cavalry force, the Carthaginian Sacred Band, Numidians Celtic lancers and Thessalians in your force will almost always be qualitatively superior to anything the Romans can field. When you have them, elephants are also quite useful to disorganize the Roman cavalry while you prepare your charge. Your cavalry's attack can also be made much more effective if it is supported by fast-moving skirmishers or lighter troops such as Iberians. In sum, a Macedonian-style army must be handled with care and speed: care for the handling of the phalanx and speed and aggressiveness with the cavalry.

The Roman army's strong suit is obviously its infantry. A standard consular army with its weak cavalry contingent fighting a combined-arms force is going to have to engage the enemy quickly and decisively while its flanks are still intact. Given the depth of your army, this is a two-fold process. Your first line closes with the enemy and inflicts as much disruption and cohesion loss as it can. The first line itself will probably be driven back and then your second line can close in for the kill against your enemy's by-now-worn-out infantry. This takes delicate timing, because in all likelihood, your flanks may be under attack by the enemy cavalry. Part of your second line may have to change front to face the flank attack, while the middle part of your line presses home the attack. In all cases, your second line must be kept intact, so that when it's time to engage comes, it can move efficiently under a line command. Tribunes and praefects must be allocated in such a way that some are available to issue line commands, while others rally exhausted units, withdrawn from the first clash of lines.

By maintaining constant pressure against the enemy front, continuously recovering and re-engaging tired units and maintaining some sort of reserve to shore up flanks if they collapse, a Roman army can win the day. One more point to remember is that a Roman army can usually take far more casualties than its enemy does before it has to withdraw, therefore, maintaining aggressive and constant pressure is of the utmost importance.



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