

PYRRHUS OF EPIRUS vs. ROME

Claiming Your Own Pyrrhic Victory

BY MIKE REED

An in-depth look into the Army of History's Greatest Soldier of Fortune

The Epirote King / Soldier of Fortune Pyrrhus had the misfortune to be at his zenith at a time when Rome was emerging as an ancient *superpower*. His battles with the Romans, while not spectacular in regards to the Art of War, added the term *Pyrrhic Victory* indelibly to our vocabulary. One uneducated in antiquity would be prone to dismiss him as a bumbling fool, but would be gravely mistaken. Pyrrhus was regarded as one of the finest soldiers of his time, by both friend and foe, even aspiring to that mythical title *Great Captain*. But what do we see when it comes time to field an army for the GBoH *Great Captains* tourney? Plenty of would-be Hannibals, Scipios, Alexanders, and Caesars, but not even one Pyrrhus! This is sad, for it denies us the opportunity to see how a fine-tuned Hellenistic style Greek army can stand up toe-to-toe with all the *pretty-boy* armies of the day. Perhaps the reason Pyrrhus was so respected by his contemporaries was that he achieved so much with the materials he had at hand. No other general of the day, save perhaps Hannibal, can make that claim. Perhaps a closer view of what GBoH offers with regards to Pyrrhus' armies will further enlighten the reader.

Pyrrhus' three major battles with the emerging Roman Republic are all covered in **SPQR**, and its module, entitled **Pyrrhic Victory**. In chronological order, they are Heraclea (280 B.C.), Ausculum (279 B.C.), and Beneventum (275 B.C.) All three are set in drastically different environs:

- **Heraclea** on the traditional flat *open map*, albeit with a stream in the middle.
- **Ausculum** over two days in a rough stream/rocky area.
- **Beneventum**, in which the Roman Camp is central to the battle.

Through these battles you get a good appreciation of the Roman vs. Macedonian military systems over three different styles of terrain. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to describe Pyrrhus' army, its strengths and weaknesses; and how best to attempt to defeat the Romans in the above mentioned three

battles. And remember, every victory you win will be a *Pyrrhic Victory*. Just what that term will mean will be up to you .

Pyrrhus' Army

The army of Pyrrhus is not in the Epirote battle plan's chance of success. They cannot be *thrown away*, yet they cannot be trusted.

Cavalry

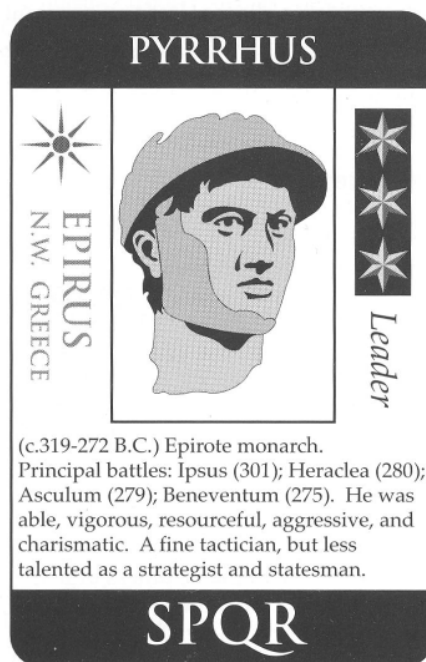
This is one area where the Epirote army outclasses all others in the **SPQR** pantheon. High TQ, Heavy and Light Cavalry both outnumber and outclass their Roman foe. Only the Carthaginian, when in possession of his Numidian allies, can match this. As the Epirote cavalry goes, so shall the battle. Every attempt must be made to gain and keep the initiative with this force.

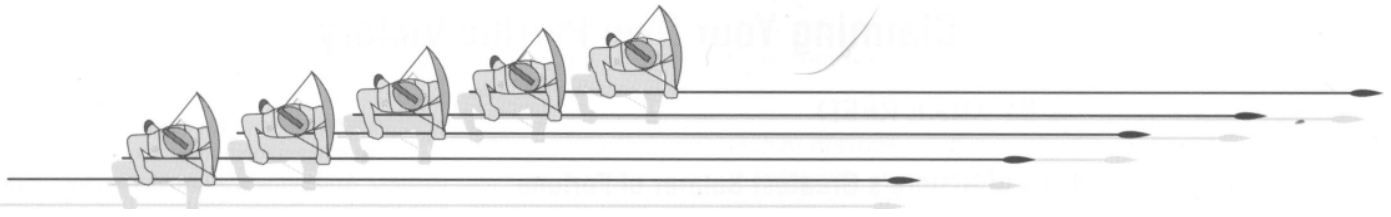
Elephants

This is Pyrrhus' secret weapon versus the Romans. From the first encounter with these beasts in Heraclea, where the Romans soiled their armor at the sight of such a behemoth, to Ausculum and Beneventum, where the countermeasures existed of ludicrous ox carts and flaming tarred pigs (!), the Roman collective consciousness is focused on these animals. No other playing pieces you possess will provide so much psychological impact for such little actual effect. Learning how to maximize this advantage for use at the crucial moment of the battle will be a main goal of your use of the Epirotes in battle.

Leadership

Here, only the Roman Military System itself can help match your outstanding battlefield leadership. The obvious advantages of an Elite leader need no discussion here. What is important to note is that the majority of your leaders outclass even the best of what the Romans have to offer. This means that once battle is joined and the lines are confused, your leadership (initiative) advantage can be put to its best use. Tribunes and Praefects





are at their most efficient while parading the lines about in preparation for battle. Once you can break the lines up, they will be no match for you.

General Tactics

As I have alluded to above, the Roman's greatest strength is their military system. When the Roman is allowed to deploy his lines freely and attack as such, he may be near unstoppable. The corollary to this is that if the opportunity to do this is denied, he will be defeated. This destruction of the *system* should be the main focus of your battle plan. Attacks should be made to cut off and isolate pockets of lines that will render line commands useless. That is when Initiative level 2 and 3 Praefects and Tribunes will become nearly impotent. Your initiative 4 and 5 leaders, with their greater command ranges, will tilt the scales in your favor. What is important here, though, is that you do not lose too much in the process of breaking the lines up. Medium Infantry is much better on the attack versus legionary troops than when they stand and receive (just check the charts for what I mean here). This is a task they are well

suited for. Utilize them to disrupt the Roman lines while the Epirote Cavalry goes to work.

The Epirote Cavalry must have as its first objective the neutralization of the Roman cavalry arm. Once this task is done, they will be able to act with impunity on the flanks and rear of the Roman force. It will probably be imperative to utilize Pyrrhus and one other high initiative leader to achieve this.

Once the Roman cavalry has prevailed, and the Roman front lines are broken up, it is time to administer the *coup de grace*. Press forward with the Phalanxes to pin the Romans in place, while the cavalry attacks the flanks. The Elephant corps is then unleashed, causing much more havoc to the Romans than the Epirotes (hopefully). During this havoc, taking advantage of the situation with Pyrrhus himself may spell victory. It will be, however, as the Duke of Wellington remarked after Waterloo, a *near run thing*. Nothing in GBoH is definite. This plan is only as good as the execution and the fortunes of war allow. Having a coherent battle plan in your mind before the battle, however, is essential to victory. Pyrrhus' army will *not* win without careful planning.

The Battles

Heraclea, 280 B.C.

This battle is, in my opinion, the closest fought match in the entire SPQR/ GBoH set of offerings. It is a straight up fight between the two forces, and is a good starting point to learn the system for an inexperienced player, even more so than the *teaching scenario* in the SPQR box. The Epirote's first effort in this battle is to stave off the attack from Drusus' right wing cavalry. A bit of on the spot leadership by Pyrrhus himself should do the trick. These Romans, unless unusually lucky, will be cut off and out on a limb after the first phase. Ruthlessly hit them in the flanks with your light cavalry

and cut them up with no rout paths. This will limit your loss to pursuit, and prepare you to fall upon that now open flank with the bulk of your force.

It is very important that you time your release of the Elephant corps properly. Use them too soon, when the Romans are for the most part unengaged, and you will not reap the benefits of the disorder you cause. It is best to spring them on the Roman left as you descend upon his flank with the cavalry and push forward with your phalanx line. This will allow maximum effect for minimum effort. They cause the Roman cavalry to *spaz* out by merely coming within OW range! Don't allow the elephants to be engaged, after their first combat (no TQ check), however. If they rout, their entire effect on the battle shall be lost (as well as possibly squishing some of your own troops in the process).

The *Megacles switcheroo* rule allows you to be a little more risk-taking than you normally would be with your OC. This is not a license to throw the Pyrrhus counter away, however, but is helpful to keep in

LIGHT INFANTRY



EPIRUS
N.W. GREECE




LI

J


A generic term applied to foot units with little or no body armor, a lightshield, and usually a spear and/or sword. Most light infantry had missile capability, although their tactics and training made them different from skirmishers.

SPQR

MEDIUM INFANTRY



EPIRUS
SAMNITE



MI

An ersatz term that applies to units (e.g., Samnite infantry) that, while not as well equipped as their heavier counterparts, had weaponry and some body protection that was superior in effectiveness to that worn (or not worn) by light infantry.

SPQR

Analysis of Pyrrhus's Epirote Army in SPQR

mind as an additional *weapon* if needed.

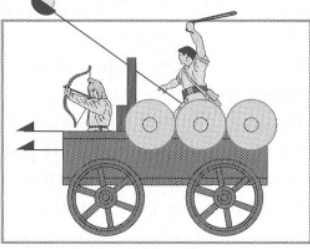
The army fielded in Heraclea will be the best that you will ever have. Enjoy it, for your job will only become harder in the future. It is, however, a good historical look at what an *Alexander in Italy* scenario could be, without resorting to historical fiction.

Ausculum, 279 B.C.

This is probably one of the hardest battles on which to formulate a plan. In fact, it practically precludes one. The best advice I can offer here is that you must utilize your cavalry and light infantry arm to their best ability to disrupt the Roman's efforts in deploying his army in *optimum* (i.e. three-line) formation. Remember, as I stated above, breaking up the Roman lines will go a long way towards victory. Doing this at the cheapest cost should be your aim here. Getting your Phalanx line deployed favorably should also be of great import. There is so much opportunity for variation in this battle, that it defies close study. As Pyrrhus, however, I would tend to avoid the set-piece battle, as the Romans are then deployed to their maximum advantage.

The elephant corps will have less impact here than at Heraclea. It is quite amusing, however, to see the pathetic little ox carts in action!

ANTI-EL OX CART



OX A

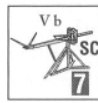
ROMAN

Roman attempt to counter the effects of elephants. Unfortunately, oxen made these weapons very slow, unmaneuverable, and almost ineffective. They carried a few slingers and archers, but neither they, nor the screen of Light Infantry helped much.

SPQR

Beneventum, 275 B.C.

One of your goals in this battle will be to get your own army deployed from march column, and reorganized prior to the Roman getting his own act together. This is no easy task. I would highly recommend using the extended night march, to better get your Phalanx on line in the middle of the flat open plain. Under no circumstances should you allow your troops to violate the night/ dusk alert lines! To do so will leave you hopelessly strung out and lose you the battle before it is joined. The first turn should be spent in reorganizing — removing cohesion hits from those units that suffered fatigue



from the night march. You did remember to stay out of *Scorpio* range didn't you? After this primary task is completed, it is time to harass the Roman debouchment from the camp with the cavalry and light infantry. Don't let your elephants close to the camp, lest they get shot to pieces by the *Scorpio!* It may be prudent to fall upon a Roman detachment in force once it has stepped outside the gate, but before it can deploy into line. Run off any Roman cavalry foolhardy enough to challenge your cavalry in the open ground.

At some time in the battle, you must decide whether it is prudent to attempt an assault on the camp. This may be necessary, as the Roman is hardly going to oblige you cutting him to pieces while he attempts to debouch from camp. There are no *killer* troops such as Alexander's Companions, Hannibal's Veterans, or Scipio's crack *I Legio*. On the contrary, the bulk of this army is of moderate TQ. Pyrrhus has two trump cards versus the Romans, however: his elephants, and his outstanding leadership. Let us first look at the rank and file, however, so that we understand better what clay this army is made of.

Epirote Infantry

The Epirote infantry is of two types: Macedonian Phalanx and allied troops. The former are of the same pedigree as Alexander's veterans. They have 7 T and will stand up (frontally) to anything the Romans throw at it. They are here, as in Alexander's army, the anvil upon which victory is forged. The supporting troops, however, leave much to be desired. A polyglot mixture of mediocre TQ Medium Infantry, their best use is to be hurled at the Roman lines in an

attempt to tie up and disrupt them long enough for the cavalry and elephant corps to carry the day. How well this is done is a key element — caution here — Phalanxes were not meant to accomplish this task! If you have not inflicted any significant damage on the Roman during his deployment, it may be better for you to have him come to you on the plain outside his camp rather than you trying to break in. Trying to break in against a well-deployed force anchored on the camp is suicide.

Conclusions

There you have, in a nutshell, my thoughts concerning the Epirote Army in **SPQR**. After using these troops enough, you can earn a real appreciation of why Pyrrhus was considered so highly among soldiers of his day, and how inappropriate his legacy to the Military Art has been. It is an easy task to win with well trained troops. It takes a far better leader to accomplish great tasks with little. Hannibal of Carthage has long been acknowledged as a master here. Pyrrhus of Epirus should be as well. I can offer no better confidence in this than by stating if I ever get to a GBoH Great Captains Tournament, there will finally be at least *one* Pyrrhic Army on the field of battle. Care to join me?



HEAVY INFANTRY



HI
HO

Hoplite

EPIRUS
N.W. GREECE

Descendants of the Greek Hoplites, these are troops protected by armor (usually helmet, breastplate and leg armor), carrying a shield and brandishing a sword and spear. Powerful units that fought in densely-packed formations.

SPQR