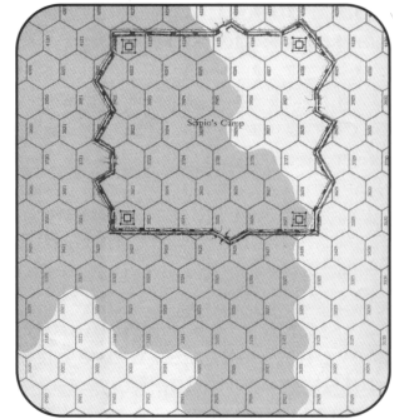


The Nike Gambit

A Strategy for Scipio at the Battle of Thapsus

By Jeff Kouba



There is nothing like a little Greek sacrifice to secure yourself a victory (especially if you aren't Greek). With clarity of vision worthy of Hannibal, Jeff Kouba provides some tips on turning disadvantage into advantage.

— SKT

Who among us does not revere the game of chess? An ancient game, it's one of the original wargames, and over the years, a large library of well-studied chess strategies and tactics has been built up. Openings, attacks, defenses . . . the chess master has a wide variety of approaches to the game from which to choose. One well-known tactic is the gambit. In chess, a gambit is the deliberate sacrifice of a piece in order to gain a winning positional advantage. The goal of that positional advantage is usually control of the center of the chessboard—usually crucial to winning a game of chess. Few successful attacks are mounted solely from the wings.

This article will describe a gambit of sorts for use in the *CAESAR* game system. I call it the Nike Gambit, after the Greek goddess of victory who assisted the gods in their battle against the Titans. You might need the assistance of the gods when using this tactic, as it is often a last ditch effort when facing overwhelming odds in scenarios where one side has a near insurmountable advantage.

Although I've used this gambit in many scenarios throughout the Great Battles of History series, I will specifically discuss the

gambit in the context of the Battle of Thapsus for the player taking the side of Metellus Scipio. Frankly, Scipio has little chance in this scenario. Never mind the historical results. In this scenario, Scipio's conscript legions are no match for Caesar's veterans. The purpose of the Nike Gambit is to give Scipio a fighting chance.

The one key difference between the Nike Gambit and the kinds of gambits seen in chess is that the winning positional advantage we seek is control of the wings, not the center. The sacrifice will be made in the center, whereas the attacks will be conducted on the flanks.

First of all, in order for Scipio to have any chance whatsoever in this Thapsus scenario, the players must agree to use the optional rule that ignores the Elephant's Last Rampage rule. The elephants are crucial to the gambit, and aside from the small contingent of Numidian cavalry, the elephants are the only effective weapon available to Scipio. The Last Rampage Rule limits the effectiveness of the elephants, and Scipio will have enough trouble without it.

Getting Down to Business The Numidian cavalry are a key on the wings. They are Scipio's most mobile units. On the first turn, use the cavalry to attack Caesar's skirmishers. This will eliminate the threat they pose to the elephants, which take two Cohesion hits for every missile hit. After the skirmishers have

been eliminated, keep pressing the attack. Look for opportunities to get around Caesar's flanks. Next, the initial setup of the opposing legions will dictate the first element of the gambit. The front line for Caesar's legions follows the 2000 row. The front line for Scipio's legions follows the 2800 row. Seven hexes lie between the two lines. With a movement allowance of 5, Caesar's legions cannot move and attack Scipio's legions in one movement phase. Because Caesar's veteran legions are automatically attack superior against Scipio's conscript legions, Scipio's legions must get the first attack in order to survive the first round of shock combat. Otherwise, the attack superiority will almost guarantee that Scipio's legions will rout after Caesar's first attack. Hence, Scipio must wait till Caesar's legions move within range. Then, charge and engage in shock combat.

However, not all of Scipio's legions should seek to engage Caesar's veterans in shock combat in this manner. Here is where Scipio executes the gambit. Scipio's wings consist of the Syrian legions on the right, and the Cilician and Cretan legions on the left. During the first turn, after the cavalry has moved out of the way, use section commands to move the Syrian legions three hexes to the right, and the Cilician and Cretan legions three hexes to the left. This places the legions behind the line of elephants on each wing, and protects them

Thapsus: CAESAR

from a direct frontal attack by Caesar's legions.

This leaves the Macedonian legions all alone in the middle. Let's say hello to our lucky contestants, shall we—Macedonian A, the "dead meat" legion, and Macedonian B, the "toast" legion. These two legions are the sacrifice. As soon as Caesar's legions in the middle move within range, move forward and attack with the Macedonian legions. This serves a two-fold purpose.

First, Caesar suffers cohesion damage in the middle. Don't let up on the attack. Use the tribunes, the Macedonian section commander and Scipio himself to press home the attack with every possible orders phase. The Macedonian legions will eventually rout, and it will be difficult to rally most of them, but the continual attacks will break some of Caesar's cohorts. Scipio is hoping that a hole forms in the center of Caesar's lines. If such a hole forms, it must be exploited. Move surviving Macedonians through the hole and keep attacking. The Macedonians may be little more than road bumps, but since Scipio's leaders have lower initiative than do Caesar's leaders, Scipio can get in the first attacks in the center. Caesar must be careful he doesn't lose too

many legions with all these Macedonians throwing themselves on Roman swords.

Second, the cohorts in the second and third lines of Macedonians can threaten to attack outward towards Caesar's flanks. Caesar must take care as he moves his legions forward on the wings, lest his legions be exposed to flank attacks by the Macedonians.

Meanwhile, the attack on the wings looks to gain the winning positional advantage. With Caesar's legions tied down in the middle, the cavalry keeps hammering away on the flanks. Most importantly, the great elephant units can now move forward. Caesar's legions must get through the elephants to get to Scipio's legions on the wings, and the legions will be reluctant to attack the elephants. Use the elephants to pound on anything in sight. Caesar's Antesignani will be difficult to deal with, but use the elephants to drive off the cavalry. Be sure to take any opportunity to remove cohesion hits from the elephants.

After the elephants have moved forward and engaged the Roman forces, Scipio should bring his remaining legions in behind the elephants and attack Caesar's wings, which should be in some disarray by this point. As with the

Macedonians—who will probably be running to the rear with all due haste by now—don't let up on the attack with the Syrians, Cilicians and Cretans. Once they are engaged, use the leaders with the lower initiatives to get in the first attacks.

When the dust settles, hopefully Scipio will have inflicted enough rout points to steal a victory. It is a difficult task, but I maintain it's not an impossible one.

As I mentioned earlier, the Nike Gambit is a tactic that can be used in any number of scenarios in the Great Battles of History series. Give up some units in the middle to tie down the enemy forces in the center, and attack relentlessly on the wings. Here, at Thapsus, the Macedonians do what damage they can in the center in an effort to buy enough time for the forces on the wings to score some blows.

It is a risky tactic. The nonstop attacks almost guarantee your units in the center will rout, and if too many units rout, your center will collapse. However, it is an aggressive tactic that can pay off in a big way. It requires the sacrifice of a good number of troops, but hey, after all, it is only cardboard!



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combat, this essentially represents one or more sieges.

Justinian was as near to paranoid as one can get regarding his generals gaining too much fame and power while away from his direct control. As such he often recalled his best generals whenever evidence (imagined or otherwise) suggested a *magister* was plotting his demise. Generals in the field were also withdrawn for "consultation" when they least expected it. This activity is reflected in the game to a point by the random event "Politics" but this event calls for the replacement of questionable officers, not their mere recall. In

practical terms, these temporary recalls can be represented by not activating the same *magister* in succession, but nothing in the game enforces that.

Considering the number of Barbarian leader casualties encountered historically, a provision for determining leader losses would be nice. Players might want to adopt a rule of rolling for leader casualties (at some mutually agreeable percentage) whenever an army loses twice as many SPs as the victor.

The final consideration of game mechanics involved the very specific incorporation of negotiations between Byzantine and Barbarian leaders. While this is dealt with indirectly through bribe money for

barbarian allegiances, there is no specific provision for direct negotiations, as transpired between Witigis and Belisarius. In the end, an optional rule was devised to account for this situation and the historical results obtained were easily applied.

These minor issues notwithstanding, *JUSTINIAN* has proved itself capable of recreating the historical events the game was designed to emulate. Having done so, I encourage players to explore strategic options other than the one's pursued herein. Perhaps you can find an easier way to regain the west or stave off Byzantine incursions once and for all. Either way, you'll have a good time trying.

