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Great Battles of History Forum: Macedonians vs. Romans

by Richard H. Berg

The design and development of **SPQR** was a task highlighted by the need to recreate the remarkable military developments wrought by the Roman legionary system, while maintaining the integrity of what has proven to be a highly popular system (**Great Battles of Alexander**). The two main areas of work would come in Command and unit usage and flexibility, the latter an area in which the Romans were notoriously superior.

The first decision we (Mark Herman and I) made was as to what battles to do. The prime recommendation was that the battle would highlight the development of the manipular system that the legions of the Roman Republic used - prior to the changes wrought by Marius in the late 2nd century B.C. (Actually, most of these changes were already in use when Marius took over; he simply synthesized them and made them "official".) The reason we chose that as a cut-off point was simple: to do otherwise would require different sets of units for the different legions. As it was, we had already upped the counter mix from the first game.

The original meld included the battle of Sentinum, in which the Romans finally gained control of Central Italy, plus Beneventum, Zama, and Cynoscephalae. Initially, we resisted the idea of including Cannae. It was a dauntingly, massive battle with an outcome so famously disparate to the numbers involved that we were somewhat chary of venturing into such difficult design waters. Three factors changed our minds. Sentinum proved to be a battle for which little hard information was available. Moreover, the Etruscan-era legion used an organizational system somewhat different from that in place by Beneventum. This would have required an individual set of legion counters - plus a great deal of rules writing to cover that system's use. Secondly, by this time, we were starting to realize that Mark's system was proving remarkably flexible, and that, with the inclusion of the Line Command system designed for **Juggernaut**, we had the means in place to provide a realistic, playable Cannae scenario. And lastly, who could resist such a challenge! Cannae! The most famous battle in Roman annals - and probably the most studied battle in all military history; Hannibal's finest moment; and a battle that would fully stretch the system's envelope.

We now had four battles in place, battles which could trace the development - and eventual triumph - of the legionary system. However, while doing some research, we came across a fifth battle that could fill the gap between Pyrrhus and Hannibal: Bagradas Plains, the big land battle of the 1st Punic War. The best thing about Bagradas was that it required no extra counters (except for a leader or two; most Carthaginian commanders seem to have the same names, anyway). It also could easily be handled on either the Cannae or Zama maps, as the (guestimate) battlefield was a flat, gravelly plain. For consumers it meant an extra game - at no extra cost. Granted, Bagradas is not the most evenly-matched engagement- the Romans get soundly trounced regardless of what they do, at least most of the time. But this was balanced by the fact that, like Granicus in **GBA**, it was a fast-playing, minimal-ruled "learning" scenario. (Actually, later on, we included an even simpler, minimum-counter, ahistorical "Learning Scenario" aimed mostly at people new to historical simulation boardgames.)

I forget how many weeks of constant e-mail it took for Mark and I to come up with an acceptable counter-mix for a "Roman legion". The problem arose from the fact that from 275 B.C. (Beneventum) to Cynoscephalae (197 B.C.) the make-up of a legion, and how the units were armed and used, exhibited a natural progression of change. For example, the *principes* started to abandon the use of the pila somewhere during the Second Punic War. Although it is not reflected on the counters - and there is no specific information concerning this - we suspect that by Cynoscephalae, the *principes* had completely abandoned their javelins. But the main sticking point was how many "counters" would comprise, say, the *hastati*, as opposed to the *velites* or *triarii*. After much discussion, we determined that, while unit Size was still not a telling factor, line "frontage" was. The interesting aspect about virtually all set-piece battles in this era was the great length to which commanders went to make sure they were not going to be flanked by an overlapping enemy line. This led to the adoption of the present legionary configuration in the game, as well as the infamous "Stacking Rules".

One of the key "pluses" of **Alexander** was that stacking was virtually non-existent. This made for faster, more visible play. The problem in **SPQR** was that the Roman line deployment, which arrayed units in checkerboard, quincunxial fashion - the large intervals between the units allowing for the remarkable ability of the Romans to change lines mid-battle, creating, in essence, a *de facto* reserve - required that we add stacking rules for the Romans, especially if we wanted to also maintain frontage. Our initial attempts at this were not happy ones; one of our key testers, the inimitable Kirk, the Slasher, Schlesinger - presently Game Editor over at Decision - had to be physically restrained from heading east, pipe-bomb in tow. Much experimentation, explanation, dissembling and electronic hate-mail passed before we came up with a stream-lined Stacking Rule that was driven by a handy-dandy Stacking Chart. The result was that we (hopefully)

achieved the best of both worlds: we instilled accuracy while maintaining playability. The addition of such rules as "Roman Manipular Extension" (an idea that came to us while watching the final battle scene from *Spartacus*) also helped greatly. Both visually, and tactically, the Roman legions in full array are truly fun to play.

With the mechanics in place to pit the smaller - but infinitely more flexible - maniples of the legion against the powerful, dense, but brittle Macedonian-style phalanxes, the next step was to make sure the Command styles of the era were correctly simulated. Alexander the Great was interesting because he was pretty much the last of the heroic-style, personally up-front leaders. (Actually, Pyrrhus was in the same mold, but by Beneventum, having come close to death far too many times previously, he had reverted to the more "laid-back", rear echelon method. Even so, his high Personal Combat and Charisma ratings in **SPQR** reflect his predilections - and great abilities.) By the time Rome had emerged as a military power, generals had realized that they could control and command with far greater effectiveness if they could keep a constant, and hopefully ubiquitous, eye on developments. The immediate result of THAT, was that leaders were now capable of directing more than a handful of units into action.

This led to the incorporation of "Line Commands", a mechanic which actually debuted in **Juggernaut**. LC's enable commanders to move entire - and similar - sections of their armies with one "order". Exactly what a "line" can be is determined for each, separate battle by the Line Eligibility Chart. Moreover, the ability of subordinates to issue LC's is often highly dependent on the capabilities of the Overall Commander. (Hannibal's marvelous command staff presents an effective exception to this premise.) Line Commands, combined with the special rules for Roman flexibility, also allowed us to relect the remarkable mediocrity virtually all Roman commanders (before Scipio) exhibited - even while overrunning the Mediterranean.

Next in place was an expanded version of the somewhat simplistic Elephant rules that **GBA** used. With every battle in **SPQR** - except for Cannae - using elephants, and this being the heyday of the war elephant, this was an absolute necessary. With H.H. Scullard's excellent book on elephants in classical warfare providing much of the hard information, we redefined rampage, differentiated between Indians and Africans, clarified the "screen" rules from **Juggernaut**, expanded the capability of infantry to allow the elephants to "Pass Thru", plus a host of other minute details that makes playing with these great animals the highlight of many a battle.

The other major addition resulted from the descriptions of action in almost every battle we read about - and especially at Cannae and Zama. In both of these

battles, the event of highest tactical importance was the fact that victorious cavalry was *hors de combat* for long stretches of time because they pursued the fleeing enemy off the field. It was obvious that a workable Cavalry Pursuit rule was needed if these battles were to be simulated with any level of accuracy. Our first stabs at this included individually-rated units and a host of mathematical calculations and endless die-rolling that looked more like a Las Vegas casino than ancient combat. Mark suggested tying pursuit to leader charisma and unit type, which greatly simplified the rule. However, it wasn't until we used the editorial machete to eliminate the silly sight of a Loser Unit being followed off the map by a Victorious Unit, like the two ends of a Halloween Horse, that the rule became not only eminently workable and fairly short, but also provided some exceptional "historicity" as well as major tactical problems for both commanders.

The final, major addition was "Casualties". The more prevalent use of the sword, plus a change in the way battles were fought, produced more on-field casualties, as opposed to the Macedonian-Hoplite era, where most deaths occurred when fleeing units were cut down. Actually, in **SPQR**, this was not as pronounced as it would be when firearms came into effect, but we wanted to see if we could put a Casualty system in place that would complement - but not replace - the very effective Cohesion system. The result was somewhat mixed: the rule "worked", but players found it somewhat cumbersome in that it meant an extra marker to add to the stack. Given that casualties rarely played more than a minor role in determining the winner - TQ and Cohesion still carried most of that burden - the testers simply ignored it. The Casualty rule, therefore, has been labelled "Optional". It's accurate, it "works" - but it's not needed.

Of course, there was also a host of minor changes, additions, adjustments and clarifications to **GBA**. Upon additional research - and thought - we further restricted the maneuverability of the phalanxes by adding Cohesion penalties for Front-to-Flank and Wheeling maneuvers. The Elite Commander Initiative rule was somewhat expanded, and clarifications were effected for Pre-Shock TQ checks, Reaction Fire (more of a major overhaul here), Orderly Withdrawal, as well as the entire Shock Procedure.

There are also lots of interesting, special rules, such as the to-scale Roman Camp at Beneventum, complete with *scorpiones*; the ability of the Roman velites to move in and out of enemy ZOC's; the attack effectiveness of the sword-swinging Celts; Philip V's double-depth phalanx formations, complete with the huge, 21-foot sarissas; Roman efforts to fight Pyrrhus' elephants with Flaming Pigs!!, etc. We also decided to give the players four levels of legionary ability: Elite, Veteran, Standard and Recruit. With the counter-mix providing players with eight, complete double legions (about 250+ counters, not including tribunes,

praefects sociorum and equituum, and a couple of proconsuls), that should give everyone the opportunity to create almost any Roman Republican battle they can get their hands on.

And, along with greatly expanded historical and design notes, as a final "bouquet" for the gamers, we have included a hypothetical - but historically based - scenario in which Alexander the Great faces a Roman army. That, alone, might be worth the price of admission!

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