Comparing the Greek Phalanx with the Roman Legion

Garrett Kochom in Collaboration with Dr. Matthew Waters
Department of History • University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Greek Phalanx (c. 220-168 BCE)

- The common formation used by ancient Greek and Eastern armies throughout the Classical and Hellenistic periods.
- Heavy infantry formed into a dense mass, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, chest to back. Usually between sixteen and thirty-two men deep and several hundred meters long.
- Rows one through five holding pikes (called sarissas) straight out in-front of them. These pikes were generally about fifteen to twenty feet long.
- Rows six through nine holding their pikes at a 45 degree angle to help deflect missiles, as well as be prepared to lower them to fill a position in front when a soldier is killed.
- Last rows held pikes straight up to deflect missiles. These men added density and weight to formation for added resilience and staying power in battle.

Advantages

- The density and number made the formation very heavy, which gave them great staying power in the shoving matches of ancient battles.
- Wall of Pikes
  - Allowed the phalanx to keep their enemies at a distance
  - Protect against missile weapons
  - Many pikes could be showing in a small area. (five pikes to every soldier showing at the front)
- Phalangetes generally wore relatively heavy armor

Disadvantages

- Had difficulty advancing over rough terrain.
- Men packed so closely together over such great distances, obstacles tended to disrupt the entire line
- Very vulnerable to flank and rear
- Cumbersome pikes could not be turned quickly to respond to these threats
- Very little short range weaponry
- Unable to relieve tired soldier
- Packed too closely together to swap fatigued soldiers with fresh ones
- Must operate as one giant unit

Roman Maniple (c. 220-168 BCE)

- "Handfuls" – Approximately 120 men per maniple, and thirty-five maniples per Roman legion
- Triplex Acies – The “Triple Line”
  - Hastati, Principes, Triarii
- Armed with short swords, large oval shields, and chain armor.
- Commanded by centurion.
- Maniples of each line deployed with gaps between the units

Advantages

- Flexible
  - Each maniple could operate independently of the rest of the army.
  - Could turn unit in any direction relatively quickly
  - Gaps between maniples allowed for maneuver while advancing without disrupting adjacent units
- Relief system
  - Front line could be substituted for second line to give soldiers rest while maintaining the front.
  - Large shield and thrusting sword
  - Gave soldiers defense advantage at short range
- Multiple lines
  - Allowed for complex formations
  - Lines could serve as reserve for line in front if the enemy managed a breakthrough
- Pila
  - Missile weapon for distance attacks

Disadvantages

- Low density lines
  - Usually only 4-6 men deep. Not as much shoving power as the phalanx
- Short distance weapons
  - Short swords meant they had to get very close to enemy to attack.
  - Only one sword per soldier at the front.

Ancient Examples

- Battle of Cannae (216 BCE)
- Roman Defeat
- Battle of Zama (201 BCE)
- Roman Victory
- Battle of Pydna (168 BCE)
- Roman Victory

Select Bibliography


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