

## Phalanx Versus Legion

[Polybius, "The Macedonian Phalanx," in *The Classics--Greek and Latin: The Greek Classics, vol. 5, History*, Marion Mills Miller, ed. (New York: Vincent Parke and Co., 1909), pp. 444-448]

Having promised, in the fourth book, to compare, upon a proper occasion, the arms of the Romans, and Macedonians, and the different dispositions of their respective armies, as also to consider the advantages, and disadvantages of both; I shall take the opportunity of their being engaged together, to endeavour- to perform my promise. For since the Macedonian disposition, recommending itself by success, formerly prevailed over that of the Asiatics and Greeks; and, on the other Side, the Roman disposition has been victorious over that of the Africans, and of all the inhabitants of the western Part of Europe; and since, in our time, there has been not only one but many trials of the dispositions and soldiers of both nations. It will be a useful and a creditable undertaking to enquire into the difference of their discipline, and consider the cause of the victories of the Romans, and of their excelling all other nations in military achievements. To the end we may not, by attributing their success to fortune, like weak men, compliment the victorious without foundation; but, by being acquainted with the true reasons of it, celebrate and admire the conquerors with justice.

As to what relates to the battles, in which the Romans were engaged with Hannibal, and the defeats they received from him, it is unnecessary to enlarge upon them, since they were not owing either to their arms, or their disposition, but to a superiority of genius, and conduct in Hannibal. This we have made appear in the relation of those battles: And this is further confirmed by the event of the war, (for, as soon as the Romans were commanded by a general equal to Hannibal, they presently became victorious) and also by the conduct of Hannibal himself, who, disliking the arms his men had until then, made use of, upon the first victory he gained over the Romans, immediately armed his forces with the arms of the latter, and continued to use them ever after. It is also certain that Pyrrhus not only made use of Italian arms, but also of Italian forces, in his engagements with the Romans, placing a body of Italians, and of his own men, drawn up in a Phalanx, alternately: however, not even, by this means, was he able to beat the Romans, but the event of all their battles proved doubtful. It was necessary to premise these things, to the end that nothing may seem to contradict our assertions.

I now return to the proposed comparison. Many arguments may convince us that nothing can resist the Phalanx in front, or withstand its onset, when possessed of all the advantages, that are peculiar to it. For each man, with his arms, when drawn up in order of battle, takes up three feet in depth; and their pikes, though originally sixteen cubits in length, are however in reality fourteen. Of these, four are taken up by the distance between his hands, and so much of the hinder part of the pike, as is necessary to balance the fore part, when presented to the enemy. This being so, it is plain that the pike, when grasped with both hands, and presented, must project ten cubits before each man. Hence it happens, that the pikes of the fifth rank will project two cubits, and those of the second, third, and fourth, will project more than two, before the file-leaders, when the intervals, between the ranks, and files of the Phalanx, are properly observed, as Homer has shewn in these Verses (Alexander Pope's verse translation):

An Iron Scene gleams dreadfiil o'er the Fields,  
Armour in Armour lock'd, and Shields in Shields,  
Spears leak on Spears, on Targets Targets throng,  
Helms stuck to Helms, and Man drove Man along.

This being truly and beautifully expressed, it follows, that five pikes, differing two cubits from one another in length, must project before each of the file-leaders: So that it is an easy matter to represent to one's self, the appearance, and strength of the whole Phalanx, when being, as usual, drawn up sixteen deep, and presenting its pikes, it makes an attack. Of these sixteen ranks, those, that exceed the fifth, cannot contribute, with their pikes, to annoy the enemy; for which reason they do not present them, but each rank inclines them over the shoulders of that before it, in order to secure them from above, the pikes, by their closeness, defending them from the missile weapons, which might otherwise, by flying over the foremost ranks, fall upon those, who stand behind them.

Besides, each of these ranks, pressing in file, with the whole weight of their body, the rank which immediately precedes, they not only strengthen the attack, but make it impossible for the foremost ranks to retreat.

This being the disposition of the Phalanx in the whole, and in part, we are now to give all account of the properties, and difference of the Roman arms, and disposition, by comparing them together.

The Romans likewise, with their arms, take up three feet in depth. But, as they cover their bodies with their shields, changing their guard at every stroke, and make use of their swords both to cut, and thrust, it happens that their line of battle is in a perpetual fluctuation. This makes it necessary for each man to have room, and an interval of, at least, three feet, both in rank and in file, if it is expected he should do his duty. From whence it follows, that one Roman will stand opposite to two file-leaders of the Phalanx, and consequently be exposed to, and engaged with ten spears, which it is not possible for one man, when once the armies close, to cut to pieces, before he is annoyed by them, or easy to break through, since the hindmost ranks call contribute nothing either to the force of the file-leaders, or to

the efficacy of their swords. From what has been said it may be easily concluded that, as I before observed, nothing can withstand the onset of the Phalanx in front, while it preserves all the advantages that are peculiar to it.

What therefore is the cause that gives the victory to the Romans, and defeats those, who make use of the Phalanx? It is this: military operations are uncertain both in time and place; whereas the Phalanx has but one time, one place, and one disposition, in which it can perform the service that is expected from it. If therefore there was a necessity for the enemy to engage the Phalanx at its own time, and place, in every decisive action, it is reasonable to conclude from what has been said, that the latter would always prove victorious. But, if this is possible, and easy to be avoided, why should that disposition be, any longer, looked upon as formidable? And, indeed, it is allowed that the Phalanx stands in need of an even and open ground, where there is no Impediment, such as ditches, chasms, valleys, eminences, and rivers. All these are capable of confounding, and breaking its ranks. It must also be allowed that it is almost impossible, at least, very rare, to find places of twenty or more stadia, in which there is nothing of this nature, however, admit there are such Places. If the enemy does not think fit to engage the Phalanx there, but, instead of that, marches round, and lays waste the towns and country of their friends, what will be the service of such a disposition? Since, while the Phalanx remains in the places, that are proper for it, so far is it from being able to relieve its friends, that it is incapable even of preserving itself. For the enemy will easily cut off their provisions, the moment they have, without opposition, made themselves absolute masters of the country. And, if the Phalanx quits the places that are proper for it, to engage in any enterprize, it will become an easy conquest. But, if the enemy, resolving to engage the Phalanx in an even place, should, instead of exposing his whole army at once to the onset of the Phalanx, retreat a little the instant it charges, the event may be easily foreseen from what the Romans now practice.

For I desire no judgment be formed of my assertions from what I say, but from what has already happened. Since the Romans do not engage the Phalanx with all their Legions drawn up in a line parallel to the former; but some divisions of them lie behind in reserve, while others are engaged. So that, whether the Phalanx forces those who are opposite to it to give way, or is itself forced by them to give way, the property of it is destroyed. For, in order to pursue those who fly, or to fly from those who pursue, some Parts of the line must leave the rest; which no sooner happens, than an opening is given for the reserve to take the ground they left, and, instead of attacking those who remain in Front, to break in upon their flanks, or their rear. Since, therefore, it is an easy matter to avoid the opportunities, and advantages of the Phalanx, but impossible for the latter to avoid those the Romans have over it, how is it possible there should not, in reality, be a great difference between them? Besides, it is sometimes necessary for the Phalanx to march through, and encamp in all sorts of places; at others, to prevent the enemy, by seizing some advantageous post; some times, to besiege, at others, to be besieged, and to meet with unexpected occurrences; for all these things are incident to war, and either decide the victory, or greatly contribute to it. And, in all these, the disposition of the Macedonians is of little, or no use; it being impossible for the men, either in companies, or singly, to perform any service. Whereas that of the Romans is properly adapted to all; for every Roman, when once armed for action, is equally fit for all places, for all times, and all occurrences. He is also ready and equally disposed either for a general, or a particular action, to charge with his company, or engage in a singlecombat. As, therefore, **the disposition of the Romans is vastly superior to that of the Macedonians in the use of all its parts,** so the enterprizes of the former are vastly more successful than those of the latter.