



Legion versus Phalanx

Myke Cole

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From the time of ancient Sumeria, the heavy infantry Phalanx dominated the battlefield. Armed with spears or pikes, standing shoulder-to-shoulder and with overlapping shields, they presented an impenetrable wall of metal to the enemy until the Roman legion eclipsed the phalanx as the masters of infantry battle.

Covering the period in which the legion and phalanx clashed (280-168 BC), this book looks at each formation in detail - delving into their tactics, arms and equipment, organization and deployment. It then examines six documented battles in which the legion fought the phalanx: Heraclea (280 BC), Asculum (279 BC), Beneventum (275 BC), Cynoscephalae (197 BC), Magnesia (190 BC), and Pydna (168 BC).

Legion versus Phalanx Details

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Author : Myke Cole

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From Reader Review Legion versus Phalanx for online ebook

Kendra says

Fascinating read, enjoyable to get into and packed with information without being tedious. Enjoyed the breakdown and the maps/pictures/drawings that were included in the book.

Larry says

Cole knows his stuff. His book is well written, well argued, and well researched.

Anna Stephens says

Amazing, detailed, thoroughly researched and genuinely exciting, particularly the battle of Pydna. Also - Atlas elephants!

A history book written with the vigour and narrative detail of fiction, without sacrificing historical accuracy and while affirming that primary sources exaggerate and don't always agree. Brilliant.

Tiffany says

Worth the read, easily understandable, and provides enough information to aid in the exploration of the two battle styles.

Casey says

A good book, providing a comparison history of the Hellenistic Phalanx and the Roman (Middle Republican era) Legion. Written by an author more known for his fiction works, Myke Cole, this book confusingly strove for two separate ends: a technical comparison of the two formations and a dramatic narrative retelling of the great battles fought between the two types of armies. Though making a great case in the beginning that fighting styles are very much the product of culture, other than a few quick tidbits on Hellenistic vs Roman leadership models, most of the ensuing discussion tended towards very technical matters (equipment, formations, and C2 methods). The first chapter did provide detailed descriptions of each type of army, but very rarely in the ensuing battle descriptions is there that same level of detailed comparison. Instead there are good summations of the ancient source's descriptions of several key battles in the ~150 years of Greek vs Roman Warfare. The commentary on the accuracy and motivation of the ancient sources is great, but was offsetting from the stated purpose of the book. Also notably absent are mentions of Hannibal and his success against the same Legions that the Phalangites rarely bested. I appreciate that he didn't technically use the Hellenistic Phalanx, but I would think the reasons for Hannibal's success in the same time and space that the Phalanx failed should elicit some treatment given the book's stated topic. Still, for all the lack of true comparison discussions in the book, the author did a splendid job with his battle

narratives. Providing perspectives from participants as varied as Generals and common soldier, these narratives are some of the best I've read of an ancient battle and makes for a pleasant read. Highly recommended for those wanting to know more about warfare in the Hellenistic and Roman Republic era.

Todd says

Myke Cole has made a name for himself in SFF, namely with the Reawakening Trilogy, the Shadow Ops trilogy, and his newer Sacred Throne trilogy. I knew I would buy this book, because I was a fan of his writing before, but this work surpassed my every expectation.

Ostensibly it's an overview that seeks to answer the question WHY did the Legion eventually win out over the Phalanx? We knew this happened from history, but why wasn't an easily answered question, or at least one that was answered casually versus academically. Myke does a fantastic job of bringing a easy to read overview of the times and circumstances that saw the venerable phalanx give way to the machine that is the Roman Legion.

He wades into the events and the characters of the age, with a storytellers aplomb and the serious eye of a scholar. Specifically he looks at six major battles where legion clashed with phalanx, and we get all of the politics, people, circumstance, weather, geography, and emotion of each engagement. You can see a half mile long line of pikes forming up to march across rough terrain. You can feel the tension and panic as sword met shield and the men of the line panic and falter.

Many of our sources from that era only come from a few historians (Polybius, Livy, etc), and they weren't the most reliable chroniclers of history, seeking to tell a story as well. Myke Cole rigorously looks at the material and where gaps occur, readily acknowledges them and then uses the novelist in him to make the gap feel exciting and alive.

I came out of this book not only salivating over the bibliography, but hoping that Myke writes another and another and another. It's highly enjoyable and readily recommended.

Mick says

A cracker of a fast paced non-fiction read. Worth your time.

Anna says

an epic fucking page turner. SO GOOD. for anyone interested in (a) military history, (b) greece, (c) rome, or (d) playing risk. or just (e) a good book about history stuff. written in a way that is very easy to read, extremely engaging.

recommend the paper copy over the kindle edition as there are lots of maps and an insert of color photographs, not really made for reading on your phone. (although tbh reading the paper edition was hard on my eyes - not the best font choices.)

anyway, 15/10, book crush.

Landofhistory says

Although Osprey is more famous for its booklet size illustrated publications it produces some excellent hardcovers as well. This one is packed with superb artwork and maps to go along with each battle, an index and a bibliography. It's an easy read in terms of time, I got through it in about a week and a half. The binding is quite flexible so don't wedge it in too many places or leave it open, but the paper quality is good. The attractive dust jacket doesn't have any of that awful faux gilt either, so you can read it without having to take it off.

This book has its origins in a discussion almost as old as the subject. How did the legion defeat the phalanx? Or perhaps the question is why? To look at the stats the phalanx should have won every time, and a lot of people are fascinated with how a head on clash must have gone. However, as Cole says early on, the question has already been answered, the legion won and it won convincingly. Despite this, the debate runs onwards, which makes the fact that there has never been a standalone study of the epic clash for ancient infantry supremacy all the more extraordinary.

Coles's book is the most accessible introduction to ancient warfare that I've read. I believe he is not overstating it when he claims that a complete newcomer to the subject will be able to understand everything that is going on. The book starts strong, and there's allot to like about it. I mean anyone who sticks to BC and AD is already on the right track for me. Those needing an easy "in" for ancient history would be advised to get *Legion Versus Phalanx*.

Part of the reason is because the author is more than happy to admit he doesn't have the answers when the source material runs out. So rather than diving into a deep discussion an honest reality is injected.

The first three chapters are devoted to aspects of ancient warfare and the opposing military systems, the phalanx and the legion. Then you get non stop battles and characters all the way to the finish. These early chapters are the foundation of the book, transmitting the basic picture in the author's mind effectively onto the page, building up an image of the opposing forces for us to reference when the fighting starts.

Cole's goal is to reach the uninitiated and asks for patience from the more experienced and scholarly. There is indeed a liberal use of parallels and imagery, yet they aren't as ghastly as the run of the mill "equivalent to a modern tank" drivel you see parroted around all the flipping time.

The phalanx section will be an eye opener for some, and there's a lot of soldierly sense included in it, military logic, both ancient and modern is deployed to good effect. Though in the early stages I was concerned that the author would do what some popular writers did in the past, and totally substitute ancient rank names and usage for approximate modern ranks and designations. Dando Collins' vivid "biographies" of the legions for instance are distracting due to his insistence on using terms like battalion, division, brigade, colonel and General etc. However, Cole is "nerdy" enough to know how annoying that is and only refers a few times to brigades, which is a relief.

In some ways Cole has his work cut out for him. Reconstructing ancient combat is challenging. For while it seems perfectly obvious how a phalanx would engage a Legion, its opposite isn't as clear. Phalanxes after all derived from a time when warfare was very simple. Citizen hoplites could be relied upon for their warlike, offensive spirit, but not allot of tactical flexibility. Thus much as in the days of the French Republic, the most

efficient way of utilising well armed militias, IE getting as many men as possible into action, was to make them stand shoulder to shoulder in a deep formation and make them walk towards the enemy in a straight line. It's no wonder therefore that in the old classical days opposing phalanx armies would go to a specific, pre agreed spot to fight.

As this book shows; the phalanx never evolved into a tacitlaly flexible unit. Even under the Hellenistic kings it was best used as Alexander had used it, as the anvil. Point it at the enemy and let the mobile flanks do the rest. Which is why I was puzzled when Cole describes the phalanx as a defensive formation, something I was unable to reconcile with its most common employment, especially in Hellenistic times, and indeed during the Persian wars and intervening, to attack and pin an enemy, from where it usually forced said enemy back, or held it at bay. Indeed perhaps it might be argued that the ability of the legion's opposing attack to halt the phalanx was perhaps a vital key to defeating the Hellenistic system. That being said this was my only real qualm, and an anvil is there to absorb punishment, so in a way, Cole still has a point.

Because of this simplistic use of an organisationally complex body, it is not at all apparent how a legion would engage a phalanx and force it back without outflanking it. Yet warfare is much more complicated than it seems in movies and novels. For instance the Persians were consistently able to engage and delay the movement of phalanxes, and indeed at certain battles even put them under extreme pressure. So if the Persians could do that, imagine what a republican legion could do.

What becomes clear as we move through the wars of the Republic, is that this is exactly the point. The Romans found out that they could under certain circumstances get into a phalanx, but it was much simpler to allow it to do the work for them. It drives forwards or stands still, the hard truth is that the phalanx was developed for well armed militias with little tactical ability and never progressed except in weaponry. therefore why not go around the side? But at first they were devilishly tricky to fight, and it seems that it was through fanatical courage alone that the Romans managed to hold against Phyrus of Epirus.

With Pyrrhus we can quickly see, just like with Alexander, the phalanx doesn't win the battle, the cavalry does, but then neither does the cavalry win battles without the stolidity of the phalanx, and often (even for the Romans) the winning cards, the elephants.

Cole's book does what a book on ancient warfare should do, it entertains and it will get you thinking. For instance, this thought occurred to me as I neared the end. The uneven nature of a legionary battle line, drawn up in its famous checkerboard, would theoretically present a difficult environment for a single entity like a phalanx, composed as it was of multiple files (incapable of independent movement) in a continuous line, to oppose. Those gaping gaps and the difficulty of command and control, communications etc, would surely have caused utter confusion in an advancing pike wall, as portions would come into combat while others were still moving. Causing at the very least a loss of cohesion along the entire battle-line and forcing the entire thing to eventually halt and remain static, unable to exert pressure and put onto the defensive. Then again the Roman's flexible system of supporting lines would allow an efficient rotation of troops without fear of pursuit due to the inability of the components of a Hellenistic phalanx to move independently. Not to mention what the effect of three-quarters of a legion's worth of javelins would do, thrown over the lowered pikes but below the raised ones, into the faces and chest's of a front line.

Myke Cole has written an accessible, entertaining and detailed narrative of the development of infantry warfare in the ancient world. If as is suggested st the end, a military system is a representation of the society it comes from, then there is a lesson there. Today western armies work on the model of the intelligence and activity of the individual soldier, who acts nonetheless as part of a team of active individuals.

Oppose this to the concept of the ancient armies we read about in legion and phalanx, we see the phalanx represents the spirit of the collective, thousands working as one, all dependant on everyone doing the same thing at the same time. Versus the Roman model, still dependant on many minds as one, but organised to afford the possibility of initiative. For there is a difference in the end between training men the same way, and making them think (or not think) the same way. With the Legion we see that the state was one of disciplined individuals, with more emphasis on the intelligence and activity of the soldier. And when we see that we do not see Athens, Sparta or Macedon, can we can yet again see the legacy of Rome today.

Deane Barker says

I struggled with this book. The author admits that it's about almost everything except a direct comparison of the legion and the phalanx. After a short introduction to ancient military tactics, it pretty quickly launches into a long history of ancient warfare and battles.

About halfway through this, disaster struck. My Kindle somehow lost its place and launched me 20-30% further in the book than I was. To my horror, I realized that I couldn't find my way back -- all the history I was reading had kind of run together, and I had no idea where I was in the book.

So, I consulted the table of contents, and decided to skip forward to the last 20%, which comes after all the history and brought everything together to say -- I gather -- that the legion won.

In the end, I estimate that I read 65% of the book.

There's no question that the author knows what he's talking about, but this is very much a book for someone obsessed with ancient warfare and military tactics (and I clearly should have surmised that from the title).

So, good book, just wrong audience. I'm not providing a star rating for that reason -- I didn't click with this book, but it wasn't the book's fault.

Joe Beach says

Myke is a History Nerd and this is a good thing. Note: his review is for the audio version.

While this book is an analysis of ancient battle formations, it is written as an epic story. Myke captures the feel of how life might have been for the soldiers that made up the legion and phalanx. He provides insight into recruiting, training and how the men are equipped. It can be a really deep dive into details but that only helps to bring these battles to life.

Alexander Cendese performs the audio book and through his narration, the ancient world really comes to life. This was a huge help for me since I would have struggled with all the Greek and Latin.

Overall, if you like or are interested in this period of history, this book is worth your time.

Becky says

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

Okay, I will flesh this out more later, BUT you guys know I love ancient history and narrative-driven histories are my favorite. This is the absolute perfect marriage of both of those. It is accurate but just as importantly it is readable, enjoyable, and will leave you wanting more. It relies on the real drama of the moment to tell you a story. If you want a history book you just can't put down, this is the one.

Chris Bauer says

I've been a fan of Myke Cole's for quite some time and have very much enjoyed his prior fictional works in the SFF realm. I was also aware of his passion for ancient warfare and history. So when I learned of his first non-fiction publication, "Legion versus Phalanx" it was a no brainer to pick it up and give it a read.

I was impressed for several reasons.

- The writing is brisk, clear and concise. A joy to read.
- Cole is able to add narrative tools and elements from fiction to create tension and reader interest...even though the results of these battles were determined thousands of years ago.
- The precision and dedication which he writes is just impressive. This is the work of a writer doing something they dearly LOVE and it shows in the pages.
- Far from dry and dusty, the ancient world sprang to life for me; descriptions of politics, geography and other matters are addressed in consistent detail.

There were a couple of elements I particularly enjoyed;

- Cole is exceedingly frank in his role of impassioned amateur. He does not have a PhD in the topic, just a lifelong fascination. Makes the work even more credible.
- His willingness to simply state "we don't / can't know"; so many lesser authors, especially those with multiple degrees from the vaunted halls of academia might be reluctant to even entertain the thought of uttering these words. Made it very fresh and real for me.

If you have an interest in ancient warfare, specifically the legion and phalanx constructs you MUST read this book.

Jeff Harris says

A history book for fans and non-fans of history. Myke Cole does a great job making a non-fiction historical book accessible and entertaining. The deep dive into the battles was something new for me as most non-fiction focuses more on the "what" than picking apart the "why".

Mia says

Accessible, informative, engaging. The only drawback is my choice of the audiobook format. This is a book where the audiobook format doesn't work so well for me because there are names of historical figures, places, weapons, foreign language phrases the spelling of which I'd like to actually learn or confirm. There is a downloadable reference but constantly cross-referencing while listening renders intuile the unique convenience of an audiobook. I will do a reread of this in another format. Oh, another thing? I think this could have been longer, more in-depth. This is not a criticism. This book reminded me of how I devoured history books when I was younger and I just didn't want it to end.
