



Legion versus Phalanx: The Epic Struggle for Infantry Supremacy in the Ancient World by Myke Cole.

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I will evaluate *Legion versus Phalanx* first as a popularizing work for general audiences and, secondly, as a would-be scholarly contribution to the study of its subject. The book is an acceptable mass-appeal military history. Author Myke Cole is not an academic; he has served as a Coast Guard officer and intelligence contractor and has written several fantasy novels. His writing style is informal and features references to depictions of iron-age warfare in popular culture, such as the hugely popular film *300*¹ and HBO fantasy series *Game of Thrones* (2011-19). The reader gets a brisk overview of Roman and Hellenistic history (and the relevant ancient authors) as well as a discussion of Roman and Macedonian military organization. Cole's enthusiasm for his subject is manifest throughout; he confesses to "geeking out" on legions and phalanxes, and encourages readers to do the same.

No one will mistake the book for a work of deep scholarship. The bibliography contains a mix of popular and (a few) scholarly entries,² rather than the seminal work of German scholars like Hans Delbrück, Eduard Meyer, and Wilhelm Soltau, or more recent reassessments by Everett Wheeler, Paul Erdkamp, and Fernando Quesada Sanz, among others. While the lack of footnotes or references of any kind will not disturb casual readers, it unmoors the project from the underlying evidence, leaving one to wonder exactly where Cole gets his battlefield reconstructions or where Livy ends and a random stratagem from Frontinus begins.

The author's source criticism is erratic at best. He sometimes even admits he has adopted a particular version of events simply because it provides a more satisfying story, a dangerous practice given the extent to which ancient authors themselves preferred morally edifying tales. Although his project arguably originates in the "legion and phalanx" excursus in Polybius, Cole is shockingly averse to using Polybius, believing him to be a shill for the Scipionic and Aemilian families. Certainly, Polybius had close ties with both families, most notably in the person of his friend and patron (P. Cornelius) Scipio Aemilianus. But to discard his testimony means ignoring the only extant source who actually saw the Middle Republican army in action or had direct access to a number of Roman generals as eyewitness oral informants. Finally, such a bias entails undervaluing the accounts of Livy and Plutarch concerning the eastern Mediterranean wars because they draw so heavily on Polybius.

Cole's interpretation of the events of battles is sometimes downright puzzling. In discussing the battle of Cynoscephalae (197 BC), he strenuously defends what is widely considered Livy's most egregious mistranslation of a source. Polybius states that, once Philip V decided to attack,

1. Dir. Zach Snyder (2007); see review at *MiWSR* 2007.05.04.

2. Including a plethora of titles from the book's publisher, Osprey, the gold-standard imprint for popular, stunningly illustrated military histories—see ospreypublishing.com.

“orders were sent out to the men of the phalanx to *lower their pikes* and charge.”³ Livy, however, claims “ordered the peltasts and the Macedonian phalanx to *put aside their pikes*, the length of which was a hindrance, and to engage with swords” (my emphasis).⁴ Livy appears to have misconstrued the verb καταβάλλειν (to lower vs. to drop), forcing him to explain why the phalangites would discard their main offensive weapons. One scholar has recently reassigned the origin of the error from Livy himself to the misguided emendation of a befuddled medieval scribe.⁵ Cole, however, insists that Livy was correct, arguing that in the downhill charge some pikes became unwieldy and were therefore discarded. This even though he is well aware that phalangites were profoundly vulnerable without their pikes and that the sources treat the downhill charge at Cynoscephalae as initially unstoppable.

Cole concludes with his own version of Polybius 18.30–31, on the relative merits of the legion and phalanx. He observes, uncontroversially, that a phalangite with a *sarisa* was vulnerable outside of his close-order formation. He also notes that Romans had an advantage over the Macedonians in the propensity of their generals to command from the rear, rather than indulging in Alexander-style heroics. But the evidence is not so clear-cut. Antiochus the Great lost the battle of Magnesia (189 BC) in part because he was so distracted by leading his own cavalry charge that he failed to notice the collapse of his left wing. Pyrrhus indulged in risky personal heroics at Heraclea (280 BC) against an Italian cavalryman, even if he managed to pull off a victory. But both Philip V at Cynoscephalae and Perseus at Pydna (168 BC) commanded from their infantry line and made crucial decisions about the timing and nature of their main effort, even if those decisions led to failure.

Cole is also correct about the role of distributed command-and-control in Roman legions, where two echelons of subordinate officers—military tribunes and centurions—could take the initiative in making snap decisions; his most compelling example is the unnamed military tribune at Cynoscephalae who, on his own initiative, shifted maniples from the Romans’ victorious right to their flailing left. In short, the empowerment of centurions and tribunes was an important aspect of Roman practice. We are not told, however, why the Macedonian officers who commanded various echelons of the phalanx did not show the same resourcefulness.

In *Legion versus Phalanx*, Myke Cole has produced a lively, readable survey of ancient military history that will entertain and inform general readers. The lack of scholarly apparatus and philological rigor make it less serviceable in an academic setting. The book presents a traditional format, unlike the typical glossy magazine-style of Osprey’s “Men at Arms” series. That said, it contains thirty-one photographs and illustrations (drawn mostly from previous Osprey publications), as well as a helpful chronology and battle maps to orient readers.

3. Polybius 18.24.9: “τοῖς μὲν φαλαγγίταις ἐδόθη παράγγελμα καταβαλοῦσι τὰς σαρίσας ἐπάγειν.”

4. Livy 33.8.12: “caetratos et Macedonum phalangem hastis positos, quarum longitudo impedimento erat, gladiis rem gerere iubet.”

5. C.H.L. Barnes, “Livy 33.8.13 and 35.35.18 Revisited,” *Classical Journal* 100 (2005) 349–63.