The Polybian Roman Army in To the Strongest!

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Introduction

The Polybian Roman list for *To the Strongest!* covers the Roman army from the reforms of the earlier Camillan army in response to Pyrrhus' invasion, until the reforms of Marius in 107 BCE permitted the recruitment of even the poorest Roman citizens.

This army represents excellent value for the wargamer, as it fought and overcame the Carthaginians, Macedonians, Seleucids, Spanish and the slave revolts, amongst many other opponents. The battles it fought include some of the most famous in ancient history, including Cannae, Zama, Cynoscephalae, Pydna and Magnesia.

The components of the Polybian Roman army

By the time of Polybius, who wrote in the later 3rd Century BCE, the Roman army was composed of *legiones* (legions) and *alae*, the latter being a force of allies broadly equivalent in size to a *legio*.

A Roman *consul* would command a consular army which would usually consist of two *legiones* and two *alae*. *Praetors* usually commanded a smaller force consisting of a single *legio* and *ala*.

An Aventine Roman Consul, superbly painted by Redzed

Each *legio/ ala* was composed of manipuli (literally "a handful") consisting of two centuries each of 60-80 men, arranged in a loose chequerboard formation which could fight effectively even in broken ground and which had more resilience than the traditional hoplite phalanx.

Two units of Aventine *velites* painted by Redzed

Aventine Miniatures allied *hastati* painted by the author

There were five different types of soldiery in a *legio*. The first class, the *velites*, consisted of younger and poorer men equipped with a round *parma* shield, a simple helmet, a handful of *hastae velitares* javelins and a *gladius* short sword. The light infantry role of the *velites* was to screen the *legio* and harass the enemy with their missile weapons and, when pressed, to fall back through gaps in the line of *hastati* to their rear, rally, and fight again. They wore individually distinctive gear such as wolf pelts or other animal skins so that their deeds of valour could be recognised and rewarded by their officers.

The second class, and the main strength of the *legio*, the *hastati*, also consisted of younger men in their teens and twenties. Their name derived from the Roman *hasta* spear with which they had been equipped in earlier times, however in this period they were equipped with the *pilum* - a heavy throwing spear designed to penetrate shields and wound the bearer, or failing that to lodge in the shield and render it useless. Most *hastati* would wear light armour consisting of a circular or square bronze pectoral. Every *hastati* would wear a small practical Montefortino or similar bronze helmet with three tall

Aventine Miniatures Roman *principes* painted by Redzed

feathers dyed purple or black, as would the *principes* and *triarii* who will be described shortly. Every man would carry the characteristic Roman *scutum* (shield), a long, stout leather-faced wooden shield with a metal boss. In close fighting, the legionary depended upon a stabbing sword, most likely the famous *gladius hispanienis* (Spanish sword).

The third class were the *principes*, men in the prime of life and likely to be similarly, but perhaps more generously equipped than the *hastati*, with some wearing bronze pectorals and others mail cuirasses. They would also carry the *pilum*.

Behind them, in reserve, were the men of the last class of infantry - the *triarii*. A triarius would likely be wealthier than the other infantry and probably to own a mail cuirass, greaves on one or both legs and a retro Etrusco-Corinthian helmet. Instead of a *pilum* he would carry an 8' long *hasta* spear. The role of the *triarii* was to stay in reserve, often kneeling on one knee, behind the *principes*. They would intervene at a critical point in a battle or to cover the retreat if things were going badly, hence the Latin phrase *res ad triarios venit* – "it comes down to the *triarii*".

Whilst the infantry was the most numerous and important element of the Polybian Roman army, no army could survive for long without sufficient cavalry to secure its flanks. *Equites* (knights) were recruited from the wealthiest class of commoners who could afford to maintain the required horses and armour. The majority of the *equites* were supplied by the Latin allies; their contingents could outnumber those of the Romans by three to one, or more.

Extraordinarii (chosen men) were the fittest and bravest men selected from amongst the socii (allied contingents). Mounted *equites extraordinarii* might act as a cavalry bodyguard to the *consul* or *praetor*. *Pedites extraordinarii* (chosen infantry) are in addition to the infantry in the allied *alae*. *Extraordinarii* might lead the column of march and on the battlefield might be deployed as a reserve.

In addition to the Roman and allied Latin forces, other Italian, Greek, Spanish, Ligurian, Numidian or Pergamene allied contingents that might join the army on campaign, depending upon requirement and availability. A Numidian contingent might include the African elephants that caused the Macedonians so much difficulty, as well as the eponymous light cavalry.

Romans took their camps very seriously - each marching camp would be well fortified with a ditch, bank and palisade. Every Roman army included a large number of military slaves, perhaps 1,000 or more for each *legio*. In extremis these servi castrensi (camp servants) would defend the camp with javelins.

Aventine Miniatures Roman *triarii* painted by Redzed

Aventine Miniatures allied *equites* painted by Redzed

Building a Polybian Roman army in To the Strongest!

A *To the Strongest! legio* or *ala* is composed of a detached general, two units each of *velites, hastati, principles* and *triarii*, and either one unit of Roman or two units of Allied cavalry. *Legiones* or *alae* must be purchased as complete entities of 8 or 9 units, respectively.

- ❧ General (foot, detached) = 5
- ❧ *Velites* x 2 = 8
- ❧ *Hastati* x 2 = 10
- ❧ *Principes* x 2 = 10
- ❧ *Triarii* x 1 = 5
- ❧ *Equites* = 9
- ❧ Total = 47

A standard Roman *legio* with a detached general on foot therefore costs 47 points and an allied *ala* 56 points including the cost of the additional cavalry unit. Either *legio* or *ala* will cost one point more if the general is heroic. Additional units of *velites* or *extraordinarii* may be added if desired.

There are options to upgrade the *principes* of a particularly experienced or well-equipped *legio* to veteran. Alternatively, all of the *hastati, principes* and *triarii* of a newly raised or slave *legio* may be downgraded to raw.

Roman deployment in To the Strongest!

Below is a recommended deployment of a *legio* and *ala* in the famous triplex axies (triple battle order) formation, for a player who is using two element units (or three elements for the *equites* and *velites*). Each coloured box represents an element of miniatures. The elements in the four units of *hastati* and *principes* have been staggered for aesthetic purposes, in order to look more like maniples deployed in a chequerboard formation. The two *triarii* units to the rear straddle the four boxes of the rear row.

If deploying a full consular army of four *legiones/alae*, the above would be doubled so that two box-widths of cavalry on each wing (six units) would flank eight box-widths of infantry (twenty-eight units).

The infantry are deployed with a screen of skirmishing *velites* to the fore, screening the *hastati* and principles who will bear the brunt of the fighting. If forced to evade, the *velites* can fall back within the same box, behind the *hastati*. A thin line of *triarii* kneels to the rear, in reserve. The more numerous allied *alae* (cavalry unites) are on one wing, and the Roman *equites* are on the other. The generals can be positioned with their infantry or with the cavalry on the wings.

Polybian Romans, 275 BCE to 107 BCE

| Unit type	Description	Number	Save	Cost
	The classic Roman army of the Punic Wars and the conquest of the East.			
	Attached general on foot	3-5	2+	4
	Upgrade to mounted	Any	-	+1
	Upgrade to detached	Any	-	+1
Generals	Upgrade to heroic	Up to half	3+	+1
	Upgrade to senior	0-1	-	+1
	Upgrade to brilliant	Up to 1	-	+4
Heroes		2-4	-	1
Equites Romani	Cavalry javelin	1-2	7+	9
	Cavalry javelin	1-4	7+	9
Equites Latini	Upgrade to cavalry javelin to cavalry javelin, veteran, as *Equites Extraordinarii*	0-1	6+	11
Pergamene lancers	Cavalry lance	0-2	7+	9
	Upgrade cavalry lance to cavalry lance, veteran	0-1	6+	11
Allied light cavalry	Light cavalry javelin	0-2	7+	5
Velites	Light infantry javelin	4-8	7+	4
	Legionaries, small unit	4-8	6+	5
Hastati	Downgrade *hastati* of an entire *legio* to legionaries, small unit, raw	All or none	7+	4
	Legionaries, small unit	4-8	6+	5
	Downgrade *principes* of an entire *legio* to legionaries, small unit, raw	All or none	7+	4
Principes	Upgrade principles of an entire *legio* to legionaries, small unit, veteran	All or none	5+	6
	Hoplites, veteran, small unit	4-8	5+	5
Triarii	Downgrade *Triarii* of an entire *legio* to hoplites, small unit	All or none	6+	4
Pedites extraordinarii	Legionaries, veteran, small unit	0-1	5+	5
Numidian elephants	Elephants, African	0-1	7+	6
Italian allied infantrymen	Javelinmen, small unit	0-4	7+	3.5
Other allied infantrymen	Javelinmen	0-4	7+	7
Allied LI archers/slingers	Light infantry other, bow or sling	0-2	8+	4
Allied LI javelinmen	Light infantry javelin	0-4	7+	4
Cretans	Light infantry other, bow, veteran	0-2	7+	5
Servi castrensi	Light infantry javelin, raw	0-3	8+	3
Ballistarii	Artillery	0-2	7+	7
Camp	Camp	1-3	-	1
Castrum	Fortifications	0-5	-	1
Allies - Aitolians, Numidians, Pergamenes				

A Roman *legio* deployed to fight Seleucids (the *velites* have fallen back to the rear);
15mm Donnington and Xyston miniatures from the collection of Ian Notter

For a two game of around 130 points a side, a player should field a *legio* and an *ala*. An entire consular army of a pair each of *legiones* and *alae* can be fielded for around 250 points. In such a consular army, the two Roman *legiones* would form the centre, with the allied *alae* drawn up on either side of them. All the allied cavalry would form up on the left wing and the less numerous Roman cavalry would deploy on the right.

Polybian Roman army tactics in To the Strongest!

In *To the Strongest!* it can be daunting to face enemy armies who often have units with two or even three hits, with an army consisting almost entirely of fragile single hit units. However, as Polybius himself wrote "Why is it then that the Romans conquer? And what is it that brings disaster on those who employ the phalanx?"
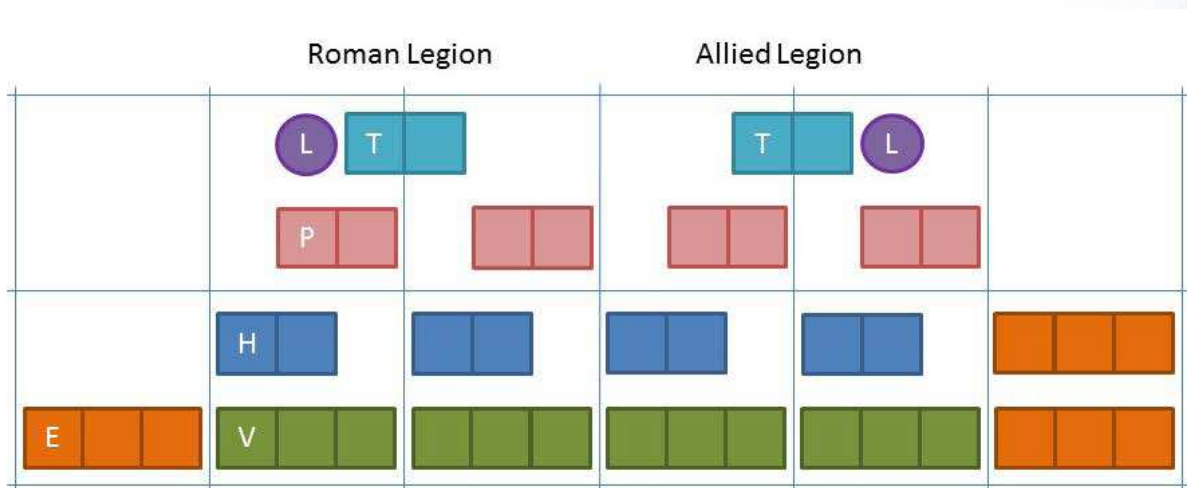
Deployment scheme for a *legio* and an *ala*.
L = *Legate*, T= *Triarii*, P= *Principes*, H= *Hastati*, V= *Velites*, E= *Equites*
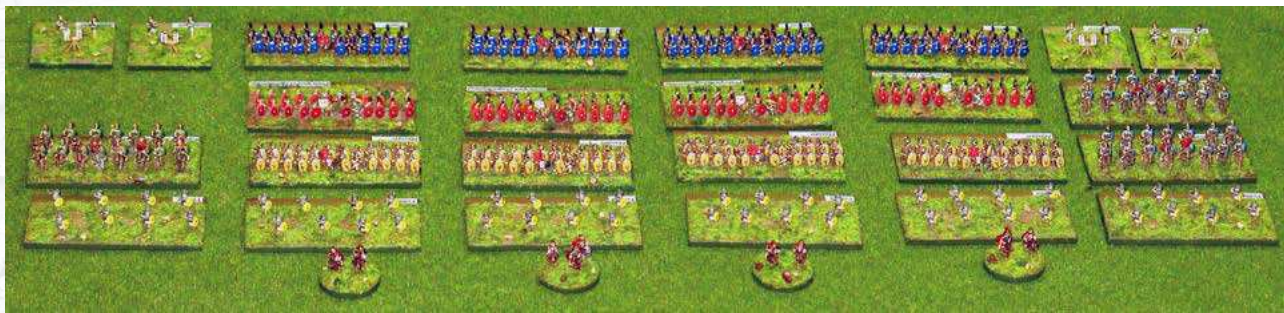
6mm Polybian army for To the Strongest painted by Big Lee

Whilst it is true that the single Roman units perish without a chance of rallying, they do, however, have certain advantages:-

- Firstly, in each *legio* no fewer than six foot units have javelin or pila which can be used to disorder and the enemy forces. Disordered warriors or phalanx are relatively vulnerable to the sharp gladii of the legionaries.
- Secondly, a Roman *legate* (legionary commander) never needs to worry about rallying his single hit units; they are either fresh or lost! If they are lost, he need only surrender a single victory medal.
- Thirdly, the Romans benefit from defence in depth, with four lines of units facing (typically) a single line of deeper foes.
- Fourthly, note the small unit rule on page 13: "a small unit that is directly behind another small unit in the same box that has been charged and just failed a save, and consequently been lost, may strike back in its place." For this reason, a Roman *legate* will usually want to make sure that he always has two units in the same box, typically the *velites/hastati* in the front box, with the *principes* moving up to replace lost units.

Polybius answers his own question by writing that a Roman *consul* or *praetor* should never engage a phalanx on the flat ground that the enemy required for success. The *To the Strongest!* Roman *consul* should choose as much broken ground as he can - this greatly disadvantages phalanx and warrior units, whose movement and manoeuvre is impeded, and provides advantageous ground for the numerous Roman *velites*! Finally, do not expose the *legate* to danger early in the battle, as while he lives, it is hard for the enemy to inflict sufficient victory point losses to demoralise the *legio*.

Collecting a Polybian Roman army

Until the last few years, it had been challenging to find the requisite miniatures for a 28mm Polybian army. Recently, however, we have become spoiled for choice with the arrival of Aventine Miniatures' excellent metal range (my personal favourite, http://aventineminiatures.co.uk/republican-romans/) and the new plastic ranges from Victrix and Agema. There are also excellent options in 15mm, including the older Donnington range and the more recent Westwind Forged in Battle miniatures. I also find myself admiring the effect of mass one can achieve with 6mm minis. One hopes that we will see many more Polybian armies taking to the field!

I do hope that you have enjoyed this expanded army list. My intention is, when time permits, to expand it into a short book with the addition of Carthaginian, Macedonian and Seleucid lists and scenarios.

Suggested further reading

If you are going to read one book, read Polybius; a great Historian who personally knew Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus, the conqueror of Macedon.

- Polybius *Histories* http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:tlg,0543,001:18:32
- Livy *Rome and the Mediterranean and The War with Hannibal*
- *Republican Roman Army 200-104 BC (Osprey Men-at-Arms)* by Nick Secunda
- *Soldiers and Ghosts* J. E. Lendon Yale University Press New Haven and London 2005
- *The Complete Roman Army* by Adrian Goldsworthy, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London 2003