

Throughout most of the Classical Period in ancient Greece the dominant land weapon used by infantry was the spear. This weapon may well have been bequeathed to the Classical Greeks by their Mycenaean ancestors as the primal weapon of attack. The hand-held spear was, however, only a minimal weapon, and not until c.700 B.C. were proper tactics developed to maximize its use, i.e., the development of the densely packed rectangle of spearmen in serried ranks known as the phalanx. With each spearman, or hoplite, bearing heavy body armour and a large circular shield, this phalanx proved to be an impressive and dominant military unit, a cross between the armadillo and the porcupine.

In Italy, apparently in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C., the Romans tended to copy the Greek arrangement, at least while most of their serious fighting was confined to the rich, flat plains around Latium. However, by the 4th century, the Romans were forced to tackle the tough, mountain tribes of central Italy and abandon the rigid and slow armadillo of the spear phalanx. The new formation was the manipular legion, a much more loosely articulated structure better fitted to rough terrain. The man-killing spear was now relegated to the third line of battle, to the hasta (spear) wielding triarii, while the first two lines of assault troops received new weapons, the pilum (javelin) and the gladius (short sword).

The first Roman swords were made of copper or bronze, later of iron, and finally of steel by the end of the 3rd century B.C. (when the sword was often called ferrum, the Latin word for steel). The earliest swords were rather crude, short instruments with one serious defect: they had only one sharpened side, and were used primarily for cutting. The most common sword type in the early period, c.400 B.C., was the leaf-shaped or parallel-sided sword which varied in length from 14-26 inches. By c.300 B.C., however, the average legionary sword measured c.22". It was sharpened on both sides and pointed. This sword was, rather curiously, carried on the right side of the legionary (though centurions wore theirs on the left). This right side arrangement would have made for a rather awkward draw, though it did keep the sword clear of the large shield carried on the left side.

Swords normally had a mid-rib along the middle of the blade, and by c.200 B.C. the shape of the blade was either straight or narrowed slightly toward the tip. The grip of the sword would measure about 6". Most swords had a heavy ball on the handle's end to better balance the blade, and were housed in a sheath (a vagina), originally made of leather or wood, which hung from a belt (balteus), either looped over the left shoulder or running around the waist. On a separate belt on the left side the legionary kept his dagger (pugio) which was sometimes as much as one foot long, and consequently could act as a smaller, reserve sword in an emergency.

The great virtue of the Roman sword was that it could be used caesim, for cutting, and punctim, for stabbing and thrusting, and also could be used in extremely crowded conditions which often prevail on the field of battle. As such the Roman sword stood in marked contrast to the Celtic sword. The Celts bore large, long, heavy weapons with only one cutting edge; they were c.3' long and were almost as crude as iron bars. The Celtic warrior, using up a great deal of space and putting forth prodigious power, would bring these weapons down upon the heads and shoulders of his foes. They would bend out of shape easily, and lose their edges rapidly. The Roman counter would be to move in close and, depending upon their metal helmets for defense, to shove their iron-rimmed shields with their pointed bosses into the foe while stabbing him in the stomach. The cut wounds, the stab kills.

Roman troops usually softened up their enemies with a thick barrage of thrown javelins (each soldier carried 2 pila), after which they ran in vigorously for the ancient equivalent of the dreaded bayonet charge. After 105 B.C., when Roman legionaries received gladiatorial weapons training for the first time, the Roman swordsman turned into a grim and deadly fighter with no equal in the civilized world. Training would be done with double weight weapons, making, in the words of one of their own analysts, "their drills bloodless battles and their battles bloody drills."