Warfare in Glorantha

By Martin Helsdon

with invaluable assistance from Jeff Richard
The Armies and Enemies of Dragon Pass
WARFARE IN GLORANTHA

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Jeff Richard

Derived from the writings of
Greg Stafford, Sandy Petersen, Steve Perrin, Ian Cooper, Michael O'Brien and Harald Smith
Front piece: design taken from a Holay vase of the early Hero Wars period. A confrontation between hoplites wearing classic Sairdite panoply.

Cover by: Mark Smylie

Illustrations and Cartography by: Dan Barker, Gene Day, Colin Driver, Martin Helsdon, Luise Perrene, Jan Pospíšil, and Roger Raupp (and some artists I am unable to identify)

‘Siege of Whitewall’ used courtesy of Andrew Taylor

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Dedications:

For Greg Stafford, 1948-2018, for creating the world we play in.
For my mother, Barbara Helsdon, 1934-2019.

Author’s Note:

Whilst every effort has been made to make this book as canonical as possible, it does not define canon.

In many cases, it has been assumed that Gloranthan materials and manufacturing are very close analogues to their terrestrial counterparts, much as the nature of the world closely corresponds to the magical world our Bronze Age ancestors believed they inhabited. This belief is why Glorantha is a Bronze Age world, even though some troops, tactics, and technologies find their equivalents in our Iron Age, when many of those ancient assumptions were being questioned, and in some cases, such as the shape and size of the Earth, or the distance of the Sun and Moon, being tested by observation.

In Glorantha, the Bronze Age mindset is key, as is the Bronze and early Iron Age of central and southeast Europe and the Near East for the look and feel, at least for central Genertela. Even where the Iron Age creeps in, it is the Iron Age of the Ancient World. The very broad ‘cut-off’ date for military technology has been assumed to be around 200 BC, though some Gloranthan technologies, mostly due to dwarven influences, would seem to be of a much more recent date.

Your Glorantha Will Vary.

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Polaris grant me victory!
Lend me the strength and valor to defeat my foes!

“There was a world . . . or was it all a dream?”
Homer, The Iliad

Yara Aranis,
Six-armed Goddess of Boundaries,
Pursue and rend,
Limb from limb,
Any who profane this text!
Introduction

A Time of Legends

Glorantha in the Hero Wars epoch is a world of magical and mundane combat.

Armies march and fight, cities are besieged, and Heroes contest for victory, but the weapons are not fashioned just from mere metal, wood, and leather, but also potent magical energies.

Humans are said to have gained dominance in Glorantha only recently, about a thousand years earlier. Before this, they were only one species among many. Humans have adapted well to the world of Time, expanding their realms at a steady pace gradually pushing aside the remnants of the Elder Races.

Events in Glorantha are now moving towards a conjunction driven by conflicting cultures, religions and ambitions.

The Lunar Empire seeks to sweep all before it as it extends southwards, bent on achieving the supremacy of the Red Goddess over the unruly Storm God.

War banners are being unfurled, some not seen for an Age of the world.

Heroes are converging towards cataclysmic confrontations.

The Elder Races are plotting their revenge.

The dragons are awakening.

The gods are stirring.

New stars are rising.

Heroes meet and clash in Dragon Pass, a strategic and magical nexus, the crossroads of a continent.

This book examines the armies of the early Hero Wars. By necessity, the text concentrates upon the human combatants.

Sources

At this remote remove from the period, surviving texts from the Hero Wars and afterwards are often fragmentary, and at times contradictory.

Archaeological evidence supplements our knowledge. Unearthed burials, weapons, armor, fortifications, decorated pottery and other pictorial evidence contributes greatly to our understanding. Numerous artifacts are on display in museums.

However, the available sources are never definitive, and must be augmented with speculation and conjecture.

In this book, it is assumed that a real historical period underlies the Legends of Argrath (or the Argraths) and the other Heroes. The most widely accepted dates of the Solar Time chronology are used, though these are, of course, subject to debate.

The present tense is used to immerse the reader in the era.

Coinage

Pay and prices are given in the coinage widely circulated in Dragon Pass in this period.

The Lunar Empire coin called a Lunar and the Sartarite Guilder are both round silver coins weighing approximately 1/8 ounce (4 grams, 0.13 troy oz.) and are virtually interchangeable. The Seshnelan Silver Imperial has the same weight.

A Note on Terminology

Terrestrial historical terminology is used throughout for convenience. The use of Assyrian, Greek, Persian, Roman, Keltic, and Anglo-Saxon terms should not be mistaken as implying that the Gloranthan equivalents are culturally or technologically identical. In some cases, the similarities are helpful, and in others superficial.

Anachronistic terms are used for simplicity. Terrestrial weights and measures are employed for convenience.

The few terrestrial asides are presented thus, as white text on black.

No one in Glorantha knows all of the background information presented here.
THE ARMIES AND ENEMIES OF DRAGON PASS

Fundamentals of Warfare

“Soldiers of the Sun! Advance!” Rurik Runespear was resplendent in gilded armor, the yellow-dyed horsehair crest of his hawk-bellom obscuring in the front rank of the phalanx. Beside him, file-leaders began their measured tread towards the enemy. The foe saw a forest of pikes swaying towards them in ordered files and ranks, a display of discipline and order. Nervously they gripped their weapons and shields. The Lunars had fought in battle with the mercenaries at their side; now a regiment of Varitar was steadily marching against them.

The Templars trod in unison, accompanied by the rhythm of clanking armor, their feet pounding the ground, stirring up dust, shields levelled together. The front rank kept their heads low, eyes staring grimly ahead, steady, determined, fixed on the enemy. “Front ranks! Lower spears!”

The long pikes swept down in unison, bright spearheads glittering, like a wave breaking on a shore - but this flood swept inexorably onwards. It would not break; it would not waver.

The second rank brought their spears horizontal in a successive wave, then the third, fourth and fifth. A wall of slim-bladed pikes all pointing ahead, even as the pikes of the rear ranks slanted forward, providing some protection against the incoming rain of missiles.

The phalanx continued its relentless advance, as javelins and arrows fell among the ranks. Men staggered but the line did not falter as others stepped forward to take their place. Steadily their pace increased, the line held as straight as their spears.

The sound of their advance grew, the clank and thump of metal on metal, of the steady footfall of hobnailed sandals.

“Front ranks! Bladesharp!”

All along the line, the fact carved upon the pike heads glittered, the brilliant bronze blades seeming even keener-edged...

Warfare in the Hero Wars period is superficially like that of our own time. Formations of foot or horse fight under the leadership of a general, king, priest, magician, or warlord against their enemies. Ambushes, skirmishes, field battles, and sieges are used to break an enemy’s will to resist.

Armies are dependent upon the supply of food, fodder, firewood and especially water; logistics places limits upon their range of operations and size. In war, a state with a logistical infrastructure has many advantages over less sophisticated foes who are reliant upon foraging and pillaging to feed their fighters.

In this era, so the legends tell us, magic plays a decisive, often even primary role in warfare. Priests cast bolts of lightning or call down flames from the heavens; shamans can unleash spirits such as the all-consuming Oakfed; devotees of War or Storm Gods can shatter regiments; and the Lunar Empire has units like the Field School of Magic and the Crater Makers or the awesome Crimson Bat that can decimate entire armies. In Glorantha, victory is often not on the side with the most sophisticated and the most magical means.

This can have surprising results; for example, a band of hunter-gatherers, backed up by powerful shamans, can overwhelm a superior civilized phalanx lacking magical support. The few armies that are both magically powerful and organizationally sophisticated (in particular, the Lunar Army) are terrifying indeed.

The Lunar Empire was the first nation to regiment its magicians and priests into cooperative organizations whose members have similar training, practice together, and strive for common good. This has proved especially successful in times of war for until the Sartarite resurgence, other lands still relied on a few powerful individuals, assisted by lesser helpers.

As a result, armies often use tactics or strategies that would often make no sense in our time but may be fundamental to using their army’s magic to its best effect. Armies are often assembled according to sacred formulae, and combatants are often chosen to best match ancient myths. Certain individuals or units may lack any direct military value, but must be present for other regiments to use their own best magic.

The availability of healing spells in this period has the effect of often making warfare even bloodier. Wounds that might incapacitate or kill can be swiftly healed. Even in a shield-wall an injured combatant might be pulled back into the ranks, healed, and return to the fray.

Most of the Third Age cultures are extremely cautious regarding innovation (the Lunars being the obvious exception) following the disasters at the close of the Second Age resulting from the rampant experimentation of the Empire of the Wyrm’s Friends and the God Learners.

Almost all technologies and tactics are said to derive from before Time or shortly after the Dawn; both the shield-wall and phalanx are derived from ancient models.

Only the Lunars (and later Argrath of Sartar) experiment to any degree with military magics, techniques and technologies.

It can be no coincidence that the long-prophesized Hero Wars are beginning.

Troop Types

Troops are divided into those utilizing shock combat, and those employing missile weapons, with some units capable of employing both forms.

Shock involves close-quarter hand-to-hand combat,
usually in dense blocks of infantry and cavalry. *Missile* involves combat inflicting casualties at a distance, using direct (line of sight) and indirect (parabolic) attacks.

**The Primary Combat Arms**

Basic warfare consists of four combat arms: Light Infantry (missile-armed), Heavy Infantry, Light Cavalry (missile-armed), and Heavy Cavalry.

“Heavy” cavalry does not necessarily mean heavy armor. It means they are trained to fight in large masses in a melee instead of as skirmishers.

The distinction between “Heavy” and “Light” is often blurred. Some fighters armed with missile weapons may fight in close formations, rather than in open skirmishing lines.

**Light Infantry**

These are skirmishers and missile users, scouts and foragers. They are often used as a screen ahead and on the flanks of the main army.

In many societies, light infantry is capable of fighting either in massed units or ahead of the main body of infantry.

A regiment of Light Infantry is typically around 1,000 soldiers. This unit type is common to almost all societies, even the most primitive. It is usually used as a skirmishing screen.

Archers can dominate any battlefield where most of the enemy are unarmored, but their dominance declines in pitched battles between massed infantry wearing heavier body armor. The javelin is a more suitable weapon in such circumstances as it is more capable of penetrating armor, and if it pierces a shield can render it unusable.

Foot archers tend to have greater accuracy and range than mounted archers.

**Heavy Infantry**

These fighters specialize in heavy weapons and armor, sacrificing speed for shock value. They typically fight in a shield-wall or phalanx.

Heavy Infantry is armored with bronze, layered linen, or leather armor and armed with spear and sword. They either carry a large shield or are well armored. A closely ordered battle-line of heavy infantry is vulnerable to flank attack. Broken, overgrown or steep ground threatens their cohesion because of the difficulties in maneuvering in close order formations in such terrain.

A regiment of Heavy Infantry is typically around 1,000 soldiers.

**Light Cavalry**

Light Cavalry is armed with missile weapons, typically bows or javelins. They skirmish with the foe, withdrawing from any offensive response only to turn around and counterattack once the offensive is spent. These units also serve as scouts, providing advance intelligence to locate the enemy and sources of supply.

A regiment of Light Cavalry is typically around 500 troopers.

**Heavy Cavalry**

These mounted fighters engage in direct contact with the foe, usually with lances (long spears), sometimes with swords, maces, or axes. They are used for the charge, meant to break up infantry formations and ride them down.

Often considered an elite, many heavy cavalrymen are drawn from the nobility.

A regiment of Heavy Cavalry is typically around 500 troopers.

**Troop Type Interactions**

The interaction of these four basic troop types can be generalized:

- Light Cavalry is offensively superior to Heavy Infantry and Cavalry.
- Heavy Cavalry is offensively superior to Light Infantry.
- Light Infantry is defensively superior to Light Cavalry.
- Heavy Infantry is defensively superior to Heavy Cavalry.
- Dominance between Heavy and Light Infantry varies subject to terrain and tactics.

“Offensively Superior” means that the combat arm can defeat its rival in an attack. The classic example is Light Cavalry versus Heavy Cavalry. The Light Cavalry constantly advances and retreats during an action, so it cannot be caught, but it is often offensively superior because it can force an action upon the Heavy Cavalry, who cannot get away from the faster, more loosely-organized horse archers.

“Defensively Superior” means that the rival is not able to successfully overcome the
when fortifications are involved these relationships change. Cavalry becomes useless, and the offensive superiority of light infantry is canceled out. If Heavy Cavalry can get to the flank of Heavy Infantry, they can triumph.

Light Infantry and Light Cavalry normally take much longer to reach a decision when offensively superior than do the heavies. This is because light troops must run away when the heavies charge (usually they can do this, because they are faster), then run back when the heavies try to flee. This continual ebb and flow takes quite a while, but the decision is no less certain than when Heavy Cavalry smash into a band of slingers - just slower.

The abilities of Light Infantry and Light Cavalry overlap, with Light Infantry being less costly to maintain but lacking the mobility and speed of cavalry, but having an advantage in broken country.

Combined Arms
The use of these four primary arms in conjunction has a major impact on warfare.

Heavy infantry and cavalry employ shock attack, engaging in hand-to-hand combat. Light infantry and cavalry employ missile attack, engaging in combat at a distance. Massed chariots once fulfilled both a shock and missile role.

Diverse cultures have historically emphasized different weapons, and the combination of different troop types. A successful combination utilizes the strengths of shock and missile troops.

The Carmanians combined their cavalry with Pelorian phalanxes; the Dara Happans combined their phalanxes with lessons learned from Pentian cavalry. The Lunar Army has blended Dara Hoppa and Carmanian traditions, creating a combined-arms tactical fusion establishing one of the most sophisticated armies in Glorantha, dominating the battlefields of Peloria.

Other Combat Arms
Artillery
Artillery such as ballista and catapults have a short range, which means they must be close to the enemy to make an impact. Their lack of mobility makes them vulnerable on the battlefield, and almost entirely restricts such engines to siege and naval warfare.

Chariots
Chariots were once widely used in Pelorian warfare, but shortly after the Dawn were replaced almost entirely by cavalry, with their use only retained, for a time, by the more conservative nations. The use of chariots is often relegated to ceremonial and ritual use – and chariot racing.

The Orlanthi still use chariots to carry champions and priests to battle.

Fliers
Fliers are capable of aerial combat and attacking ground units with missiles, spears and swords. Some flier mounts are capable of attack themselves.

They can act as scouts and provide an overview of the territory around an army.

Heroes
Heroes have transcended human limits and may be equivalent to one or more ordinary regiments. Some have become demi-gods. Most are accompanied by a band of companions.

Magical
Groups of combat magicians tend to be very small; a few priests, shamans, or wizards who typically provide offensive and defensive support for their regiment.

Some magical entities, such as the Crimson Bat are both extremely powerful and exotic.

The magical battalions of the Lunar College of Magic (and later of the Sartar Magical Union) consist of 50 to 250 magicians (priests, sorcerers, shamans, mystics and devotees) who are trained to coordinate their activities to create a magical effect beyond the sum of the individuals.

Vexillae
Vexillae are special independent Lunar commands drawing strength from regiments across the Empire or raised by private individuals. If composed of regular soldiers, the commanding officer is termed a Legate or Tribune.

A vexilla allows subunits to be detached from their regiment and its guardian standard, without losing access to their unique magics. This ability to raise small tactical formations below the level of a regiment gives Lunar generals flexibility when dealing with threats that cannot simply be engaged on the field of battle. Vexillae are ideal units for the kind of irregular warfare common along the borders of the Empire. The exact combat strengths of a vexilla derive from the units that comprise it.

Warships
Since the Opening, conflict has returned to the seas, with fleets of triremes and penteconters active along the
southern coasts. None compare with the immense
dragonships and battle barges of earlier Ages.

War Dogs
There is a long tradition in Saird of utilizing war
hounds. Dogs are used as sentries or taken on patrols
and into battle.

Dogs are often associated with Darkness by many
Gloranthan cultures. The Orlanthi tend to have a very
negative view of canines, in part because in numerous
adventures their god Orlanth faced great obstacles from
various Dog Gods. The Wolf Runners of the Sartar
Free Army are an exception.

Unit Organization
Four general categories may be identified:

Militia: non-professional fighters with limited
training, expected to aid in the defense of their
community.

Mercenary: a professional fighter serving whoever
pays them. They are responsible for providing their
own arms and armor.

Soldier: a professional fighter in the service of a
state. They may be regulars or conscripts, with the
former usually of higher quality.

Warrior: a fighter in the service of a chosen leader,
usually within the context of a tribal or clan-based
society.

These categories can and do overlap. For example,
a warrior may be a mercenary; a soldier may have been
conscripted from a militia.

Historically, Tarsh, and more recently Sartar,
demonstrate a shift from a warrior ethos to that of a
professional army, with the clan and tribal structure
being replaced by a regimental system. At the beginning
of the Hero Wars, following the end of the Lunar
Occupation, the armed forces of Sartar are in transition
as the fundamentally tribal armies begin to resemble the
regimental organization of their enemy.

Militia
A militia or fyrd is a fighting unit of mostly non-
professional fighters, usually composed of all those
eligible to fight in a clan or tribe. All able-bodied free
men (and women, in some places) are required to show
up for muster and basic training for the defense of their
community.

A clan ranges in size numbering between five
hundred and two thousand people. Most of the time
about half of the male population is potentially available
for local defense. In the event of a local disaster, any
and all able-bodied men and women can turn out and
fight, but such emergencies are rare. Most clans can
typically muster some 250 combatants.

In reality, the good fighters, equipped and trained,
are far fewer. The clan chief, the thanes and housecarls
are most likely to be well equipped and best trained.
They rarely number more than 25 professional fighters,
though War Clans can field more.

In most regions, every hamlet and village has its
own militia, its efficiency and effectiveness reliant upon
the qualities of its leader and the dedication of its
members. Farmers may have a familiarity with hunting
weapons, and herdsmen with the weapons used to protect
their herds.

Across Peloria, their overlords rarely permit the
Lodrilli peasants to form an armed militia. This will
change in the face of the nomad invasions. Only the
independent farmers of the Redlands drill with spears.
Militia members are often expected to supply their
weapons themselves and are allowed any sort of armor
which they can afford and can carry. To qualify for an
Orlanthi clan weapon take, a fighter must have a shield, a
favored tribal weapon or long knife, and a ‘strong hat’.

The basic arms of many of the Orlanthi are a
bronce-tipped spear, bronze axe and a shield, to which
the wealthy might add a sword, a helmet, and bronze
armor. Bows, javelins, and slings are common missile
weapons.

Yelmalion militia tend to be more structured than
the ordinary village militia, with two distinct types of
militia: local units and those organized by the temple.
Local militia are of variable quality, often organized and
commanded by a retired Templar. Temple militia are
squads of recruits drawn from the initiates. A
professional Templar files leader and half-file leader
provide continuity as squad members are rotated through their period of
service. The squad is responsible for patrolling a
particular area, and is housed in a barracks. In times of war
these squads supplement the professional regiments
in defending their homeland. Their
weapons are spear, javelin and shield,
with some using
brows.

Lunar
provincial
militia,
where
permitted,
are broadly
similar to
the Orlanthi
militias. In the Lunar
Heartlands, after a
century of peace,
militia may exist as
traditional social