

The morning sun creeps above the horizon. The day of battle begins. Decius leads Rome's Second Legion infantry through the yawning camp gates, three thousand men marching in a ten-wide column of heavily armored spearmen. His twelve hundred light infantry follow, unarmored young men with two javelins and a small round shield. Three hundred equites ride behind the swarm of velites, haughty young knights who are itching for the glory of lancing down a Latin commander.i

General Titus Manlius follows Decius out the gates. The aging legend wears the gold neck torque he took from the gigantic Gallic champion he once slew on the battlefield, earning him the honorific of "Torquatus."ii

Torquatus' face is as grim as Mars, the war god he worships. The consul is determined to enforce the rule that he and Publius formulated to strengthen military discipline: any man who deserts his post will be summarily executed.iii

Torquatus studies the masses of Latin soldiers who are spreading across the dusty plain, their twelve-foot spears towering over their feathered bronze domes. He glances over his shoulder, searching the cavalry for his son. *I hope Titus acquits himself well. He is so impulsive.*

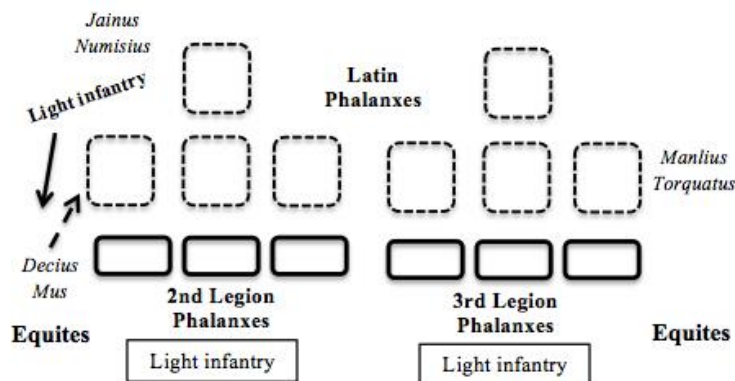
Publius Decius' legion closes within a half mile of the Latin phalanxes. He waves for his men to move to the left half of the plains. Torquatus trots his charger to the right side, his legion's columns following him.

The Roman army spreads into formation. Each legion arranges itself into three phalanxes of thirty rows of thirty-two heavy infantry, flanked by their tribunes and centurions.

Within the hour, the Roman battle line is ready. The six phalanxes stretch across a mile-wide line, each one bristling with the eight foot hastae that serve as the legionaries' attack spears.

Decius waits at the end of his phalanxes' left wing, knowing it is his legion's most vulnerable attack spot. He watches the Latins arrange themselves into phalanxes, each a dense hedge of razor-sharp spears. He looks over to his right and sees Torquatus waving his bared sword over his head. *He's stirring his men up for battle*, Publius decides.

Decius quells the urge to mimic him. *Not yet*, he tells himself, *the moment is not yet ripe.*



Battle of Fregesane Plains 340 BCE

The Latin army marches forward. Their eight phalanxes halt within a quarter-mile of the Roman battle line. The Latins' leather war drums beat a deep, rhythmic tattoo. The plains fill with the tribal battle songs of the Latin phalangites.

Decius watches the enemy's signifers raise their infantry standards, tall poles topped with animal head carvings. He bites his lower lip. *Soon they will attack. Time for me to get the men ready.*

He motions over his signifer. The standard-bearer hands him a gilt pole topped by a carving of Victoria, the winged goddess of victory.^{iv}

Decius rides out to the middle of his leftmost phalanx. He unsheathes his long, leaf-shaped sword^v and rests the blade across his breast. The young general raises the standard toward the heavens.

"I do swear to you upon my life," he bellows, "and by all the gods above, that today you will emerge victorious." He swings the standard from left to right. "Victoria rides with us. On to death and glory!" The men raise their spears and cheer, chanting their commander's name.

Publius' eyes moisten. *Gods, I thank you for giving me this moment!* The young consul rides to his remaining two phalanxes and repeats his message. He returns to his place on the left flank, his face flush with excitement.

The enemy's brass horns blare. As one, ten thousand Latins march forward, their domed helmets peeping over their oval bronze shields.

Commander Jainus Numisius rides at the front of his men. The tall old Latin is perched bareback atop a white stallion veined with battle scars. He raises a tall silver spear above his head, its purple pennant flapping in the brisk autumn breeze. The Latin infantry officers watch Numisius' pennant as they lead their men toward the Romans, waiting for his fateful signal.

Standing at the edges of their phalanxes, the Roman tribunes raise their blood-red pennants above their heads, readying their troops for the charge.

Decius nods to the tribune nearest him. The tribune jerks down his signal flag. The other tribunes follow his lead.

The Second Legion's horns ring out. The three phalanxes march forward, spreading out to close the gaps between them. "Unus, duo, tribus, quattuor," they chant, using their rhythmic counting to keep in step.

Torquatus' Third Legion follows. A sea of Roman spearmen tramp toward the advancing Latins.

Decius rides alongside his men, his eyes fixed on Jainus Numisius. The Latin commander shines like a sun in his burnished bronze armor, his silver spear gleaming like Jupiter's own thunderbolt. *He's going to charge*, Decius decides. *I can feel it!*

Publius Decius closes his eyes. *Calm yourself. You were born for this moment.* Impulsively, he gallops out in front of his men and races along the rows of stern-faced marching Romans, their round shields pressed against their armor-plated breasts.

"Courage, men!" Decius shouts, his heart hammering. "This day will be ours!"

As he nears the right flank of his third phalanx he looks back over his shoulder, just in time to see Numisius jerk down his spear.

A hundred enemy horns echo across the hill-shrouded plains. The Latins break into a trot and swarm toward the Romans, screaming like men gone mad.

"Send the signal!" Decius yells. "Fixed spears!"

The legions' tribunes wave their signal flags sideways. The Roman phalanxes halt. The legionaries plant their left

feet forward and dig in their right feet behind them. They grip their thrusting spears, readying themselves for the initial assault.

The Latins close upon the legionaries. The Roman ranks fill with the sickly sweet odor of voided urine and feces.

Two thousand velites burst out from the Roman phalanxes. The young men hurl their javelins into the teeth of their charging enemy. Hundreds of javelins clack harmlessly off the Latins' upraised shields, but scores of screams attest that many others have found their mark. Dozens of Latins fall, to be quickly replaced by the men behind them.

i The knights competed with each other to excel in *virtus*, the Roman notion of courage in battle. See J. E. Lendon's *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 177.

ii https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titus_Manlius_Imperiosus_Torquatus

iii Ibid.

iv <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vexillum>

v Early Roman legions used a longer sword modeled after the Greek *xiphos*. It was later replaced by the iconic *gladius*.