



## Some thoughts about Gladiator 1/2

General Tactical Review - The Battle

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Autres thèmes

**The battle scene opening the excellent peplum by American director Ridley Scott takes place around 180 AD, the date of the death of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. As with many Hollywood films, this film intended for a large audience should not be retained for the historical rigour of its scenario, as well as the representation of the battle itself, enamelled with many inconsistencies or anachronisms. For the historian Thierry Widemann, "Apart from the fact that no decisive battle took place in 180, the year of Marcus Aurelius' death, we see the artillery sending projectiles more than 1km away while the range of the Roman ballista did not exceed 300m.**

Such incendiary projectiles, veritable napalm bombs, evoking the bombing of the edge in Apocalypse Now, were unknown to the Romans: to achieve this effect, oil would have had to be used, which was not used, in the form of wildfire, until the 7th century by the Byzantines. A cavalry charge in the middle of a forest is unimaginable anyway, but here a fortiori, the primary forests of Germania being then of an impenetrable density. The legions advanced in successive lines, whereas the Roman tactics, resolutely offensive, were based on deep formation attacks. In the film, they are content to withstand the offensive of the Germans, where the pilum, although well reconstituted, is used as a spear, while it was a javelin whose jet prepared the assault with the sword. In fact, this battle scene tells us more about a current Anglo-Saxon view of warfare than about Roman tactics. The decision is carried by the technical weapons: by firepower, the maneuver of the armor (suggested by the cavalry), and an infantry to absorb the shock, clean and occupy the ground.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of the following discussion, therefore, is not to go into the details of all these mistakes, nor to outline the tactics used by the Roman army during the High Empire. To do this, the informed reader can turn to the remarkable works of the historian Yann Le Bohec, including in particular his History of the Roman Wars.<sup>4</sup> This scene, on the other

hand, is an excellent opportunity for anyone interested in the notion of battle. The aim is to seize the pedagogical pretext offered by this representation, certainly simplistic, but visual enough to question some elementary notions of tactics. What does the Scorpio doctrine explore and what are its meanings, on the eve of the implementation of this doctrine?<sup>5</sup>...the battle, the fight, the shock and fire? With regard to general tactics, the reader may usefully continue his reflections by referring to the current doctrine of the French land forces.<sup>6</sup>to François Géré's indispensable dictionary.<sup>7</sup> and the 2008 reissue of the introduction to military history<sup>8</sup> of Éric Muraise. Ardant du Picq<sup>9</sup> remains of course a must, and reading it today still sheds more than relevant light on these notions. Finally, although the historiographical dimensions of the battle are deliberately not addressed in this document, we can only recommend the Battle of Hervé Drevillon<sup>10</sup> among many others, to finish addressing the subject in its entirety.

"Roma victor! »<sup>11</sup> The relationship between tactics, strategy and victory. The victory obtained in Ridley Scott's film, by the Roman general Maximus, can be considered a decisive battle, since by allowing the destruction of the last remaining troops, the Roman army was able to destroy the enemy. The victory obtained in Ridley Scott's film by the Roman general Maximus can be considered as a decisive battle, since by allowing the destruction of the last barbarian opposition forces, it concludes the campaign of Germania and allows Emperor Marcus Aurelius to impose the Pax Romana on its eastern borders. In the course of history, there have indeed been a number of major clashes of this type, limited in space and time, which have enabled a belligerent to force his adversary to suspend hostilities for a more or less long period. Gaugamèles, Azincourt, Waterloo, Sadowa, Dien Bien Phu are decisive battles in this respect.

The word tactics, which comes from the Greek word "ranger", originally refers to the order or disposition of troops in preparation for battle. It consists on the one hand of placing shock units, infantry and cavalry on the ground, benefiting from the fire provided by the archery, then the artillery, the geOn the other hand, it consists in combining their action in order to obtain effects on the enemy, but also to protect his own troops. As the film fairly correctly depicts it, the battle can thus be understood in the strict sense as a violent confrontation between two armed formations of limited size, in a reduced space and during a limited time. Conceptually, combat is the phase of military operations during which the adversaries physically confront each other using the resources at their disposal.

The combat produces effects of destruction or neutralization of physical and moral resources in the opponents, the consequences of which decide the victory or defeat of one or more of the warring parties. A war is thus generally composed of campaigns, punctuated by battles, whether decisive or not. These battles are themselves made up of combats. Tactics are therefore reasoned at different levels and upstream of the action, which is what is generally referred to as the general conception and planning (Command); then during the conduct of the action (Control). The extension of tactics allows downstream to exploit the effects obtained on the opponent in view of the next battle, within the framework of a campaign (this is the role of the operational level); and/or strategic success, if this battle was decisive. Military historian John Keegan defines battle as "something that takes place between two armies leading to the moral and then physical destruction of one or the other."<sup>12</sup> Clausewitz states that "whenever there is an ambition to attack the enemy's life's work, his interests, or the interests of the enemy's people, it is a battle that is fought in the name of the enemy... the battle is the most natural and (...) the best means of doing so; he who shirks the great decision will be punished".<sup>13</sup> In his reflections on the relationship between strategy and battle, *Die Schlacht* (1912), Helmuth von Moltke the Elder also considers that strategy has the means, through tactics, to

achieve things at the right time and in the right place. It thus implements through the battle decisions planned in advance.

For classical Western strategists, the battle is therefore an essential condition for victory. The obsessive search for the decisive battle, or its avoidance, is a guiding thread in the evolution of strategic thinking to this day. The Western conception of this relationship between strategy and tactics feeds very directly into thinking about the responsibilities of the different levels of operational decision-making, the organisation of command, the capability dimensions of our military apparatus and, of course, our doctrines of use of forces. This relationship therefore makes it possible to make a very clear distinction between strategy (determination of politico-military objectives, design and conduct of operations); operatics (design and conduct of campaigns), conceptualised by the Soviets in the 1930s; and tactics (conduct of battle and combat). However, this distinction has been the subject of fundamental controversy since the beginning of the 20th century. Indeed, the obsession with the decisive battle can lead to the subordination of strategy to tactics, i.e., adapting strategic objectives to tactical outcomes. According to Moltke the Elder, who had a profound influence on German military thinking before the war, "before tactics, the pretensions of strategy, which must be able to adapt itself to the newly created situation, fall silent". For his part, Foch believed that "strategy does not exist by itself, it is only worthwhile by tactics, since tactical results are everything".<sup>4</sup> This reversal of subordination thus characterised the operations of the First World War, whether it was the attack on Verdun by the Germans in 1916, or the disastrous offensive on the Chemin des Dames in 1917. This controversy, at the heart of which are conflicts of competence between military and politicians, may also have characterised Western commitments after the Second World War at certain periods. The operations in Algeria for the French army or the Vietnam War for the Americans are good illustrations of this.

"At my signal, unleash the underworld! "Maneuvering: The relationship between shock and fire.

Although not historically realistic, the spectacular representation of the battle of Gladiator highlights a second essential point of the battle: manoeuvre. Indeed, for a long time now, it has not been limited to the frontal encounter between two non-reactive masses. Shock and fire are the two main means available to the tactician to protect his troops and to attack those of the opponent. The term fire in fact covers all methods of combat at a distance. The term shock refers to all forms of contact combat. The mobility, the organization of the terrain and the protection multiply the impact of the shock and make it possible to attenuate both the effects of the adverse shock and those of its fire. The material effects of fire and shock are inseparable from their psychological effects, the attainment of which mainly conditions tactical success or defeat. All the actions aimed at achieving these effects are therefore found in the battle. In theory, this covers a preparatory phase, intended to shape the environment and the adversary; a phase of reaching decisive objectives; and finally an operational phase. The assault, which is sometimes accompanied by hand-to-hand combat, is only one of the paroxysmal moments of the shock and can be found in any phase of the battle. It is therefore not necessarily its ultimate moment. The superiority of fire in all its forms, which characterized the conflicts of the twentieth century, has seen a growing tendency to avoid assault, made possible by technological progress and the increased effectiveness of remote combat means. However, shock is still essential to guarantee long-term control of the environment, as our recent operational commitments have shown.

The successive phases of the battle require, on the one hand, prior planning and, on the other hand, a driving ability to manage contingency, i.e. that which was not imagined or retained at the time of planning. This ability to contingency, and therefore to manoeuvre, is made indispensable by the uncertainty generated by the adversary himself and by the frictions implied by the battle environment and chance. It therefore presupposes at the very least a certain degree of reliability in intelligence acquisition systems; an aptitude for the reversibility of actions, agility and re-articulation of devices; and the systematic implementation of a reserved element. This ability to manage contingency also implies an ability to transmit orders as quickly as possible. The quality of information and communication systems therefore fundamentally depends on the ability to manoeuvre. This is what is at stake in the concept of infovalorised combat, which is now being taken up by the Scorpion programme.

3 Widemann, Thierry, Quid of the famous first scene from the film Gladiator, published in Guerres et Histoire, No. 6, April 2012.

4 Le Bohec, Yann, Histoire des guerres romaines: Milieu du VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C. - 410 AD, Tallandier, 2017.

5 Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement, Lettre de la doctrine, n° 8, June 2017, [https://www.penseemiliterre.fr/ressources/30084/41/lettre\\_08.pdf](https://www.penseemiliterre.fr/ressources/30084/41/lettre_08.pdf).

6 Centre de doctrine et d'emploi des forces, FT-02 - Tactique générale, 2009, <https://www.cdcc.terre.defense.gouv.fr/layout/set/print/publications/doctrinedesforces terrestres/francaises/lesdocumentsfondateurs/ft02>.

7 Géré, François, Dictionnaire de la pensée stratégique, Larousse, 1999. This work is no longer available in classic bookstores, but can still be acquired in electronic version.

8 Muraise, Éric (real name Maurice Suire, 1908-1980), Introduction à l'histoire militaire, Lavauzelle, 1964, reprinted 2008.

9 Ardant du Picq, Charles, Études sur le combat : combat antique et combat moderne, Hachette & Dumaine, 1880, reprinted. Economica, 2004.

10 Dré villon, Hervé, Batailles. Scènes de guerre de la Table Ronde aux tranchées, Seuil, 2007.

11 The quotation is taken from the dialogue of the film. It would nevertheless be grammatically more correct to say "Roma vicit" or "Roma victorix (est)".

12 Keegan, John, The Face of Battle: A study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme, London, (Anatomy of Battle, Robert Laffont, 1993 reprinted. Perrin, 2013).

13 von Clausewitz, Carl, Vom Krieg (Of War), 1832, reprinted. Tempus, 2014.

14 Foch, Ferdinand, Des principes de la guerre. Lectures given at the École supérieure de guerre, Berger-Levrault, 1903.

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