

Shattered Lances: The Author's Perspective

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Figure from Cover- from D S Rice, 'The Blazons of the "Baptistere de Saint Louis"', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13(2):367-380, (1950). Reproduced with permission from Cambridge University Press

Introduction

Shattered Lances is a period-specific set of wargames rules. The focal point for the rules is the Crusades in the Outremer. Nonetheless, many army-types of the Crusades fought in other theatres. This has allowed some extrapolation into theatres and eras 'bounded' by the Crusades, even if these are not directly connected to them.

The rules encompass three main army-types. These types are the armies of the 'Latin West', armies of 'Central Asia' and armies of the 'Near and Middle East'. Chinese armies of this era show some similarities with the armies of the 'Middle East', and came to share similarities with Central Asia.

The rules do not cover classical armies or earlier bronze-age types. Likewise SL does not cover armies of different areas, such as the New World or sub-Saharan Africa.

Rationale

The rules had several rationales. The first and simplest was that the rules I was familiar with, were not a faithful representation of warfare of this period. The second was that I was aware of statistical concepts or tools that had been overlooked in designing rules. There was scope to do some things a little differently. The third rationale was that I had been playing generic rules (i.e. Sumerians to Swiss) since WRG 6th Edition. I had simply sated myself on generic systems. The time was right for something more period-specific.

Historical lapses seemed to be quite common in generic rules. One of the drivers for this seemed to be a reliance on Classical warfare as the basis for these rules. This meant that both Islamic armies and Central Asian armies were modelled by extrapolation. In essence, they were often treated more like Byzantines in 'funny clothes', rather than these popular rules

reflecting the organization and doctrines of these armies.

An example of this is the Islamic infantry (*al-rijjal*) armed with spears or pikes. These fight more like Hellenistic prototypes in many popular rules. Islamic infantry operated however, on a fairly prescribed defensive doctrine. They were supposed to form up as a fortress (*hsin*). Formation depth also appeared to have been thin- with 2-3 ranks (*saff*). Instead, in many generic rules, these infantry end up being used like proto-Hoplites. Arabs or Berbers storm around the tabletop, in uncharacteristic deep formations. Defensive doctrine gives way to a drilled Macedonian offensive doctrine.

This problem of depth is not unique to Islamic armies. At Bouvines the Low Country pikemen formed up in 2-3 ranks. This successfully resisted the French knights opposing them for a notable period. Alas, many generic rules reward such medieval troops forming up as Hellenistic pikemen, 16 ranks deep, with commensurate penalties for forming up in realistic shallow formations.

These departures from history were magnified at the macro-scale. From around the 7th Century, a double-line deployment was adopted as the norm for many armies. Islamic armies often formed up with cavalry in the last line. The classical precept of a solid infantry centre with two cavalry wings, had given way to multiple thin lines, often with cavalry in the rear. Yet the norm on the tabletop was for rules to reward Medieval armies that formed up as 'classical armies', rather than as they did historically.

Many armies of this period preferred to attack with the right divisions of their army. This reflected many mounted troops' abhorrence of being attacked on their left side. Not only was the rider discomfited by having to use his left hand to hold the reins, he could only use his right arm awkwardly to defend himself against an opponent on the opposite side. In short, there were many "regularities" in warfare, reflecting sound doctrine and tactics that had disappeared completely from the tabletop.

The Design of Shattered Lances

Shattered Lances had three clear design-parameters. The first was to keep the rules 'focused'. This meant that would be restricted to a period of warfare I was most familiar with. The SL-era thus, begins from widespread adoption of Turkish methods of warfare, coincident with the promulgation of the stirrup (and the rise of Islam). This established the 7th C as the start point. The terminal point was the 14th C, with the 'infantry revolution' in Europe. This focus meant I could (fortuitously) avoid some contentious design-issues- such as whether Norman knights would beat Roman legionaries.

The second design parameter was that the rules had to generate a 'good game'. That is, it had to be enjoyable. I believed that players preferred 'moving' and 'fighting' with their units. They disliked lengthy lags between 'action', record-keeping and slow-moving games. SL thus gets armies into action quickly, and the game then moves at a brisk pace, with few hindrances to slow it down.

The third parameter was the rules themselves. The rules had to be very functional. Rules are not like normal books. They are not used solely in a 'front-to-back' reading-mode. Rather, players will flick back and forth, from one section to another. Rules could be made more functional by use of cross-referencing, judicious use of bold-type, a detailed index and intuitive

concepts. That is, by making concepts as 'intuitive' as possible, the basics of the rules could be quickly grasped. The 'dual' of this, is to avoid as much "rules-jargon" as possible.

Game Design: A Closer Look

The overall aim was to generate a game that was faithful to warfare of this era. This meant incentives to organize, deploy and employ an army appropriately had to be present. I wanted the armies on the tabletop, to look like they were historical armies of this era, and not merely 'Romans on horseback'. This meant for instance, I treated 'thin formations' as the norm and 'deep formations' (usually favoured by the pesky Byzantines) were the exception.

The game design followed an ordered development. First, I considered how armies were deployed historically to determine how they should appear on the battlefield. For instance, many armies deployed in two (or more) lines in this period. Incentives to organize, deploy and employ an army appropriately had to be present. These incentives could be introduced at a number of levels. For the double line to work, it had to be feasible to do so within the constraints of figure basing. Units in SL can thus occupy a lot of frontage by the adoption of 'thin formations'. To avoid battle-lines being easily outflanked, SL was set up to make flank attacks difficult, whilst allowing reserve lines the scope to quickly intervene.

The second step was describing units in terms of battle-field function. This process was done by jettisoning all troop-classifications that owed their basis in classical warfare. The fact that I did narrowed the focus of the rules, simplified the classification process. There is thus, no special 'pikemen' class in SL. Mounted were classed as: *Cavalry*, *Chevaliers*, *Horse-Archers*, *Irregular Horse* and *Elephants*. Foot were classed as *Archers*, *Irregulars*, *Shieldsmen* and *Shock*. These classes were sub-divided into *light*, *medium*, *heavy* and *armoured* categories.

This is a relatively jargon-free system, fairly intuitive (the sub-divisions have a simple ascending ordering function). It also controls for 'mistakes' caused by using technology to define troop behaviour. There are for example, many instances where mounted armed with bows (e.g. Lithuanians, Wallachians, some Bedouins) did not have the same battlefield function as say, Turkish horse archers.



Figure 1: Turkmen Light Horse Archers

Shattered Lances also is largely 'paper-free'. This is done by utilizing random walks (that is, mechanics weighted towards stochastic rather than deterministic processes) where feasible. Random walk processes are often used to model complex systems. Examples include extinction models in biology and forecasting models in economics. Their advantage for modelling is they do not require many 'variables' or 'factors' to be useful. For game design, this translates into bypassing the need for lots of 'factors' and also 'record keeping'. In short, almost any gaming mechanic can be mimicked by a random walk. The random walk however, has fewer hindrances (consideration of factors, judging circumstances, maintaining detailed paper records), thus giving the tabletop game more impetus.

These 'random walks' motivate for instance, the combat system. Units move between the states of being *steady*, *mildly disordered (D1)*, *severely disordered (D2)* and *broken*. The random walk has an inherent 'drift' towards cohesion loss. These different states provide more elaborate outcomes than binary 'destroyed/not destroyed' systems. These states could be tracked on the tabletop, by varying the unit's appearance.

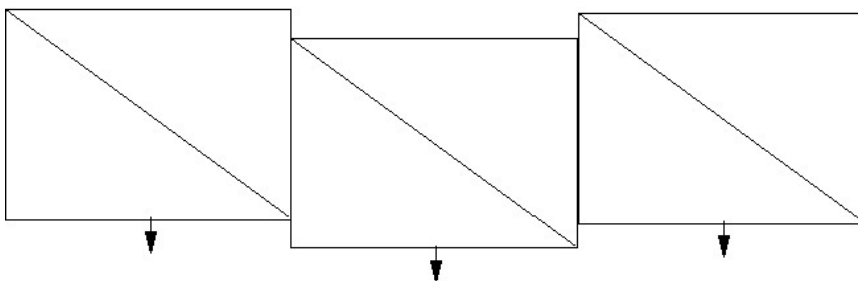


Figure 2: A Mounted Unit in Mild Disorder

The combat system was made as transparent as possible. The goal was to allow a player (or spectator) to view the table, and instantly divine the side with the combat advantage. Thus

combat modifiers only apply to explicit properties of the unit (e.g. is there supporting archers, who has more frontage?) than any opaque, intrinsic property of the unit.

‘Command and control’ is modelled as a decentralized system. This is because most command decisions were made by local commanders, responding to local threats and opportunities. This decentralization results from weak command hierarchies (such as those found in Crusader armies) or large battlefield distances. Units are assigned an initiative rating, which is the primary determinant of their ability and willingness to react to local conditions.

Units and divisions (a sub-set of an army) both have an initiative rating. For units, the initiative determines their base-chance of performing certain actions. Complex actions are penalized by modifying the base-chance. This means the ‘average’ time to complete a complex manoeuvre is more than that required to complete a simpler manoeuvre.

While some armies (like Mongols) had an explicit command hierarchy, the distances their armies ranged over (consider 1st Huns, in 1289, fought along a 21km front) frustrated generals’ abilities to influence more than local conditions. Battlefield success, even for the Mongols, depended on skilled local commanders taking the initiative and developing attacks while removed from the direct command of their CinC. Generals are able to provide some guidance to units beneath them, but this ‘command effect’ is typically weaker than other rules presume.

In SL moves are done by division with the almost certainty that players will alternate moving their constituent divisions. The order depends on each division’s initiative. This division-based sequence avoids the main problem of simultaneous moves. This problem is the requirement for ‘highly structured’ turns, to ‘regulate away’ opportunities for a ‘waiting’ player to observe and react to his or her opponent.

Nonetheless, army-level IGo/UGo systems are also problematic. They are much more artificial and introduce lengthy periods, where a player has nothing to move (as it is their opponent’s turn). SL has more of an inter-leaved movement sequence.

Generally it is advantageous to observe your opponent’s move before acting in conflict-games. SL exploits this *follower-advantage* to prompt appropriate postures for divisions. The divisions on the ‘right’ have their initiative biased, so they are more likely to have an aggressive posture.

The SL movement sequence thus keeps gamer active ‘playing’. It also provides incentives for players to imitate regularities in warfare of this era- chiefly the reliance on the right to attack with.

The rules were playtested with the aid of wargamers at the North Shore Wargames Club. Generally, I ‘overloaded’ the rules with factors, and on the basis of playtests, simplified by eliminating those factors with high levels of redundancies. This came from my belief that wargame rules should model the *main* drivers of combat. Attempting to model every gambit, ploy or tactic, however obscure, was the path to madness.

SL’s Vital Statistics

Shattered Lances uses the same basing conventions as DBx. A d10 is used for most

command tasks, while 2d6 are used for all combat situations. An ordinary playing deck of cards is used to generate terrain for the table-top, for 'fictional' battles. The use of such commonly-found mechanics is intended to make the game easy to pick-up and play.

The troop scale ranges from a low end of 1:100, to a high end of 1:250. This makes SL suitable for battles between 5,000 and 30,000 men (for one player).

Playtests have repeatedly shown that *both* players can move their armies and resolve necessary combats, inside 10 minutes per turn. DBM-sized games last 2-3 hours.

Combat is based on a base factor, to which 2d6 are added. A small number of modifiers may apply. Combat scores are completely additive, with no multiplications or ratios employed. If the final score is: 20 or more, the opponent breaks and flees; 18-19, the opponent is severely disordered; 16-17, the opponent is mildly disordered; and at less than 16, there is no change to the opponent's status.

Missile combat is separated into harassment, and close-range volleys. There is a difference in overall effect between the two shooting types. Volleys are rather more lethal, and assumed to use special armour-piercing arrows. Harassment is rarely lethal. Its main effect is to change the behaviour of a target. Harassment may disorder an opponent, but this is an outcome with a 'short memory'. If the unit makes their saving throw, they will 'forget' their disorder. Saving throws however, require units to undertake actions (such as 'halt' or 'withdraw') they would not normally select. If the saving throw is failed by an appropriate margin, the target may surge forward after their harassers- or panic.

This short memory effect, distinguishes SL from sets with 'long memories'. *Revenge* is an example of a medieval set with a long-memory. Casualties (represented by removed figures) are never forgotten by a unit. This long-memory seemed to miss the tactical function of harassment shooting. Further, missiles used for harassment were typically very light (made of reeds). They were intended to cover long distances, rather than achieve penetration. Numerous stories of arrows 'raining' down on Crusaders, and such Latin soldiers fighting with numerous arrows sticking out of their armour and clothes, is testament to the fact that casualties were really, an unlikely outcome of such missile attacks.

SL is a *unit*-based system. Units are also able to adopt a range of prescribed formations. Such possibilities are limited by the unit's overall type. Each formation type has strengths and weaknesses. Some are advantageous for attack; some may 'soften' an opponent's attack. This introduces an element of player-skill to the game, as they have to judge which formations are appropriate given the threats and opportunities their unit faces. Given the system of unit initiative however, units are not going to do what you want, as soon as you want, all of the time.



Figure 3: Ghilman in 'wave':

The wave is suited to close-attacks on an opponent, but provides a dense target vulnerable to chevaliers.

Summary

The overall aim was to generate a game that was a faithful representation of warfare of this period. This was based on the presumption, that there were key differences in the way armies were organized, deployed and employed, to the classical period. My goal was to stop designing, once the rules were producing something faithful to this period (and where the games did not resemble 'standardised' ancient tabletop games).

This is now the point the rules have reached. The decisions players have to make have been shifted to down to the unit level. Co-ordinating units to fix or prepare an opponent for an attack, becomes the focus of the tabletop strategy. Such co-ordination is easier where army doctrines of the period are followed. Player choices are expanded by elaborating both the formation types and methods of attack. Reinforcing success is much more important in a period where multiple lines are the norm. SL provides something playable, different and historical.