

# HUZZAH! IT'S THE... BATTLE OF SABIS

PART TWO, By Dean Emmerson and Howard Whitehouse



In WI274 we printed an article about the huge, center-piece game co-ordinated by Dean Emmerson for the very first Huzzah! convention held in Portland, Maine, USA. In this companion article we can read the thoughts of Dean as he speaks with Howard Whitehouse about how best to adapt Howard's *Clash of Iron* rules to the enormous battle (over 3,000 miniatures) on the tabletop.

## HOWARD WHITEHOUSE:

When the Maine Wargamers decided that they wanted to use my *Clash of Iron* rules for their 3000 figure Battle of Sabis, my immediate reaction was "That will involve making it a lot simpler."

I know, you were expecting, "These people are crazy!"

But I'm pretty crazy myself, and I've put on a lot of convention games over the years. The first thing to bear in mind is that, given the choice, you should always make the rules fit the game rather than the other way round. The rules are simply the mechanical support for what happens between large numbers of consenting adults equipped with what amounts to a bucket of toy soldiers. This is important to recognize. Trying to get complete strangers in a crowded, noisy hall who know nothing of the rules set to follow the intricacies that the designer is so

proud of – well, it isn't going to work, and nobody will be happy with the result. My initial plans for *Clash of Iron* involved a pretty small game for at most 50-100 figures per side. As things moved along, it became clear that it was becoming an army level set of rules (probably akin in scope to 2000 points WAB affairs) so some of the lower-level detail came out and more command features came in. That made it a game where an experienced player could operate a whole army of 12-15 units, but a newbie might best command 3 or 4. Even so, while the rules themselves are fairly simple, there's a lot of action/reaction between sides, and a certain amount of stuff that doesn't easily translate to "Here's your command. Advance towards the Romans. I'll explain everything as we go along. If you can get my attention, of course, because there are twenty other people playing."

What Dean and his friends needed was a much simpler version of *Clash of Iron*.

## DEAN EMMERSON:

Those of you following the Sabis project, or having read a bit about the battle, will know that Caesar had his hands full, nearly losing his VII and XII legions, as well as the army wagon trains, to the barbarians. But, he didn't. Instead, he rallied his troops and held against waves of onrushing Nervii until his other legions could march to his rescue and save the day. The battle favored the Nervii early, but then turned against them decisively once the supporting Roman forces arrived on the field. Our task was to craft a scenario that would reflect the main events of the battle, give each side a measure of satisfaction if not success, and provide the players with a fun afternoon pushing troops and rolling dice.

The Nervii start the game watching the Romans from the heavily forested banks of the River Sabis. They are waiting for the Roman wagon train to arrive at the new camp before launching their attack. The Romans begin the game with nearly half their forces set forward of the encampment which is being built by the rest of the army. The goal for the Nervii is to disrupt the Romans early and inflict awful casualties so that the subsequent waves of barbarians can overwhelm the still reeling legionaries. Both sides know that if the Romans are able to organize their legions into supporting battle lines, it will be a long day for the Nervii.

## THE MHWA

The Maine Historical Wargamer's Association is a not-for-profit corporation providing news announcements, web forums, club calendars, and gaming opportunities to wargamers throughout the state of Maine. The purpose of the MHWA is to grow the hobby of historical wargaming, promote an enthusiasm for history, and provide quality events for players from Maine and New England.

HUZZAH! 2010 was the club's first full-weekend convention, gathering clubs from New England states, and nearby Canada. The first HUZZAH! offered more than 70 historical wargames and speaking sessions.





#### HOWARD WHITEHOUSE:

First of all, they had to learn the game. I sent them the rules. Now, reading rules as laid down on paper and actually playing them aren't the same thing. While I try for an amiable, none-too-complicated style both in the writing and in the actual rules, I'd be a fool to expect that people can pick up a Beta version of a game and play it exactly as I would. I couldn't go to Maine to try out the game myself (it's a six hour drive) but Tony Reidy did. What this meant was that I spent much of a Saturday afternoon taking a succession of phone calls from Tony, answering questions.

Apparently certain wargamers in Maine can't just line up their barbarian hordes and charge like proper savage Celts. No, they wanted to manoeuvre like ballerinas around the battlefield (which *Clash of Iron* is firmly against!) and slam into one another at peculiar angles.

We got through that. Dean wrote to me with a lot of questions. Between us, we clarified some things, which allowed him to try a simpler form of some of the rules.

The Maine group tried the rules again. I don't think I had to answer the phone at all.

#### DEAN EMMERSON:

On two occasions, Tony Reidy of Wargames Factory hopped the train from North Station in Boston to Portland, Maine in order to game test *Clash of Iron* with members of the Maine Historical Wargamers Association. Howard had sent us the most current draft of the rules, which some of us even read in advance of the game test, but having Tony on hand to walk us through the rules was very helpful. That, and having Howard on the phone for live Q&A!

I dutifully kept a pad of paper on which I jotted questions and observations as I read the rules, and as we played the game. The rules were well received by the club, especially the core concepts of Ferocity and Discipline, which are the two major characteristics that determine how a unit fights. Throughout the game test sessions and scenario design sessions, Howard was a wonderful correspondent, sharing his rationale for one mechanism or rating vs. another, and skillfully deflecting my "improvements" to his game.

It should be made clear that we were really testing and exploring two different sets of rules. *Clash of Iron* as Howard and the Wargames Factory team were designing it, and a significantly more simple version of the rules for our game, which came to be known as *Clash of Iron: MASS BATTLES*. When it came to what our club was attempting to create for the Battle of Sabis, Howard was very flexible about making major revisions to the existing system.



To meet our very specific needs for the Sabis game, we made the following modifications:

1. Ferocity and Discipline ratings could not be maintained for each warband on the tabletop. There were just too many barbarian units to track, so we assigned F&D to the leader figures, and their current F&D values were then reflected on all warbands in their control.
2. Movement would be performed by the player rolling for the leader figure, moving the leader to the new location, and then moving the warbands as a cloud to within 4" of the leader figure.
3. We dropped some sub-phases of the turn.
4. We assigned a number of hits per stand value for melee resolution so that we would not need to track individual casualties. If a unit took fewer hits than this value, the hits were ignored.
5. Because F&D were being tracked for the leaders only, and then reflected upon all units in their control, we had to add a Nervii rally phase. This was necessary because a Leader's Discipline rating could be reduced to 0 when a warband lost badly in melee. We wanted the warband in question to be removed, but not the entire command! This rally phase did the trick.

The modifications made for a few odd moments, but, generally, they worked. In game testing we were able to move large numbers of barbarians quickly, and combat was resolved with minimal need for tracking anything from turn to turn.

#### HOWARD WHITEHOUSE:

Sabis is a heavy infantry battle. It consists of a seriously hyper-active Nervii army, cunningly hidden behind trees, rushing forward to overwhelm a Roman army who are mostly occupied in digging their nightly camp. There's very little in the way of skirmishers or cavalry. So, Dean and company's mission was to recreate the key elements of the battle in a dramatic way. We discussed this by email. Caesar's account suggests that, while some Roman cohorts were deployed in good order (probably to cover the construction crews) others were completely unready for battle, some without helmets and armour, some with work parties separated from their leaders. The 'right' balance would involve an element of risk that the Roman lines be overrun before their comrades were ready.

Dean referred me to another part of Caesar's account (and we should all treat Caesar's writings with a certain mistrust) where he rides up to a group of units, apparently facing outwards in something resembling a square. These legionaries had survived one of several Nervii attacks; they were demoralized, disorganized and low on surviving centurions. Caesar, of course, rallied them and filled them with fighting spirit to face the next attack. So, among the lessons from this we learned that there were times in the battle where there was a lull in the action. Attacks came in a sequence, with pauses between them.

#### DEAN EMMERSON:

Having now set the stage for our battle we wondered, what would 60,000 barbarians look like on the table? At a ratio of 1 figure to 30 men, that would be 2,000 infantry figures, plus some lights and cavalry to round out the forces. We were planning to mount our Nervii five figures per stand, six stands per warband. On a frontage of 60mm per stand, three stands wide and two stands deep, that is 180mm frontage per warband. Approximately 70 or 80 warbands, plus the lights and the cavalry, would then cover 12,600mm, or 496", which is 41.33 linear feet! Our table would only be 12' long, and the two Roman Legions would have a combined frontage of roughly 94.48", or roughly 8'. As we looked at the table and troops, it became clear that at least three waves of Nervii would need to cross the tabletop and grapple with the Roman cohorts of the VII and XII Legions over the course of eight hours.

We estimated that the game could manage six Roman players, and as many Nervii players as could surround the table. There would certainly be some people who like playing barbarians and would gladly do so all day, but we also wanted to bring others into the game who might only have time the time and interest to push Nervii for half an hour to an hour. The game needed to accommodate both groups of players.

What we needed was a much simpler version of *Clash of Iron*.

#### HOWARD WHITEHOUSE:

By the time I traveled to Portland for the actual event, Dean and his crew had the rules where they wanted them. My attitude was to accept any changes they'd made (I'm not possessive!) and to serve primarily as an observer. I wanted to see how 'Clash of Iron' worked in its Mass Battles form.

I listened to the players to see if they had any questions, and on a couple of occasions made suggestions to the game masters; nobody complained, nobody seemed confused, nobody slapped me. When I questioned one gamer I knew, he smiled and said, "I like it. It's easy!" So, thumbs up there.

It was grueling, as warband after warband crashed on the Roman wall, and the legionaries began to wear down as they were unable to withdraw to rebuild their Discipline – all their supporting cohorts were already in desperate action along the line. I think everyone was tired as the time bell was called. We had 3,000 model soldiers in battle, after all.





#### DEAN EMMERSON:

How did it go? Everyone was exhausted, absolutely wrung-out by the end of our second session. The game had not played as we had planned and game tested, but in the end the results were similar to what happened in history. By the end of the game the Romans were cracking, the cohorts having been involved in one melee after another, a seemingly endless blur of dice rolling as the Nervii came out of the forest and across the river in waves to break against the Roman wall. The Romans had been winning the individual fights but because they had all their cohorts in the fighting line, they had no opportunity to rotate fresh troops forward. There were no fresh troops! This prevented the Romans from regrouping to restore their normally high Discipline. Eventually, the Romans failed to control their troops, resulting in breaks in their line, and an opportunity for the Nervii. The Romans had not taken as many casualties as we'd expected, but the Roman's Discipline had been worn down to the point where they were breaking, or were nearly ready to break, all across the table. It would have been a great spot for the game to be at the end of the first session, or halfway through the second. What would we do differently? The Romans need to start the game with the cohorts on guard further from the fortifications. These cohorts should be under attack almost immediately when the Nervii break from the woods, fighting a desperate action to slow down the barbarians. The Roman cohorts working on the fortifications should have more difficulty forming their battle line. In our game, the Romans needed to activate in order to don their armor and weapons, and to form, but it was too easy to accomplish. The Roman player should be faced with the decision of forming to fight immediately, with a reduced armor rating, or attempting to prepare his troops for combat properly, with the associated risk that they might be impacted by the Nervii before ready. As Howard observed, we need to create more drama.

#### HOWARD WHITEHOUSE:

We debriefed after the event. The battle had taken up two game sessions, and Dean and I talked about doing a 'traveling' one session version. Dean said he thought that the Nervii should completely ignore the standard unit activation rules in Clash of Iron. I agreed, on the grounds that they were hopped up for battle the moment the game started, and didn't need any geeing along. I suggested that some of the Romans start the game in an even greater state of unreadiness for battle, even to the point of risking a Nervii victory an hour after starting the game. After all, it's a wargame; there's no reason not to just start over!

#### DEAN EMMERSON:

Our future plan for the Sabis game, now that we have recovered sufficiently to begin to think about setting it up again, is to take it on a tour of New England clubs and conventions. The collection, the tabletop terrain, the game, and the story of so many people working together to make Sabis happen is just too compelling to leave boxed up in a closet.

For more images of the Battle of Sabis table, and the Huzzah! show, visit:

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