

# THE ROMAN SHIELD AND THE SHIELD OF FAITH

Every Roman soldier carried a shield both for his own protection and as part of various unit offensive and defensive formations. The *scutum* was about 3.5 feet tall by 2.5 feet wide with a center hand-grip protected by an iron or bronze boss on the front of the shield. The *scutum* was curved to help ward off blows. Strips of wood on the back side of the shield gave it additional strength.

As an offensive weapon, it would be used to push, shove, and slam into the enemy either individually or as a line of Roman soldiers smashing violently into an enemy formation. The aim was to inflict injury and to unbalance the opponent. A quick upward thrust of the shield could catch an opponent under the chin and inflict serious damage.

As a defensive weapon, the *scutum* was effectively a kind of “pre-armor” used to deflect sword thrusts, blows from war clubs, arrows, spears, or swords. It would also provide deflective protection against acorn or almond shaped lead bullets, or *glans*, which could reach a velocity of near 80 miles per hour when launched from a sling. These two-pointed lead bullets had an effective range further than an arrow, and were harder to detect. They would be unseen until they began to wreak havoc on their targets.



In order to produce a strong, supple, and lightweight shield, the Romans used plywood. The usual pattern was to have at least three layers of thin wood held together by glue. The finished product would be covered with cloth - or in some cases light leather - and painted with the unit colors and symbols. The final touch was to rim the entire shield with either a leather band or a thin strip of bronze to keep moisture from dissolving the glue which would cause the shield to deteriorate, losing its strength and protective power.

Because of its construction, the *scutum* was both lightweight and tough. An opponent who swung his sword at a Roman shield could easily cut through the metal or leather edging, but his sword would stick in the plywood. All the Roman soldier had to do was make a quick sideways motion with his shield and the opponent would be forced to hang onto his weapon (the most immediate, but final thought). The urge to hang onto his weapon would over-ride the thought of letting go and stepping back. Thus, the Roman soldier would simultaneously thrust his shield to his left, and lunge forward with a thrust of his sword which was always carried in the right hand.

In New Testament Greek, the shield was called a *thuron*, or door. This was due to the over-all shape of the shield. In a real sense it did act as a door in that some people were kept out by its use, and others were allowed to enter as the “door” opened to allow a fellow soldier back into the ranks, or to cover him for extra protection if wounded.

One of the most famous formations used by the Romans was the *testudo*, or tortoise. In this formation there would be four soldiers holding their shields in their left hands at eye level. The four soldiers behind them would hoist their shields over their heads forming a protective shield/shell over the entire unit. Arrows shot high into the air to rain down on the formation would be useless. Essentially this would be the Roman infantry equivalent to an armored vehicle used by modern military units. At a signal the group would form up into a solid wall of

shields and advance toward the enemy with spears or swords projecting from the right side of each shield. Think of a metal studded porcupine on steroids and you have a fairly accurate picture.

During basic military instruction the new Roman troops would train with a double weight *scutum* to strengthen them and to make the regular shield seem lighter and easier to use in battle.

Romans always used the shield in their left hand, never the right. The sword was always used in the right hand, never the left. This made forming lines of shields nearly impenetrable and predictable. There was no concern of where to place the lefty in the line, because everyone held the shield the same way. Every soldier was replaceable by every other soldier in the line should there be an injury or death. Unity and uniformity was the strength of the Roman legions. No one fought as an individual. They all fought as a unit.

Key Roman terms:

<i>Scutum</i>	the Roman plywood shield called a thuron in Greek
<i>Testudo</i>	a defensive formation of shields in front of and over troops
<i>Glans</i>	an acorn or almond bi-conical lead bullet propelled by a sling



[www.biblefaces.com](http://www.biblefaces.com)

**E-mail:** [dickardis@comcast.net](mailto:dickardis@comcast.net)

**Phone:** 970-667-0866