SHIELD WALL II by Phil Sabin

INTRODUCTION

This is a simple abstract game of 6 battles between Vikings, Saxons and Celts from 871 to 1066. It updates my 1995 *Shield Wall* game from *Slingshot* 181 with ideas from my 2021 design *Legion II*. The game is played on an 11 x 9 hexgrid (used also by my 2021 tactical WW2 solitaire game *Combined Arms*), with terrain modules as shown in Figure 1. Each army has a camp in its central board edge hex, from which 10 warbands (one led by the lord) deploy on turns 1 to 3. Armies with 2 leaders still have just 1 lord. Either army wins if 4 or more enemy units rout. The *inferior* army wins if it avoids defeat for 18 turns or (except at Ashdown with its defensible ridge) if 2 or more enemy units rout. The camp and the lord's warband count as 2 units each if routed.

SEQUENCE OF PLAY

Each turn has 2 player turns, starting with the army listed first. The superior army begins its player turn with 1 fewer commands than it has unrouted warbands, and the *inferior* army with 3 fewer commands than warbands. Each army first moves and/or turns any of its warbands for 1 command each (with no extra cost for moving and then turning). For 1 command, a warband may deploy in any facing in a vacant hex next to its camp, but it may not move further that turn. After finishing all movement, the army pays 1 command for each warband which attacks an adjacent enemy unit. Warbands which move and/or turn may also attack later that player turn if enough commands remain. Warbands may move in any order and attack in any order, but all those attacking a given hex must make a single combined attack. Unused commands are lost, and warbands rout if still undeployed after their third player turn.

MOVEMENT

Units always occupy a specific hex, and warbands face a hex corner with 2 adjacent hexes in front. Camps may never move. Warbands which pay the 1 command cost may change to any facing instead of moving, or may move 1 hex into one of their 2 frontal hexes and then change into any facing. Warbands may not leave the board or enter hexes containing a wood, marsh or river or another unit of either side. To stop troops sliding past nearby enemies, warbands next to 2 *mutually adjacent* enemy units in any facing may not move or pursue into a hex next to either of them.

ATTACKS

Camps may never attack. Each warband which pays the command cost may make 1 attack per turn on an enemy unit in 1 of its 2 frontal hexes, either alone or together with other warbands attacking the same hex. The defending player rolls a die, and if the result plus the basic strength of the attacked unit exceeds (not just equals) the total modified strength of all warbands attacking the hex, there is no effect; otherwise a hit is scored. Basic strengths are 4 for the lord's warband, 3 for other warbands, and 2 for camps. Each attacking warband applies the following cumulative modifiers to its basic strength:

+1 for the lord's warband, unless in a combined attack on the enemy lord

+1 if attacking downhill, except against the enemy camp

+1 if this is the only warband attacking this hex

-1 if another friendly unit is in the attacking warband's other frontal hex

Figure 1: My original mat with 13cm hexes shows the grid shape required. The 4 possible terrain modules are keyed to one of the 6 board corners, defined as being on the right flank or to the right or left rear of the respective armies. Marshes and woods occupy the corner hex itself and all 3 adjacent hexes. Hills consist of hilltops in these 4 hexes and slopes in the 5 adjacent hexes. Hilltops are higher than slopes, which are higher than non-hill hexes. Rivers run for 5 hexes from 1 hex beyond the corner hex to 1 hex beyond the next corner hex in a clockwise direction. The scattered foliage is purely for visual effect.

Figure 2: I now play *Combined Arms* and *Shield Wall II* on a larger mat whose simpler hex centre dots are 18.5cm apart. My original 25mm figures on chunky 12.5cm collective bases are ringed by newer individually based 28mm figures. On turn 3 at Ashdown, the *inferior* Danish army has 7 commands (10-3) to continue forming up on the ridge (made with underlays of 20mm corrugated card). 3 commands are needed to bring on the warbands still undeployed, so only 4 of the 7 warbands already on the field may move and/or turn. The 4 leading warbands move outward and turn forwards, freeing space for the kings' guards and the 2 other warbands to deploy as shown. The 3 board edge warbands remain unactivated.

COMBAT RESULTS

All warbands begin fresh. A warband becomes spent if hit. Spent warbands operate normally, but they never recover, and if hit again they are routed and removed from play. If a hit would rout a unit, the defender may opt instead to make a fresh friendly warband adjacent to the unit spent, even if it is not next to the enemy. The lord's warband avoids routing only if 2 fresh warbands next to it become spent. Camps never become spent, may not absorb hits, and rout after any hit not transferred to a fresh warband. If the defending unit routs, one of its attackers may immediately pursue into its hex (without changing facing or expending further commands). Pursuit is compulsory for the *inferior* army unless all attackers are blocked by other adjacent enemies.

BATTLES

1. **Ashdown**, 8 January 871
Danes (Halfdan & Bagseg): Hills to LR & RR
Saxons (Alfred & Aethelred)

2. **Brunanburh**, Autumn 937
Vikings & Celts (Olaf & Constantine): River to LR, Wood on RF
Saxons (Athelstan): Weondun hill to LR

3. **Maldon**, August 991
Saxons (Byrhtnoth): Wood to RR
Vikings (Olaf): Marsh to LR, River Panta on RF

4. **Clontarf**, 23 April 1014
Leinstermen & Vikings (Maelmordha & Sigurd): River Liffey to LR, Tolka marsh to RR
Irish (Brian Boru & Murchad): Tomar's wood to LR

5. **Fulford**, 20 September 1066
Norsemen (Harald & Tostig): River Ouse to LR, Marsh on RF
English (Edwin & Morcar)

6. **Stamford Bridge**, 25 September 1066
English (Harold): River Derwent on RF
Norsemen (Harald & Tostig)

DESIGN NOTES

The original *Shield Wall* was an even simpler spin-off of my chess-like *Phalanx* design on ancient battles, and performed well as a participation game at shows. *Shield Wall II* adds spent status to make attack success more gradual and to allow more nuanced modifiers and give lone attackers an outside chance. The new command system creates difficult trade-offs between moving and attacking as armies seek to strike the first blows in the attritional duel. Although I retain equal strength armies, the historical victors now get a command advantage but must break their opponents with minimal losses to win the game. You may tweak commands or victory thresholds to offset differences in player skill, and if the *inferior* army wins, you may play on if desired to see which army wins a real battlefield victory. Lords are potent but vulnerable, with the restriction on their attack bonus reducing the risk of stand-offs between opposing lords. To keep things simple and avoid excessive randomness, there are no leader rally attempts or casualty checks. Allowing units to transfer hits to friends behind (as Romans may in *Legion II*) offsets their inability to pull back once committed. I have retained compulsory pursuit by the historical losers, whose opponents may even let a unit rout as at Hastings to entice their enemies to break formation and expose themselves to counterattack. With its simple focus on infantry rather than combined arms contests and with only half as many units per side as in my other systems, *Shield Wall II* is significantly quicker to play. For more details of my many other designs, Google 'Sabin wargames'.
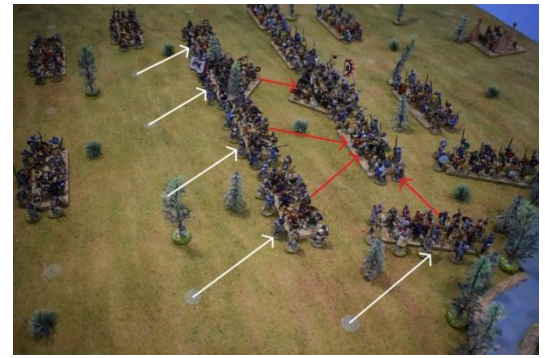
Figure 3: At Clontarf, the Irish use 5 of their 9 commands (10-1) to advance warbands on the bank of the Liffey, leaving enough commands for 4 of them to attack. Brian Boru opts to engage the enemy lords alone so as to qualify for his lord and lone unit bonuses, but on a roll of 3 the defence strength of 7 (4+3) just exceeds his attack strength of 6 (4+1+1). 3 other warbands combine against the corner enemy warband, so despite a defence roll of 5 and the middle warband's penalty for having friends in front, the totals are tied at 8 (3+5) and 8 (3+2+3). The defending warband is hit and becomes spent, which I show by placing casualty figures in front.

Figure 4: At Maldon, the exhausted Saxons have lost Byrhtnoth and 1 other warband, so they will break when a further warband is routed later this turn. However, they have routed 1 Viking warband in return, so routing 1 more will allow them to immortalise their heroic last stand. They have just 5 commands (8-3), so after advancing reserves to fill the gap, they can make only 4 attacks. The outflanked enemy warband is engaged by 2 warbands, one with friends in front, but its roll of 2 means the totals are tied at 5 (3+2) and 5 (2+3). The hit cannot be transferred to the warband behind since this is also spent, so the lord's still fresh unit absorbs it instead. The doomed Saxons make their final attacks on the now spent enemy lord, whose roll of 1 gives him only 5 (4+1) against 6 (3+3). The 1 fresh warband on his right is not enough to absorb the hit, so the Saxons win the game with 3 enemy units (1+2) routed. If play continues, the warband which moved would have to pursue, since 2 adjacent enemies block the other.