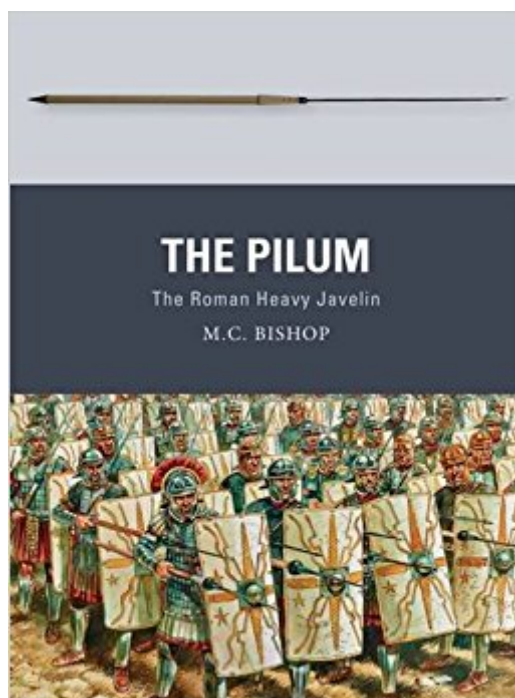


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# The Pilum: The Roman Heavy Javelin (Weapon)



## Synopsis

A heavy javelin, normally used as a shock weapon immediately before contact, the pilum was designed with a particular specialty: it could penetrate a shield and carry on into the individual behind it. Relying on mass rather than velocity, at short range a volley of pila had much the same effect on a charging enemy as musketry would in later periods. The design was not uniform, with a wide diversity of types throughout the developmental history of the weapon, but for more than four centuries it remained a vital part of the arsenal of weapons at the disposal of the Roman legionary. Drawing upon recent major finds in the Iberian Peninsula and the Balkans, as well as written records and rigorous scientific analysis, this enthralling study lifts the veil on the evolving nature of the pilum, the Roman heavy javelin that helped to conquer the known world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Writer, publisher and archaeologist M.C. Bishop is an authority of all aspects of Ancient Rome at war, with particular emphasis on arms and armor of the era. He has written, co-written, or edited dozens of books and articles on the subject, and leads tours of Hadrian's Wall and other Roman sites. Peter Dennis was born in 1950. Inspired by contemporary magazines such as Look and Learn he studied illustration at Liverpool Art College. Peter has since contributed to hundreds of books, predominantly on historical subjects, including many Osprey titles. A keen wargamer and modelmaker, he is based in Nottinghamshire, UK.

Swords, guns, bows and even exotic pole-arms have been prominently featured in books and other audio-visual depictions of weaponry. But the lowly "spear" has gotten very little air time. This fine book analyzes the history, development and use of a truly hi-tech javelin designed for extreme penetration. The meticulously researched text and extensive bibliography are most informative for those knowledgeable about the subject, and the highly readable writing style and first class illustrations make it interesting for the general reader as well. There was no other weapon quite like it in the ancient world and it richly deserves a book of its own. Especially one as good as this. Highly recommended.

M.C. Bishop has provided a detailed account of the Pilum, the heavy javelin of the Roman Legions, useful as a throwing and thrusting weapon. The narrative explains the weapon, its probable origins, and its uses, based on a veritable ransacking of the available surviving material, both written and physical. The text is supported by a variety of illustrations and diagrams. Of particular interest are the photographs of re-enactors demonstrating the use of the pilum. Highly recommended to students of the Roman Legions as a concise introduction to one of its primary weapons, along with the gladius, covered in another recent Osprey Weapon Series book.

A welcome addition to the study of Roman military equipment. Good illustrations and well written text. A concise work on a little known subject.

This booklet is about the pilum, the throwing spear of the Roman legionary. It ideally should be read as a complement to a similar book on the gladius by the same author, although each title can be read separately and both are simply excellent. Once again, the author comes up with a clear narrative well supported by good illustrations and photos, including some from re-enactors, and technical explanations about the pilum's somewhat uncertain origins, the various archaeological findings across Europe, Africa and the Middle East, its evolution and its purpose. Also included are three full pages of bibliography including all the primary sources and a collection of articles where pilums appear or are discussed. The main point made by the author is that the pilum was a shield and armour piercing weapon thrown just before contact. The objective was to wound or kill the enemy by throwing this sophisticated weapon so that it pierced his shield and incapacitated the warrior or soldier behind it. As the author states quite clearly, a secondary objective could be to encumber the opponent's shield, but this was not the main

purpose. A second point, also well-made, is to show how sophisticated this killing tool was, but also how expensive and time-consuming it was to make, with the various evolutions of pilum types through the Republic and during the first couple of centuries of the Empire emphasising some of its characteristics. A related feature was that legionaries would do their best to ensure that pilums could be re-used as much as possible. They were often easy to repair in the field and make serviceable. A third feature was the killing tool's versatility. It was mainly a throwing weapon used against enemy infantry formation, but it could also be used as a thrusting spear against both infantry and cavalry or thrown at cavalry, including heavily armed Parthian or Persian cataphracts. A further feature relates to its evolution. An excellent point made by the author is that the pilum did probably not entirely fall out of use, contrary to what some authors believed a few decades ago. Instead, it is more likely that it survived under a different name alongside lighter types of javelins. A related point was the emergence of cheaper, smaller, less cumbersome and easier to make alternatives. The *martiobarbuli* of the fourth and fifth century - a kind of heavy darts of which three to five were carried in the soldier's shield is the better known example and served a similar purpose although its range may have been shorter. Also included is a piece on the pilum's influence upon similar weapons with the Germanic *angon* used by Franks and Alamans alike being the main example. A well-deserved five stars.

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