MILITARY IDEOLOGIST OF ANCIENT EUROPE: VEGETIUS

FÁBIÁN István, Assistant Professor Ph.D.,
"Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureş

Abstract: The paper presents the work of Publius Flavius Vegetius "Epitoma de rei militaris" and its impact on later, early medieval, Renaissance and even modern military ideology in Europe. Considered to be the most accurate military handbook of Later Roman Empire, the "Epitoma" describes not only practical aspects of military arts but, also psychological aspects of military leadership. In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance philosophers and historians like Toma d' Aqunio, Flavio Biondo or Niccolo Machiavelli used Vegetius's ideas to write about their ideology concerning battle management and military leadership.

Keywords: Roman Empire, Vegetius, army, ideology, warfare.

"God - said Vegetius - inspired the legion, but for myself, I find that God inspired Vegetius."-said the Austrian Field Marshal Charles De Ligne around 1770. Indeed this short book was meant to revolutionize Roman warfare and to solve the military crisis of the Roman Empire. *Epitoma de rei militaris-Epitome of military science* by Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus. Although his manual had no use for the decaying Roman military institutions, it became "one of the most popular Latin works from Antiquity, rivaling the elder Pliny's *Historia naturalis* in the number of copies from before AD 1300. A number of early translations into vernacular languages were made, and frequently additions and adjustments were introduced to adapt the work (…)".[1]

Vegetius's book had a long lasting effect on the European military ideology during the Early Middle ages (7-9 centuries): being considered a work of capital importance in the writings of Byzantine Emperors Mauricius and Leon the VI, not to mention the Western European literates like Isidor of Seville, Beda Venerabilis, or Alcuin. Also in the 12-13th centuries his work is remembered in the books of John of Salisbury, Thoma of Aquino and later in the 14-16th century in the works of Konrad Keyser, Robertus Valturius, Flavio Biondo and, of course, Nicolo Machiavelli[2]

About the author little is known: he was born at the middle of the 4th century A.D. somewhere in the Western part of the Empire (probably in Spain) and he was designated by the great majority of the manuscripts as: *vir illustris comes*[3]. Beside the *Epitome* he wrote a less known book entitled *Mulomedicina* dedicated to the breeding of horses and mules. What is certainly sure is that he was Christian: in many times in his *Epitome* uses the names of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit. That is why he was regarded later as the perfect source of the renaissance of the Roman military ideas in the Middle Ages.

[1] Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science. Translated with notes and introduction by N.P. Milner, Liverpool University Press, 1993,p.6
[2] Kákoci Balázs: Vegetius: Epitoma de rei militaris. „Epitoma" hatása a középkori (had)tudományban, Diss, Debreceni Egyetem, Bölcsészettudományi kar, 2O12, passim
[3] Milner. Op.cit. p.XXII Kakoci op.cit. p.28

BDD-A23455 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:42:01 UTC)

The *Epitome* was realized during the complete decay of Roman military structures in the 4th century as a remainder of the ancient military virtues. Unfortunately the book never was used as a military manual by the Roman military leadership. In the 4th -5th centuries the Roman army underwent significant changes. The legions and *auxilia* of the principate were now two out of a wide array of unit types[4]. Further development was forward specialization of function or armament which can be seen occurring during the third century and which is reflected in the profusion of units bearing names such as *lanciarii, balistarii, clibanarii, cetrati* and *funditores*.[5]

One of the most important sources for the military organization of the Later Empire, *Notitia Dignitatum* shows that by the end of the century (3rd century A.D.) there were five field armies in the eastern half of the empire, each under the command of a *magister militum*, they comprised two praesental armies based near Constantinople, and three regional armies of the East, Thrace and Illyricum.

For the western half of the empire, the *Notitia* reveals a rather different picture. On the other hand, the command structure is more centralized, while on the other, there are a larger number of smaller regional armies. Thus there is one *magister peditum praesentalis* in overall command. The largest of the regional armies in Gaul was under a *magister equitum* (…) while other smaller armies in Africa, Tingitania, Spain, Britain and Illyricum were commanded by *comites*, also under the *magister praesentalis*".[6] So there was a tendency toward reducing the number of troops in an army a tendency which was present in the 5th century and it will be a model for medieval warfare. Considering the human resources of the late imperial army, the appeal to "barbarians" became accentuated especially after the treaty of 382 between Theodosius and the Goths. Barbarians trained in the Roman way, and thus considered to be romanised, could be distributed among other units, or could be kept together, and organized as a regular unit sent to remote areas where the possibility of desertion was very small.

There were two cases of recruitment: a defeated tribe settled inside the Empire (*deditici*) or, they were allowed to cross the frontier and land was given to them. A common feature of both aspects was the stipulation that the tribesmen must defend the sections of the frontier where they had been granted lands, or that they must contribute troops for the army.[7] In the fourth century the number of officers and soldiers of Germanic origin had a percentage never known before. "Even the overall consolidation of the empire following the establishment of the Tetrarchy did little to slow this development (…) A majority of scholars have described this process as "barbarization", a term that is intended to signify that the army of the Principate underwent a significant change through the mass recruitment of barbarian mercenaries.[8] Many scholars argued that, the assimilation of barbarian tactics and equipment had reduced the strategic and tactic advantage of the Roman army moreover; the use of *bucellarii* had destroyed the "state's monopoly of the use of military force".[9]

[4].Averil Cameron, Peter Garnsey (ed,), *The Cambridge Ancient History.* Volume XII, The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425. Cambridge University Press, 2006.p.211. (*C.A.H. XII.* in the following) p.214
[5] *C.A.H. XII* p.215
[6] *C.A.H. XII* p.216
[7] Southern Pat – Dixon Karen, *Late Roman Army,* Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996, p.47
[8] Paul Erdkamp(ed.) *A companion to the Roman Army Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2007 p.498*
[9] Ibidem p.498

BDD-A23455 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:42:01 UTC)

This was the state of the army which was meant to be reformed the Vegetius's *Epitome*. The work itself, using all what ancient European military ideology could provide is structured in IV Books presenting the phases of Roman military system from recruitment, training, structure of armed services, the battle order, logistics, castrametation, fortifications, siege and defense tactics, and naval warfare. Of course the wide range of military aspects approached by Vegetius is too large for this paper that is why three aspects – actually the most important for every army are emphasized: discipline, the quality of the troops and their training and, the duties and qualities of the commanders.

Discipline of the troops was highly appreciated by the author who considered that continuous training in military arts is the receipt for conquering the entire *orbis terranum:* "*We see that the Roman people conquered the world by no other means than training in the military arts, discipline in the camp, and practice in warfare. How else could small numbers of Romans have succeeded against hordes of Gauls? How could they with their small stature have dared to face the tall Germans? It is clear that the Spanish were superior to our men not only in numbers but also in bodily strength. Often we were no match for the Africans in treachery or money. No one doubts that the Greeks surpass us in the arts and wisdom. But against all of them we triumphed by selecting recruits carefully, by teaching them the principles, so to speak, of war, by toughening them by daily exercise, by teaching them in advance through maneuvers in the field everything that can happen on the march and in battle, and by punishing severely the indolent. For knowledge of military science fosters courage in battle. No one is afraid to perform what he is confident that he has learned well*"[10]

Of course the quality of men performing the act of conquering is also very important. That is why Vegetius emphasizes the fact that a good recruit:*" ought to have alert eyes, should carry his head erect, have a broad chest, muscular shoulders, strong arms, long fingers, a small waist, slim buttocks, and legs and feet that are not fleshy but sinewy and strong."*[11] Interesting, the fact that this description of the ideal recruit has much to do with the racial and medical prejudices of the time: the author presumed that recruits from the temperate and cold areas are far better soldiers than those from hotter areas.

Likewise he preferred men from the rural areas which were much better accustomed with hard labor than those from urban areas (and of course we are dealing with the heritage of the Greek hoplite ideal of the peasant-soldier).[12] As for their training Vegetius insists on the importance of the military step: *For on the march and in the battle line nothing should be maintained more carefully than that all the troops should keep in step as they move. This can be achieved only if through repeated practice they learn to maneuver quickly and in formation. An army that is split up and in disorder is always in grave danger from the enemy. So, twenty miles (*around 30 km*) should be completed with the military step* (militaris gradus) *in five hours, at least in summer. With the fuller step* (plenus gradus), *which is quicker, twenty-four miles* (around 36 km) *should be completed in the same time. If you add anything to this it amounts to running, for which a distance cannot be defined. But recruits should especially be accustomed to running too, so that they can charge the enemy with greater*

[10] Brian Campbell(ed), *Greek and Roman military writers. Selected readings*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004,p.46
[11] Ibidem p.47.
[12] Adrian Goldsworthy *Totul despre armata romană,* Enciclopedia Rao, Bucuresti, 2008, p.77

BDD-A23455 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:42:01 UTC)

force, occupy important positions quickly when the need arises, or get there first when the enemy aims to do the same, travel fast on scouting missions and return even faster, and more easily catch a fleeing enemy. The soldiers should also be trained in jumping so that they can leap over ditches and surmount any height blocking the way, and consequently when difficulties of this kind appear, they can cross them without trouble".[13]

As for the commanding officers – more precisely the generals (*legatus legionis*), Vegetius has some very strict ideas: beside the physical aspects: not to set base in unhealthy regions, or not to do long do unnecessarily long marches in hot areas or during the night in winter, he stresses out the importance of the psychological aspects: *The general should find out carefully what the soldiers are thinking on the very day on which they are going to fight. For confidence or fear can be recognized from their expression, words, movement, and gestures. Do not be entirely confident if it is the recruits who want battle, for battle is sweet to the inexperienced. You will understand that you must postpone battle if experienced soldiers are afraid to fight. However, soldiers' courage and fighting spirit grow through the advice and encouragement of their commander, especially if they receive such an account of the coming battle that they expect to obtain an easy victory. Then the general should point out the cowardice or blunders of the enemy, and remind the army if they have ever been beaten by us before. He should also say things calculated to inspire hatred of the enemy in the minds of the soldiers by stirring up their fury and indignation.*[14] In the same matter, Vegetius stresses out the importance of what we today may call as "psychological warfare": the general must know how to set ambushes, how to organize offensive and defensive actions, and, which is very important, how a general *"should organize his march so that while being fully prepared himself he can attack the enemy while they are eating or sleeping or at least taking their rest, when they are relaxed, unarmed and without their boots, with their horse unsaddled. In an attack of this kind his soldiers can build up their confidence. "*[15] An all because a good commander must know that if somebody wants peace must prepare for war *sic vis pacem para bellum* and also he must understand that *courage is of greater value than numbers.*[16]

As mentioned before, Vegetius had a great impact on later, medieval, military ideology: to mention only the most important ones, Isidore of Seville (for the first time in post-Roman Europe) in his *Etimologiae* (Books IX and XVIII) describes the training of the recruits and the organization of the legion. Alcuin also in his *De fide sancte et individuae trinitatis III*[17] describing the characteristics of a good emperor, refers to The *Epitome*.

Tomas d'Aquino wrote in 1267 *De regno ad regem Cypri* an incomplete work of political ideology dedicated to king Hugo II of Cyprus. In the first 16 chapters the author is preoccupied by the theoretical aspect of the kingship (types of power, the positive aspects of the absolute power, the relation between king and Christianity etc.). In the second book, speaking about the establishment of a kingdom d'Aquino specifies: "*As Vegetius asserted < the greatest nations, the greatest kings considered the greatest glory the establishment of new cities or the enlargement of the older ones > in concordance with the Holy Scriptures where*

[13] Campbell, *op.cit.* p.48
[14] Ibidem p.86
[15] Ibidem p143
[16] Ibidem p.144
[17] apud Kakoci, op.cit. p.103

BDD-A23455 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:42:01 UTC)

is said by the Wise Man [Ben Sira] that a cities name is in accordance with its founder. For instance the name of Rome would be not known if wouldn't be for Romulus."[18] Like Vegetius, Tomas d'Aqiuno considered that the best place to establish a kingdom is a temperate climate because the men from that area ar far better soldiers like those form hot areas.

The most important inheritance of Vegetius's ideas is seen in the works of Flavio Biondo (1392-1463) and Niccolo Machiavelli. The first, author of works like *Pulcher tractatus, Italia illustrate, Historiarum ab inclination Romanorum Imperii decades,* emphasizes in his book *De Roma triumphante* the positive aspects of the ancient Roman military and administrative ruler ship. Biondo rejects the *condotta* service and firmly believed that the town militias would be reorganized after the model provided by the ancient legions. Of course his sources are Livy, Varro, Festus, Caesar but also uses Vegetius when he underlines the fact that the Italian troops from the 15th century lacked the discipline and training presented in the *Epitome.* [19] Biondo also quotes massively from Vegetius when he describes the ideal recruit and of course in describing the rules of engagement in the battles (interesting fact is that Boetius do not mention nothing about use of firearms, actually he considered them as not worthy for an army of citizens).

At last but not least, Niccolo di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (1469 - 1527), in 1520 wrote his *Art of war- Sette libri dell'arte della Guerra* in which he presents, in a form of the Socratic dialogue, his ideas about the destiny of warfare in his time[20]. "Practically, the book is a Renaissance time reinterpretation of the Roman art of war, considered to be actual in the 16th century as it was in the Antiquity".[21] Machiavelli never mentions Vegetius's name but, the way he speaks about the conscription of the citizens (the difference is that Machiavelli is not discriminative about the region of origin of the recruits, emphasizing the fact that, through rough training and practice anybody can be a good solider), duty of commanders, and organization of the military in battalions (6000 troops, like a Roman legion). Of course, like Biondo, Machiavelli does not agree with the *condottieri* system, and stresses out the importance of a disciplined, well-trained citizen militia force. This should be organized by Roman standards: a large infantry unit, whose soldiers are using modern weapons (firearms) but Roman tactics. Machiavelli's work, although criticized because he underestimated the increasing role of the artillery, opened the way to the re-interpretation of Vegetius in the 16th and 15th centuries especially in Nederland and Sweden, where reformers like Mauritz van Nassau and king Gustav Adolf II understood that the basics of modern military lies in the constant training, discipline, cooperation between different classes of weapons (infantry, cavalry, artillery). Practically, through Machiavelli, Vegetius[22] entered in the ideology of warfare in European history, inspiring continuously military elites: Clausewitz, Napoleon, Moltke, DeGaulle, Churchill, Guderian all understood the fact that the secret of a good battle management is the permanent readiness of an army from all points of view (logistics and morale).

[18] Apud ibidem. p.154
[19] Ibidem p. 243
[20] Niccolo Machiavelli, *Arta razboiului*, Editura Antet, Bucuresti, 2010, passim
[21] Kakcoczi , op. cit. p.248

BDD-A23455 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:42:01 UTC)

Bibliography

Adrian Goldsworthy *Totul despre armata romană,* Enciclopedia Rao, Bucuresti, 2008
Averil Cameron, Peter Garnsey (ed,), *The Cambridge Ancient History.* Volume XII, The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
Brian Campbell(ed), *Greek and Roman military writers. Selected readings*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004
Paul Erdkamp(ed.) *A companion to the Roman Army* Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2007
Kákoci Balázs: Vegetius: Epitoma de rei militaris. „Epitoma" hatása a középkori (had)tudományban, Diss, Debreceni Egyetem, Bölcsészettudományi kar, 2O12
Niccolo Machiavelli, *Arta razboiului,* Editura Antet, Bucuresti, 2010
Southern Pat – Dixon Karen, *Late Roman Army,* Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996
Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science. Translated with notes and introduction by N.P. Milner, Liverpool University Press, 1993

BDD-A23455 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:42:01 UTC)