

BELLARIA CIII



Publius (Flavius) Vegetus Renatus (late 4th C AD)

Epitoma Rei Militaris (i)

By kind permission of Liverpool University Press, these extracts are taken from *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science* translated, with introduction and notes dealing with the many problems, by N.P. Milner (1993). To buy the print book, go to <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/books/id/53421/>

Introduction

Vegetius composed two works: the *Epitome of Military Science* and a work on equine and bovine ailments. All that we know about him derives from these two works. He was not a soldier but a high-standing bureaucrat; and he was a Christian

who believed that God and the Emperor worked hand in hand (the emperor in question was probably Theodosius I, d. AD 395).

Nor was Vegetius a historian. His *Epitome* is not a history of the Roman army but a pick'n'mix selection of military lore, put together in accordance with his own prejudices from many earlier sources (e.g. Cato's *de re militari* and Frontinus' *Strategemata*), and designed to remedy what he saw as the current weaknesses of the Roman army—and this at a time when the western Empire was under threat from the Germanic invasions which would eventually bring it to an end. The fight, in his view, must be carried on by Roman legionaries and without the help of mercenaries, whose numbers in the Roman army had continued to grow.

His *Epitome*, which he composed off his own bat for the emperor, was wildly popular in the early Middle Ages but gradually fell out of favour when authors like Machiavelli began to write serious history about ancient warfare, firmly based on writers like Livy and the newly available Greek historian Polybius (*Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, published 1531).

That said, however much of a mish-mash, it is full of interest.

1. That the Romans conquered all peoples solely because of their military training.



Ancient Gauls

1. For we see no other explanation of the conquest of the world by the Roman People than their drill-at-arms, camp-discipline and military expertise. How else could small Roman forces have availed against hordes of Gauls? How could small stature have ventured to confront Germanic height? That the Spaniards surpassed our men not only in numbers but in physical strength is obvious. To Africans' treachery and money we were always unequal. No one doubted that we were surpassed by the arts and intelligence of the Greeks.

nulla enim alia re uidemus populum Romanum orbem subegisse terrarum nisi armorum exercitio, disciplina castrorum usuque militiae. quid enim aduersus

Gallorum multitudinem paucitas Romana ualuisset? quid aduersus Germanorum proceritatem breuitas potuisset audere? Hispanos quidem non tantum numero sed et uiribus corporum nostris praestitisse manifestum est; Afrorum dolis atque diuitiis semper impares fuimus; Graecorum artibus prudentiaque nos uinci nemo dubitauit.

1. But what succeeded against all of them was careful selection of recruits, instruction in the rules, so to speak, of war, toughening in daily exercises, prior acquaintance in field practice with all possible eventualities in war and battle, and strict punishment of cowardice. Scientific knowledge of warfare nurtures courage in battle. No one is afraid to do what he is confident of having learned well. A small force which is highly trained in the conflicts of war is more apt to victory: a raw and untrained horde is always exposed to slaughter.

sed aduersus omnia profuit tironem sollerter eligere, ius, ut ita dixerim, armorum docere, cotidiano exercitio roborare, quaecumque euenire in acie atque proeliis possunt, omnia in campestri meditatione praenoscerere, seuere in desides uindicare. scientia enim rei bellicae dimicandi nutrit audaciam: nemo facere metuit quod se bene didicisse confidit. etenim in certamine bellorum exercitata paucitas ad uictoriam promptior est, rudis et indocta multitudo exposita semper ad caedem.

2. From what regions recruits should be levied.

2. The order of our subject demands that the first part should treat of the provinces and peoples from which recruits should be levied. Now it is common knowledge that cowards and brave men are born in all places. However, nation surpasses nation in warfare, and climate exerts an enormous influence on the strength of minds and bodies. In this connexion let us not omit what has won the approval of the most learned men.

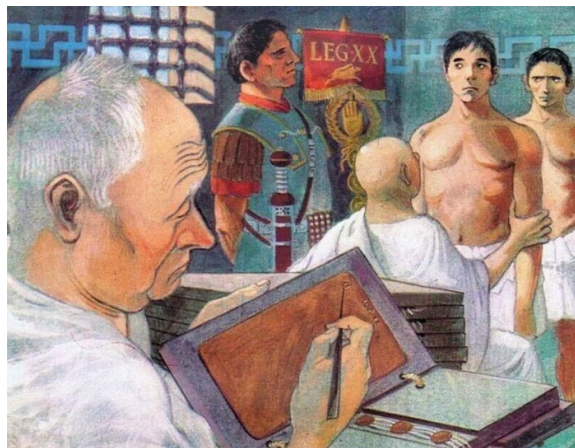
rerum ordo deposcit, ut, ex quibus prouinciis uel nationibus tirones legendi sint, prima parte tractetur. constat quidem in omnibus locis et ignauos et strenuos nasci. sed tamen et gens gentem praecedit in bello et plaga caeli ad robur non tantum corporum sed etiam animorum plurimum ualet; quo loco ea, quae a doctissimis hominibus conprobata sunt, non omittamus.

2. They tell us that all peoples that are near the sun, being parched by great heat, are more intelligent but have less blood, and therefore lack steadiness and confidence to fight at close quarters, because those who are conscious of having less blood are afraid of wounds. On the other hand the peoples of the north, remote from the sun's heat, are less intelligent, but having a superabundance of blood are readiest for

wars. Recruits should therefore be raised from the more temperate climes. The plenteousness of their blood supplies a contempt for wounds and death, and intelligence cannot be lacking either which preserves discipline in camp and is of no little assistance with counsel in battle.

omnes nationes, quae uicinae sunt soli, nimio calore siccitas, amplius quidem sapere, sed minus habere sanguinis dicunt ac propterea constantiam ac fiduciam comminus non habere pugnandi, quia metuunt uulnera qui exiguum sanguinem se habere nouerunt. contra septentrionales populi, remoti a solis ardoribus, inconsultiores quidem, sed tamen largo sanguine redundantes, sunt ad bella promptissimi. tirones igitur de temperatioribus legendi sunt plagis, quibus et copia sanguinis suppetat ad uulnerum mortisque contemptum et non possit deesse prudentia, quae et modestiam seruat in castris et non parum prodest in dimicatione consiliis.

3. Whether recruits from the country or from the city are more useful.



3. The next question is to consider whether a recruit from the country or from the city is more useful. On this subject I think it could never have been doubted that the rural populace is better suited for arms. They are nurtured under the open sky in a life of work, enduring the sun, careless of shade, unacquainted with bathhouses, ignorant of luxury, simple-souled, content with a little, with limbs toughened to endure every kind of toil, and for whom wielding iron, digging a fosse and carrying a burden is what they are used to from the country. Sometimes however necessity demands that city-dwellers also be conscripted. These, when they have given in their names for military service, must first learn to work, drill, carry a burden and endure heat and dust; they must adopt a moderate, rural diet, and camp now under the sky, now under tents.

sequitur, ut, utrum de agris an de urbibus utilior tiro sit, requiramus. de qua parte numquam credo potuisse dubitari aptiorem armis rusticam plebem, quae sub diuo t in labore nutritur, solis patiens, umbrae neglens, balnearum nescia, deliciarum ignara, simplicis animi, paruo contenta, duratis ad omnem laborum tolerantiam membris, cui gestare ferrum, fossam ducere, onus ferre consuetudo de rure est. interdum tamen necessitas exigit etiam urbanos ad arma compelli, qui ubi nomen dedere militiae, primum laborare, decurrere, portare pondus et solem pulueremque ferre condiscant, parco uictu utantur et rustico, interdum sub diuo interdum sub papilionibus commerentur.



3. Only then should they be trained in the use of arms and, if a long campaign is in prospect, they should be detained for considerable periods on outpost-duty and be kept far away from the attractions of the city, so that by this means their physical and mental vigour may be increased. It is undeniable that after the City was founded the Romans always set out for war from town. But in those days they were not enervated by luxury. Youth would wash off sweat collected in running and field exercises, swimming in the Tiber. The same man was both warrior and farmer, merely changing the style of equipment. This was so far true that by all accounts Quinctius Cincinnatus was offered the dictatorship.

tunc demum ad usum erudiantur armorum, et, si longior expeditio emergit, in agrariis plurimum detinendi sunt proculque habendi a ciuitatis inlecebris, ut eo modo et corporibus eorum robur accedat et animis. nec infitiandum est post urbem conditam Romanos ex ciuitate profectos semper ad bellum; sed tunc nullis deliciis frangebantur, (sudorem cursu et campestri exercitio collectum iuuentus natans abluebat in Tiberi) idem bellator, idem agricola, genera tantum mutabat armorum; quod usque adeo uerum est, ut aranti Quinctio Cincinnato dictaturam constet oblatam.

4. At what age recruits should be approved?

4. Next let us examine at what age it is appropriate to levy soldiers. Indeed if ancient custom is to be retained, everyone knows that those entering puberty should be brought to the levy. For those things are taught not only more quickly but even more completely which are learned from boyhood. Secondly military alacrity, jumping and running should be attempted before the body stiffens with age. For it is speed which, with training, makes a brave warrior. Adolescents are the ones to recruit, just as Sallust says: 'Directly as soon as youth was able to endure war, it learned military practice in camp through labour.' For it is better that a trained young man should complain that he has not yet reached fighting age, than that he should regret that it has passed.

nunc, qua aetate milites legi conueniat, exploremus. et quidem, si antiqua consuetudo seruanda est, incipientem puberatem ad dilectum cogendam nullus ignorat; non enim tantum celerius sed etiam perfectius inbuuntur quae discuntur a pueris. deinde militaris alacritas, saltus et cursus ante temptandus est, quam corpus aetate pigrescat. uelocitas enim est quae percepto exercitio strenuum efficit bellatorem. adulescentes legendi sunt, sicut ait Sallustius 'iam simul ac iuuentus belli patiens erat, in castris per laborem usum militiae discebat.' melius enim est, ut exercitatus iuuenis causetur aetatem nondum aduenisse pugnandi, quam doleat praeterisse.

4. He should also have the time to learn everything. For the art of war does not seem a slight or trivial matter, whether you wish to train a cavalryman, a foot-archer or a *scutatus*, or teach all the routines and all the gestures of the *armatura*, not to desert one's post, not to disorder the ranks, to hurl the javelin with a true aim and great force, to know how to dig a fosse and plant stakes in scientific fashion, handle a shield and deflect oncoming missiles with oblique movements, avoid a blow intelligently and inflict one boldly. For this recruit so trained, fighting against all manner of enemies in battle will be no terror but a delight.

habeat etiam spatium uniuersa discendi. neque enim parua aut leuis ars uideatur armorum, siue equitem siue peditem sagittarium uelis inbuere siue scutatam, armaturae numeros omnes omnesque gestus docere, ne locum deserat, ne ordines turbet, ut missile et destinato ictu et magnis uiribus iaciat, ut fossam ducere, sudes scienter figere nouerit, tractare scutum et obliquis ictibus uenientia tela deflectere, plagam prudenter uitare, audacter inferre. huic taliter insituto tironi pugnare aduersum quoslibet hostes in acie formido non erit sed uoluptas.

5. At what height recruits should be approved.

The height of recruits was, I know, always required to be up to the 'standard', so that men of 6 ft. (= 5 ft. 11) or at least 5 ft. 10 in. (= 5 ft. 9in) were approved for the *alares* cavalry or the first cohorts of the legions. But in those days the population was greater, and more followed a military career. For civilian careers did not then take away the better class of youth. So if necessity demands, it is right to take account not so much of stature as of strength. Even Homer himself is not wanting as a witness, since he records that Tydeus was small in body but a strong warrior.

proceritatem tironum ad incommam scio semper exactam, ita ut VI pedum uel certe V et X unciarum inter alares equites uel in primis legionum cohortibus probarentur. sed tunc erat amplior multitudo, et plures militiam sequebantur aramatam; necdum enim ciuilis pars florentiorem abducebat iuuentutem. si ergo necessitas exigit, non tam staturae rationem conuenit habere quam uirium. et ipso Homero teste non fallitur, qui Tydeum minorem quidem corpore sed fortiroem armis fuisse significat.

6. That the potentially better recruits are recognized at selection from the face and physical posture.

6. He who is charged with carrying out the levy procedure should take great pains to choose those able to fill the part of soldiers from the face, from the eyes, from the whole conformation of the limbs. For quality is indicated not only in men, but even in horses and dogs, by many points, as is understood in the teaching of the most learned men. Even in bees, the Mantuan author says, it is to be observed:

'Two kinds there are, the one better, distinguished in face and bright with ruddy scales; the other type is shaggy and inert, and drags along its fat, cowardly paunch.'

sed qui dilectum acturus est uehementer intendat, ut ex uultu, ex oculis, ex omni conformatione membrorum eos eligat, qui implere ualeant bellatores. namque non tantum in hominibus sed etiam in equis et canibus uirtus multis declaratur indiciis, sicut doctissimorum hominum disciplina comprehendit; quod etiam in apibus Mantuanus auctor dicit esse seruandum:

'nam duo sunt genera, hic melior, insignis et ore et rutilis clarus squamis, ille horridus alter desidia latamque trahens inglorius aluum'.

6. So let the adolescent who is to be selected for martial activity have alert eyes, straight neck, broad chest, muscular shoulders, strong arms, long fingers, let him be

small in the stomach, slender in the buttocks, and have calves and feet that are not swollen by surplus fat but firm with hard muscle. When you see these points in a recruit, you need not greatly regret the absence of tall stature. It is more useful that soldiers be strong than big.

sit ergo adulescens Martio operi deputandus uigilantibus oculis, erecta ceruice, lato pectore, umeris musculosis, ualentibus brachiis, digitis longioribus, uentre modicus, exilior clunibus, suris et pedibus non superflua carne distentis sed neruorum duritia collectis. cum haec in tirone signa deprehenderit, proceritatem non magno opere desideres. utilius est enim fortes milites esse quam grandes.

7. Of what trades recruits should be selected or rejected.



7. The next matter is for us to examine from what crafts soldiers should be selected or rejected utterly. Fishermen, fowlers, pastry cooks, weavers and all who shall seem to have dealt in anything pertaining to textile-mills should in my view be banned far from camp. Masons, blacksmiths, wainwrights, butchers and stag- and boar-hunters may usefully be joined to the military. This is a matter on which the safety of the entire state depends, that recruits be levied who are outstanding both in physique and moral quality. The strength of the realm and the foundation of the Roman Empire depend on the initial examination of the levy. Let it not be thought an unimportant duty, nor one which may be delegated to anyone, anywhere.

sequitur, ut, cuius artis uel eligendi uel penitus repudiandi sint milites, indagemus. piscatores aucupes dulciarios linteones omnesque, qui aliquid tractasse uidebuntur ad gynacea pertinens, longe arbitror pellendos a castris; fabros ferrarios carpentarios, macellarios et ceruorum aprorumque uenatores conuenit sociare militiae. et hoc est in quo totius reipublicae salus uertitur, ut tirones non tantum corporibus sed etiam animis praestantissimi diligentur; uires regni et Romani

nominis fundamentum in prima dilectus examinatione consistunt. nec leue hoc putetur officium aut passim quibuscumque mandandum

7. It is well-known that among his considerable range of qualities Sertorius was praised by the ancient (writers) for this in particular. For the youth in whose hands is to be placed the defence of provinces, the fortune of battles, ought to be of outstanding breeding if numbers suffice, and morals. Decent birth makes a suitable soldier, while a sense of shame prevents flight and makes him a victor. For what benefit is there in training a coward, of his spending several years' service in camp? An army never makes fast progress if the selection procedure in approving recruits has been awry.

quod apud ueteres inter tam uaria genera uirtutum in Sertorio praecipue constat esse laudatum. luuentus enim, cui defensio prouinciarum, cui bellorum est committenda fortuna, et genere, si copia suppetat, et moribus debet excellere. honestas enim idoneum militem reddit, uerecundia, dum prohibet fugere, facit esse uictorem. quid enim prodest, si exerceatur ignauus, si pluribus stipendiis moretur in castris? numquam exercitus proficit tempore, cuius in probandis tironibus claudicarit electio.

7. And as we know from practice and experience, it is from this cause that so many defeats have been inflicted on us everywhere by our enemies, whilst during long years of peace the levying of soldiers has been neglected, while all those of decent birth have been pursuing civilian careers, while recruits levied from landowners have through the corruption or neglect of those granting approval been joined to the army only when they were of the sort their lords disdained to keep. So suitable recruits should be levied with great care by great men.

et quantum usu experimentisque cognouimus, hinc tot ubique ab hostibus inlatae sunt clades, dum longa pax militem incuriosius legit, dum honestiores quique ciuilia sectantur officia, dum indicti possessoribus tirones per gratiam aut dissimulationem probantium tales sociantur armis, quales domini habere fastidiunt. a magnis ergo uiris magnaue diligentia idoneos eligi conuenit iuniores.

Next week: Vegetius on training recruits