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THE *DE RE MILITARI* OF VEGETIUS.
HOW DID THE MIDDLE AGES TREAT
A LATE ROMAN TEXT ON WAR?

The *Epitoma rei militaris* or, as it was more generally called, the *De re militari* of Flavius Vegetius Renatus was the most frequently cited and authoritative text on military affairs known to the Middle Ages. Quoted (quite often, probably, from collections of excerpts) when such matters were discussed or referred to in many forms of literature* ⁽¹⁾, it was to play a significant role in the creation of medieval military culture which slowly emerged during the period. It would also play an important part in developing thinking about the role to be played in war by military institutions, not least by the army itself, whose place and function in society was to be influenced by the way that men read and interpreted the text and what it had to say about the army in Roman times.

Vegetius, who lived in the late fourth-early fifth century (this making him a contemporary of such great figures as Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine) was a senior official at the imperial court, a man of many interests who was also the author of another text known to the Middle Ages, the *Mulomedicina*, which makes him into a veterinary specialist as well as a military one! It was probably in the late fourth century, at a time of severe crisis in the Roman world, that he offered the emperor

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⁽¹⁾ These include spiritual literature and sermons; works on political and social thought; chronicles; histories; and chivalric literature.

some ideas regarding reform of the army, ideas which appealed to the emperor who ordered Vegetius to write more⁽²⁾. In the form which has come down to us, the *De re militari* consists of four books which dealt, broadly, with the following aspects of military activity: the recruitment and training of the young soldier, or *tiro*, (Book I); the administration and organisation of the old Roman army as it had been in better times (Book II); preparation for battle, the steps to be taken by the commander in advance of a confrontation, in short a guide to the essential characteristics of successful leadership (Book III); and, finally, advice on siege warfare and on war at sea (Book IV), the last one sometimes being divided into two to make a total of five books⁽³⁾.

Such was the work of which about 220 unabridged manuscripts survive to this day⁽⁴⁾. These include a few seventh-century folios⁽⁵⁾ to manuscripts copied around 1500 or later⁽⁶⁾, by which time the age of print had arrived. Of these manuscripts, some date from the ninth and tenth centuries, more from the twelfth century and then yet more from each century thereafter. This places Vegetius in the top four or five of the list of classical authors whose works were copied in the Middle Ages. It is difficult to deny that the *De re militari* was a popular text among manuscript-owning groups and individuals.

Who were these owners? In the earliest days they were frequently monastic communities or bishops. The fact should cause little surprise, for the clergy will have felt a strong affinity to many of the work's

⁽²⁾ The latest attempt to date the work is that of M. B. Charles, *Vegetius in context. Establishing the date of the Epitoma rei militaris*, Stuttgart, 2007, who takes account of the earlier literature on the subject.

⁽³⁾ Latin text: *Vegetius. Epitoma rei militaris*, ed. M. D. Reeve, Oxford, 2004; English trans.: *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*, trans. N. R. Milner, 2nd rev. edn., Liverpool, 2004; Portuguese trans.: *Vegécio, Compêndio da Arte da Guerra*, trans. J. G. Monteiro & J. E. Braga, Coimbra, 2009.

⁽⁴⁾ For the surviving manuscripts, see C. R. Shrader, "A handlist of extant manuscripts containing the *De re militari* of Flavius Vegetius Renuatus", *Scriptorium*, vol. XXXIII, 1979, pp. 280-305; M. D. Reeve, "The transmission of Vegetius's *Epitoma rei militaris*", *Aevum*, vol. LXXIV, 2000, pp. 243-354; *Epitoma*, ed. Reeve, p. xiv, n. 27.

⁽⁵⁾ Biblioteca Apostólica Vaticana [BAV], Reg. lat. 2077.

⁽⁶⁾ For example, Prague, National Library, Ms. XIII G. 2 (2369), or Venice, Bibl. Naz. di S. Marco, Ms. 4333.

exhortations and recommendations. The *tiro* (or recruit) preparing to become a *miles* (or fully trained soldier) was the military equivalent of the novice training for ordination as a monk. The life of order, discipline, training, submission to authority was common to both soldier and monk. Each was preparing himself for conflict: the soldier against a real, physical enemy, who must be defeated; the monk against a spiritual enemy, often within himself, an enemy who could be purged and driven out through life-long training in the use of spiritual weapons, notably prayer. So we find Alcuin (and in the eighth century he is not the first) citing Vegetius as he exhorts his readers and correspondents to fight the good fight against the forces of evil⁽⁷⁾ 8.

By 800, the reputation of the *De re militari* was already assured. Cited by a variety of writers for centuries to come, the application of its contents and teaching would be developed and extended. This was particularly so as the great days of the Carolingian empire passed away, its lands were broken up, and the threat of hostile forces was increasingly felt. In such days the advice offered by Vegetius was seen to have wider application. So it was that Rabanus Maurus, abbot of Fulda and archbishop of Mainz, compiled a short work, the *De procinctu Romanae militiae*, largely an abridged version of Book I and some two chapters of Book II of the *De re militari*, to express his "own" thoughts on military practice. Soon afterwards, about 850, Freculph, bishop of Lisieux, prepared what can only be called a new "edition" of Vegetius' work, which strongly suggests that there was appreciation of the practical doctrines of the work's contents. Freculph presented his text to Charles the Bald, telling him that a ruler would benefit from reading and acting upon what it had to offer. At about the same time Hartgarius, bishop of Liège, sent a copy to Eberhardt of Friuli, who had charge of the empire's south-eastern borders. The *De re militari* was coming into the hands of men for whom war was a central part of their existence and the basis of their power.

(7) C. Veyrard-Cosme, "Réflexion politique et pratique du pouvoir dans l'oeuvre d'Alcuin", *Penser le pouvoir au Moyen Age (VIIIe-XVe siècle)*, ed. D. Boutet & J. Verger, Paris, 2000, pp. 409-410.

(8) Rabanus Maurus, "De procinctu Romanae militiae", ed. E. Dümmler, *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Alterthum*, vol. 15, 1872, pp. 443-451.

By the beginning of the second millennium the *De re militari* had already earned solid respect, and was widely looked upon as an important part of the classical inheritance, in particular in so far as it informed military affairs. With the twelfth century the increase in the number of copies made points towards a new career for the *De re militari*: the provision of military advice for kings and princes anxious to stamp their authority upon lawless elements in society. The context was one of the growing powers of monarchy in France, Iberia and England, a monarchy anxious, in France in particular, to bring the nobility under control. It was the age, too, when the classics came into their own again, and knowledge of their contents became more widely diffused and better appreciated.

More than once Vegetius had referred to the value attributed by the ancient world to the written word as the chief means of transmitting knowledge and experience from one generation to the next. It was from such teaching that rulers learned much that would be of use to them⁽⁹⁾. Indeed, as the defence of their people, carried out by forces raised, led and maintained by them or their lieutenants, came to be regarded as a prime obligation incumbent on rulers, so it was seen that those same rulers had an obligation to familiarise themselves with the benefits of man's military experience. The text of the *De re militari* gave the attentive reader the opportunity to do just that.

Vegetius had placed an army high on the list of what the peaceful state should possess. In a number of passages he extolled it as the chief agent of security in society. "There is nothing more stable or more fortunate or admirable", he wrote, "than a State which has copious supplies of soldiers who are trained [...] [our enemies] are kept down solely by fear of our arms"⁽¹⁰⁾ 11. "There is no secure possession of wealth", he would declare elsewhere, "unless it be maintained by defence of arms"⁽¹¹⁾. The message that society depended upon an army for its security

⁽⁹⁾ *De re militari* [DRM] I, Praef.; III, Praef.; "Antiqui, sicut invenitur in libris..." (I, ID-

do) "Nihil enim neque firmitus neque feliciter neque laudabiliter est republica, in qua abundant milites eruditi [...] solo terrore subiguntur armorum" (DRM, 1,13).

⁽¹¹⁾ "Neque enim divitiarum secreta possessio est, nisi armorum defensione servetur" (DRM, III, 3).

was coming through loud and clear. "Who can doubt that the art of war comes before everything else when it preserves our liberty and prestige, extends the provinces and saves the Empire?..⁽¹²⁾. The army, however, should not rely on numerical superiority; Vegetius strongly emphasised the need for it to "fight with strategy, not at random"¹² ⁽¹³⁾. In short, he was recommending the creation of a trained, disciplined and well motivated force which, led by men appointed by the emperor and paid from public funds⁽¹⁴⁾, would work to defend the state, its freedoms and its interests⁽¹⁵⁾.

Two further factors suggest that Vegetius envisaged an army created and controlled by the emperor or ruler. The first was the emphasis which he placed upon military service being carried out in the name of, and under the orders of, the emperor⁽¹⁶⁾. The soldier's oath of obedience to the emperor given when, after training, he was accepted into the army, made him into a servant of the community. As such, the soldier should not go on leave without permission; service on behalf of the public interest should take precedence over his own, private interest⁽¹⁷⁾. The second factor which made Vegetius' army into a centrally-controlled army was the organisation required to support it. The legion which he envisaged should be like a "munitissimam civitatem" or an "armatam civitatem"⁽¹⁸⁾, its material requirements in both equipment and provisions (including food) supplied through advance planning. Providing these was the main task of specialist departments of the army. It is surely significant that Vegetius should have insisted that the soldier most likely to win

(12) //Quis autem dubitet artem bellicam rebus omnibus esse potiorum, per quam libertas retinetur et dignitas, propagantur provinciae, conservatur imperium?" (*DRM*, III, 10).

(13) "[...] dimicet arte, non casu" (*DRM*, III, Praef.).

(14) "[...] cum publica sustententur annona..." (*DRM*, II, 20).

(15) //Pro salute propria et libertate communi" (*DRM*, II, 24).

(16) *DRM*, II, 5 (particularly the final sentence).

(17) *DRM*, II, 19,20. See C. Allmand, "Le problème de la désertion en France, en Angleterre et en Bourgogne à la fin du Moyen Age", *Guerre, pouvoir et noblesse au Moyen Age. Mélanges en l'honneur de Philippe Contamine*, ed. J. Paviot & J. Verger, Paris, 2000, p. 36.

(18) "[...] apparet legionem bene institutam quasi munitissimam esse civitatem" or an "armatam civitatem" (*DRM*, II, 18, 25).

promotion would be one who had at least some working experience of the army's administrative "departments"⁽¹⁹⁾.

The transmission of Vegetian ideas owed much to one work in particular, the *Policraticus*, completed by John of Salisbury in 1159⁽²⁰⁾. In this work, Salisbury made much use of the *De re militari*, citing it at length as if it were his own, not always admitting openly his clear indebtedness to ideas derived from the Roman writer. What is important in this case is the use to which such ideas were put. Among other things, Salisbury was trying to provide intellectual support for the re-assertion of princely authority in an age when much of Europe still lacked effective rule. That use is clear and explicit: it is the contribution of the philosopher to the practical education of the prince, and falls into a category of didactic works which had a considerable future before it. In the mid-twelfth century it was important because then, as never before, kings were claiming to act as effective rulers, wielding power for the common good⁽²¹⁾. Once again, Vegetius' text was being used for purposes which were neither primarily nor solely military in character. Suitably adapted, it was to be drawn into a wide-ranging discussion relating to the provision of stable government and the achievement of the general good through the use of legitimate and controlled force against illegitimate and disruptive violence. This required the channelling of violence into the legitimate use of force by a recognized social institution for the achievement of the general good, "pro salute reipublicae"⁽²²⁾.

The twelfth century would give the *De re militari* an important and prominent role in the intellectual armoury supporting the development of royal authority in a physical form. This was clearly seen in the context of the *Policraticus*, a work in which the responsibilities of kings for the

⁽¹⁹⁾DRM, II, 21; "[...] in legionibus plures scholae sunt..." (DRM, II, 19).

⁽²⁰⁾*Iohannis Saresberiensis Episcopi Carnotensis Policratici sive de Nugis Curialium et Vestigiis Philosophorum, Libri VIII*, ed. C. C. I. Webb, Oxford, 1909.

⁽²¹⁾ It may be emphasized that the renewed interest in Roman military practices (in particular the place of the army in society), along with the revival of Roman law, were two aspects of a wider development underpinning the development of royal government in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. On the broader historical context, see (most recently) T. N. Bisson, *The crisis of the twelfth century. Power, lordship and the origins of European government*, Princeton & Oxford, 2009.

⁽²²⁾ DRM, II, 18.

well-being of their kingdoms and subjects were held up for discussion. How could those responsibilities be effectively discharged other than through the putting into practice of the best available advice which, in the military sphere, meant heeding that to be found in Vegetius' text? That same text also influenced the view of some who wrote about the policies and activities of kings within the context of chronicles. In his *Phillipidos*, written about 1220, Guillaume le Breton, a cleric and a man of the schools, describing the steps taken by Philip-Augustus of France to bring the nobility to heel, presented the conflict as one between certain nobility, seeking the fulfilment of their own interest, and the rest of the community, whose cause the king was actively championing. The royal victory over the nobility at Bouvines in July 1214 was depicted as a triumph for the common good over particular interest, achieved by the royal army under the king's command, evidence of the legitimate use of force to support the rule of law and respect for the authority of the crown. In short, military action by the army, led by the king, was given the chronicler's approval when he depicted it as a legitimate means of achieving public stability in society as a whole⁽²³⁾.

French historians, in particular, have always regarded the battle of Bouvines as an event of great significance in the history of the growth of monarchical power, witnessing a major success on the part of the king's army to put down a challenge to the royal authority presented as a threat to the general good of the kingdom. In this, the *De re militari* had its part to play, emphasizing as it did the societal role which the army could play in defending the common welfare. In a world nominally feudal, the reader of the *De re militari* was being presented with an unusual view of the army and the soldiers who made it up. In Vegetian thought the role of the soldier - hence that of the army - was one of service and honour carried out by men sworn to obey the ruler and those appointed by him to take command in his name. No one would ever claim that the ideal was always fulfilled in reality. None the less, the Vegetian model of the properly selected and trained soldier, consciously fighting for the good of his society under the command of its ruler, was something relatively new in the early thirteenth century. It marks the acceptance of one of the main points giving impetus to the *De re militari*: the role which the army

⁽²³⁾ *La Philippide, poème par Guillaume le Breton*, ed. F. Guizot, Paris, 1825.

could, and should, play in the establishment and preservation of peace and stability within society, now slowly becoming the nation.

By now the pace at which Vegetius' work was actively influencing attitudes and developments was beginning to increase. The thirteenth century would demonstrate the growing influence which Vegetius' work was to have upon European society. In Castile, Alfonso X, "the Wise", was continuing efforts to secure the defeat of the Moors, efforts which he regarded as being the road to greater unity among his people under the crown. One way by which this process was advanced was through the drawing up the *Siete Partidas*, a wide-ranging legal code based on Roman law which crucially, included a significant section on the waging of war which relied a great deal upon the work of Vegetius, described in one passage as "El Sabio", in this case "the man with the know-how"⁽²⁴⁾. The main message conveyed was that the process of re-conquest should be carried out by an army, drawn from the Castilian people themselves, and led by the king, clearly depicted as the natural lord of the realm. The factors which owed their inspiration to the *De re militari* all pointed in one direction. As in France, now in Castile, armies were being used to encourage the conscious growth of nationhood under the active leadership of their rulers. As Vegetius had envisaged it, those making up the armies must be fully trained and prepared for the task facing them. As the *Siete Partidas* would have it, soldiers were chosen to fight for the community of the land, in which case, as the text of the *Partidas* puts it, any defeat which they suffered was keenly felt by the entire community⁽²⁵⁾. Likewise, success in battle was a victory for others than those responsible for achieving it. The fate of a country's army, whether it encountered victory or defeat, was coming to affect the community as a whole, reflecting the growing importance of the army within the nation which it existed to defend and to serve.

Before long, Vegetian teaching would again make its mark upon the ideas of another thinker, Giles of Rome, whose *De regimine principum*, written in the 1280s, would help (not least through translations) to

⁽²⁴⁾ Lfls *Siete Partidas del rey Don Alfonso el Sabio*. Tomo II *Partida segunda y tercera*, Madrid, 1807, II, xix-xxiii; *Las Siete Partidas. Volume 2: Medieval government. The world of kings and warriors*, trans. S. R Scott, ed. R. I. Burns, Philadelphia, 2001.

⁽²⁵⁾"[...] porque la perdida serie communal de todos" (*Ibidem*, II, xix, 6)

diffuse the name of Vegetius for the remainder of the Middle Ages⁽²⁶⁾. In this hugely influential work, Giles developed ideas regarding the state which, reflecting Aristotelian perceptions and contemporary Thomist teaching, were an advance on those expressed by John of Salisbury a century or more earlier. In a long section of Book III, part iii, in which he cited Vegetius some nineteen times, Giles discussed war, the army and the legitimate use of force, in addition to embodying the Roman's ideas unacknowledged into other parts of his text. We should note his important and significant question: "Quid sit militia et ad quid sit instituta?"⁽²⁷⁾. His reply to his own question was not literal or descriptive, as Vegetius' definition had been⁽²⁸⁾. Unexpected, his answer was startling. "Sciendum igitur militiam esse quandam prudentiam, sive quandam speciem prudentiae"⁽²⁹⁾. An army, in his view, should be regarded "as a kind of prudence", an investment (in men, selection, training, leadership) which would give the state a big advantage when an enemy threatened. For what was *prudentia* in this case other than being prepared to meet external threats, an idea which owed something to Aristotle, and which, above all, took into account Vegetius' insistence that the most effective way to preserve peace was to prepare for war⁽³⁰⁾. For this to be done successfully, those chosen to fight must be trained (Vegetius had famously written that if a soldier did not train regularly, there was nothing to distinguish him from the civilian)⁽³¹⁾; they should also be marked by certain physical and moral qualities. In Giles' eyes the soldier must possess "strenuitas bellandi" (energy?); he should have

⁽²⁶⁾ Aegidii Columnae Romani, *De Regimine Principum. Lib. III*, Rome, 1607; reprinted Aalen, 1967 [DRP].

⁽²⁷⁾DRP, III, iii, 1 (p. 555).

⁽²⁸⁾ "Exercitus dicitur tam legionum quam etiam auxiliorum nec non etiam equitum ad gerendum bellum multitudo collecta" (DRM, III, 1). ["An army is said to be a number of legions, *auxilia* and cavalry brought together for the purpose of fighting war"].

⁽²⁹⁾DRP, III, iii, 1 (p. 555).

⁽³⁰⁾ Aristotle had emphasized the need for the "constitution" to arrange for the means of defence to be permanently in place (*Politics*, II, vii, 14). In writing that "an assailant will not even attempt to attack those who are well prepared" (*Ibidem*, VII, xi, 12), he had foreshadowed Vegetius's famous dictum "qui désirât pacem, praeparet bellum" (DRM, III, Praef.).

⁽³¹⁾DRM, II, 23.

"prudentia erga bella" (a measured, thoughtful / intelligent approach to war) as well as "animositas" (which is courage, yet more than that). Like that described by Vegetius, Giles' soldier was not just any man; he must show qualities enabling him to fulfil his obligations to the society of which he was a member, which he had undertaken to serve, and which paid him to do its fighting.

Such were Giles' views on the need for every state to be protected by an army manned by men selected from its population, trained and ready to fight in its defence⁽³²⁾. It was a view which owed much to Roman ideas regarding the functions of the army in society as these might be understood from an appreciation of the contents of the *De re militari*. If accepted, the view held implications which had to be acted upon. Their implementation demanded an army (or armies) under central control, summoned by the ruler to defend the wider interests of a society as a whole rather than those of particular groups or individuals who, as in the not so distant past, had used violence to further their own ends. Under this dispensation force could only be employed

(i) for the wider benefit, and (ii) by men sworn to obey the commands of the ruler, or his nominated lieutenants, who might pay them for their services to society from the public purse now, in the late thirteenth century, replenished through taxation. As part of their responsibility to society, and to demonstrate their acceptance of it, those thus employed should train regularly in the skills which the effective practice of their art required. Change would not be immediate. But at the time that Giles was writing developments in the direction which he advocated were in the air and were already being practised in certain countries. The next two centuries would see the acceptance of the "state" army, with all its faults and failings, in most parts of Europe.

Between the 1260s and the 1280s there took place yet another important transformation of Vegetius' text, a vital part of its incorporation into an ever-widening medieval context. Until that time, the *De re militari* had been read in Latin alone. Now, in a few years of activity, it was to receive the accolade of being translated into several vernacular languages: first into Anglo-Norman, perhaps for the Prince Edward (King

⁽³²⁾Aristotle, *Politics*, IV, iv, 13-15.

Edward I of England to-be) in the late 1260s⁽³³⁾; then, in 1284, into French in a translation made by no less a writer than Jean de Meun, part author of the *Roman de la rose*⁽³⁴⁾. At about the same time, Bono Giamboni was turning the *De re militari* into Tuscan⁽³⁵⁾. Three further translations into French, one a rendering of Meun's version into verse form⁽³⁶⁾, would be completed by about 1380. In addition, two Catalan versions would appear in the course of the fourteenth century⁽³⁷⁾, and two (the second in verse) in English in the fifteenth century⁽³⁸⁾, which also saw translations into Castilian⁽³⁹⁾, German⁽⁴⁰⁾, and, possibly, into Portuguese⁽⁴¹⁾.

Evidence of this nature compels us to recognize in these translations something of the appreciation of the *De re militari* and its teachings shown by a world in which the vernacular languages were encouraging a widening readership of the text. It is important, too, to look for signs of what was being done to the work by translators, and, if possible, to understand changes introduced into the texts in their new forms.

⁽³³⁾ See Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Ms. Marlay Add. 1, for the sole known manuscript.

⁽³⁴⁾ L/ *Abregemenz noble honme Vegece Flave René des Establissemenz apartenanz a chevalerie*, ed. L. Löfstedt, Helsinki, 1977.

^m*Vegezio Flavio. Dell'arte della Guerra, libri IV. Volgarizzamento di Bono Giamboni*, ed. F. Fontani, Florence, 1815.

⁽³⁶⁾ Jean Priorat, *Li Abrejanze de l'Ordre de Chevalerie*, ed. U. Robert, Paris, 1897; Jean de Vignay, *Li livres Flave Vegece de la chose de chevalerie*, ed. L. Löfstedt, Helsinki, 1982.

⁽³⁷⁾ Madrid, Bibl. Francisco de Zabàlburu, Ms. 1655; Palma de Mallorca, Bibl. Bartomeu March-Servera, Ms. B96-V3-2.

^m*The Earliest English Translation of Vegetius' De re militari*, ed. G. Lester, Heidelberg, 1988; *Knyghthode and Bataile*, ed. R. Dyboski & Z. M. Arend, London, 1935.

⁽³⁹⁾ An edition of the Castilian text, prepared from the six surviving manuscripts by José Manuel Fradejas, of the University of Valladolid, will be published shortly.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ F. Fürbeth, "Eine Unbekannte Deutsche Übersetzung des Vegetius aus der Bibliothek des Anton von Annenberg", *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Literatur*, voi. 124, 1995, pp. 278-297. The earliest translation known before this discovery was the "Kurcze Red von der Ritterschafft", made by Ludwig Hohenwang, and printed in Augsburg c. 1475.

⁽⁴¹⁾ See J. G. Monteiro, "A cultura militar da nobreza na primeira metade de Quatrocentos. Fontes e modelos literários", *Revista de História das Ideias*, voi. 19, 1998, pp. 195-227.

If no translation was done "de mot à mot", or *literatim*, there were good reasons for this. Translators did not always fully understand Vegetius' meaning, as some glaring examples of mistranslation indicate. Sometimes his language was too technical, or the correct modern-day word did not exist; such situations (not uncommon in parts of the *De re militari* with a particularly technical vocabulary) led to errors of translation or, not infrequently, to the omission of a sentence or longer passage. On other occasions, while the meaning was clear, the choice had to be made between a literal translation (which might be out of date) and one which, while not necessarily strictly accurate, would mean something to the modern-day reader. The translator, therefore, wielded considerable power, particularly over details: changes of meaning, omissions, as well as addition of passages (one of the most notorious being found in the 1407 English translation in which the recent use of cannon by the English in Wales is referred to)⁽⁴²⁾, used to "modernize" or bring the text up to date were not uncommon.

Such "adaptations" suggest that translators made changes so that *their* text might serve as a useful guide to war almost a millennium after it had been written. But not all saw it in that way. As the marginalia scribbled on many manuscripts indicate, there were those who regarded the *De re militari* mainly as significant historical evidence regarding the state of military thought and practice c. 400. Consider the marginalia in Petrarch's Latin copy of the text⁽⁴³⁾, and see how it helped him understand and appreciate other classical texts already known to him. Others readers, however, regarded the *De re militari* as a text containing wisdom and information appropriate for all time, including, of course, their own. For example, an analysis of the marginalia of the majority of surviving manuscripts shows that the parts of the work which provoked most response from readers were Books I and, in particular, Book III. These, the first with its insistence on proper selection and training, the third with its emphasis on the role of the commander and the need to prepare properly for battle, were probably regarded as offering advice applicable for all time, thereby making the *De re militari* relevant to a much later age. Book II, largely about the organisation and functioning of the

^m *Earliest English Translation*, IV, 22 (p. 173).

⁽⁴³⁾ BAV, Vat. lat. 2193, fols. 102-118v.

Roman army, provoked little comment until coming more into its own in the late thirteenth century as the importance of military organisation came to be better recognised.

We may judge how the *De re militari* was appreciated if we consider where librarians shelved the text. Library catalogues suggest that people understood its contents in different ways. The copy owned by Philippa of Hainault, consort of Edward III, was classified under "Romances"⁽⁴⁴⁾. However, when Amplonius de Berka founded the Collegium Amplonianum in Erfurt in the late the fourteenth century, at least one of the three (!) copies of the *De re militari* with which he endowed his new foundation was shelved among books of "moralis philosophie"⁽⁴⁵⁾, while in 1460 the collegiate church of St Paul at Liège possessed a copy (bound, in this case with the *De regimine principum* of Giles of Rome) classified among the "libri morales"⁽⁴⁶⁾. This evidence suggests that Vegetius' work was regarded more as a "philosophical" text than as a practical manual of war. Above all, it stressed the absolute need to win, and the role which a properly considered view of an approaching conflict could contribute to victory. As such, it was a text appreciated by the thoughtful, rather than by the rash, commander.

Significantly, such a view receives support from a few manuscripts which have illuminations referring to the text of which they are part. While Vegetius (or the Philosopher, as he is sometimes called, thus laying claim to the title frequently given to Aristotle) is usually presented dressed as a sage, those whom he addresses are almost always shown in medieval costume⁽⁴⁷⁾. Likewise, military scenes normally depict soldiers and knights wearing medieval dress or armour. In other words, the illuminations were added to encourage the reader to think that the text, while old, contained lessons useful to those soldiers of his

⁽⁴⁴⁾J. Vale, *Edward III and Chivalry. Chivalric Society and its Context 1270-1350*, Woodbridge, 1982, p. 50. This is a reminder of how broadly the term "Romance" could be interpreted.

⁽⁴⁵⁾Erfurt, Biblioteca Amploniana, Ms. CA 2° 5.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ O. J. Thimister, "La bibliothèque de l'église collégiale de Saint Paul à Liège en 1460", *Bulletin de L'Institut Archéologique Liégeois*, vol. 14, 1878, p. 161.

⁽⁴⁷⁾See BAV, Reg. lat. 1880, fol. 1; Vicenza, Bibl. Bertoliana, Ms. 295, fol. 1; Oxford, Bodleian Lib., Ms. Laud 56, fol. 1; Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Ms. Marlay Add. 1, fol. 2v., reproduced in M. Prestwich, *Armies and warfare in the Middle Ages. The English experience*, New Haven & London, 1996, p. 184.

own day who heard them and put them into practice. Illuminations thus underlined the value of the transmission of ancient military wisdom into the present, as well as the respect due to the messenger, Vegetius himself.

By the fourteenth century, with the growth of national awareness and the nation state, some of the lessons offered were coming to have practical application. Two examples will underline this development. To the reader of Vegetius who turned his attention to John Barbour's *Bruce*, completed by the archdeacon of Aberdeen about 1370⁽⁴⁸⁾, the parallels between two very different works were, in certain respects, remarkable. Both stressed the obligation of the ruler to accept practical responsibility for his kingdom's defence. Both underlined the role of the army, whether acting in guerrilla style or confronting the enemy head-on in battle, in defending the land (in this case Scotland under English attack) and its freedom. Both emphasised that an army (in the sense of a group of fighting men) could not do without proper leadership (a major theme in *The Bruce*); both, too, set out to explore qualities of leadership, notably "prudentia", the quality of thoughtfulness and foresight (intelligence) which received repeated emphasis in Barbour's work. The commander envisaged by both Vegetius and Barbour was a "thinking" commander, not one who rushed into action hoping for the good opinion of the men who watched him. Whether Barbour was familiar with the full text of the *De re militari* (as I am inclined to think he was), or had only access to a collection of excerpts, is a relatively unimportant matter. The military leader whom he presented, the events which he described and the principles of Vegetian thought which Barbour illustrated transform his *Bruce* into something very much more than a simple narrative of the often dramatic events which it records⁽⁴⁹⁾.

If we advance exactly a century, and change the location from Scotland to Valois Burgundy, we encounter strong Vegetian influence exercised over certain military practices applied in the Burgundian army by duke Charles the Bold. From the very first lines of his work, Vegetius had

^m*The Bruce*, ed. W. W. Skeat, London, 1870-89. *The Bruce*, an edition with translation into modern English prose by A. A. M. Duncan, Edinburgh, 1997.

⁽⁴⁹⁾T. Summerfield, "Barbour's *Bruce*: compilation in retrospect", *Writing war. Medieval literary responses to warfare*, ed. C. Saunders, F. Le Saux & N. Thomas, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 107-125.

emphasized the ruler's responsibility for the army, for its organisation, for providing it with informed leadership (much as we have just seen in the case of Robert Bruce). At the same time he recognised the need for men who could share responsibilities with the ruler. Vegetius described an ordered chain of command, reflecting the fact that those who exercised authority did so in the name of their ruler whose lieutenants (or *locum tenentes*) they became. This Vegetian ideal was given life by duke Charles when, in the 1470s, he instituted a very public annual ceremony at which he formally presented letters of appointment to a small group of senior lieutenants, on the understanding that such appointments were to be authorised for only a single year, at the end of which each man was to return his letter (his commission, as any modern officer would call it) to the duke⁽⁵⁰⁾. Was this pure theatre, enacted at court to convey an important message? Almost certainly so. Yet the message went deep, since the duke's intention was to ensure, through a very public act, that military authority was known to be exercised on his behalf, and that he could renew or withdraw it as he pleased. The ceremony also emphasized that the army was regarded not simply as men recruited by their local lord whom they followed into battle, but was viewed as a national force which accepted the orders and the leadership of persons acting in the name of the duke, who constantly sought to be regarded as independent and sovereign. The term "sovereign" is used deliberately since the right to lead and control an army legitimately was regarded as an aspect of sovereignty. The moment had not yet been reached, but a significant step had been taken towards the creation of the more "statist" army of modern times.

Some long-term, interrelated themes may be brought together here. One was the conflict between those who wielded power, often through violence, at a local or regional level, and the increasingly influential monarchies (of France and Castile, for instance) which claimed to exercise a legitimate monopoly of power for the sake of the common good. The development of political and social ideas, particularly from the thirteenth century onwards, which encouraged rulers to seek the common good, implied the authority to create armies as visible and

⁽⁵⁰⁾See C. Allmand, "Did the *De re militari* of Vegetius influence the military ordinances of Charles the Bold?", *Publications du Centre Européen d'Etudes Bourguignonnes (XIVe-XVIe s.)*, vol. 41, 2001, pp. 135-143.

legitimate instruments of their ability both to deter those wishing to undermine a society and, if need be, to ensure its effective defence against aggression. In the long process of creating institutions furthering domestic peace, the gradual acceptance of the "statist" army may be seen as complementing that of the development of the law and legal institutions as guardians of the peace and internal security of the state. And just as the development of the law owed much to Roman texts and practices, so wider acceptance of the role to be played by the army, increasingly regarded as an instrument in the pay of the growing state, in the maintenance of peace (whether through deterrence or action) owed much to practices described in the *De re militari* of Vegetius. When Charles the Bold, who knew his Vegetius, hit upon the idea of a formal presentation of military authority to his lieutenants, he knew what he was doing, and the message of that ceremony will have been well understood by those who witnessed it.

Such were some of the avenues down which the *De re militari* led the Middle Ages. Vegetius had advocated a particular approach to war which demanded certain ways of doing things. Listen to his very words: "He who desires peace, let him prepare for war. He who wants victory, let him train soldiers diligently. He who wants a successful outcome, let him fight with strategy, not at random. No one dares challenge or harm one who, he realises, will win if he fights". Those wanting peace should prepare themselves to deter a potential aggressor. They should prepare, above all, by constant training, since this promotes both skills and confidence, enabling men to fight with strategy. Put another way, planning, foresight, anticipation, making decisions based on reliable information (Vegetius emphasised the importance of espionage) are the attributes which lead to victory. If an enemy were reluctant to challenge a well-prepared army, he would be even less willing to confront a well-led army. Greater emphasis, therefore, should be given to strategy than to tactics. Vegetius had rightly given prominence to the personal qualities, acquired skills and experience of the good general. An army should function as a team: the general made decisions according to a plan which took account of conditions, circumstances and the forces at his disposal; the army, trained to obey orders, acted accordingly. As the manuscript evidence shows, it was widely appreciated that neither force nor numbers alone brought victory; everything depended on how they were used. Success in war relied first and foremost upon a confident

working relationship between leader and led, each trusting the other. Those who shelved manuscripts of the *De re militari* among the "libri morales" were right. The "moral" or "philosophical" messages which it conveyed were at least as important as the practical ones. The Middle Ages viewed the text as much more than a military manual. And rightly so. For that is what it was, and what it remains to this day.