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Storia Militare Antica

a cura di
MARCO BETTALLI ED ELENA FRANCHI



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L'“Erzspanngeschütz” dell'ingegnere tedesco Erwin Schramm (1856-1935): ricostruzione ipotetica del χαλκοτόνον (Chalkotonon. pezzo di artiglieria con molla di bronzo) di Filone Alessandrino. Vetrina con ricostruzioni di pezzi di artiglieria meccanica nel Museo del Castello di Saalburg in Assia (Germania). Particolare dalla Foto di SBA73 2007, su Flickr (Artilleria experimental romana a Saalburg). CC SA 2.0, Wikipedia Commons.

Who Was Vegetius? *

by SABIN H. ROSENBAUM

It is with a great deal of trepidation that this foray into the contested arena of Vegetian studies is initiated. I am obligated by necessity, for the ever-continuing debates regarding Vegetius and his writings detract precious attention from another equally important aspect of his works, namely the identity of the battle that forms the backdrop to the first and third books of the *Epitoma Rei Militaris*. “Articles continue to swell in a manner out of proportion to the ‘growth of knowledge’, and the facts tend to be obscured, lost in lengthy disquisitions or swallowed up by the ‘literature of the subject’.”¹ It is hoped that by discussing certain original observations, and sharing them in this brief paper, satisfactory resolutions to the date and identity of Vegetius might be found.

The current assessment of Vegetius

It would be wise to establish a probable identity for Vegetius beforehand, because only a positive identification in the historical sources will allow a date to be subsequently established. There are specific personal details pertaining to this author that scholars seem to agree upon, and these must be given a cursory review. Extensive commentary on the traditional points is unnecessary and will be avoided out of respect for all previous investigators and their works.

Publius Vegetius Renatus, according to certain manuscript *subscriptions*, a *vir illustris* and *comes*, added the honorific title *Flavius* to his name when his advanced position in the externally indistinguishable civil service or military allowed him to do so.² There is support to the idea that the appearance of *Flavius*

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1 Sir Ronald Syme, *Roman Papers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Vol. I, chap. 23, p. 315. Although Syme is speaking of the latest installment of the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, his statement is equally applicable here.

2 M. D. Reeve, *Vegetius. Epitoma Rei Militaris*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004, introduction p. vii.

in connection with the *Epitoma* and not with the *Mulomedicina* signifies that the former was written by Vegetius in an official capacity³. This in turn may show that the *Mulomedicina*⁴ was published on his own time, and thus did not necessitate the inclusion of *Flavius*. From Vegetius himself we learn that Book I was presented to the un-named emperor voluntarily, and upon favorable reception Vegetius was later obliged to provide books II, III and IV. This scenario does not in any way preclude Vegetius from tailoring an existing booklet with the addition of suitable laudations and poetic flourishes before presentation. We also know from his own writings that Vegetius was familiar with contemporary taxation, recruitment and corruption issues, as well as legal affairs (particularly law codes, army constitutions, etc). He was clearly knowledgeable in a variety of subjects such as geography, anatomy, history, literature and mathematics. No one doubts his keen description of the Hunnish horse, or his close and longstanding relationship with horses in general. Indeed, Vegetius seems quite the veteran traveler; he was someone who paid attention to the health of his mounts, remembered the beneficial characteristics of breeds encountered, and offered practical equine advice freely. The latter are definitive personal traits that will reveal new facts about Vegetius, all of which can be extracted from within extant historical information.

Overlooked personal information

While scholars are somewhat aware of the enthusiasm Vegetius displays for horse care and horse-breeding, this facet of his personality has been overshadowed by a consistent focus on the rather infantry specific *Epitoma*. The key to his identity, and thus the whole situation, actually lies within his *Mulomedicina*.⁵ It proves that Vegetius was intimately versed in the inner workings and woes systemic to the army and state transport and communication apparatus, the *cursus publicus*. A demonstration of these indicators is needed to drive home this invaluable point.

In the *Mulomedicina* we find “*inflammation of the feet resulting from wear and tear of the road*”, mentions of “*harmful and excessive galloping*”, the train-

3 Proven by similarity of style, Vegetius is the acknowledged author of *Digesta Artis Mulomedicinae*.

4 M. B. Charles, *Vegetius in Context: Establishing the Date of the Epitoma Rei Militaris*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007, chap. 1, p. 24.

5 I have used the tragically unfinished translations by the late Margaret Mezzabotta, generously provided by Professor David Wardle of the University of Cape Town.

ing of horses for “smooth riding”, an ear “bruised by an accident”, “anxiety provoked by a long journey driving animals to angry resentment”, “accidents and blows”, “wounds to horses caused by carelessness of the attendant”, a horse “being forced to gallop beyond the limits of its strength”, broken bones caused by “being struck by wheels and axles”, “abnormally large loads” and the physical distress on joints caused by “travel on rough roads”, how “clean stables with dry, plank wood floors” and “care of hooves and hocks, especially worn feet” is something very beneficial after a journey.⁶ Vegetius knows his business when he speaks of “horses, mules and donkeys discharging their duties with their backs alone under saddles or pack saddles” not to mention “the care of wounds caused by size and fitment” of the same.⁷

We cannot fail to observe that this knowledge stems from the conditions exhibited by the *cursus publicus*, the “more mundane services” as Vegetius himself puts it. He even draws a distinction between this utilitarian service and the other “necessary services of a horse” (these being war, racing and riding for sport).⁸

A few more examples should suffice, before we move on to other factors. Vegetius speaks frequently of “back damage done by riders” as well as limiting loads so backs can heal, kidney damage from “overloading or stretching hind legs while trying to cross ditches”, falls, “resulting from fatigue caused by a long journey or from the tortuous windings of hilly roads” or from “urging the animal to gallop or making it jump”, horses being denied the opportunity to urinate “because of being forced to work or gallop a large part of the day”, diseases caused by being “driven by the lash in rain, snow, hail and cold” and hunger and tiredness “resulting from a journey with low supplies”.⁹

This list is by no means comprehensive, the “knocks from wheels and axles” being too numerous to mention individually. Note also that Vegetius expounds on countless local curative recipes that utilize “old axle-grease”. This detail should be appreciated and compared to the ancient veterinarian sources, for instance Pelagonius and Collumela, who tend to favor bitumen, resin or pitch.¹⁰

6 *Mulo*. Bk. I, sub-chapters 38, 51, 56, and Bk. II, sub-chapters 14, 16, 20, 27, 37, 47, 54, 58, respectively.

7 *Mulo*. Bk. II, sub-chapter 59.

8 *Mulo*. Bk. III. 6.

9 *Mulo*. Bk. II, sub-chapters 60, 67, 69, 79, 92, 102, respectively.

10 Old axle grease was probably more abundant at the *mansiones* than the other imported ingredients.

Vegetius and the cursus publicus

It becomes obvious from these references that Vegetius was intimately familiar with the fast service, the *cursus velox* or *celer*, as well as the slower regular service, the *cursus clabularis*.¹¹ The worst attrition was obviously suffered by the swift post, which provided saddlehorses (*veredi*) as well as packhorses and mules to the abusive dispatch riders. We cannot rightly ignore the comments regarding heavy cartage either; the most common vehicle during this time being the ubiquitous four wheeled army transport wagon, the *currus*.¹² In fact, book four of the *Mulomedicina* concerns heavy draft animals exclusively.

Vegetius advises careful care “when they return covered with mud from the road”, how “special precautions must be taken not to tire them either by too much running, or by a long journey or, indeed, distress them with loads that are too heavy”. Vegetius tells us how oxen “suited to labor rather than speed lose their bowels or suffer fevers”, even remarking, “for a creature that is by nature inactive and suited for labor rather than speed is seriously harmed if forced to an action to which it is unaccustomed”.¹³

The forced actions of which he speaks are the cursory requisition of private draft animals by the state or army to move supplies on contingency and the abuse subsequently incurred. In the same section Vegetius speaks of these poor creatures, “exhausted carrying its load” and contracting illness “from being thoroughly drenched or chilled by rain”.¹⁴ Please note how agricultural related injuries appear almost as an afterthought, with a mere two comments appearing near the very end of the book at IV.16, and IV.18.

If Vegetius was truly intimate with the *cursus publicus* one might conclude that he should be familiar with the associated tradesmen such as *muliones*, *carpentarii*, *hippocomi*, *vehicularii* or *custodes*. Indeed, he considers *carpentarios* and *fabros ferrarios* among those useful men who make suitable recruits (*Epit.* I. 7. 2), and knows of *calones* and *galearii* and even their proper positioning in a

11 Cornelis Van Tilburg, *Traffic and Congestion in the Roman Empire*, Routledge, 2007, p. 58.

12 W. W. Mooney, *Travel Among the Ancient Romans*, R. G. Badger, 1920, p. 21. The *currus* was originally a two wheeled cart, but evolved during later Roman times into a type of heavy wagon with four wheels. The widespread use of this vehicle ensured that the commonly used Latin term would become an early English loanword.

13 *Mulo*. Bk. IV, sub-chapters 5, 9, 12, respectively.

14 *Mulo*. Bk. IV, sub-chapter 12.

baggage train.¹⁵ How well did Vegetius know the *mansiones* and *mutationes*, the vital network of night lodgings and changing stations that comprised the backbone of the system itself? Seemingly plenty, since he frequently speaks of stables and byres as well as *baths*. We find within the *Mulomedicina* the unique mention of a horse being led into the “caldarium of the baths” to induce therapeutic sweating.¹⁶ One cannot rationally imagine a sickly horse being led into public baths in an urban setting, or the sumptuous private structures often found at wealthy villas! We can, however imagine this singular treatment occurring at a smaller establishment such as a rural *mansio*.

The intended recipients of the Mulomedicina

With these details outlined, we are able to make some startling observations. Vegetius did not write the *Mulomedicina* for “the private amusement of himself and his aristocratic friends”; this being the general assessment of professional scholars.¹⁷ As he states himself:

*“Foolish popular opinion gives rise to the detrimental situation wherein every person of high rank believes it shameful and worthless to have acquired knowledge of the art of healing draft animals.”*¹⁸

Persons of wealth and power being excluded as recipients by their own thoughtless bias, he gives us a clear indication regarding just whom he intended his work to benefit, at *Mulo*. III. 27 .8:

“but in case a longer book might seem to bring more confusion than instruction to its readers, I think I should make a complete end, while admonishing you again and again to attempt to cure the initial stages of a disease with careful attention.”

The intended recipients of his treatise, those who were attempting to cure disease, those who would have been confused by a longer book, were in fact the careful *paterfamilias*¹⁹ and the careful and skilled *mulomedicus*.²⁰ Bearing in mind that one of his motivations for writing was to counter the enormous amount

15 *Epit.* Bk. III, chapter 6.

16 *Mulo*. Bk. II, sub-chapters 6 and 88, respectively.

17 N. P. Milner, *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*, Liverpool University Press, 1996, introduction xxxii.

18 *Mulo*. Bk. I, preface, section 9.

19 *Mulo*. Bk. II, prologue. Most, if not all *mansiones* were run privately by dedicated families.

20 *Mulo*. Bk. I, sub-chapter 21, section 1.

of money charged for certain exotic healing potions, it becomes obvious that the recipes cater to the thrifty and practical, the men for whom “*the unimpaired health of draft animals entails profit*”, “*persons appointed to oversee their care*”, or for the “*stable-hand himself*”.²¹

It is clear that Vegetius was thoroughly familiar with every aspect of the *cur-sus publicus*, and wrote the *Mulomedicina* for the lower classes tasked with keeping it operating efficiently (as the title actually suggests). Contrary to earlier times, aristocrats in Vegetius’s day apparently had no interest in such mundane matters as mule-care. Now that these critical details have been introduced, the high probability that Vegetius was involved with some oversight of the public post as a function of his high ranking position will allow us to find comparable suspects in the surviving historical sources.

A candidate in Theodosian Code

During previous investigations of an entirely unrelated nature, an excerpt hidden in a *leges novella* of Valentinian III caught my attention:

*“It shall be sufficient to have granted such protection for their safety and their fortunes to the praetorian office staffs, to whom We also grant quartering officers, whom they have long desired to have, for the peace of their mansiones, O Albinus, dearest and most beloved Father”.*²²

Some explanations of this law are needed before reaching the main point. It seems that Albinus, praetorian prefect of Italy at least since the 17th of August 443²³, had brought to the attention of the highest authorities several issues facing his office staff. Remedial *suggestiones* had been made by these personnel and suitable legislation was drafted to this effect. Praetorian office staff would henceforth no longer fear investigation in regard to uncompleted terms of service and audits of private accounts after five years. After a proscription against *cautiones* issued by the officers under duress of creditors, there appears the paragraph above.

The critical sentence has been highlighted. Someone on the praetorian office staff was concerned with the current state of the *mansiones* and had long been

21 *Mulo*. Bk. I, preface, section 10 and 16. Vegetius could not be more obvious at this point.

22 Clyde Pharr, *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, Princeton University Press, 1952, p. 535, title 22, 4. Pharr’s translations are not always accepted by scholars, but this passage is quite clear.

23 R. J. Weber, *Albinus: The Living Memory of a Fifth-Century Personality*, Historia, Franz Steiner Verlag, (4th Qtr., 1989) p. 482.

pushing for better management. Without a *mentor* or *metator* at least provisionally assigned to the *mansiones*, anyone with travel permits (*evictiones*) however dubious²⁴ could demand food and lodging to a point of gross impropriety. The quartering officer had the authority to prevent such abuses and ensure that lodging for legitimate travelers was adequate but not burdensome on the family tasked with running the station.²⁵ Consider momentarily the influence, the clout, needed for any bureaucrat to have this paragraph, a matter which relates to the *cursus publicus*, (which actually falls under the jurisdiction of the *magister officiorum* and not the praetorian prefect) inserted at the very end of official imperial legislation otherwise dealing with clerical tenure and debt.

Again, the department run by the master of offices was supposed to administer the *cursus publicus*, not the prefecture. This knowledge, that someone in the office of the prefecture had the welfare of the post in mind, and that Vegetius (a *vir inlustris* and *comes*) was also involved with the public post, forces us to put adjacent laws under scrutiny.

The Primiscrinus of the Praetorian Prefect

The next decree of Valentinian's *Novellae* to be reviewed has been noticed before, but perhaps for different reasons. It dates from September 11th, 449, and the pertinent section reads:

"We make wise provision by this edictal law for the department of the agentes in rebus, whose labors, cares, and watchfulness are so great that they alone appear to acknowledge and accomplish whatever burden there is, and thus they shall obtain the privileges which antiquity had granted for their reward and which had long been interrupted. Of course the primates of the aforesaid office shall usurp nothing without consulting the primiscrinus, who from the agentes in rebus has arrived at the services of the praetorian prefecture after infinite dangers and after spending the better part of his life."²⁶

Here we first learn of the powerful character who heads the office staff of the praetorian prefect.

24 Forgery, theft, and unnecessary duplication of travel permits by soldiers, bureaucrats, nobles and clergy with excessive entourage constituted the worst strain on the whole postal system.

25 Pharr, *The Theodosian Code*, glossary p. 592.

26 Pharr, *The Theodosian Code*, p. 539, title 28, 1-2.

We can deduce that he is the same man who requested, under Albinus, quartering officers for the *mansiones* in 446, for this *primiscrinus* had been promoted from the upper echelons of the *agentes in rebus*. This department as we know, was responsible for the actual day-to-day supervision of the roads, *stationes* and *mansiones* of the *cursus publicus*, the enrollment and employment of dispatch riders, the issuance and verification of *evictiones*, and the delivery of imperial decrees as well as their enforcement. Indeed, the “privileges which antiquity had granted for their reward” were likely prosecutorial immunities and gratuities derived from their function as customs officers. Members of this department were also among the few who were allowed to hold certain joint appointments.²⁷

Something of this man’s career can even be reconstructed. We are told that the *primiscrinus* had arrived after “infinite dangers” at the services the Italian prefecture. Although it is clear the *primiscrinus* had obviously served among the *agentes in rebus*, it appears likely from the wording that he had also worked with a different praetorian staff on a previous occasion. Bear in mind that Albinus succeeded to the Italian prefecture, sometime prior to August 17th 443. If we remember the tradition that Albinus was prefect of Gaul sometime after Florentius in 439, this issue can be clarified.²⁸ We can determine that our man, the *primiscrinus* who deeply cares for the “peace of his *mansiones*” had “spent the better part of his life” as an agent attached to the Gaulish prefecture. In this capacity, he had likely supervised various aspects of the *cursus publicus*, perhaps as a *regendarius*²⁹, or even *curiosus*.³⁰

It is possible to deduce what probably happened. A long-time attaché, our man had faithfully served alongside Albinus during his brief tenure as prefect of Gaul. When Albinus received the Italian prefecture, this trusted officer was summoned back from places unknown to head his new *officium*. This fellow arrived in Italy after some personal brush with unspecified threats and dangers, to assume a position in which he retained considerable authority over the office he recently vacated.

27 Christopher Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 83.

28 Prosper, *Epitoma chronicon*, chap. 1341.

29 Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, p. 89.

30 Pharr, *The Theodosian Code*, p. 577. These confidential agents also retained their original function of inspecting the public post, but at a higher authority than the *regendarii*.

Vegetius the Primiscriinius under Albinus

None of this would relate to our study of Vegetius, were it not for one fact. Vegetius, of all the bureaucratic and administrative functions that he could have used for exempla in his *Epitoma*, compares the chief centurion and his cycle of promotion to the “*primiscriinius of the praetorian prefect*”.³¹

The entire section of the *Epitoma* deserves to be reviewed by scholars and recognized for what it is, because this information is absolutely critical. Note the superfluous addition, “(who) attains the end of an honorable and lucrative career”.³² This is no paraprax, no *lapsus plumae*; Vegetius is proudly referring to his own position and retirement. When Vegetius refers to the “circular promotion through various administrative departments” and the “gaining of unlimited privileges”, he is not speaking of the *officio praefectorum praetorio*, but the *agentes in rebus* from whence he came. We know from imperial decrees which regulated this department that promotion in the *agentes in rebus* was based strictly on military grades of seniority.³³ This system of rotational administration, guided by rigid tenure, was perfectly familiar to Vegetius. In fact, it was this path through the “hierarchy of soldiers” that led to the “Emperor’s judgment regularly exalting him to riches and dignities”.³⁴ His origins in the *agentes in rebus* (an agency notorious for spies and informers) are shown repeatedly. Note *Epit.* III. 6:

“In addition, he should find out everything from intelligent men, from men of rank, and those who know the localities, individually, and put together the truth from a number of witnesses.”

Note also *Epit.* III. 4; Vegetius warns that generals must learn of sedition “not according to the malice of informers but the true facts”. Vegetius provides ample evidence that these conclusions are correct.

Observe his use of the contemporary titles *ducenarius* and *centenarius* (*Epit.* II. 8), military service grades used by the *agentes in rebus*.³⁵ We can now understand

31 Milner, *Epit.* Bk. II, chap. 21, p. 55.

32 This is not the only example of a bureaucrat speaking with unabashed pride of his achievements in a publicly acknowledged document; see John Lydus, *On the Magistracies of the Roman State*, Bk. III, 29.

33 Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, p. 212.

34 Milner, *Epit.* Bk. II, chap. 24, p. 59.

35 Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, p. 20: (Agents) “advanced through five service grades with the same titles as non-commissioned ranks in the cavalry: *equites, circitores, biarchi, centenarii and ducenarii*.”

his “diverse and lengthy travels” in the context of an ex-imperial agent, and considering that high ranking individuals in this service were sometimes employed in the diplomatic role, comprehend his acquaintance with the Hunnish horse.³⁶

Vegetius and Merobaudes

Now that we have recognized the traces left by Vegetius as a distinguished and powerful administrator at the court of Valentinian III, c.443 to 449, it stands to reason that more evidence can be exposed. A search of contemporary literary material led me to focus on certain fragments of court poetry. Merobaudes, a Romanized Frank, was poet laureate to the Emperor Valentinian III during this same time and fortunately, portions of his works survive.

In Merobaudes “Panegyric I”, accurately dated by F. M. Clover to between 443 and 446³⁷, we find this fragmentary passage:

“...a tent...to level ground...he sets up a tent, then if there is a respite from war, you survey either sites for cities³⁸, or mountain passes, or the broad expanse of fields, or river crossings, or distances on roads, and there you seek to discover what place is more suitable for infantry or cavalry, more suited for and attack, safer for a retreat, and richer in resources for a bivouac. Thus even the very interruption of war is advantageous for war. But aside from distinction in battle, who is there who exhibits so great a celerity in planning, a strictness in judgment, etc.”³⁹

It is clear from fragment I b. that Merobaudes is lavishing praise on his patron Aetius, a point of which scholars appear to agree. But although ‘echoes of Vegetius’ have been noticed here before, namely by the sagacious Mr. Goffart⁴⁰, these items of interest are actually found in the *Epitoma*, and certain interesting patterns are displayed by their dispositions. We are startled to observe that these

36 One immediately thinks of the mission to the Huns c. 448 (no doubt one of many) as recorded by Priscus.

37 Frank M. Clover, *Toward an Understanding of Merobaudes’ “Panegyric I”*, Historia, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1971, p. 364. Also, see Clover, *Flavius Merobaudes*, p. 10.

38 See Milner, *Vegetius*, p. 120, note 2: “Symmachus, *II laud. Val.* 20, uses *civitates* of towers.” Vegetius has the same poetic pretensions at *Epit.* IV, preface. See also Goffart 1977, p. 77-8.

39 Frank M. Clover, *Flavius Merobaudes: A Translation and Historical Commentary*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 61, No. 1, (1971), p. 12.

40 Walter Goffart, *The Date and Purpose of Vegetius’ “De Re Militari”* Traditio vol. 33 (1977) p. 100.

martial requirements fall into two basic divisions, those culled from book I and those from book III.⁴¹

Merobaudes was obviously familiar with these works of Vegetius, and another passage compliments this assessment. Panegyric I, fragment I a. reads:

*“By all means, let those witnesses (of Aetius’ character) who wish to come to us—judges however severe of our customs and integrity, and not only our own Catos, but also the renowned foreign names of the Lacedaemonians and Athenians. Surely they will find, no period of time, no day, and in short no hour among your deeds which they would not admire.”*⁴²

It seems that someone present for the oration was being called on as a witness; someone who, it was widely known, admired ancient deeds of martial valor, yet had recently been critical not only of the current military customs and integrity of the audience, but past military writers both Greek and Roman. Vegetius, who was the target of the aforementioned fragment, had recently written and circulated the following statement:

“We must therefore recover the ancient custom from histories and (other) books. But they wrote only the incidents and dramas of wars, leaving out as familiar what we are now seeking. The Lacedaemonians, it is true, and the Athenian and other Greeks published in books much material which they call tactica but we ought to be inquiring after the military science of the Roman people, etc.” (Epit. I. 8)

Vegetius goes on to mention his sources, the first of which is *Cato*. Note the striking parallels in the word order. We know that Vegetius considered contemporary standards at fault, and longed to recover “the ancient custom”. He further offended sensibilities when he found the honored, traditional historical resources to be lacking. Merobaudes’ public reply was spurred by Vegetius’ impolitic insistence on the superiority of “military science of the Roman people” (i.e. not renowned foreigners such as Goths and Huns) and comment “*brave deeds belong to a single age*” (Epit. II. 3).

41 It is quite conceivable that book II, concerning the organization of the ancient legion as reconstructed by Vegetius, was a bore to the average reader such as Merobaudes, and was subsequently passed over.

42 Clover, *Flavius Merobaudes*, p. 12.

Vegetius and the Imperial Consistory

Merobaudes, we know, had the title *vir spectabilis* and was a count of the consistory, the Emperor's advisory council. "In Merobaudes' time about twenty civil and four military officials served actively on this board. Four of the highest civil officers, with the topmost senatorial rank of *vir inlustris*, formed the inner core, while the remaining members were *spectabiles*."⁴³

Vegetius, as *comes*, served alongside Merobaudes on this council in his capacity as *primiscrinus* to the praetorian prefect. If one doubts that Vegetius would have been in close association with the Emperor, remember his comments that "*the classicum is sounded when the emperor is present*", note what units provided an honor guard for palatines,⁴⁴ or simply reflect on his curious remark found in the *Mulomedicina* regarding eunuchs.⁴⁵

Vegetius was thus in an excellent position at the center of Valentinian's court to offer his "booklet on the levying and training of recruits"; the opportunity came with the intensifying crisis that followed the loss of Carthage to the Vandals in 439. The hostile fleet that put to sea in the summer of 440 threatened the Italian peninsula and even Rome, and finally convinced Valentinian's administration the gravity of the situation. Drastic promulgations followed over the next five years, as attention was turned towards long neglected issues facing the military.

It is painfully clear from the edicts and the *Epitoma* of Vegetius that the regular army regiments had become attenuated:

"whilst during long years of peace the levying of soldiers has been neglected" (*Epit.* I. 7)

The restoration noticed by Birely and Varady⁴⁶, misunderstood and dismissed by Milner⁴⁷, was not so much a return to antique organization and training, as it was a massive levy; a draft intended to fill existing native battalions back to their intended strength. It was the intensive draft beginning in 443 and running through 444, which convinced Vegetius to present book I to the Emperor:

"we attempt to show then, by a number of stages and headings, the an-

43 Clover, *Flavius Merobaudes*, p. 40: "Merobaudes held the latter rank, and was thus part of the consistory."

44 *Epit.* II. 22, *Ioviani* and *Herculiani*, cf. *Epit.* I. 17, legions *palatinae*.

45 *Mulo*. Bk. II, sub-chapter 53. Because of their castration, "gout seldom troubles eunuchs".

46 E. Birley, *The Dating of Vegetius and the Historia Augusta*, Bonner Historia-Augusta Colloquium vol. 17, 1982-3, p. 66.

47 Milner, *Vegetius*, introduction, p. xxxix.

cient system of levying and training of recruits. Not that these things would appear unfamiliar to you, Invincible Emperor; but so that you may recognize in your spontaneous dispositions (i.e. “pragmatic sanctions”) for the safety of the State, the principles which the builders of the Roman Empire long ago observed, etc.” (Epit. I. preface)

This levy reminded Vegetius of another he had witnessed earlier in his career. This previous failure of selection and training weighed heavily on his mind and was the original catalyst for the entire scope of his proposed reforms.⁴⁸

Vegetius the influential bureaucrat

Vegetius, as *primiscrinius*, chief of the financial aspect of the praetorian prefecture and a count of the consistory was ideally located to distribute his material successfully (which we know he did) and his hand can be seen behind one more law. There is a decree addressed to the prefect Albinus from the early summer of 445 concerning a delegation from the Numidians and Moors.⁴⁹ In the middle of this legislation there was inserted a sanction allowing for the commutation of a soldier’s subsistence allowance into a cash payment, and also prohibiting exorbitant prices charged to such soldiers while on campaign. The cause of this change, clearly stated, was noted by Pharr:

“Taxes were generally assessed in kind, but might be commuted into money payments, *when the required transportation was too burdensome.*”

The movement of heavy bulk goods, the *modii* of wheat, *librae* of meat, and *sextarii* of wine, over long distances to collection points strained the bovine resources of the taxpayers, and the requisition of vehicles and draft animals by the state to deliver these extractions to “soldiers on expeditions” further stressed the *cursus publicus*. Vegetius (who headed Albinus’ staff) realized that this situation was cost prohibitive to all concerned, and with the welfare of the post in mind, proposed the remedy of commutation and the establishment of fixed prices; soldiers could now purchase their rations locally with a stipend, this being set at 4 *solidi* for one year. Note how the wine is listed in *sextarii*, not *cupae*, (barrels) as it appears elsewhere in the code. For what it is worth, also observe that the unit of liquid measure most commonly used by Vegetius in his *Mulomedicina* is the *sextarius*.

48 S. H. Rosenbaum, *Identifying the battle behind the Epitoma rei Militaris*, an unfinished work.

49 Pharr, *The Theodosian Code*, p. 527, title 13, 4. See also Pharr’s footnote no. 13.

Additional dating evidence

There are a few more items that will be addressed before an end is made to this paper. Much has been said about Vegetius' remarks blaming the Emperor Gratian for the state of the army, but surprisingly little has been made of his comment on the battle of the river Frigidus which took place in A.D. 394. This matter deserves rectification.

Vegetius at III, 14, warns the reader about "*headwinds that habitually arise at a regular time, during the fighting*" and how these "*headwinds deflect and depress your missiles, while aiding the enemy's.*" He is realistically speaking of the actual effects of the "Bora", which it was said, during the second day of combat, blew down from the mountains, aiding the victory of the Eastern emperor Theodosius over the usurper Eugenius. The meteorological phenomenon described by Vegetius matches that by Ambrose of Milan,⁵⁰ and Claudian although without the literary embellishment:

*"Swiftly beneath thy auspices was victory achieved. Both fought for us — thou with thy happy influence, thy father with his strong right arm. Thanks to thee the Alps lay open to our armies, nor did it avail the careful foe to cling to fortified posts. Their ramparts, and the trust they put therein, fell; the rocks were torn away and their hiding-places exposed. Thanks to thine influence the wind of the frozen North overwhelmed the enemy's line with his mountain storms, hurled back their weapons upon the throwers and with the violence of his tempest drove back their spears. Verily God is with thee, when at thy behest Aeolus frees the armed tempests from his cave, when the very elements fight for thee and the allied winds come at the call of thy trumpets. The Alpine snows grew red with slaughter; the cold Frigidus, its waters turned to blood, ran hot and steaming, and would have been choked with the heaps of corpses had not their own fast-flowing gore helped it on its course."*⁵¹

But why does Vegetius describe this occurrence and warn the reader of it, from the standpoint of the defeated? It cannot be an oblique reference to Cannae, for sand and dust blew into the Roman's faces that day instead of arrows. If indeed Vegetius used the Frigidus battle as an exemplum, should he not be speaking of the confrontation from the winner's side if the victorious Theodosius I was

⁵⁰ See St. Ambrose of Milan, *Sermon on psalm 36*. See also St. Augustine *City of God*, Bk. V, chap. 26.

⁵¹ Claudian, *Panegyric on the Third Consulship of the Emperor Honorius (A.D. 396)* Loeb Classical Library 1922, p. 278.

the intended recipient of the *Epitoma*? Vegetius clearly displays an attitude of support for the *western* legions who fought for the pagan Eugenius and his conservative general Arbogast. With this pro-western stance of Vegetius in mind, it becomes clear that his famous polemic on the “intervention of neglect and idleness” (*Epit.* I. 20) is not so much a personal attack on the hapless Gratian, who indeed preferred barbarian mercenaries⁵², but perhaps a subtle nod of approval in the direction of the Spanish military traditionalist who ensured Gratian’s divinity.

The Easter reference

Some scholars have discerned a reference to calculating the date of Easter in Vegetius’ fourth book. It has caused for the most part, simply a great deal of confusion and unnecessary debate. The contested section can be found at *Epit.* IV. 35:

“This has been the lesson of science herself and the everyday experience of all shipbuilders, and we recognize it too when we contemplate the very religious festival which it has been decided to celebrate for ever more on these days alone.”

One commentator in particular believed that this quip should be associated with a theological reform of 387-388, and Milner, in his 1996 edition, agrees.⁵³ The argument is that Theophilus, the bishop of Alexandria, developed a paschal calendar for one hundred years based on the first consulship of Theodosius in 380. Milner seems to accept this premise and “lists it with personal arguments that can be used to reinforce the supposition that the *Epitoma* was dedicated to Theodosius I.” The fact is that these reforms failed to end the Easter debate at all; various Christian congregations scattered throughout the Roman Empire continued to use unorthodox methods for determining the date of Easter, including an unacceptable reliance on the Passover observances of local Jewish communities. The problem persisted and the controversy continued to grow, with the Latin Church finally taking a firm stance against this practice only around the mid-fifth century. Without a doubt, Vegetius is referring to apostolic canon 8:

“If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon shall celebrate the holy day of Easter

52 Zosimus, *New History*, Bk. IV, chap. 114: “This produced among his soldiers a violent hatred against him, which being gradually inflamed and augmented, incited in them a disposition for innovation, and most particularly in that part of them which was in Britain, since they were the most resolute and vindictive.”

53 Milner, *Vegetius*, introduction, xli.

before the vernal equinox, with the Jews, let him be deposed."⁵⁴

We should not doubt that the canon was fully sanctioned by the Church and enforced by the administration of Valentinian III.⁵⁵ It must have gone into effect around the year 450, as we note the subsequent appearance of various Easter *Computi*, such as the Carthaginian Computus of 455, all of which tried to ensure that the holy day was calculated only by Christians, always fell after the equinox and preferably on a Sunday. The mid fifth century dating of the apostolic canons (as proposed by Johann Sebastian von Drey) has the added benefit of corresponding exactly with the *subscriptio* of the emendator Flavius Eutropius in Constantinople.⁵⁶ The Eastern emperor did not die until the 28th of July of that year, so it is even possible that the dedication *ad Theodosium Imperatorem* (found in certain manuscript *subscriptiones*) is also legitimate.

The Career of Vegetius

His professional career, we can now observe, began at the provincial level with some manner of involvement with the *cursus publicus*, perhaps as a dispatch rider. Once Vegetius joined the *agentes in rebus* his career progressed steadily; he moved steadily upwards through the various *scholae*, administering all the departments in turn.⁵⁷ Vegetius, who happens to bear a provincial *gentilicium*,⁵⁸ eventually reached the topmost position, a *regendarius* or even *curiosus* assigned to the Gaulish prefecture, and served Albinus during his brief tenure.

54 Henry R. Percival, *Apostolic Canons*, 1899. In various editions it may appear listed as canon 7.

55 It would be hard to argue that Valentinian (in Rome frequently during this time and firm supporter of Pope Leo's primacy) would have ignored and not promulgated this canon. See Mark Humphries, *Valentinian III and the City of Rome (425-455): Patronage, Politics, and Power*, in Lucy Grig and Gavin Kelly (eds), *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2012), 161-82.

56 The subscription speaks of the *Epitoma* being revised for the seventh time in 450; most likely with the final draft of book IV, the last installment. Vegetius the *primiscrinus* would have been in an excellent position to send manuscripts to Constantinople along with the regular imperial correspondence.

57 Vegetius in fact cleverly recreated the ancient legionary structure from a) his proximity to provincial administrative *cohors*, b) familiarity with members of the corps of notaries whose civil service rank is *tribune* (*Epit.* II. 7) and c) the prefecture; the staff of which was patterned after, and enrolled in, the fictive *legio I Adiutrix*.

58 Milner, *Vegetius*: introduction p. xxxiii.

After a short and dangerous hiatus (which provided the material for book IV)⁵⁹ Vegetius was summoned in the year 443 along with or by Albinus to even greater honors, that of *primiscrinus*; it was a move clearly intended to prevent the most senior post on the prefect's staff being held by one of its own internally promoted members.⁶⁰ Coming as he was from the *agentes in rebus*, members of which were allowed to hold certain joint appointments, Vegetius as *primiscrinus* retained considerable oversight of the *cursus publicus*. Vegetius' personal concern for the public post shows itself most clearly in several surviving laws.⁶¹ He reached his apogee over the next seven years, acquiring the rank of *vir inlustris*, the honorary title of *Flavius*, and as *comes*, served with Merobaudes in the *consistorium*.⁶² It is also quite possible that one of his additional appointments was secretary to the *Magister Ultriusque Militiae*, an office that had lapsed after the ascendancy of Aetius but was reconstituted during the Vandal emergencies of 440-1. His *Epitoma* was written and began circulating at court around the time of the great levies, but before Merobaudes' "Panegyric I." Books II, III and IV were not revised and officially presented to the Emperor until later, towards the "end of his honorable and lucrative career". Vegetius did not survive in office long beyond the replacement of Albinus with Firminus in 449.⁶³ Opilio, the *magister officiorum*, may have aided his bureaucratic survival for another year or so.⁶⁴ The *Mulomedicina*, written to improve veterinarian standards at the *mansiones*, and including as it does proud references from his time supervising the post, his time at court, and his extensive travels, was initiated before and completed soon after his retirement.

59 Note also *Epit.* III, 3: "for if the enemy finds you unready, everything becomes confused in panic, and things needed from other cities are denied you through the roads being closed." Vegetius was clearly witness to this unspecified "experience of recent emergencies" (*Epit.* IV. 30) and barely escaped "after sustaining infinite dangers" (*N.Val.* 28, 1-2). It was most likely either a barbarian invasion, or foederate revolt.

60 Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire*, p. 210.

61 *Mensores* were definitely on his mind due to the law of 443, see *Epit.* II. 7.

62 Considering that the *Primicerius notariorum* merely held the 2nd rank of *spectabilis*, Vegetius as *inlustris* likely served as secretary for the *consistorium*, and even as secretary for the *officium* of the M.V.M.

63 Tony Honoré, *Law in the Crisis of Empire, 379-455AD: The Theodosian Dynasty and its Quaestors*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1998, pp. 270-271. Firminus (a possible candidate for quaestor "W18" who was responsible for seven laws, 446-7) succeeded Albinus by June 17th, 449.

64 Coming from the *agentes in rebus*, Vegetius was ultimately responsible to Opilio, despite his appointments alongside Albinus.

Epilogue

At this time, in the absence of any known facts to the contrary, my conclusions (which match every aspect of the evidence) are in all probability, correct. Yet much of this subject remains to be studied. Vegetius knew of the Theodosian code; he may have been involved in its promulgation throughout the western provinces. Countless examples of his close familiarity with this law code, such as the height of recruits, restitution for ration allotments, or trades banned from the draft, need to be tallied and examined. Why has the reference to the Burgundians and Thuringians (who rose to prominence only in the fifth century) rarely been discussed? We may ask this question: what manner of event would serve to familiarize a man of the *cursus publicus* with the horses of these tribes? The only probability that comes to mind is the officially controlled relocation of the Burgundians in A.D. 443. The meteorological data used by Vegetius in book IV, including the Egyptian festival of Pachone, needs to be compared to material found in the *Laterculus* of Polemius Silvius; this *fasti* we know, was compiled in 449 and circulated at the court of Valentinian III. Did Vegetius make use of Macrobius, Palladius or the *Mensuratio orbis* from c. 435? Incidentally, there even exists a corpus of five works which all share some distinctive features such as illustrations, the style being consistent with the late Roman Empire. It was suggested long ago that the nature of these documents “would seem to indicate that this corpus once belonged to the archive of a Roman official”.⁶⁵ There is ample information available to identify this official with Vegetius. Another corpus of ancient texts is compiled of sources Vegetius quotes directly and contains perhaps yet another unrecognized personal work. Further details concerning these observations will be shared in forthcoming papers.⁶⁶ I can only comment and indicate. It will be up to the experts to establish relationships (if any) with Vegetius from amongst these additional documents.

Over time, two very different dates have been proposed for the works of Vegetius, but it now appears that the conclusions of Seeck, Birley, Goffart and Gibbon were absolutely correct. There remains the strongly held notion that Vegetius could not have written at any time after the emotional terminus of 410 A.D. Difficult questions must now be asked of this premise: is this an opinion

65 E. A. Thompson, *A Roman Reformer and Inventor*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952, p. 14.

66 H. Rosenbaum, *Thoughts on Materiel in the Codex Spirensis* and *A New Terminus for the Notitia Dignitatum*.

based on facts, or perceived truths? What really makes us form these conclusions and perpetuate them despite evidence to the contrary? Have we been consciously defending an obsolete historical narrative? What uncomfortable re-evaluations are forced upon us by a fifth century Vegetius?

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Solidus of Theodosius II, minted in Constantinople, c. 435 AD.
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Costume Armor in the
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includes original paper label
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