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a cura di  
MARCO BETTALLI ED ELENA FRANCHI



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## Insights into the Writer Vegetius

By S. H. ROSENBAUM

ABSTRACT. This paper, “*Insights into the writer Vegetius*” aims to introduce to fellow scholars provocative information hidden within a Late Roman military treatise. It has long been known by commentators and translators that the writer Vegetius composed his most famous work, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, in the shadow of some recent catastrophic defeat of imperial arms. The inability to properly identify this battle has led to much erroneous speculation regarding the date of this document, the purpose for which it was originally written, the origins of the writer himself, and the anonymous emperor to whom it was later sent. Answer to these problems were found rather inadvertently during research into an unrelated subject. The following observations, having been refined over the course of a decade or more, rely on close comparison of the parent material in the original Latin to numerous geographical, linguistic and literary cognates. Conclusions are based on rational weight of evidence. While one matching factor can be rightly ignored, and multiple similarities dismissed with sound arguments, dozens of verifiable parallels demand the attention of the most incredulous historian. Much work remains to be done. Review and further investigation into the sources cited by individuals on a personal basis is strongly encouraged. The insights offered by this paper towards our dim understanding of events in the fifth century A.D. are, as of yet, unmeasured. It would seem that the events recorded by Vegetius have an additional hidden potential. Like a dark age “Rosetta stone”, other obscure historical material, once undecipherable, can perhaps be identified and placed into proper context. Such a unusual suggestion, that long sought information has lain quietly within the *Epitoma*, will hopefully stimulate no small growth of curiosity.

**T**he work of Flavius Publius Vegetius Renatus known as *Epitoma Rei Militaris* suffers from neglect disproportionate to its outstanding value. To the students of the Late Roman empire, one province in particular, Vegetius’ writings offer a singular view into hitherto forgotten military events crucial to our comprehension of this period in European history. It is not the purpose of this paper to re-evaluate the sources or methodology used by Vegeti-

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us,<sup>1</sup> rather to bring into context data either unknown or disregarded by previous scholars. This insightful material has the incredible potential to greatly illuminate certain words, phrases, and passages that have been, until now, considered incongruous or even irrelevant. Historical investigation at its best is a collective effort. It is not the purpose of this work to disassemble, but build upon in a traditional fashion, all the efforts of former commentators. By doing so, every aspect of this subject will hopefully benefit.

### *Tragic Indicators of a Forgotten Battle*

In the first three books of the *Epitoma* of Vegetius there is a background element, a substratum that has not gone unnoticed. Scholars such as Milner agree that, due to multiple and repetitious indicators, it is certain that Vegetius writes in the aftermath of some catastrophic defeat.<sup>2</sup> That this observation is intuitively correct will be shown presently.

The preface aside,<sup>3</sup> it is clear that Vegetius had personal impressions of this disaster foremost in his mind when his composition, book 1, was initiated. The first pertinent statement occurs almost immediately at I. 1: “*rudis et indocta multitudo exposita semper ad caedem.*” Vegetius starts not with the beginning of a chain of events, but with a tragic outcome. Note that a “rude and untrained multitude” does not match what we know of the crack regiments of the elite eastern field army which took the field at Adrianople under Valens. Another quip at I. 9, speaks of a “divided and disordered” army, followed closely in chapter 10 by the first of numerous references to “rivers not always traversed by bridges” necessitating among the unskilled “swimming ability” for the sake of their own lives, I.

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1 W. Goffart “*Rome’s fall and after*”, London 1989, p. 47. Mr. Goffart recognized that “the positive approach towards the book became a hunt for its sources”; admirable work concerning transmission also being accomplished in this respect.

2 N. P. Milner “*Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*”, Liverpool University Press 1993, introduction xxvi. Milner notices this “repetition of wider subjects” but passes it off as Vegetius’ editorial method; admitting later at p. 84, note 1, “V. was writing in the aftermath of some disastrous pitched battle”, assuming Adrianople. See note 5, p. 90, on irregularities that both Schenk and Milner could not account for.

3 Scholars agree that book IV as well as the various prefaces were written far later; the obscure Eutropius has been rightly suggested by the sagacious Mr. Charles to be the original consolidator of all four works. See; M. B. Charles, “*Vegetius in context, etc.*” Stuttgart 2007, p. 37.

10, fin. After this chapter there are two statements, I. 13 fin., and I. 20: “*fugam*” and “*fuga*”; i.e. precipitous flight.

Next is chapter 21-5 on camp building, awkwardly fitted into the book, as noted by Milner<sup>4</sup> but actually fitting the mental chronology from which Vegetius was recollecting. Indeed one finds Vegetius elaborating on camps in a most peculiar manner that begins to demonstrate a pattern.<sup>5</sup> The dangers of an unfortified camp, its vulnerability to surprise attack especially at night, its poor choice of location in terms of sanitation and drainage, and the necessity of adequate provisions against unforeseen contingencies, all seem to indicate personally witnessed episodes recalled with great detail. It can be argued at this point that these allusions, to which Vegetius obviously expects his readers to understand, are far better evidence for familiarity than a war story told at full length. There are not just one or several allusions, but very, very many. Vegetius briefly refers back, at I. 26, to the midst of the unknown final battle, “*Nam et constipati perdunt, etc.*” before touching on serious issues that occurred at the outset of the nameless campaign at II. 2: “*Auxiliares cum ducuntur ad proelium, ex diversis locis, etc.*” The proceeding section puts these events in order by way of emphasizing what *should* have happened. The mention of a *legion* being involved, and in the present tense, is striking.<sup>6</sup>

Is Vegetius really speaking of an actual event he witnessed? Suspicions are at this point, just that. A relative sequence is needed to prove the veracity of all tentative observations. Vegetius provides the needed review, an abridged expose’, at III. 1:

*“For a greater multitude is subject to more mishaps. On marches it is always slower because of its size; a longer column often suffers ambush even by small numbers; in broken country and at river crossings it is often caught in a trap as a result of delays caused by the baggage train. Also it is an enormous labor to collect fodder for large numbers of animals and horses. Difficulties with the grain supply, to be avoided on any expedition, afflict larger armies sooner. For however thoroughly rations may have*

4 N. P. Milner “*Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*”, p. 23 note 1. Vegetius inserted these chapters on camp-building for the subject of the undefended camp weighed heavily on his mind.

5 Heed the strange comment at III. 10, “*Respondebitur: Si fuisset ista cautela, nihil nocturni aut diurni superuentus hostium nocere potuissent.*” This resembles in its precise legal wording transcripts from a military court of inquiry, further adapted by Vegetius.

6 Vegetius tells that this *legio* had not campaigned for some time; its veterans were like fresh draftees.

*been prepared, they run out more quickly, the more they are distributed to. Finally water itself sometimes hardly suffices for too large a number. And if for some reason the battle line should turn tail, more casualties must inevitable occur to more men, and those who escape, once terrified, thereafter fear battle.”*

In the following chapters, Vegetius elaborates on these same issues in a first hand manner; see III. 1, “never in camp should federates outnumber our countrymen”<sup>7</sup> and III. 2, “pestilential marshes”, “disease” and “deprivation”, exactly as in book I. These comments have every hallmark of recalled memories (dwelling, as memories tend to do, upon the experiences of bodily suffering). These concepts will be explored fully in an upcoming paper, “*Identifying the Battle Behind The Epitoma Rei Militaris*”.

### *Events of the Campaign as outlined by Vegetius*

Even if there were nothing further to base these deductions upon, (which is not the case), from this point in the *Epitoma* one can offer a brief reconstruction. It seems some emergency arose. An expeditionary army was assembled of a *legio*<sup>8</sup> and all too numerous federate *auxilia*, and with untrained draftees a campaign was launched into rough highlands, a place of forests, moors and bridge-less rivers.

The “multitude” tarried too long, wasting away at a diseased camp well into winter. sudden night attack on this unfenced, soggy camp was followed by an unplanned retreat in adverse weather. During this retreat the crossing of swollen rivers was accomplished with a great many drowning. Despite the perilous fording, a delayed baggage train led to the disordered column being ambushed at another river crossing. There was a final battle with signals ignored and unit confusion; a collapsed fighting line left survivors surrounded. The expedition ended in a total rout and tragic massacre. Once these features are recognized, they appear throughout the *Epitoma* with a regularity that renders further cataloging pointless.

Several points must now be made clear. This campaign does not in its particu-

7 Annotated English translations are personal efforts, the result of some discrepancy. The rest are based mostly on Milner’s translations.

8 This legion (or two) was probably of the late type, comprising of regiments of 1,000 men, created by the division of the original parent unit and capable of simultaneous deployments on multiple fronts.



lars resemble, *in any way*, that of Adrianople in A.D. 378.<sup>9</sup> In fact, no documented battle during the Roman Empire, at any time period or in any province, matches the vivid descriptions of Vegetius, *except for one*. Although most experts in the field of Roman studies quite likely have never heard of this particular battle, its location has never been forgotten and can be visited today.<sup>10</sup> Similarities between it and the *Epitoma* material are too frequent and precise, immediately ruling out the possibility of coincidence. The fever-ridden camp, the debilitating stay and tragic retreat, actually allow similar comments to be observed in other respected sources.<sup>11</sup>

This battle and its relationship to the works of Vegetius has remained concealed for a host of reasons; ambiguity of date, obscurity in location and literature, and stubborn conceptual discrepancies that preclude objective investigation. Accurate comprehension of past events must change with new information.<sup>12</sup> With that in mind, it is to *Ayrshire, Scotland* one must now turn.

### *The Clades Caeliana*

Local traditions in Ayrshire, which are reinforced by colorful place-names, excerpts in early Scottish histories and actual battlefield artifacts, all tell of a long forgotten conflict in this area.<sup>13</sup> A certain Coilus, leader of the northern

9 Vegetius does in fact mention Adrianople at III. 11, in the context of marching fatigue, but does not use the details of this campaign for his works. The battle of the Frigidus River in AD 394 is also spoken of at III. 14; it is indicatively, told from the standpoint of *the defeated*.

10 While the creation of unique place-names does not automatically indicate a battlefield, dozens of such names increases the probability of a factual historic event lurking in the background.

11 Gildas "*De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*" section 19: "*Statuitur ad haec in edito arcis acies, segnis ad pugnam, inhabilis ad fugam, trememntibus praecordiis inepta, quae diebus ac noctibus stupido sedili marcebat etc.*" Note both *tela*, (used in the context of archery cf. of Veg. III. 8), and *fratrum pignorumque*, poetically describing the federate auxiliaries.

12 Newfound evidence of forgotten battles, such as the *Harzhorn* in Germany, can rather painfully force scholars to reconsider the existing historical record.

13 Place-names are preserved in cartographic resources, the works of Boece and Fordun are extant but spurned while the existence of the "Caprington Horn", found on the battlefield, has been ignored. A war horn with an intriguing metallic composition, a twin resides at the Bonn *Rheinisches Landesmuseum*, and a similar mouthpiece can be found at the *Scottish National Museum*, Edinburgh.

Britons, stirred strife between the Picts and Scots.<sup>14</sup> (compare to III. 10: “*Inter hostes discordiarum serere causas sapientis est Ducis*”). The effort miscarried<sup>15</sup> and resulted in a general rising, III. 1: “*infinita multitudo ex gentibus ferocissimis rebellasset*”, in a place where the “provinces had been extended”, III. 10: “*propagantur prouinciae*.”<sup>16</sup> A “raw and untrained horde” (I. 1) comprised of at least one legion and auxiliaries then gathered to retaliate: “*Sed cum legiones auxilia uel equites ex diuersis aduenerint locis*” (III. 9). Vegetius makes clear that problems with discipline arose immediately, before the army even set out; II. 2: “*peruenire qui discrepant, antequam dimicent*.” and III. 4: “*Interdum mouet tumultum ex diuersis locis collectus exercitus etc.*”

Despite these inauspicious setbacks, the campaign began. From the outset it seems the leadership strategy of the Picts and Scots was to deny this army provender as well as opportunity for decisive action,<sup>17</sup> and this receives confirmation at III. 9:

*“For sometimes the enemy hopes that the campaign can be ended quickly, and if it becomes long-drawn out, is either reduced by hunger, called back to his own country by his men’s homesickness, or through doing nothing significant is compelled to leave in despair. Then very many desert, exhausted by effort and weariness, some betray others and some surrender themselves since loyalty is less common in adversity and in such case an army which was numerous on taking the field insensibly dwindles away to nothing.”*

This expedition of the Britons and their allies encamped close by the lower reaches of the River Doon,<sup>18</sup> south of the modern town of Ayr.

It can be surmised based on this passage at III. 4, “*Seu mare siue fluuius uic-*

14 Hector Boece “*Historia gentis Scotorum*” 1575, folio edited By Dana F. Sutton, I. 27. “(Coilus) delayed the project for the better part of two years, seeing if perhaps fortune would give the Britons a suitable opportunity to fight, if either nation (Pict or Scot) would commit some wrong against the other.”

15 Boece I. 28; “At length the Britons’ responsibility was brought to light”.

16 More details on this subject may be found in another forthcoming paper by S. H. Rosenbaum: “*The Location of Valentia, the Fifth British province*”. Note Vegetius at III. 6; “provinces in which the emergency occurred”.

17 Boece I. 28; “(Fergus) commanded his soldiers that the Britons should be worn down by delay and lack of supplies”.

18 Boece I. 28; “(Coilus) and his army encamped on the bank of a stream known as Duneaton Water, sending men to scour the region and bring back any Scot or Pict they found for punishment.”

*inusest sedibus aestiuo tempore ad natandum cogendi sunt omnes*” that the sea was close at hand; a fact confirmed by scattered artifacts.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Camp at Cambusdoon*

The numerous statements of Vegetius offer rich details concerning this camp. It was too small for the army and its train, (I. 22. fin.) it was located on low ground, too close to bad water, and too far away from good water. Certain comments indicate there was a hill or ridge near, putting the camp within bowshot; see I. 22 and III. 8: “*ne ex superioribus locis missa ab hostibus in eum tela preueniant.*” This data, along with place names, should allow the ready discovery and positive identification of this camp on the ground.<sup>20</sup>

Vegetius warns of the predominance of auxiliaries in camp, and even hints that there was dissent there as well; see III. 4: “*si qui turbulenti uel seditiosi sunt milites*” and “*segregatos a castris.*” The situation deteriorated steadily at this camp, (III. 2, III. 8) and as autumn turned to winter, severe shortages of food, fodder, firewood and clothing began to arise.

The sentence located at III. 3 implies that the Picts and Scots were as equally hungry: “*Frequenter autem necessitas geminatur et obsidio saepe fit longior, quam putaris, cum aduersarii etiam ipsi esurientes circumsidere non desinant quos fame sperant esse uincendos.*” Vegetius seems to indicate that at this time

19 “*Royal commission on the Ancient and Historical monuments of Scotland*” NSA Vol. 5, p. 40, archaeological notes, NS31NW93219 to 3322; Throughout the whole of the area along the coast from the River Ayr to the Doon, “Roman and British places of sepulture are found, with Roman armor, swords, lances, daggers and pieces of mail, and *brazen camp vessels*, intermixed with urns of rude baked clay, hatchet and arrowheads, and other implements of warfare used by the Caledonians” (NSA 1845 A. Cuthill). One may expect that funerary remains are to be found in the vicinity of a diseased camp. The site was believed to be haunted. See “Tam’O Shanter’s ride”.

20 Samuel Lewis, “*A Topographical Dictionary of Scotland*” 1846 Vol. I, p. 88, “There are evident traces of the old Roman road leading from Galloway into the country of Ayr, and passing within a half a mile of the town, and other portions of it are still in tolerable preservation. A tract on the coast, called “*Battle Fields*”, is supposed to be the scene of a fierce conflict between the natives and the Romans, both Roman and British implements of war, urns of baked clay, and numerous other relics of Roman antiquity, have been found at this place.” Burials would have taken place away from camp along the road; the camp itself could not have been too far away, placenames here include “Cunning Park”, “Gear Holm”, “Wright field”, “North Park” and “*Cambusdoon*”.

desertions became a problem, III. 9: “*Tum fracti labore et taedio plurimi deserunt, aliquanti produnt, aliquandi se tradunt, quia aduersis rebus rarior fides est et nudari incipit qui copiosus aduenerat.*” The final and unendurable crisis, the flooding of the low lying camp as winter rains set in, served to convince the leadership of the necessity of retreat (III. 8).

Scottish sources are somewhat silent about the flooding,<sup>21</sup> but speak of a force of five thousand Britons, “*accustomed to moving about in steep country*” sent against their nearby highland refuge. This was possibly a diversion by a crack British light infantry regiment to cover the retreat. Vegetius speaks of it at III. 22:

*“Some would retreat with the army by night along routes they had reconnoitered; when the enemy realized at dawn, they were unable to overtake those who had gone ahead. Of course, the light, nimble soldiery was sent beforehand to the hills, in order that at short notice the entire army could withdraw, and if the enemy wished to pursue, they were routed by the light troops who had occupied the place earlier.”*<sup>22</sup>

In any case, according to the Coilsfield story, the evacuation plan failed. The Picts and Scots resolved to strike first, at the now vulnerable and unsuspecting camp.

### *The Night Attack on the Camp*

It was decided at council<sup>23</sup> that Fergus and his Scots should make an attack on the camp during the “first vigil of the night”, and create a commotion. The Picts were to cross the River Doon at a ford, hike through “impassable stony places” and fall upon the rear of the camp. This description of the assault may be quite accurate, but it is suspected, by the nature of the terrain, to be in reverse order.<sup>24</sup> Imagine the turmoil as shelters and tents were set alight, men were cut

21 Local tradition does relate that the Coyle Water was so flooded that Coilus could only cross it far to the south at a place called to this day, “The King’s Steps”.

22 Milner had translation difficulties at this section; indeed it makes no sense outside the context of the Ayrshire campaign. It is with great effort that the similarity of these two separate passages can be dismissed as mere coincidence.

23 Boece I. 29; “Thus varying advice was offered on all sides, and in the end they decided that Fergus and his soldiers should attack the Britons’ watchmen during the first vigil of the night”.

24 To attack the rear of a camp with its back to the sea, approach must be logically made from along the shore; rocky and difficult stretches of which actually exist just to the southwest, at the “Heads of Ayr”.

down, horses and draft animals escaping, whole units deserting, the uncontrollable havoc. The successful *night* attack on the *unfortified* camp, plus the ensuing chaotic fighting in the darkness, is what was most memorable. It obviously left an impression on Vegetius *and* the federate auxiliaries. Their unique recollections allow this disastrous campaign to be traced in other potentially overlooked sources.<sup>25</sup> Frequent statements concerning a night attack on an un-fenced camp was the suspicious clue that led me to the initial analysis of the disaster-exempla found within the *Epitoma*.

### *The Army Retreats*

The references of Vegetius, combined with place-names in Ayrshire, indicate that the army of Coilus did not perish at the ruined camp. That dubious honor would go to a rolling landscape about nine miles away that is traditionally known as *Coilsfield*.<sup>26</sup> The sequence of events leading to the final dissolution is actually described in some detail by a vernacular poem:

*“The Britones marchet, tuo days before the field, to Marrok’s mote for  
easement and beild;  
Afore the night they waughtet liquor fine, Lyke filthie beasts lying like  
drunken swine.  
Quhen Fergus heare they were in sutch a pley, Doune fra Craigsbian he  
came right suddenly,  
And took his will upon his traitorous foes, quhair thousands lay skatteret  
like windlestroes.  
Coylus he fled unto the river Doune, quher drownet were many yt thair did  
runn,  
And northward held quhil they cam till a muir, and thair was stayet be Scots  
that on him fuir.  
Fergus he followet and came right heastilie, quhair Coyll was killet and*

25 Saxo Grammaticus, “*Gesta Danorum*” Editio Princeps I. 8. 7: “*Itaque Danis in extremas desperationis angustias compulsis, nocte concubia sine auctore tale castris carmen insonuit.*” These passages tell the whole story from the auxiliaries point of view: an inauspicious start, a desultory campaign, a starving army, omens during the first watch telling the *auxilia* to flee, nocturnal battle, slaughter during flight and a final disastrous battle. A forthcoming paper, “*Insular Source Material in the Gesta Danorum*” will treat this difficult subject and further define my observations.

26 It means the field or battleground of Coilus. For more on this subject of place-names, see “*Scottish Place-Names*”, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, Edinburgh 2001, and G. T. Flom, “*Scandinavian Influence on Southern Lowland Scotch*”, New York, 1900.

*his hole armie..*”.<sup>27</sup>

While the initial movements and preparations may have been planned,<sup>28</sup> the decision to retreat in the night, in the aftermath of the attack, was possibly spontaneous.<sup>29</sup> In any event, Vegetius makes clear that secrecy was not kept concerning this withdrawal, and the route was not properly reconnoitered or trusted guides procured; chapter six in book III concerns this march exclusively.

Immediately following this is a chapter on crossing rivers, allowing one to place the various comments on swimming in their proper context. Earlier comments by Vegetius regarding the flooded camp and “*Saepe repentinis imbribus uel niuibus solent exundare torrentes*” at I. 10 show not only meteorological correlations<sup>30</sup> but point to the downstream, and wider and deeper, reaches of the River Ayr being at the time impassable.<sup>31</sup>

This idea is backed by local lore that maintains the army of Coilus retreated south and east from the Doon-side camp, down and around the aptly named “Craigs of Coyle” and crossed the Water of Coyle well upstream from the hamlet of Coylton. The Ayr was eventually crossed somewhere as well, for when the final battle ensued the column was on the north bank of said river. Etymological evidence may well implicate the crossing at the location called *Stair*. Setting aside the supposed “Stuarts of Ayr” contraction, the M.E word *steir* comes to mind. It can mean disturbance, tumult, confusion, etc. Apt remarks for what must have been the chaotic crossing of a swollen river by a panicked army, being

27 This excerpt originates from a lost collection of poems and writings by Ayr schoolmaster John Bonar, c. 1631. It is greatly desired that the full text be found, as it preserves details remembered by untold generations of locals concerning the whole affair.

28 Vegetius indicates that preparations to retreat were underway, most certainly after the camp flooded.

29 It could be argued, based on diverse comments, that the superstitious and disgruntled Germanic auxiliaries, immediately following, (or during?) the night attack on the camp, were the first to bolt.

30 The same storms that made the rivers impassable and flooded the low-lying camp, if seasonal, could offer aid in determining closely the time of year. Vegetius merely indicates that autumn passed and winter had begun.

31 William Scott Douglas “*In Ayrshire: a descriptive picture etc.*,” 1874 p. 8. “The usual velocity of the Ayr is about a mile an hour, but when swelled by a heavy fall of rain or the melting of snow from the higher localities around, its velocity is increased to six or seven miles an hour”. Cf. Vegetius I. 10, “*Saepe repentinis imbribus uel niuibus solent exundare torrentes.*”

pursued, in the dark. Many current roads may well overlie earlier pathways and tracks, perhaps even Roman roads from two centuries prior. The goal seems to have been, what is now, the modern B743 and its exit from Ayrshire.

### *The Ambush*

Some idea of the situation is provided by Vegetius:

*“For a greater multitude is always subject to more mishaps. On marches it is always slower because of its size; a longer column often suffers ambush even by smaller numbers; in broken country and at river-crossings it is often caught in a trap as a result of delays caused by the baggage train.”*

Vegetius explains what happened twice more:

*“One thing to avoid is the column being severed or thinned out through the negligence of one group setting a fast pace while another is moving more slowly”* and *“soldiers divided while crossing a river.”*

A study of the battle-field allows us see exactly where this ambush likely occurred. It is perhaps no coincidence that the river spoken of by Vegetius is today called by the peculiar name of “Fail” at the place aptly named *Failford*.<sup>32</sup>

It is possible to reconstruct events with some precision up to this point. The column was dangerously long, but the terrible night of the camp attack and tumultuous retreat had passed. Sometime during the following day (or days) the faster paced lead division that had crossed Water of Fail, (being thus separated from the rest of the army by the river-bed), was ambushed.

By describing the ideal trap at III. 22: *“In transfretatione fluuiorum qui praecedit illam partem temptat oprimere, quae prima transiuerit, dum reliqui alueo separantur; qui autem sequitur festinate itinere, illos, qui nondum potuerunt transpire, conturbat,”* Vegetius obliquely explains everything that happened.

In retrospect, this was a most ideal location; the River Ayr, running high in its gorge south of the road, made escape in that direction difficult. The Water of Fail and Fail loch provided obstacles to the east and north. The generally wooded and broken nature of the valleys all around facilitated the concealment and deployment of the ambusher.<sup>33</sup> It is likely that the remainder of the column, stretching

32 The singular word, “fail”, perhaps of Latin derivation, can mean “to deceive”, as well as unsuccessful. It might refer to the riverine ambush set by the Picts and Scots.

33 If this battlefield is ever properly investigated, iron artifacts will logically be found in these

from at least Failford back towards Stair, also suffered from some manner of attack at this time; see III. 6: “*nam insidiatores transuersos frequentur incursant.*”

### *The Battle of Coilsfield*

These attacks resulted in combat formations being ordered. The position of particular regiments in the column logically determined their deployment on the line. The lead divisions marched rapidly and had gone too far ahead. After recoiling from the ambush now they, “wish to get away rather than go back” (III. 6). These “*deteriores bellatores*” (III. 20) were put on the right flank while the heavily armed infantry and choice cavalry were deployed on the left flank. This is shown in odd comments throughout chapters 15-21. Vegetius remarks about the handicap of the left position several times as well as its vulnerability. Elite units normally set aside for reserves “must sometimes out of necessity be assembled on the left” (III. 20). Note also the comment “*Si quando alam sinistram longe habueris meliorem*” that appears in the same section. The battle line as formed was on the higher ground, and probably stretched in a south facing arc from the high-ground at Coilsfield Mains to the west end of Carngillan hill.

Vegetius describes this very deployment and its weaknesses also at III. 20: “*quia, in prolixo spatio cum tenditur acies, non aequalis semper campus occurrit, et si hiatus aliqui in medio uel sinus aut curuatura fit, in eo loco acies frequenter inrumpitur.*”

The front of the army was thus about a kilometer long, quite possibly more if terrain is factored in. This might even allow an expert in these matters to arrive at a rough estimate of numbers involved.<sup>34</sup> The arrangement was fairly strong except the left flank, which was in the air. A competent general with the adept use of cavalry could have potentially turned this situation to his advantage, a concept Vegetius would later ponder.<sup>35</sup>

There is one more location on this battlefield that must be mentioned. Dead-

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uncultivated areas, scattered accoutrements of those who fled and perished in the rout. There is the possibility that bodies remained *in situ* for some time.

34 The army of Coilus, even after hunger, disease, desertions and drowning, may still have been in the tens of thousands. Not to mention camp followers.

35 Vegetius insists that the creation of reserves, their timely deployment to the left flank, and the subsequent destruction of the enemy right wing, could in the future insure victory; III. 17, III. 20.





Coilsfield, Bloody Burn, Water of Fall, River Ayr (Google Maps)

men's Holm, or *riverbank of the dead men*, is a tract of ground traditionally identified on the east side of Fail Water opposite the mouth of the Bloody Burn. It figured in this battle somehow as well. It is detached from the primary sites of combat and Vegetius makes no allusions about it. One possibility arises. Was this the place where the survivors of the ambushed division, unable to rejoin their comrades, perhaps rallied?

If the nationality of these trapped units is considered, pending that these were indeed Germanic auxiliaries from the advance guard, subsequent movements on the battlefield proper could be explained.<sup>36</sup> Vegetius implies, by insisting on strict obedience to signals throughout his works, that signals *were not* followed, especially during the ensuing combat.<sup>37</sup> An intentional disregard of communication is not unheard of in military history; units often advance or retreat despite orders.

<sup>36</sup> One must be aware of Germanic ties of loyalty, kith and kin; if friends and relatives were trapped, *especially if that location was visible or audible from the main battle lines*, disobedience to Roman orders can be understood. Deadmen's Holm has in the past produced armor, weapon and bone fragments.

<sup>37</sup> It is quite likely that the Germanic term for Roman signal horns was the Vulgar Latin word *pipa*; such disrespectful military slang is indicative of scornful association. "*Pipa*" denotes the begging squawk of helpless young birds, i.e. Romans calling on their auxiliaries in battle. It remains to this day in our vocabulary.

He also describes, at III. 20, “the fourth action”, a general forward movement that tends to thin the middle of the line; “*Sed hoc genus certaminis, licet cito superset, si exercitatos fortissimosque produxerit, tamen periculosum est, quia mediam aciem suam qui sic dimicat nudare compellitur et in duas partes exercitum separare.*”

It seems logical that this risky forward movement and the shuffling of regiments could be related; Vegetius reminds us of these mistakes over and over, III. 17: “*Once you start transferring soldiers of the line from their stations, you will throw everything into confusion.*” III. 19: “*Beware also of deciding to change your ranks or transfer certain units from their stations to others at the moment when battle is being joined. Uproar and confusion instantly ensue, as the enemy press more easily upon unready and disordered forces.*”

### *Broken Battle Line*

This transfer, perhaps an attempt to get the whole column moving east again, also coincides with a flanking maneuver by enemy “drungi”<sup>38</sup> on the “strong infantry” holding the open left flank. This also is stated twice, “*de quibus sinistrum cornum semper extendat, ne circumueniatur ab hostibus*” and “*Cauendum uel maxime, ne ab ala cornuque sinistro, quod saepius euenit,*” respectively, at III. 18, and III. 19. There was other activity on the field to be sure. Serious trouble apparently developed in the middle of the line, possibly by the Bloody Burn.<sup>39</sup>

Vegetius then tells us that the enemy made a successful attack that fragmented the battle aryline, I. 26: (soldiers) “*...when too thinly spread and showing the light between them provide the enemy with an opening to breach. It is inevitable that everything should at once collapse in panic if the line is cut and the enemy reaches the rear of the fighting men.*”

Again this is repeated in a way that defies suggested coincidence; see III. 15: “*If the line is too thinly deployed, it is quickly broken through*

38 It is a Celtic word, akin to Old Irish “*drong*”, and is used *twice* by Vegetius to describe only *enemy* combat formations. The popularity of Vegetius’ work in high circles ensured that this fresh exotic term quickly became ingrained into the military vocabulary both east and west.

39 If bodies so choked this portion of the field that this rivulet ran with blood not water, it could be indicative of the heavy, oscillating, nature of the fighting; indeed the battle may have lasted several hours as Vegetius states they often do (III. 9).

*when the enemy makes an assault, and after that there can be no remedy.”*

No further review of the ensuing rout is needed. Statements regarding the slaughter of those who took flight are far too numerous to be indicated individually.<sup>40</sup> Place-names at Coilsfield even preserve the fate of unarmed people from the baggage train. Carngillan Hill, literally means “hill of the servants (camp followers) cairns”. The fate of those who did not flee is of some interest however. Vegetius tells us this, at I. 26: “*next they are commanded to form circles, which is the formation commonly adopted by trained soldiers to resist a hostile force that has breached the line, to prevent the entire multitude from being turned to flight and grave peril ensuing.*”

Note several other interesting comments at III. 21; “*But trapped men draw extra courage from desperation, and when there is no hope, fear takes up arms. Men who know without a doubt that they are going to die will gladly die in good company*” and “*Whereas trapped men, though few in number and weak in strength, for this very reason are a match for their enemies, because desperate men know they can have no other recourse.*” Logically, it can be deduced that Vegetius was among these trapped men.<sup>41</sup>

### *Aftermath of Coilsfield*

We are even fortunate to have an accurate account of this situation’s conclusion from Boece, I. 29: “*In the morning, after the battle, the Scots and Picts retired to their standards. On a high hill the Britons who had survived the panic, in the night collected together, and hearing that their king was dead and the greater part of their army lost, sent a herald to the enemy generals in order to request peace.*”

The following statements by Boece indicate that the survivors *and* the remnants of the baggage train were allowed to depart, Vegetius no doubt among them, their brave stand a balm on wounded pride. Though Vegetius admits the defeat and even describes the aftermath at III. 25, this slip “*...quasi uictor ex omni parte*

40 If, as Vegetius indicates, the Picts and Scots reached the “rear of the fighting men”, the fate of the stationary baggage train is clear. Pertinent iron artifacts should be located along B743 westwards to Carngillan hill.

41 His familiarity with pack animals (see “*Who was Vegetius?*”) likely places him with the baggage train. His knowledge of the course of the battle stems from his vantage point on Carngillan hill. No doubt many of the camp followers, or *galearii* as Vegetius calls them, perished when the *acies* was over-run.

*discesserit.*” preserves true personal sentiment.<sup>42</sup>

It is obvious that Vegetius used the Ayrshire debacle as parent material for his books. His examples inadvertently document this otherwise lost and forgotten campaign. Extraneous elements are identified easily; standardized methods, dictated by the cosmopolitan and cultured nature of the intended audience, being common to the time period, resulted in the intended ambiguous sophistication.<sup>43</sup> If one excludes his countrymen and odd bureaucrats who were aware of the disaster, it becomes most probable that the provenance of his *exemplum* was as unknown then as now.

The fate of Coilus is, according to tradition, split two ways. One version of events puts him in flight only to die ignominiously, like others in the moor a short distance north the battlefield. Other lore has Coilus falling on the swell of ground that claims his sepulchre, Coilsfield Mains.<sup>44</sup>

Vegetius, perhaps out of prudence does not directly state anything about his death, but does indicate his responsibility for the disaster: “*He who is beaten in battle in a general engagement, though there too art is of very great advantage, can nevertheless in his defence accuse Fortune; he who suffers sudden attack, ambushes or surprises cannot acquit himself of blame, because he could have avoided these things*” (III. 22).

One final remark, (at III. 10) “*Si quid enim illis eueniat in bello, et ipsius culpa et publica uidetur iniuria.*” sums up the official verdict, but there are other scattered words that hint of darker aspects influencing these forgotten events. There is a sentence located at section III. 9, “So let the general be vigilant, *sobber* and prudent.” that raises an eyebrow; *sobrius* does not automatically imply merely “sensibility” in this context. An equally disturbing comment also found in the same chapter warns of flattery influencing war councils to ill effect; a final warning among the maxims, “*Quid fieri debeat, tractato cum multis, quid uero facturus sis, cum paucissimis ac fidelissimis uel potius ipse tecum.*” implicates

42 The general sentiment displayed by Vegetius is: “the enemy did not carry the *entire* field”, referring to the brave defensive action of which he likely took part.

43 References to the obscure, exotic, and distant, serve to prepare the work for diffusion across the Roman Empire; largely within army circles and the highly militarized imperial administration. Merobaudes’ *Panegyric I*, c. 440’s show familiarity with it.

44 The funerary urn of rude baked clay found there under a tumulus bears the item number RMSEA19, and has been assigned a Bronze Age date on stylistic grounds.



Coilsfield, Tarbolton, Ayrshire (now Montgomerie). The Mansion of Colonel Hugh Montgomery, afterwards Earl of Eglinton, from Francis Hindes Groome, *Ordnance gazetteer of Scotland : a survey of Scottish topography, statistical, biographical, and historical.*, Edinburgh, 1882 (Wikimedia Commons)

someone both manipulative and untrustworthy close to the general.

### *Coilus, Caelus, Celæs, and Coel*

Coilus as a historical figure can no longer be relegated to the realm of fairy-tales by modern scholars. As well as appearing in Welsh material,<sup>45</sup> his Latin name survived *as an Anglo-Saxon kenning* preserving phonetically what is likely

<sup>45</sup> The name Coilus is cognate to Coel Hen or “Old Cole” and is familiar to those who study the Welsh genealogies; the name, of various *pronunciations*, lent itself also to the region of Kyle in Ayrshire.

his actual name: *Caelus*.<sup>46</sup> The possibility of alcoholism at the highest level of command, combined with the known Germanic contempt of Roman signal horns, casts a rather macabre or even *sinister* shadow over a venerable *English* nursery rhyme. It likely recounts the death of Coilus in traditional oral fashion.

### *A British Locus*

Certain comments made by Vegetius in the course of his works, aside from the myriad campaign specifics, can be explained only by realizing a British *locus*. This setting of a land filled with highlands, forests, moors and tidal estuaries, yet always in oceanic proximity, shared by developed cities as well as fierce tribes, is unique.

The statements of Vegetius (especially at III. 8), describe a land littered with old fortifications, with *castella* and *burgi* along the roads. Experts could analyze passages in I. 9, and IV. 39, referring to the amount of daylight. Scholars might find they correspond to Britain's latitude. Climatic indicators abound. Winters with incessant rain *and* snow necessitating roofed training halls do not quite correspond to continental situations. Descriptions of the surrounding Irish and North Sea can be found in IV. 38-41. Vegetius mentions collecting "round river stones" suitable for catapults at IV. 8. Such stones are abundant in rivers flowing through once glaciated lands, a fact well known to those who live in such places.

A true red flag concerning his provincial origins is the passage concerning the navy of the Britons (IV 37.). When studied contextually, we can even deduce the purpose, ethnicity, and station of these *scaphae exploratoriae*.<sup>47</sup> These units known personally by Vegetius appear un-coincidentally in the British sections of the *Notitia*.<sup>48</sup> Any scholar familiar with the state run weaving mill listed in Brit-

46 "*Finsburg Fragment*" line 29, "*celæs bord*" i.e. the shield of Caelus. In turn a kenning, *Caelus*' *shield* could imply his bodyguard as well. The context of these lines, (lying within the initiation of a tragic last stand and described with allusions familiar to the audience), including the unique word "*banhelm*", (the poetic opposite of a "*sighelm*") will be addressed in a short separate work, "*Footnote # 50*".

47 By his description, the oared vessels resemble the boats from Nydam, Denmark, but with sails. These are true predecessors of the Norse maritime tradition.

48 These units at Portus Adurni will later figure prominently in the Anglo-Saxon settlement narrative. They have been thoroughly exposed by the late, brilliant Mr. Tolkien. See: "*Finn and Hengist: the fragment and the episode*".

ain should recognize the *gynacea* reference in I. 7. Possible linguistic abnormalities need to be briefly pointed out;<sup>49</sup> note the use of the word *civitates* (I. 16),<sup>50</sup> *mattiobarbuli* (I. 17),<sup>51</sup> *tiro* as found throughout,<sup>52</sup> and *drungi*. The word *adgestus* as used in IV. 3, actually describes the composite town walls well known to any student of Roman Britain. A translation to “siege ramp” is unremarkable.<sup>53</sup> Please note the following section on modifying existing town ditches as well. Other words that need investigation include *metallae*, *tribuli*, *campigeni*, *servo*, *eligendum*, *docetur*, *vineae*, *sudatum*, *musculi*, etc. The comfortable use of Germanic words such as *cautia*, *burgi*, and *scaphae* is also noteworthy.

### Conclusion

A difficult situation faces those trying to introduce new historical information. These hurdles include disinterest, preconceived opinions, unfounded skepticism and outright ridicule. Such disaffection has resulted in the complete fragmentation of traditional historical understanding. The isolated regional genres which have emerged over the last forty years (each defensive in outlook, unsympathetic in bearing, and protective of demarcations) must someday re-coalesce. The matter of the *Clades Caeliana* requires scholastic collaboration amongst all requisite fields. It is believed that these insights concerning Vegetius and his works show untapped historical potential, the unfettered dissemination thereof being a worthy goal in its own right.

49 Vegetius cannot hide his provincial dialect; there is a tendency to change clausula: *tium* becomes *tum* or *dum* (see *eligendum* III. 6.) and a use of odd spellings such as “*recreabuntur*”; (Veg. *Mul.* I. 50. I.)

50 Gildas and Bede both use it comfortably in place of the more common “*urbs*” to describe the urban landscape in Britain.

51 British familiarity is shown by the numbers of these weapons found at Wroxeter; Milner’s *unfamiliarity* with this fact is found on p. 17 note 2, of “*Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*”

52 Cf. Gildas *tironem*, “recruits”, i.e. Romano-British Christian, *not heathen barbarian*, soldiers.

53 John Wacher “*The Towns of Roman Britain*” London 1974, chap. 2 pp. 72-8. If the word *adgestus* is, as Milner thinks it is at note 1 p. 122, ‘generally means a siege ramp’, why does Vegetius at IV 15, use the term *agger* to describe a siege ramp? *Adgestus* was the Latin term used by Britons to specifically describe components of their urban defenses; the earthen bank later upgraded, by the insertion of a masonry wall at the front, and in the lifetime of Vegetius, by artillery bastions and wider ditches.

## THE CAPRINGTON BRONZE HORN.

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## IV.

NOTE ON THE CAPRINGTON BRONZE HORN. BY R. W. COCHRAN-PATRICK, Esq., B.A., LL.B., F.S.A. Scot.

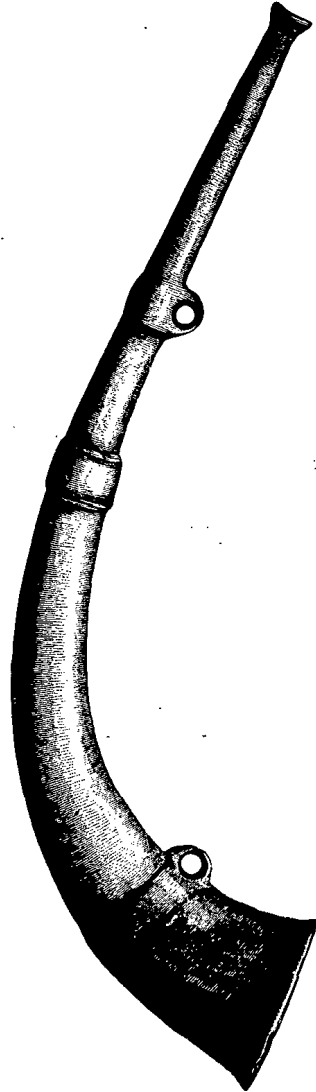
The bronze horn or trumpet, of which an illustration is here given from a woodcut presented to the Ayrshire and Wigtownshire Archæological Association, by Mr Smith Cunningham of Caprington,<sup>1</sup> was found some time before 1654<sup>2</sup> on the estate of Coilsfield, in the parish of Tarbolton, in Kyle.

It is thus referred to by Sir Robert Gordon, in the description of Kyle given in Bleau's Atlas, published at Amsterdam in 1654 :—

“In campo ubi decertatum lituus incurvus figura sua cornu referens, in primus canorus, multo post annis effosus est, quo comarchi Caprintonii, quorum ædes primariæ nostris Coilsfield dicitur, ad cogendos rusticos suos et operarios utuntur.”<sup>3</sup>

Defoe says : “ A trumpet resembling a crooked horn, which has a very shrill sound, was dug up in the field of battle, and is still kept in the Laird of Caprington's house, called Coilsfield.”<sup>4</sup>

The writer of the “New Statistical Account” notes that “this horn, so minutely



<sup>1</sup> “Ayrshire and Wigtownshire Archæological and Historical Collections,” vol. i.

<sup>2</sup> “New Statistical Account of Ayrshire,” p. 753.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. vi. p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> “Tour through Britain,” vol. iv. p. 130.





So called Missorium of Kerch, 4th century Found: Bosphoran Necropolis, vault on the Gordikov estate. Near Kerch, the Crypt in the North-Eastern Slope of Mount Mithridates, 1891 This silver dish was a diplomatic gift from the Byzantine Emperor to a representative of the Bosphoran government. In this fine example of the early Byzantine art traditional Classical themes are combined with a new artistic style. The vessel shows a composition typical of Roman coins: the Emperor on horseback is piercing the enemy with a spear. The rider was usually accompanied by one or several warriors and Nike crowning the winner. In contrast to the Classical composition showing the final scene of a battle, here we see the scene of triumph: Emperor Constantius II sits on a horse, triumphantly raising his spear. To emphasize the Emperor's highest rank and divine power, the artist used special pictorial devices including, for example, the distortion of proportions. The images were produced by a chisel. Part of the ornamentation is nielloed. The outer surface is gilded and a loop is soldered onto it. Hermitage Museum. Saint Petersburg. CC BY-SA 4.0 (Wikimedia Commons).

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