

The Roman *Disciplina* according to Vegetius

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Flavius Vegetius Renatus was neither a soldier, nor a historian, he worked as a clerk, possibly as a *comes sacranum largitorum*.¹ His work, the *Epitoma Rei Militaris* is the only source about the roman military that was preserved in its entirety.² It's dating is uncertain, it was most possibly written sometime between 383 and 450, most likely during Theodosius' residence in Italy, between August 388 and June 391.³ The work is essentially a collection, it contains various sources. Vegetius' aim was to impress his reader⁴, that's why he frequently mentions his sources like Frontinus, Cato, Paternus, Augustus, Traianus, and Hadrianus' *Constitutiones*. It consists of four books, each covers a different topic. The first one is about enlistment, the second is about the military arrangement, the third is about tactics, and the fourth is about fortresses and water warfare. The *Epitoma Rei Militaris* is not only important because of it's description of the roman military, but also because it had a great impact on medieval warfare.⁵

In the first chapter of the first book Vegetius explains the roman *disciplina*, and the reasons behind the greatness of the empire and its (military) superiority over others. He states that the well-trained soldier must be confident so he can conquer the enemy easily:

„Scientia enim rei bellicae dimicandi nutrit audaciam: nemo facere metuit quod se bene didicisse confidit. Etenim in certamine bellorum exercitata paucitas ad victoriam promptior est, rudis et indocta multitudo exposita semper ad caedem.”⁶

He explains that it is very important to prepare the soldiers for every challenge they may have to face on the battlefield with continuous training. He emphasizes the necessity of strict punishment of idleness.

¹ Watson, G. R. 1972.; 1111.

² Watson, G. R. 1972.; 1111.

³ Watson, G. R. 1972.; 1111.

⁴ Watson, G. R. 1972.; 1111.

⁵ Watson, G. R. 1972.; 1111.

⁶ Vegetius 1885.; 6.

The enlistment officer was the *capitularius* or *temonarius*. This title was considered a burden, and an officer did everything he could to avoid having to do it.

Vegetius does not mention this in his work, but the primary requirement for enlistment was being born free.⁷ Slaves were only enlisted in case of emergency, such as Radagast's invasion in 407.⁸ Initially the enlistment was voluntary because Tiberius stated in 23 that if somebody wouldn't want to be a soldier on their own accord then they are not brave enough for the army. Obligatory enlistment was introduced by Diocletianus, we don't exactly know when, but in 313 it was already in practice for sure.⁹ According to a law by Diocletianus veterans and sons of soldiers were obligated to enlist in case of emergency. Constantine changed this law in 326, so the sons of soldiers were able to join the local *curia* instead of enlistment.¹⁰ Sons of soldiers often tried to avoid enlistment by cutting off both of their thumbs thus becoming unfit for military service.¹¹ However, this practice entailed serious punishment. A veteran's son could only join the cavalry if he could afford a horse for himself plus two other horses, or one horse and a slave.

Vegetius considered certain nations to be more fit for military service, mostly because he thought certain climates affect body composition:

„Sed tamen et gens gentem praecedit in bello et plaga caeli ad robur non tantum corporum sed etiam animorum plurimum valet; quo loco ea, quae a doctissimis hominibus comprobata sunt, non omittamus.”¹²

Most soldiers of barbarian origins were Germanic. Barbarians often enlisted voluntarily to the Roman military because their quality of life lured them. Roman soldiers often didn't want to be deployed too far away from their homes so they didn't mind barbarians being enlisted and being deployed instead of them (however, sometimes they weren't happy about deployment either). The *origo* of the cavalry is often unknown, only 5% of known sources contain surely specified origins.¹³ Géza Alföldy located the *origos* of cavalries according to a *diplomata militaria*.¹⁴ The composition

⁷ Davies, R. 1989.; 9.

⁸ Jones, A. H. M. 1973.; 614.

⁹ Jones, A. H. M. 1973.; 615.

¹⁰ Jones, A. H. M. 1973.; 615.

¹¹ Davies, R. 1989.; 7.

¹² Vegetius 1885.; 6.

¹³ Devijver, H. 1992.; 112.

¹⁴ Devijver, H. 1992.; 112.

of the *ordo equester* was relatively unified, they left their homes so they can participate in centralized management.¹⁵ Barbarians didn't always join the military voluntarily. Sometimes they were prisoners of war or refugees. There were several units named after barbarian tribes, such as *cohors Ituraeorum*, but these didn't entirely consist of barbarians. It was not dangerous to enlist barbarian soldiers, because they were romanized very quickly, and they didn't have too much 'national pride'. Also, they mostly had conflicts with each other, rather than with the Romans so they did not join their forces against them. It was mandatory for them to learn latin, and most of them managed to learn it very quickly and very well, so they didn't even use their mother language anymore.

	Italia	Sicilia-Sard.-Cors.	Gallia Narbonen.	Tres Galliae	Germaniae	Britannia	Dalmatia	Raetia-Noricum	Moesiae	Pannoniae	Dacia	Hispania Tarracon.	Baetica	Lusitania	Africa	Mauretaniae	Numidia	Occidentalis	Thracia	Macedonia	Achaia	Asia + Pisidia	Bithynia-Galatia-Lycia-Cilicia	Syria	Aegyptus	Arabia	Orientalis
Augustus/Nero/a.69	277	3	24	9	5	-	1	-	-	-	-	13	10	2	2	1	-	1	1	3	3	29	3	2	-	-	6
Flavii	51	-	11	1	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	17	2	-	-	1	-	7	1	-	3	9	2	-	-	-	3
I s.	41	-	5	1	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	2	-	3	-	-	-	-	1
SUMMA: I s.	369	3	40/11	7	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	32/12/2	2	3/2/	-	8	2/5/6	41	5	2	-	-	-	-	-	10	
Traianus/Ant. Pius	107	1	16	3	-	-	2	6	1	1	2	23	6	-	15	8	10	20	-	2	5	21	10	13	12	-	3
Marc. Aur./Sept. Sev.	45	1	3	-	2	1	2	1	-	3	4	3	2	-	11	6	7	18	-	-	1	7	7	7	1	-	7
II s.	55	4	3	-	1	-	2	1	1	-	-	1	3	1	10	2	10	10	-	-	-	8	7	2	-	1	1
SUMMA: II s.	207	6	22/3	3	3	1	6	8/2/4/6	27/11/1	36/16/27	48	+	2/6	36	24	22	13	1	11								
Caracalla/Gallienus	26	-	1	-	1	1	2	3	1	1	4	5	-	-	14	5	8	14	-	4	1	6	6	4	1	2	6
III s.	15	-	1	1	2	-	1	4	2	4	4	-	-	-	8	8	4	10	1	1	-	6	3	-	1	1	3
SUMMA: III s.	41	-	2/1	3	1	3	7/3/5/8	5/-	-	22/13/12	24	1/5/1	12	9	4	2	3	9									

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1. Distribution of the recruited cavalry

The author explains that people from rural areas were more used to physical activity and harsh circumstances so they became better soldiers. The less a person is exposed to the easier urban lifestyle the more suitable he is for military service:

¹⁵ Devijver, H. 1992.;113.

¹⁶ Devijver, H. 1992.; 118.

„Ex agris ergo subplendum robur praecipue videtur exercitus; nescio quomodo enim minus mortem timet qui minus deliciarum nouit in uita.”¹⁷

However, he also states that if a person of urban origin is enlisted they must undergo strict training and teach them to endure such things just like their companions. They must get used to sleeping in tents or even in open air, limited food and the complete absence of luxury. Their enlistment was less of a problem during the era of the republic, because the conditions in the city were far away from luxurious, for example the only place for taking a bath in Rome was the Tiberis. During those times it was possible for someone to be a soldier and a farmer at the same time, for example Quintus Cincinnatus was plowing his land when he was invited to be dictator. Vegetius states that if the unit stations in one place for a long time, they must resist the temptations of the city.

According to Vegetius the most ideal time for beginning the training of the soldiers is when they reach adolescence. He mentions that Sallustius said that in his time training began when a boy was able to carry the weapons. He thought that it important to start training before „their age would make their limbs stiff”. Complete census before enrollment was introduced by Theodosius I. in 383, which is a great source about the age of enlisted soldiers. Studies showed that the enlisted soldiers were aged between 13 and 36 years (the maximum age is 35 according to Cassius Dio)¹⁸, but 75% of them was between 18 and 23. According to Cassius Dio’s works enlisting soldiers whose age was inappropriate was punished, ab epistulis officers were forced to resign because of it.

They primarily chose the tallest men, according to certain sources the minimal height for enlistment was 6 feet¹⁹, but it was certainly well above 5 feet.²⁰ However, Vegetius thought that height shouldn’t be a primary concern: he said that what a soldier lacks in height can be made up for with bravery. The most essential thing was that a soldier must be stronger than a civilian. In later times it was even less typical for soldiers to be tall, because there were far less candidates to choose from.

Vegetius exactly describes the ideal traits of a soldier. He thought that their face is very important, most specifically their eyes (they must be bright-eyed) and also their limbs. Only those

¹⁷ Vegetius 1885.; 8.

¹⁸ Davies, R. 1989.; 7.

¹⁹ ~178 cm

²⁰ Davies, R. 1989.; 4.

candidates should be chosen whose traits suggest that they will become good soldiers after the training.

„Sit ergo adulescens Martio operi deputandus vigilantibus oculis, erecta ceruice, lato pectore, umeris musculosis, valentibus brachiis, digitis longioribus, uentre modicus, exelior clunibus, suris et pedibus non superflua carne disentis sed neurorum duritia collectis.”²¹

After describing their qualities he states again that if they have all these qualities their lack of height can be disregarded:

„Cum haec in tirone signa deprehenderis, proceritatem non magnó opere desideres. Utilius est enim fortes milites esse quam grandes.”²²

On the other hand Frontinus, who Vegetius names as one of his most important sources states that a soldier must be tall, because their advantage in height would give them confidence thus making them brave.²³

He thought that people with certain occupations are more eligible for military service than others:

„Sequitur, ut, cuius artis vel eligendit vel penitus repudiandi sint milites, indagemus. Piscatores aucupes dulcarios linteones omnesque, qui aliquid tractasse, videbuntur ad gynaecea pertinens, longe arbitror pellendos a castris; fabros ferrarios carpentarios, macellarios et cervorum aprorumque venatores convenit sociare militiae.”²⁴

He thought blacksmiths, carpenters, butchers and hunters to be especially fit for service, however, he thought fishermen, fowlers, weavers, cooks, and people doing certain occupations considered feminine should not be enlisted. For the cavalry units, such as the tribuni angusticlavii legionis they only enlisted from the elite, mostly from Italy.²⁵ The fate of the empire depended on them, so they only chose the most trustworthy men, criminal record was a ground for refusal (for example people who were exiled but ran away often tried to join the military – this was forbidden).²⁶

²¹ Vegetius 1885.; 10.

²² Vegetius 1885.; 10.

²³ Davies, R. 1989.; 8.

²⁴ Vegetius 1885.; 10-11.

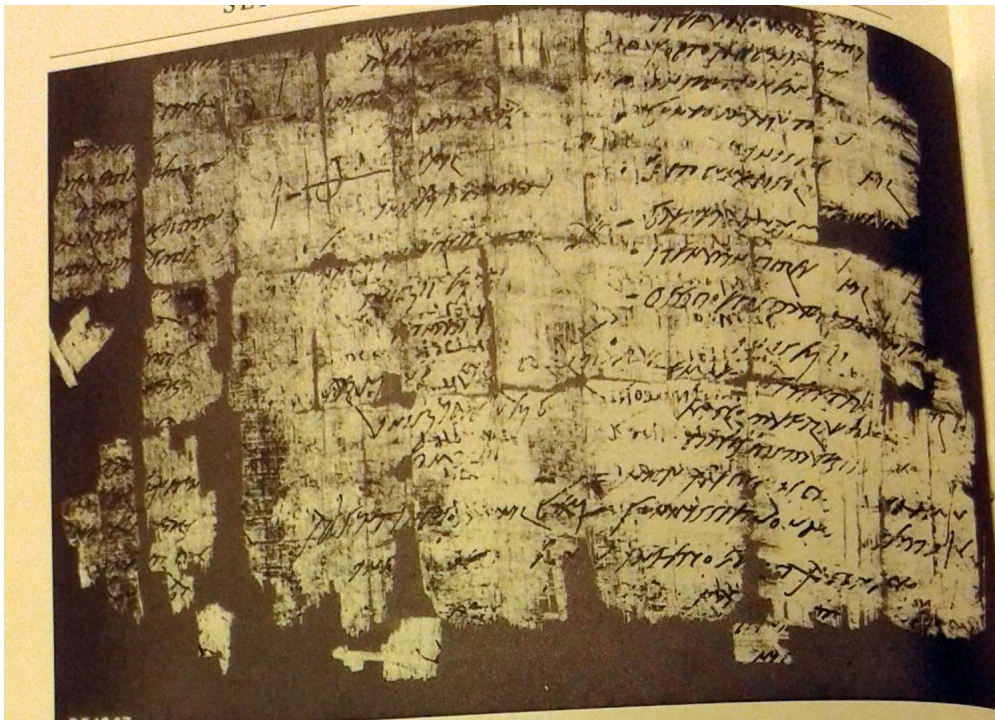
²⁵ Devijver, H. 1992.; 111.

²⁶ Davies, R. 1989.; 11.

He thought the most important virtues to be *honestas*, *verecundi*., and *industria*.²⁷ He thought that honor would restrain them from breaking the rules and lead them to victory. He thought that the reason behind every past failure and defeat is the inadequate selection of soldiers.

The enlistment process

Every step of the enlistment was precisely documented, it took a long time, because it was a highly complex process. Candidates had to go to an enlistment office and bring a letter of recommendation (*epistula commendatica*), where they underwent the *probatio*.²⁸ The candidate was called *probatas*, they examined their physical endowment, sight, they went through various medical exams.²⁹ They recorded their name and recognizances (*iconismi*). When their name was recorded to their unit, they earned the *signatus* status, and their arrival was documented in the *acta diurna*.³⁰



2. Records about a soldier's fitness on a papyrus from Egypt³¹

²⁷ Davies, R. 1989.; 6.

²⁸ Davies, R. 1989.; 3.

²⁹ Davies, R. 1989.; 7.

³⁰ Davies, R. 1989.; 18.

³¹ Davies, R. 1989.; 34.

However, it wasn't unusual for candidates to escape before before they were even assigned to their units. It was also common, that they got assigned, but they deserted, and tried to apply to an other unit. If somebody deserted, but returned after a short time it was condoned, but if they did it again they had to face serious consequences, especially if they tried to sell their weapons which was a major crime (since Caracalla).³²

The records written during the probatio were sent to their units, but their kept a copy in the recruitment office. After these the training began, and after completing it they earned their *numerus relatus (miles)* status, and they got their military insignias. The *signaculum* was a lead sheet with their name hanging around their neck, which was given to them over a ceremony along with their complete equipment. Vegetius thought that it is important to test the newly enlisted soldiers on duty, because there were candidates who seemed promising, but failed the probation. He stated that these soldiers must be immediately rejected, and replaced with better candidates.

Vegetius often refers to a long period of peace, which resulted in the disappearance of the training practice, which can be evoked through various writings by historians. The physical training is crucial, because soldiers need to go through it before they were given weapons. It lasted for at least 4 months, and their results were recorded. The training took place on the campus (*in campo*), but there were also an indoor area for bad weather conditions (*sub tecto*). However, they often trained in open air even in bad weather, because they needed to get used to the conditions of the battlefield. There was a platform next to the *campus*, and the training officer watched them from there (sometimes audience too). Religious events also took place here, they also offered their sacrifices here (mostly gazelles)³³ to the *campestres* at the *campestres* altar. The *campestres* were the (probably) Gaul gods of the training ground, Iuppiter Optimus Maximus and after the second part of the 2nd century Mars Militaris and Victoria Augusta. The training officer was the *campidoctor*, the weapon instructor was the *doctor armorum* or *doctor armatura*, the trainer of the battalion was the *doctor cohortis*, and the trainer of the cavalry was the *exercitatores* and the *magister campi*.

The first thing the soldiers had to learn was the parade step, which was acquired through constant fast marching.

³² Davies, R. 1989.; 11.

³³ Davies, R. 1989.; 119.

„Primis ergo mediationum auspiciis tirones militarem edcendi aunt gradum. [...] Militari ergo gradu XX milia passum horis quinque dumtaxat aestiuus conficienda sunt.”³⁴

It was very important to keep their place, because an irregularly marching unit is more likely to be defeated. If they march too close they can impede each other's free movement, but if they march too loosely, the enemy can easily get amongst them. Regular marching was called *ambulatio*, they had to march 20 miles in 5 summer hours, 25 miles in the faster version. They never went faster than this, because they would have to run, and that way they couldn't keep their place. However, they were trained by running, which, according to Vegetius was important because this way they could approach the enemy more confidently, and could also run away if necessary. They were also trained to jump so they can go through uneven grounds and trenches. Vegetius said that the goal was to intimidate the enemy, and to defeat them before they even had the chance to defend themselves. Through the summer months the young soldiers were taught to swim, because it was possible that they had to cross rivers, for example if the bridge fell, or if there were a flood.

„Natandi usum aestiuismensibus omnis aequaliter debet tiro discere. [...] Non solum autem pedites sed equites ipsosque equos uel lixas, quos galiarios vocant, ad natandum exercere percommodum est, ne quid imperitis, cum necessitas incumbit, eveniat.”³⁵

Vegetius said that according to old sources the drills took place next to the Tiberis and they refreshed themselves after it by taking a swim in the river.

„Ideoque Romani veteres, quos tot bella et continuata pericula ad omnem rei militaris erudiverant artem, campum Martium vicinum Tiberi delegerunt, in quo innuentus post exercitum armorum sudorem pulueremque dilueret ac lassitudinem cursus natandi labore deponeret.”³⁶

If they only had the chance to swim far away from the camp, they lived in tents next to the water.³⁷

The method for learning to use arms was called *armatura*. The drills took place every morning and afternoon by the poles (*palus*) on *the campus*. These were 6 feet tall, which indicates that this

³⁴ Vegetius 1885.; 13.

³⁵ Vegetius 1885.; 15.

³⁶ Vegetius 1885.; 15.

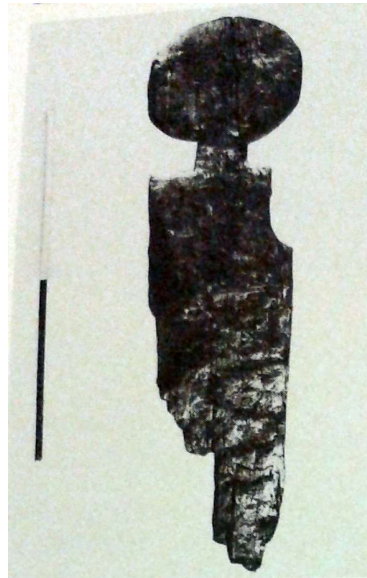
³⁷ Davies, R. 1989.; 118.

must have been the minimum height for soldiers.³⁸ They were given weapons two times heavier than the real ones (wooden swords and spears), so they could use the regular ones with ease.

„Antiqui, sicut inventur in libris, hoc genere exercuere tirones. Scuta de vimine in modum cratium conrotundata texebant, ita ut duplum pondus cratis haberet, quam scutum publicum habere consuevit. Idemque clausas ligneas dupli aequae ponderis pro gladiis tironibus dabant.”³⁹

This method was also used for training gladiators.

„Palorum enim usus non solum militibus sed etiam gladiatoribus plurimum prodest.”⁴⁰



3. Pala; Annerwell street, Carlisle⁴¹

They were taught not to cut but to pierce with their swords, because it was more likely to be fatal. People who fought by using the edge of their sword was ridiculed, and considered a weak opponent. During the use of the sword it was inevitable for the left arm and side to be uncovered.

They taught about one third or one quarter of young soldiers to use bow and arrow by the pala with daily training. Vegetius emphasizes that the trainers of the archers must be chosen very

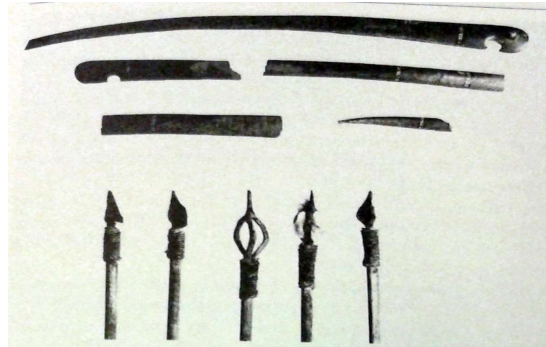
³⁸ Davies, R. 1989.; 6.

³⁹ Vegetius 1885.; 15.

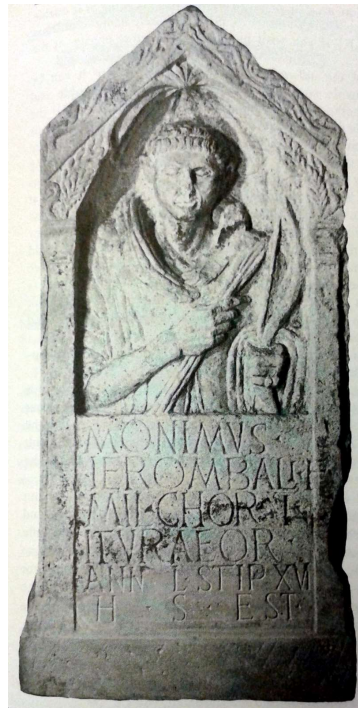
⁴⁰ Vegetius 1885.; 15.

⁴¹ Davies, R. 1989.; 78.

carefully. They were taught the proper way to hold and tighten the bow, and to concentrate their attention to one point. They had to learn to use the bow and arrow on horse as well as on foot.



4. *Arrowheads; Bar Hill, Scotland*⁴²



5. *Epitaph of Monimus, archer of the cohort Ituraeorum. Ituraea provided archers for the Roman army since the early republican era*⁴³

They were taught to throw rocks both by hands and sling. This was useful because this way they didn't have to carry weapons (primarily on rocky terrains), so they used slingers in every battle.

⁴² Davies, R. 1989.; 111.

⁴³ Davies, R. 1989.; 109.

Every soldier bought five spears (*martio barbuli*) with them in the hollow of their shields. The advantage of this weapon was that it could both seriously injure people and horses.

They constantly practiced jumping to the saddle on wooden horses so they could quickly jump onto their horses in unexpected situations. At first they had to complete the task without their weapons, then with them, from both sides, with their swords drawn then with their spade.

Marching with weights was also part of the training, so they got used to carrying their own weapons and supplies from time to time. The author quotes Vergilius on the topic:

„Non secus at patriis acer Romanus in armis

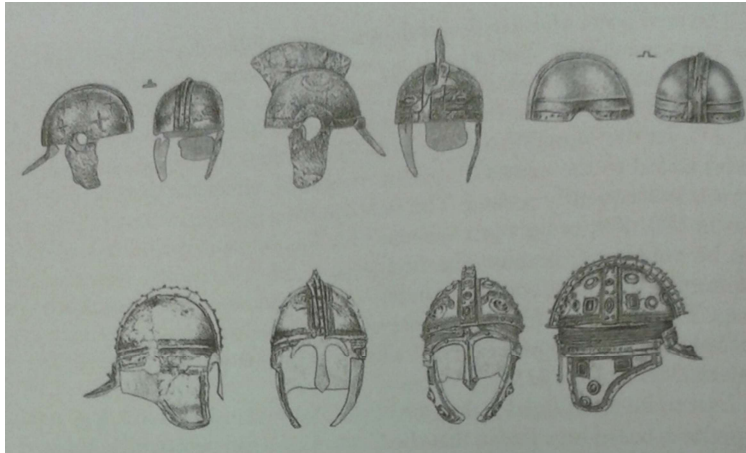
Iniusto sub fasce uiam cum carpit, et hosti

Ante expectatum positus stat in agmine castris.”⁴⁴

They had to (both the infantry and cavalry) complete a march (10 miles from the camp and back) three times a month. It had to be done in full equipment and with weapons, completely in order with a specified speed, which was occasionally made faster during the march. The cavalry also marched fully armed, they also practiced chasing the enemy.

Their weapons were developed in the example of Goths, Alans, and Huns. From the foundation of Rome to the age of Gratianus the infantry wore armour, but they thought it to be too heavy, so after some time they refused to wear it thus becoming vulnerable against the Goths' arrows.

⁴⁴ Vegetius 1885.; 21.



6. Late Roman helmets from Pannonia⁴⁵

Vegetius thought that it shouldn't be condoned that they take off their armour, but they should be accustomed to wearing them. Their protective armour consisted of a helmet, a breast plate, iron greaves, and a gauntlet on the left arm for the archers. Vegetius emphasizes that defense is just as important as offense. Soldiers have been accustomed to wearing helmets by making them wear Pannonian leather helmets.

The weapon of the infantry was the spade (*piles*), that had a triangular iron head that was up to 1 foot long. It was designed this way because due to the triangular shape it was impossible to pull it out from a shield, and it could also injure the armour more easily. When Vegetius wrote his work he said these were not in use anymore. The primary weapon for the barbaric heavy infantry was the *bebrae*, they brought 2 or 3 of them to every battle.

Soldiers fighting in the first line were called *principes*, the second row *hastati*, and the third *triarii*. While the others were fighting, the *triarii* were waiting in a kneeling position, protecting themselves with their shields. There were battles won by the *triarii* after the *principi* and the *hastati* were already destroyed.

It was important to teach recruits how to set their camps properly, so they could be safe in the view of the enemy both by day and night. They had to set the camp so its size would accommodate to their headcount, and the shape to the terrain. On the ideal side there is plenty of wood, water, food and forage, and isn't surrounded by high grounds (that would make the enemy and also floods very

⁴⁵ Kovács, P. 2003.; 36.

dangerous).⁴⁶ Vegetius stated that if they weren't faced by immediate danger the ideal size of the trench is 9 feet wide and 6 feet deep, the rampart on the inside should be 3 feet tall, and if there was danger, the trench 9 feet wide and 6 feet deep, and the rampart 4 feet tall with palisades on top. If somebody didn't do their job well they were punished, because someone who received their training should be able to do the job fast, quickly, and without making mistakes.

Part of the drill was to learn to organize into various formations. It was important to organize into a straight line in the shortest time possible while keeping equal distance from each other. This was practiced until they could do it without any difficulties.

In the conclusion of the work Vegetius addresses the emperor, he ensures him about his loyalty:

„Haec fidei ad deutionis intuitu, Imperator inuicte, de uniuersis auctoribus, qui rei militaris disciplinam litteris mandauerunt, in hunc libellum enucleata congeffi, ut in dilectu atque exercitatione tironum si qui diligens uelit existere, ad antiquae uirtutis imitationem facile conrobore possit exercitum.”⁴⁷

He repeats again what he emphasized during the work: a good army can only be achieved along the lines of the ancestors, the superiority of the Roman Empire can only be restored through the revival of *disciplina*.

⁴⁶ Davies, R. 1989.; 127.

⁴⁷ Vegetius 1885.; 29.



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