Introduction

Little is known about Publius Vegetius Renatus. He was probably born in the mid-fourth century AD, possibly in Spain. Although familiar with the language of the army, it is unlikely that he was ever a soldier or had practical military experience. He was, rather, a member of the bureaucratic élite at the imperial court, bearing the title 'Flavius', which identifies him as a public servant, as does the title 'comes', found in one branch of the manuscript tradition. It is likely, however, that he had experience of the recruitment, administration and provisioning of armies, for these receive much of his attention. From the *Mulomedicina*, a work on veterinary medicine which he almost certainly wrote, we learn that he was a much travelled man.[1] From the evidence of the *De re militari*, it appears that he also appreciated literature, as his references to the works of Virgil and Sallust testify. That he was a Christian (writing some three or four generations after Constantine had issued the Edict of Milan in 312) is witnessed to by his references to the Trinity in the *De re militari*.[2]

The discussion regarding the date of composition of the *De re militari* has caused much ink to flow. We cannot be certain about the precise date, as the author does not say for which emperor he was writing, although it must have been between 383 and 450. A recent study of the cultural, literary and historical milieu of, and the language used by Vegetius, has led its author to suggest, that, on the balance of probability, a date in the mid-fifth century was the most likely.[3] Majority opinion, however, still appears to favour a date in the late 380s, and that Vegetius' 'patron' was his fellow Spaniard, Theodosius I 'the Great' (379–395), the first emperor to enforce orthodox Christianity and the last to have charge of a united empire. In any event, in whatever form the text was presented to the imperial authority, the origins of the work lay in a memorandum of

[1] The *De re militari* and the *Mulomedicina* are found together in BL Royal 12 C. xxii.
[2] *DRM*, II, 5.
[3] M. B. Charles, *Vegetius in context. Establishing the date of the* Epitoma rei militaris (Stuttgart, 2007).

proposals on military reform which Vegetius presented to the emperor. This was well received, and its author was asked to write more. It was from this effort that what came to be known as the *Epitoma rei militaris* or, less formally, as the *De re militari* emerged.

The modern reader should be clear what he can expect to find in Vegetius' work. As an 'art of war', the *De re militari* does not possess the originality which many imagine it to have. Its author (a civilian, in today's language) lacked practical experience of fighting to compile such a work. However, what he could do, and was good at doing, was consider, assimilate and draw practical conclusions of a general kind from earlier Latin military literature, much of it now lost, in which he was well read. Was this likely to produce a masterpiece whose impact would be immediate? No. To his contemporaries, the *De re militari* may have seemed retrospective, if not old fashioned, in its views and attitudes, and it probably made little impression upon them.

The reader is offered a text which is esssentially a work of polemic reflecting what its author regarded as the pressing needs of the time, the effective recruitment, training and organisation of the army, along with the requirement to provide it with the arms and equipment necessary to achieve victory against those threatening the security of the Empire. While it deals, in some respects, with strategic requirements, it does not consider every aspect of war. Little is said about cavalry, precisely because there was little to say;[4] the same could not be said of infantry. And although attention is paid to the defence of towns, there is little advice on how to attack them, perhaps because Rome's main enemies were not town dwellers. This is a work concerned mainly with field armies, and the contribution which these could make to the success of Roman arms.

How was the ruler to learn what he needed to know regarding the 'disciplina armorum'? For Vegetius, the answer lay in the written word. Compiled under a particular set of circumstances, the *De re militari* represented what were, in its author's view, 'systematized remedies', the search for which made him look back unashamedly to the days when the Roman army had carried all before it. A firm believer in the value of the study of past writers on war, whose teachings, both moral and practical, passed down through generations, Vegetius sought to incorporate them into his model. So it is that the reader encounters (at least by name) the historian Sallust, and some of the main military writers of the past who had written in Latin: Cornelius Celsus, Paternus, Cato the Censor and Julius Frontinus. As he formulated his ideas, so he showed where these came from and what had influenced them. He modestly

[4] *DRM*, I, 20; III, 26.

played down his contribution which, he insisted, was limited to having selected basic ideas 'dispersed through various authors and books' which he had brought together, 'summarising [them] as if to form an orderly sequence'. Explaining how the Romans had conquered much of the known world, Vegetius emphasised that while it was important to know what had happened, it was more important to learn why and how it had happened. It was in seeking answers to such questions that he reached what he regarded as the root causes of Roman success, and in so doing helped to further the long tradition begun by the Greeks, who had created the science of war passed down through the written word 'later consolidated by the authority of generals'. It does neither text nor author a favour if the work's derivative character is ignored or forgotten. There are few signs of any impact which it may have had in the early years of its life. Although, unlike the *Mulomedicina*, not translated into Greek, the work was known in Constantinople, by then capital of the Empire, when Flavius Eutropius corrected it in 450. It is possible that it was in Constantinople that Cassiodorus came to know it in the mid-sixth century, while about 600 a Greek rendering of twenty-one of the Rules ('Regulae') contained in the *De re militari* (III, 26) was incorporated in the *Strategikon* (VIII.B) associated with the emperor Maurice, although it may be doubted whether his knowledge of Vegetius' text extended any further.

These would be only the first examples of generations to come to use the contents as a mine of information and ideas for works of very different character, some primarily military, others less so. The emphasis of this study will be to see how men in the Middle Ages responded to what Vegetius wrote, what parts of his work they appreciated (and why), and how they used what they learnt from him to influence what they wrote and did centuries after his death. From this Vegetius, a near contemporary of such intellectual giants as Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome, will emerge as a man of both philosophical and practical influence who, although not an original thinker, set out principles which, in later times and circumstances, would have influence extending beyond the military sphere to which they had originally been directed.

The main purpose of the inquiry traced in the pages which follow is to help a modern-day reader appreciate how the contents of the *De re militari* may have been understood when read through the eyes of medieval man, and what effects that understanding may have had, mainly but far from exclusively, upon military practice during the Middle Ages. The inquiry will be divided into three parts. In the first, on the reception of the text, attention will concentrate upon what the surviving manuscripts of the *De re militari* can tell us about the responses of readers to the work,

and what they found interesting and useful in it. Some two-thirds of the extant manuscripts bear marginal evidence of such reactions which, when assembled, enables us to understand something of the response of the otherwise anonymous readership to Vegetius' ideas. Was it, for them, largely a historical text, evidence of how a man thought about military affairs in the late fourth century? On the other hand, did it contain ideas and information, about military organisation for instance, which could be useful in a later age and setting? Or should it be read mainly as a moral or philosophical work whose advice and teachings were, in most respects, simply 'basic principles in an unspecific form which could be adapted to serve a great variety of military situations'[5] and, therefore, likely to appeal to all ages? To many others, as the manuscripts reveal, the text was largely a source of philological knowledge, a mine of unfamiliar words and terms which clearly puzzled some while delighting others: 'About that word "accensi", which gave us trouble; I have found it in Vegetius. This was the discovery I wanted to share with you', Erasmus wrote to a correspondent in 1497.[6] The use of the interrogative 'Quid . . . ' in the margins of many manuscripts underlines the sense of questioning which filled the minds of many who read the *De re militari* anticipating the chance of acquiring new knowledge. The medieval manuscripts provide the modern reader with a valuable opportunity of accompanying readers of the period, among them no less a figure than Petrarch, along what was for many a voyage of discovery into the past, and how that past might be related to the present.

Our quest can be furthered by considering two further, closely related matters: what texts were most commonly associated with Vegetius' work, and who were the principal owners of that work? In the cases in which the *De re militari* was linked to another text, whether through being copied by a single scribe or through sharing the binding of a single codex, what associations linked Vegetius' work with others in the minds of its owner? Were they texts which happened to be 'classical'? Or, perhaps, had they a subject, theme or author in common? When the *De re militari* was bound, as it was on several occasions, with the *Strategemata* of Frontinus, we can reasonably assume that the owner's intention was to create a codex of classical writings on war.[7] This was particularly so when the owner may have been of the military class; here, a link between the content of the work and his professional/social interests clearly existed. Rulers,

[5] *Vegetius: Epitome of military science*, trans. N. P. Milner (2nd rev. edn, Liverpool, 1996), xiii.
[6] *The correspondence of Erasmus. Letters 1 to 141, 1484–1500*, ed. W. K. Ferguson, trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson (Toronto, 1974), I, 116.
[7] See below, chapter 4, pp. 56–9.

as Vegetius had emphasised and the Middle Ages were to accept, must know about war; to such as these, the *De re militari* would be useful. But would it be of use or, possibly more important still, of interest to military men alone? Were there elements or underlying messages in Vegetius' work which could appeal to those who had no prima facie interest in its content? The clergy, or at least certain ones of their number, were major owners of the text. What can be learnt from surviving codices and their owners (as far as we know who they were) which will inform us about the reception of the *De re militari* in the Middle Ages?

The section on the transmission, which follows, will attempt to show first, through a consideration of a number of codices copied in the Middle Ages, how Vegetian ideas came to be taken up and passed on through the works of selected medieval authors. These 'particular responses' to Vegetius are largely taken from examples of work which, it can be suggested with confidence, owed at least something to Vegetian thinking and advice. What makes this section both interesting and important is the variety of avenues along which that thought was to travel, and the influence it was to exert. Both John of Salisbury and Giles of Rome, writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, used Vegetius' teaching about the army to bolster a message at times seemingly more political than military, the need to enhance the effective power of the ruler as a force for peace and order in society.[8] The works penned by Guillaume le Breton early in the thirteenth century, and the *Siete Partidas*, compiled half a century later, each underlined the importance of a king taking steps to lead his people against a common enemy; this, too, was both a military and a political message. Towards the end of the Middle Ages the emphasis would be upon the need for military organisation to be placed increasingly in the hands of the ruler, as the advice of both Christine de Pisan and Jean Juvénal des Ursins, and the contents of the Burgundian military ordinances issued by duke Charles the Bold, all show. The trend would be brought to fruition in the work of Machiavelli. Finally, to show that Vegetius offered ideas that could be useful in forms of conflict other than that between armies, the waging of the spiritual war also found itself guided by certain Vegetian principles, set out in the work of the monk Denis the Carthusian.

In this way, Vegetius would influence the ages which came after him. We should not underestimate the debt which the propagation of his ideas would owe to those writers whose works, written centuries later, diffused his ideas for later generations to consider and act upon. Anyone wanting

[8] The point is emphasised by F. H. Sherwood, 'Studies in medieval uses of Vegetius' *Epitoma rei militaris*' (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1980).

to cite a respected authority could do no better than to make use of, or at least reference to, the *De re militari*, the work, as a number of illuminated manuscripts show, of a sage to whom rulers, in particular, should feel obliged to listen. At the same time, it must be recognised that the Vegetian influence, reflected in a group of texts written between 1465 and 1520, suggests an inspiration in slow decline, yielding to the rapidly changing nature of war.

Together, these serve to underline the variety of texts reflecting the ideas of the Roman writer to be compiled in the Middle Ages. An important practical element in the transmission of Vegetian ideas and principles was to be found in the translations which appeared from the last quarter of the thirteenth century onwards, a process (the breaking of the Latin monopoly) which, by 1500, would bring Vegetius to the notice of readers in six European languages. The story of translation, which should be seen as part of the broader tendency towards the 'vernacularisation' of classical texts at this period, was not always straightforward. For whom was a translation intended, and for what purpose was it made? Translating a work containing so much technical vocabulary into meaningful language created problems for the translator. A rendering which stuck closely to the original (what today we might call a 'crib') might be a difficult task even for a man with a good command of fourth-century Latin. On the other hand, by translating the text freely he might recontextualise it to make a contribution to the development of the military thought and practice of the late Middle Ages through (in effect) the creation of a new work which had something to teach his readers about war in their own time. Yet, if this road were followed, would not those interested in the 'historic' text lose out, for, as the evidence of marginalia makes plain, unfamiliar words and terms interested many readers? As will be seen, translators, some more skilled than others, took different views as to what their task involved. However, their contribution to the dissemination of Vegetian ideas, like the role played by patrons who commissioned the translations, should never be in doubt.

We should appreciate that an understanding of the *De re militari* could be acquired in other ways than these. Although a complete text gave the interested reader the chance to read and interpret the work as he wished, not all had the intention, the time or the opportunity to read the entire text. From early on, collections of excerpts presented readers with the chance to read selections from the work, selections which inevitably restricted the reader's knowledge and, consequently, his appreciation of Vegetius' ideas. Yet by their very nature collections of excerpts could be influential, as being all too easily able to persuade readers that what they read constituted the very essence of Vegetian thinking while, in fact,

reflecting mainly the particular interest of the person who had chosen the excerpts, thereby not necessarily offering a true reflection of the work as a whole.

One may ask how far Vegetius, if fancifully brought back to life a thousand years after his death, would have appreciated the scope and use being made of the *De re militari*. He might have been surprised by the degree of authority which had come to be attached to his name ('Vegetius' came to be almost synonyous with 'war'), since he had written for what was, for him, the present. Was the price of reputation the 'decontextualisation' of his work and its original recommendations? Would he have appreciated how his work had been dissected (the creation of collections of excerpts did precisely that) rather than being regarded as a whole? Might he have thought that some were reading too much into his text, and that he was being interpreted in ways he had never intended? What would he have thought about the use of certain crucial words when his text came to be translated into the languages of later times, conditions and circumstances? Was the late-Roman understanding of what an army ('exercitus') was understood, if not shared, by later ages? The number of occasions when the word 'exercitus' is written in the margin of manuscripts suggests an unusually high interest in the Roman concept of the army and of its place and function in society. When Vegetius wrote about selection, how much of this was there (or could there be?) in the Middle Ages? In brief, while at a linguistic level such words and concepts might, to all intents and purposes, be fairly easily understood, at a practical level was there not always the likelihood that, rather like that of Ovid, Vegetius' work had not always been fully understood, or was being used to serve new purposes, not necessarily by some deliberate metamorphosis but, in this instance, more by the effects of the passing of time on everyday vocabulary?

The third section will suggest that Vegetius left the medieval world with elements of a not insignificant military legacy. Some critics may not agree with this, preferring to disparage the banality of much of his work, arguing, for example, that it does not require a Vegetius to tell a commander that he should be well informed about things going on around him, that he must act with caution, and that he should earn the respect of his soldiers by the way he treats them. Is advice claimed to be Vegetian not largely common sense rather than the expression of opinion on the part of a man who, although he had read a lot, had never experienced real fear, while presuming to tell military men what fear was in language which hardly corresponded to that used by modern-day writers with field experience to back them up? For these critics, Vegetius' emphasis on the passing down of experience through the written word

underlined his 'bookish' rather than his 'hands-on' experience of war. For such reasons, it is argued, his teachings did not merit the regard generally accorded to them in the Middle Ages.

In spite of such reservations, it will be argued that a reading of the *De re militari* by men of the Middle Ages did leave something of a legacy. This assumed different forms. Certainly the army (and those who fought in it) might emerge enhanced in the eyes of society as a result of what Vegetius wrote about it. Following the teaching of John of Salisbury and of Giles of Rome (among others), the army slowly developed into a 'statist' force, the 'hand' ('manus') used by the ruler to fulfil his obligation to protect his people, even if it was sometimes abused by him for his own advantage. Similarly the 'miles', whether knight or soldier, assumed an enhanced position in society partly as a result of descriptions of him as the protector of society and the public good.

The Vegetian canon also attributed great practical importance to leadership. The gradual move from command exercised by virtue of social rank to that based on authority delegated by the ruler to those who had proved their military worth would be an important one. The emphasis which the text placed on a reasoned approach to the waging of war would also become increasingly widespread. The importance of the triumph of the mind over physical strength, based, as Vegetius had emphasised, upon a proper assessment of the current military situation, would be seen as increasingly significant as time passed by.

The evidence of a work's legacy is not always easy to pin down in precise terms. But an examination of the relationship between important aspects of Vegetian thinking and certain historically recognised developments in, for instance, military practice and procedure can lead to the recognition that the *De re militari* inspired future practitioners of the art of war. The marked interest in certain themes among the readers of the text strongly suggests that, in returning time and again to those same themes (illustrated here, for instance, by a recurring interest in matters of provisioning and logistics), they were creating a de facto legacy for some of the ideas offered and often insisted upon by Vegetius. In so far as men read the *De re militari* for examples of good practice (which might well extend to a search for examples of effective military organisation, as described mainly in Book II) from which they might seek inspiration useful in their own day, we are entitled to see this as recognition that readers were ready to acknowledge that the *De re militari* constituted a legacy to be drawn upon by men who lived centuries after it was written. This evidence only confirms the fact that the history of Vegetius' text in the Middle Ages was no ordinary one. 'Few classical texts can boast as

many Carolingian witnesses as the *Epitoma*, or so wide a spread either on the map or over the centuries, or vernacular translations at so early a date.'[9] What follows is an attempt to show and underline the truth of that statement.

[9] M. D. Reeve, 'The transmission of Vegetius's *Epitoma rei militaris*', *Aevum*, 74 (2000), 250.