



Training the Roman Soldier in Vegetius' *Epitoma Rei Militaris* (De Re Militari)

ABSTRACT

Flavius Vegetius Renatus' Epitoma rei militaris is the most influential surviving Latin handbook on Roman warfare. Book I is effectively a programme for rebuilding military effectiveness through careful selection, relentless drill, and disciplined routine. This paper analyses Vegetius' training model for recruits and serving troops—marching and pace control; running, leaping, and swimming; weighted weapons practice at the post (palus); thrust-focused sword doctrine; missile training; load bearing; formation evolutions; and the year-round continuation of drill. It also considers the interpretive problem that Vegetius presents many practices as 'ancient customs' to be recovered, meaning his account is partly prescriptive and idealising. Even with that limitation, his text reveals a coherent philosophy: repeated, standardised labour creates endurance, confidence under stress, and unit cohesion.

1. Introduction: Vegetius, purpose, and the problem of description versus prescription

Vegetius writes as a compiler and reformer. In Book I he insists that recruits should not be accepted on appearance alone, but tested for fitness and aptitude, then taught arms through constant daily exercise. He frames his project as a recovery of older practice: the 'essential custom' has been weakened by a long peace, and the remaining method is to consult books and earlier authorities for the ancient system of discipline. (Vegetius, *De Re Militari*, Book I.8).

This self-description is a warning to modern readers. Vegetius is not necessarily describing a single, uniform training syllabus in active use across the empire at the moment of writing; he is advocating a reform programme and presenting earlier models as standards. Modern scholarship therefore often treats the *Epitoma* as a late Roman handbook with 'antiquarian characteristics and a debated date and context. (Whately 2009, 131; Rance 2021, 5).

With that caution, Vegetius remains invaluable for the history of training because he provides unusually concrete prescriptions—pace targets, repetition schedules, equipment weight differentials, and the specific sequence of skills by which a recruit is turned into a soldier.

2. Marching as the foundation: pace discipline and movement in order

Vegetius places marching first because it is collective discipline in motion. Troops must learn to march 'quick and together' and keep ranks with exactness; disorder on the road translates into vulnerability in battle. He supplies benchmark rates: at the common military step, twenty miles in five 'summer-hours'; at the faster 'full step', twenty-four miles at the same time. Beyond that, he argues, soldiers are no longer marching but running, and the formation's reliability breaks down (Vegetius, Book I.9).

Two ideas stand out. First, speed is valuable only when it does not destroy order; Vegetius prioritises controlled tempo over frantic haste. Second, marching is implicitly a rehearsal for line discipline: spacing, alignment, and responsiveness to commands are practised every day on the move.



3. Running, leaping, and swimming: practical mobility for varied terrain

Alongside marching, Vegetius prescribes running and leaping to support sudden tactical demands: charging with vigour, seizing advantageous positions, and reconnoitring or pursuing with speed (Book I.9). These are not athletic 'extras' but battlefield competencies for uneven ground, ditches, and abrupt shifts in tempo.

He adds swimming as a universal requirement for young soldiers in summer. Rivers cannot always be crossed by bridges, and both pursuit and retreat can force a swimming crossing; floods make ignorance of swimming as dangerous as the enemy. Vegetius also embeds swimming within Roman military culture by citing the Field of Mars near the Tiber as a traditional training environment (Book I.10).

4. The post (palus) and weighted training: building endurance and controlled violence

The best-known element of Vegetius' programme is the post drill. Recruits are given wicker bucklers 'twice as heavy' as service shields and wooden swords 'double the weight' of ordinary ones, and they practise at the post both morning and afternoon (Book I.11). The post stands as a surrogate enemy: the recruit aims at head, face, sides, thighs, and legs; learns to advance and retire; and is repeatedly cautioned not to expose himself while striking.

This training logic is explicit. Increased practice weight strengthens the body and makes the real weapon feel lighter and faster; but the post drill is also a pedagogy of restraint. It develops the habit of attacking while maintaining protection—an approach consistent with Vegetius' wider preference for simple, repeatable actions that remain reliable under fear and fatigue.

5. 'Not to cut but to thrust': efficiency, protection, and lethality

Vegetius' sword doctrine is unambiguous: recruits should be taught 'not to cut but to thrust' (Book I.12). He offers three reasons. First, edge blows 'seldom kill' because vital parts are defended by bone and armour; second, a stab of even limited depth is 'generally fatal'; third, cutting motions expose the right arm and side, while a thrust keeps the body covered and strikes before the adversary fully sees the blade.

Whether or not this perfectly captures every Roman period's practice, it reveals Vegetius' training philosophy: maximise the probability of effect with minimal motion, and train techniques that preserve protection while delivering decisive injury.

6. Armatura and enforcement: drill as a system of incentives and shame

Vegetius describes a formal drill system taught by masters-at-arms (armatura). He claims that troops proficient in this drill are most useful in engagements, and he emphasises enforcement: instructors were rewarded; lagging soldiers could be punished by ration downgrade (barley instead of wheat) until they demonstrated competence before senior officers (Book I.13).

This is training as governance. Skill is not left to chance; it is demanded, verified, and tied to daily material consequences. Vegetius' model assumes that the army's quality depends on an institutional habit of measuring, correcting, and repeating.

7. Missile training and layered lethality



Vegetius' recruit curriculum includes multiple missile disciplines: heavy practice javelins thrown at the post, bows and arrows for selected younger soldiers, stones by hand and sling, and lead-weighted darts (*martio-barbuli*) carried within the shield (Book I.14–17).

The implication is a layered battlefield: soldiers should be able to wound men and horses before close contact and remain effective when ground, weather, or enemy equipment makes one method less useful. Even when Vegetius compresses practices from different eras, his training goal is clear: versatility as a form of resilience.

8. Load bearing and the soldier as a logistics system

Vegetius insists recruits must frequently march carrying 'not less than sixty pounds' (excluding arms), because difficult expeditions force soldiers to carry provisions as well as weapons (Book I.19). The point is not merely toughness; it is operational independence. If the army can move with its own supply burden, it can manoeuvre with fewer pauses, fewer wagons, and less vulnerability to disruption.

9. Formation drill: ranks, intervals, wedge and orb

In Chapter 26 Vegetius insists that nothing is more essential than keeping ranks without opening or closing excessively. Crowding prevents effective fighting, loose order invites penetration and rear attack. He prescribes a progression: begin in a single rank; learn to dress a straight line and keep 'an equal and just distance'; then double ranks quickly, then form four deep. From there, recruits practise the triangle or wedge and the defensive circle or orb—evolutions that can preserve cohesion after disruption and prevent a total rout (Book I.26).

Vegetius' battle theory is therefore deeply 'training-led'. He assumes that formations fail not because soldiers lack courage, but because they lack the rehearsed ability to restore order when fear and pressure fracture the line.

10. Rehearsal in real ground: monthly marching manoeuvres and difficult terrain

Vegetius reports that older ordinances required cavalry and infantry to be exercised three times a month through armed marches of a fixed distance: infantry marched ten miles out from camp and returned in exact order, altering pace on parts of the march; cavalry performed comparable movements and evolutions. Crucially, these exercises were conducted not only on even ground but also in 'difficult and uneven places' and on mountain ascents and descents to familiarise soldiers with varied manoeuvres required by terrain (Book I.27).

11. Year-round drill: winter infrastructure and the refusal of 'intermission'

Vegetius stresses continuity. To keep drill going in winter, the army erected sheltered training spaces: covered porticoes or riding halls for cavalry and large covered halls for infantry. Even in winter, if weather allowed, soldiers drilled in the field so that an 'intermission of discipline' would not weaken courage or physical condition (Book II, as quoted in the training discussion).

He then lists a catalogue of perpetual practices: cutting wood, carrying burdens, passing ditches, swimming, marching in the full step, even running with arms and baggage—so that labour in peace becomes familiar and war does not feel like an alien shock (Book II, 'The training of soldiers').



12. Conclusion: what Vegetius' training system is designed to produce

Vegetius' programme is not 'fitness' in isolation. It is a deliberate machine for producing (1) endurance without loss of order (paced marching and burdens), (2) reliable lethality through repeated simple technique (post drill, thrust doctrine, missile practice), (3) cohesion and recoverability under stress (rank discipline, wedge and orb), and (4) campaign self-sufficiency (swimming, ditch-crossing, wood-cutting, and load-bearing).

Because Vegetius writes as a reformer looking back to 'ancient customs', his manual must be read critically as both descriptive and prescriptive. Even so, it remains our richest surviving Latin account of how Romans thought soldiers were made: through incessant repetition, standardised routines, and the moral economy of discipline.