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**Fascicolo 21. Marzo 2025**  
**Storia Militare Medievale**

a cura di  
MARCO MERLO, FABIO ROMANONI E PETER SPOSATO



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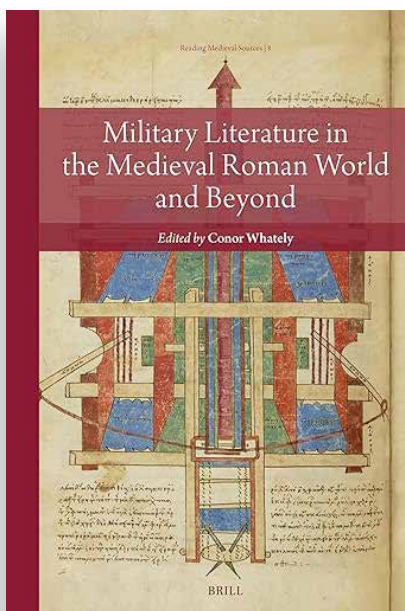


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CONOR WHATELY (ED.)

## *Military Literature in the Medieval Roman World and Beyond*

Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2024, pp. 454



This volume is a collection of essays devoted to the study of the military literature in the medieval world. The authors consider the texts they deal with as part of a genre with specific traits and characteristics, which are tackled by C. Whately in the second part of his *Introduction* (although the matter of the existence of a proper “genre” of the military manuals is more extensively dealt with in the conclusion)<sup>1</sup>. The *Introduction* is particularly useful,

<sup>1</sup> On this issue, see also the contributions by Whately himself and J. Chlup in James T. CHLUP and CONOR WHATELY (Eds.), *Greek and Roman Military Manuals: Genre and History*, London-New York, Routledge, 2021.

as it offers a contextualisation of the issues considered more in depth by the other authors. In the first part, Whately provides a summary of the appearance and evolution of the military manual, from the Greek world to the medieval scenario. This section is especially welcome, as many contributors highlight, in their own papers, the constant relation between technical authors and the previous tradition. The author, however, tackles the Chinese tradition as well, although only one of the following papers is devoted to the East — a limit of which the editor is fully aware. In the second part, as said, Whately highlights the main traits of the military manual as a text. In this section, one specific issue deserves special attention: the supposed lack of originality of many military manuals. The author frames this problem in the context of the pervasive importance of the military technical and cultural tradition. As mentioned, the analysis of the relations between the writers of new manuals and their predecessors is one of the foremost strong points of this collection of essays. Whately goes on to consider the authors of the manuals themselves and then delves into the complex matter of the historical accuracy of these texts. The most important point raised here is that, even when these technical writings may be thought not to accurately reflect the reality of their own time, they are still representative of the views and the culture of the author's milieu. This cultural focus is another strength of the book.

The first part of the book is devoted to late antiquity. M.B. Charles (*Using Vegetius' Epitoma Rei Militaris as a Source for Late Antiquity: Some Reflections on Methodology*) starts where the *Introduction* ended, with a salutary reminder of the cultural importance of the *Epitoma*. Through the case study of Vegetius' criticism of the lack of armour of the soldiers of his own times, the author shows that Vegetius' aim is to advocate the return to an idealised model of *antiqua legio*, rather than to precisely reconstruct the characteristics of the Roman army at a given time. Charles' methodological remarks imply a salutary caution about attempts to precisely reconstruct the chronological frame of this *antiqua legio*, which, as in Charles' reconstruction, is best seen as an idealised creation by Vegetius himself<sup>2</sup>.

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2 See Marco FORMISANO, «Fragile Expertise and the Authority of the Past: The Roman Art of War», in Jason KÖNIG and Greg WOOLF (Eds.), *Authority and Expertise in Ancient Scientific Culture*, Cambridge, University Press, 2017, pp. 147-152 and Wendryll J. BENTO TAVARES and Ana T. MARQUES GONÇALVES «O manual militar como artefato cultural: Vegécio e a ordenação do passado romano no Compêndio da arte militar (século IV d. C.)», *Antigüedad y Cristianismo* 40 (2023), pp. 201-226.



This, of course, does not mean that Vegetius' reconstruction was not based on his sources. This enables historians to try and reconstruct the origin of single pieces of the author's description. This is what P. Cosme and M. Emion do in their paper (*Tribunes and Prefects of Legions according to Vegetius*). The authors focus on the features of the tribunes in Vegetius' description of the *antiqua legio*. As in the previous article, the main contention is Vegetius' attempt to promote a reform of the army in line with the principles of the *antiqua legio* he describes. Unlike the previous paper, however, the authors insist on the possibility of pinning down the chronological setting of this *antiqua legio*. The reader cannot help but feel that a methodological discussion among the authors might have been useful. Instead, the two different approaches are juxtaposed but not compared or discussed<sup>3</sup>. This first part goes on with C. Hof's contribution (*Building in and by Military Manuals in Late Antiquity: Reverse-Reading Traditional and Innovative Features from City Walls in the Roman East*), which frames the issue of the practical value of the military manuals in the innovative context of the fortifications. The first part of the paper is, in reality, an overall view of the decline of technical knowledge in late antiquity, with interesting reflections on the Christians' attitude towards pagan knowledge. Taking the walls of Resafa as a case study, the author reconstructs an ideal military manual for the builders; a comparison with extant technical works reveals notable similarities. The first part of the volume closes with a discussion of the connotation of bravado in Vegetius and Mauritius. Ł. Różycki (*Bravado on the Battlefield: A Study of Late Antique Roman Military Treatises*) focuses on the importance of discipline and the criticism of excessive audacity by both Vegetius and Mauritius. Both texts represent bravado as a common feature in recruits and highlight the need for training to prevent it.

The second part opens with M. Whitby's paper on Maurice (*The Strategikon of Maurice*). This contribution is not only an excellent and up-to-date introduction to the *Strategikon*, but also a discussion of specific points that are well connected with the other papers of the collection. Whitby considers the relation of the author both with the previous tradition and with contemporary reality, showing that these two concerns were not at all mutually exclusive. The following paper, by I.

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3 Although the starting point – Vegetius' aims – is the same, the opinions about his strategies in pursuing these aims seem to be irreconcilable. The writer is either seen as setting forth a realistic and precisely reconstructed IV century Roman army as a model, or as creating an idealised model from different sources from different times.

Eramo (*Authorship in Byzantine Military Literature*), again opens with a reflection on the relationship between the author of a military manual and his predecessors. Eramo then goes on to discuss the attribution of several Byzantine manuals to their possible authors. Perhaps the biggest value of this article, apart from the excellent discussion of the individual attributions, is its methodological contribution, as the reader witnesses the exploitation of several different lines of approach in order to reach a conclusion on the matter of the authorship of a manual. Next, K. Schoneveld (*Manuscript Illuminations in Military Manuals*) focuses on the illustrations accompanying military manuals and on their historical accuracy and reliability. Once again, the issue of the relation between the technical manuals and contemporary reality is at the forefront of the volume, this time in a different and quite original direction. The following paper, by N. Williams (*Dwarfs Fighting on the Shoulders of Giants: The Legacy of Greek and Roman Military Manuals in the Byzantine Empire*), is specifically devoted to the practical value of the military technical literature and therefore, once again, to the connection with the contemporary world, as well as to that with the previous tradition. The main contention of the author is the constant practical aim of the authors of military manuals, from the Greek and Roman classical tradition to the Byzantine manuals. Although her comments about the objectives of the mentioned authors are sound, the discussion is perhaps a bit too one-sided, as the possible antiquarian and cultural reasons behind the composition of these works are left aside.<sup>4</sup> The author's comments, at any rate, fit very well in the general context of this volume, and counterbalance the predominantly cultural approach of other contributions. One of these is the paper by G. Chatzelis (*Wars and Cultural Wars: The Military, Cultural and Ideological Background to the Emergence of Byzantine Military Treatises (c. 800–1100)*). The author explores the ways in which the traits of the military manuals were influenced by the military and cultural context and, from an ideological perspective, on the role of these manuals in the self-definition as "Romans" of the Byzantine upper class. Once again, the importance of the rela-

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4 Especially in the introductory section, about more ancient authors, the nuances of the modern debate are not highlighted (on Asclepiodotus, with whose work the author deals in particular, see Graham WRIGHTSON, «To use or not to use? The practical and historical reliability of Asclepiodotus' philosophical tactical manual», in Geoff LEE, Helene WHITTAKER and Graham WRIGHTSON (eds.), *Ancient warfare: introducing current research*, vol. 1, Newcastle, Oxford Scholars, 2015, pp. 65-93).



tion with the previous Roman world receives careful scrutiny, under a different light. The last paper from this part is by S. Kyriakidis (*The Reading of Military Manuals in Byzantium from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Centuries*). This contribution is very well connected with the others, as it explores the importance of the knowledge of the ancient military treatises, this time from the point of view of the readers in the Byzantine world. This leads to a discussion, from yet another point of view, of the practical importance of these texts.

The third part of the volume, with its three contributions, takes the reader beyond the Roman and Byzantine worlds. In the *Introduction*, as mentioned, the editor regrets the disproportion, which is largely due to the constraints imposed by the Covid pandemic. This notwithstanding, this section undoubtedly adds to the value of the book, and will stimulate a wider and more interdisciplinary debate: indeed, one of the strengths of this part is that it tackles, in a different context and for different cultures, issues similar to some of those that are dealt with by the other contributors. The first paper, by D.A. Graff (*Medieval Contributions to Chinese Military Thought*), starts with an introduction about the Chinese tradition of military manuals and military thought, which will prove very useful to the non-expert reader. The author then focuses on the medieval innovations with respect to the previous works. Again, as said, the fascinating issue of innovation vs tradition is at the forefront of the volume. M.S. Fulton (*Medieval Mechanical Artillery 'Treatises'*) delves into the issue of the creation, evolution, and expansion of the knowledge related to the building of the trebuchet. The reader again finds familiar issues such as the importance of technical images and diagrams and, again, the transmission of military knowledge. A very interesting, although marginal, point raised by the author is the presence in the West of the idea according to which “inferior” and “less cultivated” peoples were less skilled in terms of military technique. This attitude closely parallels that found in the Roman imperial world<sup>5</sup>. Lastly, J.D. Hosler (*Writing and Warfighting II: John of Salisbury's Policraticus to the Eighteenth Century*) deals with the reception of the *Policraticus* from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The author focuses especially on John's importance in the transmission of the ancient military manuals, and of

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5 See Serafina CUOMO, «Ancient written sources for engineering and technology», in John P. OLESON (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Engineering and Technology in the Classical World*, Oxford, University Press, 2008, pp. 15-34.

Vegetius' *Epitoma* in particular.

The conclusions are actually split into two parts. First, G. Theotokis (*Timeless Principles of War and the Vertical Transmission of Military Knowledge through the Taktika*) focuses on the common points of the ancient and medieval military treatises. The first part of this paper, dealing with the possibility to classify the military manuals as a genre with common characteristics, might have befitted an introduction rather than the conclusions, as it justifies the line of approach of the whole volume; at any rate, this discussion is both very welcome and convincing. The main focus of the article, however, is on the idea that these common features ensured a high degree of “vertical transmission” of previous manuals and ideas. This broadens and reframes Whately's suggestion, in the *Introduction*, that the lack of game-changing evolutions in the practices of ancient warfare allowed military manuals to remain relevant long after their composition. This pragmatic line of approach by the author complements the cultural focus on the same issues by many other contributions (see in particular Chatzelis' paper), and it is very nice to see such an interesting topic tackled under different perspectives. Finally, J. Haldon's *Epilogue* summarises the main innovative points of this volume, rightly underlining the social and cultural focus of many contributions.

On the whole, this book is extremely stimulating. It might not be, as Whately recognises in the *Introduction*, “a last word on the subject”, but in many cases, and for many topics, the papers collected in the volume offer new insights, suggest new lines of approach, and will certainly not fail to stimulate a wider debate and new appreciation of these texts. In this respect, this volume follows in the footsteps of a previous book edited by Whately himself, together with J. Chlup<sup>6</sup>, on Greek and Roman military manuals. The two books have much in common: both volumes focus on key points such as the transmission of military knowledge, the aims of military technical literature, authorship, and readership.

This book will prove very useful to the expert reader, but also to the more casual reader and to those who want to deepen their knowledge of the military culture of the ancient world. Bibliographical references are abundant and up-to-date, and the language is clear, while misprints are few and far in between<sup>7</sup>.

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6 James T. CHLUP and CONOR WHATELY (Eds.), *Greek and Roman Military Manuals: Genre and History*, London-New York, Routledge, 2021.

7 See, for instance, p.3, nt. 9, “an” for “and”; p. 109, “heigh” for “high”; p. 113, “loophools”

Perhaps only one minor drawback might be mentioned. At times, the reader feels like some contributions might have benefitted from a wider discussion among the authors. In some cases, different lines of approach are followed by the contributors, but these are not discussed in comparison<sup>8</sup>. This, however, is hardly the editor's or the contributors' fault: the Covid pandemic is again to blame, and, if anything, these divergences of opinion might provide yet another reason for this book to become a stimulating starting point for further debate.

GABRIELE BRUSA

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for "loopholes"; p. 143, "under no circumstances" for "under any circumstances"; p. 280, "Vigil" for "Virgil"; p. 301, "*Taktika Theoria*" for "*Taktike Theoria*". These misprints do not detract from the clarity of the text.

8 This is particularly evident, as argued above, in the pair of papers by M.B. Charles and P. Cosme and M. Emion. A higher degree of discussion might have made the treatment of other issues, such as the practical aims of the manuals and the problem of tradition vs innovation, more coherent.

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حضرت اسکندرو انکه  
عسکری کلوب یوم  
ایدوب سفره کتکه  
مشاوره ایله کتک  
نصیر در



حضرت اسکندر انکه  
و انکه عسکری ایله سفر  
کترکه سلا نیل عسکر  
فرشوجیقوب اسکندر  
ای ایغانه دوشد کتک  
نصیر در



+ ...

“Alexander Romance”, a 14th century Armenian miniature ms in S. Giorgio dei Greci in Venice (San Lazzaro, 424) depicting scenes from the life of Alexander the Great. In this illustration Alexander the Great and his troops arrive in Thessaly and receive gifts from a tyrant. The scene is depicted entirely in the fashion of the late Byzantine period (1204-1453). Wikimedia Commons.





Hausbuch von Schloss Wolfegg, Venus und Mars, Fol. 13r: Mars und seine Kinder  
(Venus und Mars. Das mittelalterliche Hausbuch aus der Sammlung  
der Fürsten von Waldburg Wolfegg“. München 1997). Wikimedia Commons.

# Storia Militare Medievale

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