WAR IN HISTORY
The History of Polish and General Military Science

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How to choose the best field of battle – according to the authors of Roman military treatises

Quemadmodum idoneus locus eligatur ad pugnam

Choosing a suitable location to fight a battle has always been one of the most crucial factors determining the outcome of the ensuing clash. In the Antiquity, it was often the deciding factor, especially if the opposing sides utilized heavy infantry or cavalry formations, which required open areas to operate effectively. Another aspect that affected the choice of the battlefield was the composition of one’s forces, the size of cavalry units, and the make-up of the enemy army. A properly selected deployment area oftentimes ensured the cohesion of one’s formation; it could also serve to negate an enemy’s advantage, thus determining which force would have the upper hand. Before a battle it was the commander’s duty to ensure the most favorable conditions for his army, while simultaneously weakening the position of the enemy. It is worth emphasizing that in the Antiquity leadership was more about motivating the army rather than tactics. Common ideas about how ancient battles were fought are often incorrect, particularly with regard to the role of the commanding officer. It was a leader’s task to mentally prepare his men before the clash and to choose a suitable location for the battle, which

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1 I have already touched on the subject of the battlefield in: Ł. Różycki, Quemadmodum idoneus locus eligatur ad pugnam Czyli jak wybrać najlepsze miejsce walki – zdaniem autorów rzymskich traktatów wojskowych, [in:] Pola bitew wczoraj i dziś, ed. A. Olejko, P. Korzeniowski, K. Mroczkowski, Oświęcim–Rzeszów 2013, p. 151–158. This work is an expanded and supplemented version of the aforementioned Polish piece.

2 Vegetius 3.13.1. further cited as „Veg.”

would be advantageous to his forces, while neutralizing the advantages held by the enemy. During actual fighting, contrary to popular belief, the commander’s role was less important and usually boiled down to deploying the reserves⁴. It was not unheard of for the opposing sides to maneuver into position for hours or even days. Each general would attempt to find the best deployment area and at the same time to put the enemy at a disadvantage. However, once an ideal position has been occupied, one also had to make the enemy accept a battle under these particular conditions. Avoiding a clash in such a situation was not difficult. Normally the opposing forces would only engage if both commanders wished for it to happen, which meant that they were both convinced of their own strength or the strength of the occupied position (or, for that matter, its weakness, if the enemy was at a disadvantage). It was only once the leading officers were satisfied with their deployment that a battle was fought. Notably, there have been instances where a clash was avoided altogether because no side wished to abandon an advantageous position⁵.

The generals of the Antiquity were well aware that the choice of the battlefield may affect the outcome of the battle. This is clearly the guiding idea in Late Roman military treatises that deal with the issue of where to fight a battle. The purpose of this piece will be to compare two works about warfare. The first will be the most popular and highly influential⁶ Roman military treatise – De Re Militari by Vegetius; a work written in the comfort of the author’s home, by someone with no military experience, but based on previous works about the theory of warfare. The second work, Strategikon, is a manual created at the end of the 6th century C.E. by a military practitioner fighting with the Slavs and Persians⁷. A comparative analysis of the two texts may yield other unexpected benefits, but most importantly the results will fairly accurately identify the crucial factors taken into account when evaluating specific locations in terms of their military value. One additional benefit of analyzing the Strategikon will be the possibility to determine the major stages of deciding on where to fight a battle. In this par-

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⁴ Ibidem, p. 149–163.
⁵ It happened, for example, during the conquest of Gaul. Compare: Commentarii de Bello Gallico, 1. 48; 2. 7; 5. 17; 7. 19; 7. 53.
ticular case it is imperative to follow the chronological order, especially since the author of Strategikon most likely knew the work of Vegetius and drew from it.

What we learn from De Re Militari

We will begin by analyzing the work of Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus – De Re Militari, written in Latin most likely during the reign of Theodosius I. The author had no practical military experience, but was an insightful observer, meaning that most of his knowledge came from his personal assessments and reading of other texts on military theory, which he in large part summarized and compiled for use in his own work. There are many antiquarian passages in De Re Militari, copied from other military pieces, which often had no practical application anymore in Late Antiquity. This impedes the interpretation of the work and forces scholars to monitor if a given passage is not outdated when confronted with the organization of the army in the 4th century. In numerous instances Vegetius refers back to the republican character of a Roman army, citing the description that we know from the work of Polybius as an example to be followed. This gives Vegetius' work a partially moralizing quality – the author urged the return to Roman virtues and the restoration of heavy legionary infantry to its previous

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8 For a list of similarities between the treatises, which supports the conclusion that the author of Strategikon was familiar with De Re Militari (either directly or indirectly – i.e. being familiar with works, which Vegetius himself made use of), see: Ł. Różycki, Mauricjii Strategicon praktyczny podręcznik wojskowy i dzieło antykwarskie, Poznań 2015, p. 167–189.
9 It often appears under an alternative title Epitoma Rei Militaris.
11 Polybius, Historiae, 6.25.
12 In the Roman literature of the late Empire period the example of the Republic was often brought up as the time of prosperity and strict moral principles. This was done by both Christian and pagan authors.
prominent role\textsuperscript{13}, disregarding other formations\textsuperscript{14}. It bears mentioning that this moralizing character was actually common to many other works on military theory; it was one of the distinctive literary features of East Roman military manuals\textsuperscript{15}.

Although Vegetius himself has never set foot on any battlefield, thanks to his familiarity with numerous works on military matters he was usually able to identify the crucial aspects of a given subject. One of these fundamental issues, an opinion shared by Vegetius, was the choice of the battlefield. The author of \textit{De Re Militari} has the following to say on the subject:

Good commanders realize that victory depends in large part on the choice of the location for the battle. Consider then the advantages that any given position offers in a fight. The higher the ground, the better. Weapons thrown

\textsuperscript{13} See the introduction to Book II. \textit{Instituta maiorum partis armatae plenissime elemantiam uestram peritissimeque retinere continuis declaratur victoribus ac triumphis, siquidem indubitata adprobatio artis sit rerum semper effectus. Verum tranquillitas tua, imperator inuicte, altiori consilio, quam mens poterat terrena conicere, ex libris antiqua desiderat, cum ipsiam antiquitatem factis recentibus antecedat. Igitur cum haec litteris breuiter comprehendere maiestati uestrae non tam discenda quam recognoscenda praeciperer, certa aut saepius devoto cum pudore. Quid enim audacius, quam domino ac principi generis humani, domitori omnium gentium barbarorum, aliquid de usu ac disciplina insinuare bellorum, nisi forte iussisset fieri, quod ipse gesisset? et rursum tanti imperatoris non oboedire mandatis plenum sacrelegi sidebat ari atque periculi. Miro itaque more in pandoaudax factus sum, dum metu novi uideri audacior, si nessem. Ad quam tenueritatem praecedens me indulgentia uestrae perennitatis anaimaut. Nam libellum de dilectu atque exercitatione tironum dudum tamquam famulas obtuli; non tamen culpatus abscessi. Nec formido iussus adgreli opus, quod spontaneum cessit impune. The author was faced with a true conundrum; at times praising the emperor as the best tactician, but on the other hand wishing for the return of the Roman legions of old. The solution was simple: to describe the ruler as someone who puts into practice the instructions found in the treatise (\textquotedblleft it is obviously not my intention to lecture Your Imperial Majesty about the glory of the past, rather to remind You of Your own"). Thus, the Emperor would not feel admonished by Vegetius, which could end badly for the Roman author.

\textsuperscript{14} This sentiment is evident as seen on the example of cavalry, particularly armed formations. Vegetius ignored the existence of heavy cavalry, which in the 6\textsuperscript{th} century was already a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield. The author limits his notes on mounted formations to a single conclusion—that they are well trained and there is no need to elaborate on them. Compare: Veg. 3. 23, with the Battle of Aetorotum, especially: Ammianus Marcellinus, \textit{Res gestae}, 16. 12. 36–41. Concerning sources dealing with Roman cavalry, see also: K. R. Dixon P. Southern, \textit{The Roman Cavalry: From the First to the Third Century Ad}, London 1992, p. 11–19, especially 11–16.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium}, p. 1962. It’s impossible to determine exactly when this new genre came into being; its early representatives were Vegetius in the West and Syrius Magister in the East. Compare the introductions to \textit{De Re Militari}, \textit{Strategikon}, \textit{Tactica}, \textit{De velitatione bellica}, or the works of Syrius Magister. Moralizing passages appear in all of them, and with the sole exception of the writer of \textit{De velitatione bellica}, every author claims that their treatise is the only solution to the current crisis in the army.
from a height gain additional momentum and are better at penetrating the enemy’s defenses. Additionally, our foes will have to fight two battles, against the slope itself, and then against our soldiers. But there is one difference that you need to be aware of: if you’re facing mounted units with your infantry, you should look for an area that is difficult to approach, uneven and hilly; but if your strength lies in cavalry, which will face the enemy’s foot soldiers, then do not seek out hills, but rather open plains, where no forests or marshlands will stand in the way of your troops.

Vegetius was aware of the importance of choosing where to fight. This decision often made the difference between winning and losing and, consequently, living and dying. The author placed a heavy emphasis on occupying a high ground. This advice is inherently tied to the purpose of the work, which was to restore the prominence of Roman infantry (Vegetius makes no mention of any army with a large cavalry force – as horsemen were not suited for operating in difficult terrain). But it is also consistent with how infantry units were used in Late Antiquity – it was preferable to receive an enemy’s charge in a defensive formation, relying on the strength of one’s position, armor, shields and projectile weapons. Vegetius’ focus on deploying in an elevated position would have most bearing on the use of ranged weaponry.

According to the treatise, before a fight the legionnaires should occupy the highest position available. This was believed to provide nothing but advantages to the defenders, while seriously hindering the attackers. First of all, any projectiles thrown by infantry were more effective as they gained additional force. It is worth mentioning that positioning an infantry unit on a hill slope allowed more legionnaires to throw their *pila* without the danger of hitting anyone standing in the front ranks. This was particularly important in the case of the *pilum*, as the range of this weapon was only around 30 meters, but positioning the sol-

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16 Bonum ducem conuenit nosse magnam partem victoriae ipsum locum, in quo dimicandum est, possidere. Elabora ergo, ut conserturus manum primum auxilium captes ex loco, qui tanto utilior iudicatur, quanto superior fuerit occupatus. In subjectos enim vehementius tela descendunt, et maiore impetu obnirientes pars altior pellit. Qui adverso nititur cluuo, duplex subit cum loco et hoste certamen. Sed illa distantia est, quod, si de peditibus tuis victoriam speras contra equites hostium, loca aspera inaequalis montuosa debes eligere, si uero de equitibus tuis contra aduersarii pedites victoriam quaeris, sequi debes paulo quidem editiora loca, sed plana atque patentia, necque siluis necque paludibus impedita. Veg. 3. 13.

17 Centuries later, a similar observation will be made by the author of De viitiatione bellica, 3. 11.


19 Goldsworthy’s work includes the most important calculations regarding the *pilum*. Ibidem, p. 184.
diers on a slope increased the effective range. A similar result was achieved for the *plumbatae* used in the times of Vegetius\(^{20}\). While on a hill, the commander could set up his men in more ranks, without losing effectiveness. It also placed a natural obstacle before the enemy soldiers, who were forced to advance uphill, which additionally sapped their strength and significantly reduced their ability to respond with ranged weapons of their own. There is also the issue of psychology, although the author makes no mention of it. Nevertheless, having the high ground always provides a boost to the defenders’ morale. Secondly, an army in deep formation is less likely to flee\(^{21}\). By occupying an elevated position the commander not only ensured that more ranks of his soldiers could contribute in ranged combat, but also improved the spirits of his men and made them more likely to stand their ground. The attackers, on the other hand, had to face a sustained barrage of Roman projectiles while charging uphill without the possibility of returning fire as effectively. This would surely have been a serious blow to the soldiers’ motivation.

Additionally, we should further factor in the psychology of the battlefield. If the enemy relied on discipline, they had another issue to deal with. Advancing up a slope while under fire was disheartening, and the soldiers’ feeling of helplessness could result in two outcomes. One was that they would break formation to close in with the defenders as quickly as possible, charging with no regard for tactics. Alternatively, finding themselves under constant fire and not being able to fight back, the attackers would begin to retreat, not wanting to risk their lives in a situation which, from their perspective, could not bring victory. Both outcomes were, obviously, more than acceptable for a Roman commander.

Vegetius also pointed out one of the oldest rules of war, namely that specific types of military forces differed in terms of effectiveness depending on the terrain\(^{22}\). Cavalry is best suited for fighting in open plains, so a primarily mounted force should strive to confront any opponents in similar areas. But if a Roman


\(^{22}\) Which is rather funny, once we realize that the author of *De Rei Militari* had no idea why different types of troops were effective against others. Another author who had difficulty with understanding these interactions was R. M. van Nort, who in *The Battle of Adrianople and*
army of mostly infantry faced enemy horsemen, the instruction was to deploy on uneven, mountainous ground, which was unfavorable for the mounted attackers. The instructions provided in *De Re Militari* regarding the choice of the field of battle were not comprehensive. This serves as yet another proof that the author had no practical experience and learned everything through observation and by reading historical treatises. Although the instructions are fairly basic, it is worth mentioning that they contain no blatant mistakes and are clear for the reader.

**What we learn from Strategikon**

The other Late Antiquity source to be analyzed is the *Strategikon*, which was most likely written during the reign of Emperor Maurice, in the years 582–602. The *Strategikon* was the work of a practitioner, demonstrating a unique view of the Roman military at the end of the 6th century. The goal of its author was to put down instructions and basic tenets of leadership for novice commanders. In essence, *Strategikon* was intended as a military theory manual, although it also included numerous references to previous works. The author of the treatise devoted much space to the issue of preparing for battle and the crucial points to be remembered before a clash. Detailed instructions guide the reader through the process of choosing a suitable battlefield and specify the responsibilities for combat.
of the commander. The most valuable information on the subject is compiled in book VII of Strategikon, which includes guidelines on what to do before an engagement. In the following paragraphs I will try to analyze the procedures that a commanding officer was to follow when choosing where to fight.

First of all, the commander should send out a reconnaissance party tasked with scouting out the area between the Romans and the enemy force. This indicates that the author of the treatise had practical experience and was well aware of the importance of learning about the enemy and the terrain lying between the two armies. It is worth noting that in the work of Theophylact Simocatta, which describes the reign of Emperor Maurice – i.e. the period when Strategikon was most likely written – we find an interesting passage dealing with the reconnaissance before the Battle of Solachon. It proves the importance of scouting missions; in the case of question intelligence was gathered by Christian Arabs, who had excellent knowledge of the area where the Romans fought against the Persians.

Several passages in Strategikon deal exclusively with the subject of scouting operations, which demonstrates how important it was to have knowledge about the enemy. What is more, the author assumed a situation, in which it was the enemy who dictated the conditions of the engagement. This was a novel approach, because other military works written prior to the Strategikon by such authors as Syriacus Magister or Vegetius did not account for any initiative.

\[28\] Compare with the actions of Caesar leading a relief force to aid the besieged Cicero. Commentarii de Bello Gallico, 5. 49. Caesar sent out scouts tasked with reconnoitering the area before the advance of the army. Also, Commentarii de Bello Gallico, 7. 44, where we learn how proper reconnaissance was equally important to both Caesar and Vercingetorix.

\[29\] Strat. 7B. 13. Apart from inspecting the field of battle, the horsemen were also tasked with capturing deserters from both sides.

\[30\] ὡς ἐπεισοδεύσαντες άνδρας λογίσαι ἐπὶ κατασκοπή τοῦ πολέμου ἔβρεσον Σεργίου τε τῷ λοχαγῷ ἀνακατείκεν, ὥς ἐπὶ τῷ Μαρδεσ φρουρά ἐγκατείρησον, τόν τε Ἄγγελον καὶ Ζωγομον' πυλάσας ἐφ' οὗτοι τῆς συμμάχου τῶν Ρωμαίων δυνάμεις, ὡς Σαρακηνός εἴδως Λατίνοις ἀποκαλεῖν So on the next day he prepared a select group of soldiers to gather intelligence on the enemy, and entrusted them to logos Sergius, who led the defense of Mardes, and to Ogyrus and Zogomus, chieftains of tribal auxiliaries, whom the Latins call Saracens, delivered to the Romans.


\[32\] See, e.g.: Strat. 2. 3; 7. 3; 7A. 8; 7B. 5; 7B. 13; 9. 5.
on the part of the opposing force. Vegetius instructs about the best locations to be occupied, but fails to advise on what to do if the opponent avoids confrontation or begins maneuvering into position that favors his troops over ours; a similar disregard is shown by Syrianus, the author of Περὶ Στρατηγικῆς. This approach is typical for Roman intellectuals of the Late Antiquity, who described their own idea of war, which was not backed by any actual experience. The author of Strategikon realized that the choice of the battlefield depends on both sides, and that it is difficult to force the enemy to act according to one’s designs. The duty of the scouting party was to reconnoiter the terra nullius that separated the two armies, round up any deserters from their own forces, and observe the enemy’s movements. Gathering intelligence about the field of battle was the responsibility of the mandator (μανδάτωρ)34, who would also serve as a messenger during the battle, moving between the formations of the Roman army. Only smart and responsible soldiers could fulfill this role. The author of Strategikon had this to say about their duties:

Mandators should scout the area where the battle will be fought, that is the terrain separating the two armies. They should pay particular attention to channels, marshland and any other obstacles35.

Similarly to Vegetius, Strategikon’s anonymous author emphasized the importance of natural obstacles, which were to be identified beforehand. If the army failed to do that, the soldiers could discover similar obstructions while advancing

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33 For example: In the event that the enemy attacks us with such numbers that we will have no chance of victory and no chance of avoiding battle, this is what must be done. The army should occupy the highest ground available, and when the enemies begin their ascent, repel them with slings and thrown stones, then retreat under cover of night. If the opposing army continues to be a threat, the maneuver should be repeated. Retreat in the night and in the morning occupy a new position on nearby hills. Syrianus 37. Vegetius and Syrianus Magister were both theoreticians, so they normally did not account for any counter-action by the enemy. Case in point – their instructions on army arrangement, which do not in any way account for changes in the opponent’s behavior. Veg. 3. 20. Each of the tactics suggested by Vegetius is based on the assumption that the enemy will do exactly as the Roman general wishes.


35 Strat. 7B. 16.
or, worse still, while engaging the enemy, which could lead to breaking formation — a disastrous outcome for the Roman units, who lived and died by their discipline\(^{38}\). What is more, some natural obstacles offered the perfect place to stage an ambush, so discovering and neutralizing any hidden enemy units was of utmost importance\(^{37}\).

The treatise continues in similar fashion about the work of scouts and spies:

> Every effort should be made to send out motivated soldiers at suitable intervals to act as spies and scouts and gather intelligence about the enemy’s movements, strength and organization, which will be a safeguard against any surprises\(^{36}\).

The author made a distinction between two similar functions; a spy (κατάκόσμος) was tasked with assessing the enemy’s capabilities, took great risks, and usually operated alone or with a small squad, while a scout (ἐξειδικοματωρ\(^{39}\) or σκούλκατωρ\(^{40}\)) was responsible for monitoring the approach to the camp, cap-

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\(^{37}\) Like in the Battle of Argentoratum, when the warriors of Chnodomarius attempted to draw a whole wing of the Roman army into an ambush using natural obstacles. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*, 16.11–12.

\(^{38}\) Χρη αυτα τα κατα τους ξεφορις σπουδαζειν πολυπραγμονήσαι δια σκολικων ἀκριβών και συνεχων ἐκ διαστημάτων ἱκανων και δια κατακόσμων ἦταν ἐκσυλλογισμόν την τε κίνησιν τὸ τε πολὺ τοῦ πλῆθος αὐτῶν και τὴν ταξίν, καὶ οὕτως ἀρματοῦσα εἰς τὸ μὴ αἱρετισθῆναι παρ’ αὐτῶν Strat. 7A 3.

\(^{39}\) Ἐξειδικοματωρ is the equivalent of the Latin *ekplorator*, meaning a scout.

\(^{40}\) The word is also of Latin etymology. It most likely stems from *scula*, and although some linguists claim that it also has some German influences (*skulk*) this theory is indefensible in the opinion of Marichal: R. Marichal, *Les ostraca de Bu Njem*, Libya Antiqua Supplementum 1992, vol. 7, p. 68–70. after: P. Rance, *The fulcum...* footnote 88. Vegetius uses the term *excubatores*, which did not, however, refer to scouting units, but rather light infantry. Veg. 2.15. Simocatta use the same term to refer to sentries, or to be more precise, the lack thereof: τοινυν ὁ Ἱωμάνθην φοινικατο- σθέντες ἐπι τοὺς συγκωπησαι πρὸς τρυφὴν κατεκλίνοντο, εἶτα τῇ μὴ συνεπαίτηντον καὶ τῇ παρονίᾳ τὰς εὐπρεπίς νοτεύοντες της διαφορουσάς κατημέλισσαν, ἴνα σκολικάν κυνήσης τῇ πατρίῳ φόβῳ Ἱωμάνθην ἀποκαλεῖτο. Sim. 6.9. 14. Simocatta clearly indicates that the word *scula* is derived from Latin. It is worth noting that the term *excubatores* (or, in the opinion of Rance – *sculators*; P.Rance, *The fulcum...* footnote 88.) appeared in the work of Cassiodorus: Th. Mommsen, *Cassiodori Senatoris Variae*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica vol. XII, Berolini 1894, II. 20. and referred to scouting ships (atque ideo praesenti decernimus iussione, ut quantas in Ravennati urbe excubatores potueris repitere, frumentis fiscalibus oneratas ad nos usque perducas, quatenus alimonia publica tali provisione relevata necessitatem inopiae non debante sustinere.), although it is believed by J. Rougé that Cassiodorus used it to describe transport ships. J. Rougé, *Sur un
turing deserters and gathering intelligence. Scouts were lightly armed, mounted on swift horses, and operated in larger units that could hold their own against the enemy’s reconnaissance parties. However, it bears remembering that the author of Strategikon distinguished between conducting reconnaissance before a battle and in the course of a campaign. While an army was on the march, scouting activities were done by explorators, who often also served as the rearguard, whereas before a battle the terrain was inspected by mandators, more experienced with this type of work.

Once the reconnaissance was carried out and the strategos was provided with the necessary information, a council was held. It brought together all the merarchs, i.e. commanders who were afforded tactical freedom during battle (officers leading the two army wings, the center, the defensive units and the commander of the ambushing drungos). The purpose was to make plans for the coming battle, particularly to agree on where to engage the enemy and assign objectives to respective meroses. This way, the lay of the land and the locations of any unexpected obstacles were known not only to the leading strategos, but to all high-ranking commanders, whose decisions would affect the correct execution of the battle plan.

If the mandators carrying out the reconnaissance discovered any difficult ground between the two armies, the author of Strategikon suggested the following:

> If any are identified, our army should hold its position and allow the enemy to pass through them, then engage once they are back on open ground.

By adopting this strategy, the enemy was forced to negotiate the obstacle and begin the engagement suffering from fatigue. Meanwhile, the Romans avoided the exhausting march. Also, the opposing force would start the battle in an area they had not examined as closely. Furthermore, if the conditions were favorable, this stratagem allowed the Romans to launch an attack on the enemy while they were still crossing the difficult ground and were therefore in loose formation. In this manner the obstacle gave an advantage to the army that adopted a defensive stance. The importance of proper reconnaissance cannot be overstated here. Only if the whole battlefield had been inspected beforehand was it possible

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The fact that Cassiodorus explains why the ships were filled with grain and tributes may suggest that these were actually scouting ships used in an unusual fashion rather than transport ships.

41 Strat. 9.5.
42 Strat. 7A. 8.
43 Strat. 7B. 16.
to draw up a plan of action that made use of the available terrain features and watercourses.

Another factor to be taken into account was where the enemy was from:

We should pick the battlefield accounting not only for the types of arms that we possess, but also for the place of origin of our enemies. Parthians and Gauls operate effectively on open plains, Iberians and Ligures fight better in the mountains and hills, whereas the Britons – in forests, and warriors from Germania feel most at home in marshlands⁴⁴.

This piece of advice is clearly a relic of the past and was most likely first written down during the decline of the Republic or the beginning of the Principate⁴⁵. In the 6th century most of these peoples were already extinct or found themselves outside of the scope of political or military interests of the Empire. But it is notable that Roman commanders were aware how certain enemies preferred to fight in specific terrain. This is evidenced by book XI of Strategikon, in which the author considers ways of battling different peoples. The book points out that the Persians feel most at home in open plains⁴⁶, that nomads should be engaged on difficult ground⁴⁷, and that the Slavs and Antes were experts in fighting in woodlands and marshes⁴⁸.

When choosing a battlefield the commander also had to account for the opposing army’s equipment and armament. When attacking cavalry, the Romans were to do so in areas filled with natural obstacles, whereas if the enemy had mostly archers at his disposal, the solution was to engage them in open plains and close into melee range as quickly as possible⁴⁹. Once the council had considered all the crucial information and decided on where the battle will be fought, this information was to be passed on to all the soldiers. As specified in Strategikon:

Whichever area is chosen by the strategos for the battle, it should be communicated to his subordinates. This will allow them to avoid obstacles and

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⁴⁴ Strat. 8. 2. 8.⁴⁵
⁴⁵ Although it is impossible to identify its original source.
⁴⁶ Strat. 11. 1.
⁴⁷ Strat. 11. 2.
⁴⁸ Strat. 11. 4. Consequently, Slavs should be fought against in Winter, because it would be easier to identify their tracks in the snow and the trees would not provide sufficient cover to the defenders. However, an order given by Emperor Maurice about waging war in the Balkans in Winter led to the army’s rebellion and the end of the dynasty. Sym. 8. 6. 2–8.
⁴⁹ Strat. 7A. pr. Compare with Veg. 3. 13.
by knowing the lay of the land they will engage the enemy with increased confidence\textsuperscript{50}.

This was useful advice, especially for an army that decided to advance towards the enemy, and for any cavalry units. If the officers leading the mounted formations had prior knowledge about any possible obstacles, they could operate more efficiently, without the fear of getting ambushed or bogged down on difficult ground. This was particularly important for the flanking force, the archons of which were afforded a large degree of tactical independence once the battle had begun. On a final note, familiarizing the soldiers with the surrounding area would surely boost their morale, allowing them to get accustomed to the idea of fighting in that particular place.

**Conclusions**

The above examples paint a clear image of the authors’ theoretical knowledge about the choice of the battlefield and actual decisions made by Roman commanders in that regard. Vegetius completely disregards the possibility of the enemy having the initiative, assuming *a priori* that they will accept battle under conditions dictated by the Romans. In reality, it was the goal of both the Roman and the barbarian commanders to ensure the highest possible advantage over the enemy, and if the opposing side occupied a favorable position, a battle was normally avoided. The author of *Strategikon* approached this problem from a much more practical perspective. The choice of the battlefield was still seen as an opportunity to gain the upper hand; this much is evident from how much the treatise focuses on the importance of scouting ahead and deciding where to fight. Reconnaissance was carried out by the most competent soldiers available, and any intelligence brought back was then analyzed by a council of all the high-ranking officers in command. The final say in this decision still belonged to the supreme commander – the *strategos*. Nevertheless, all officers included in the council had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the area of engagement, learn about any existing natural obstacles and how to use the terrain features to their advantage. Equipped with this knowledge, the archons returned to their units and communicated all they had learned. This allowed the whole army to be prepared for the upcoming clash.

\textsuperscript{50} Strat. 8. 2. 89.
Though the author of *Strategikon* demonstrates a different attitude towards choosing the field of battle than Vegetius, both works support the idea that if a reasonable choice was made that accounted for all the crucial factors, it would all but guarantee victory. Battles in the Antiquity carried with themselves a high degree of risk, and the task of the commander, which holds true to this day, was to minimize the threat of defeat. Deciding on a suitable battlefield was one of the ways to ensure success in the bloody contest of war.

**Summary**

The purpose of the piece *How to choose the best field of battle – according to the authors of Roman military treatises* is to present the ways of choosing a suitable location to fight a battle during late antiquity. The analysis covered mostly fragments of Vegetius’ work, *Strategikon* and passages from Syrianus Magister. The results clearly indicate that treatise authors knew well the significance of choosing a suitable location to fight a battle. Though the author of *Strategikon* demonstrates a different attitude towards choosing the field of battle than Vegetius, both works support the idea that if a reasonable choice was made that accounted for all the crucial factors, it would all but guarantee victory. Battles in the Antiquity carried with themselves a high degree of risk, and the task of the commander, which holds true to this day, was to minimize the threat of defeat. Deciding on a suitable battlefield was one of the ways to ensure success in the bloody contest of war.

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Itinerary of the Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen (1407–1410)

Travelling was exploited by rulers as one of the main mechanisms of exercising power in a medieval state. In this regard, such a ruler was often referred to as *rex ambulans* – the itinerant king. Travels over subordinate territories combined two important elements of comprehending power in the Middle Ages – sacral and practical (administrative and fiscal) qualities¹.

As for the sacral dimension, rulers were seen as messengers of God that maintain order in the world. Medieval people felt more secure in the presence of authorities, perceiving it as a guarantee of durable peace. Subordinates saw their ruler as their guardian, a leader in the fight against evil and a symbol of unity in the reality familiar to them. The figure of the monarch was a certain incarnation of the supreme (transcendental) guarantee of the existence of a community. For this reason, the ruler himself was also interested in strengthening such a perception of authority held among subordinates².

In addition to the sacral nature of travelling, rulers recognised the importance of the administrative and fiscal dimension. The king controlled subordinate officials, served as a judge, made decisions of economic nature (bestowals, privileges, immunities), collected tributes and taxes. The monarch met with representatives of elites as well as ordinary citizens, supporting them both spiritually and materially. On his visits on borderline areas, the ruler controlled the defence system

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