

Jeffrey L. Forgeng (transl.), Pietro Monte's Collectanea. The Arms, Armour and Fighting Techniques of a Fifteenth-Century Soldier, Woodbridge (The Boydell Press) 2018, 313 p., 15 fig. (Armour and Weapons), ISBN 978-1-78327-275-4, GBP 60,00.

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For the military historian or the cultural historian of warfare, one of the greatest challenges is reconstructing the actual lived experience of men fighting on the battlefield in the pre-modern world. The enormous scholarly debate regarding the nature of combat between phalanxes in classical Greece is a case in point. Historians have drawn upon the widest possible array of sources by complementing the brief descriptions in classical Greek texts as well as limited pictorial depictions and archaeological finds of weapons with information drawn from modern world, such as the experience of men (and women) serving in massed phalanxes of riot police. Yet the actual nature of the phalanx battle remains a matter of great dispute, and is as elusive as ever.

The actual face of battle to use John Keegan's evocative phrase is equally difficult to discern in the warfare of the Roman Republic and Empire as well as Rome's western and eastern successor states in medieval Europe, the Byzantine Empire, and the Muslim Caliphate. To the narrative sources and weapons finds of the classical period, scholars investigating the Roman and post-Roman battlefield can add treatises on warfare, as well as the physical remains of combatants that illustrate the wide array of wounds that men suffered. And yet, it remains difficult, if not impossible, in most cases to gain a close understanding of the actual training of men for war, the specific ways in which they handled their weapons, and their behavior on the field, itself.

The one treatise that illuminates these questions for the late Roman Empire and the medieval West is Vegetius' »Epitome rei militaris«. This text, which was among the most frequently copied secular works in the Middle Ages, does provide detailed information about the training of men for combat, and there is clear evidence that Vegetius' commentary was understood and taken to heart by at least some of those men responsible for the training of soldiers in the early and high Middle Ages. Nevertheless, there remains considerable skepticism among many historians about both the bureaucrat Vegetius' understanding of warfare, and also the extent to which his work actually provided a model for the training of fighting men.

The popularity of Vegetius' text, if one measures this by both the number of surviving manuscripts and subsequent translations and printed editions, increased substantially during the late Middle Ages and the early modern period in the context of an explosion in the number of »modern« treatises dealing with the conduct of war. Unlike Vegetius' »Epitome« however, many of these texts were written by experienced soldiers, who sought to share their knowledge of all aspects of warfare, including the experience on the battlefield, with a wide audience, often taking advantage of the new medium of print. The growth of this genre



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of manuals offering first hand accounts of what was involved in combat, which were written by men with both personal experience and a didactic intent has the potential to expand considerably the ability of military and cultural historians to investigate the real face of battle in the late pre-modern era. Indeed, it may also be possible to read backwards some of the insights gained from these late medieval and early modern texts into earlier periods as well. The new translation and commentary on the works of Pietro Monte by Jeffrey L. Forgeng, curator of arms and armor and medieval art at the Worcester Art Museum, is therefore particularly welcome, as it opens up for the first time to an English-reading audience the works of this prolific writer and *condottiere*.

Pietro Monte (1457–1509) was a soldier by profession, who also made a name for himself in Milan as one of the finest contemporary instructors in fencing, riding and training horses, as well as unarmed combat, including wrestling. Although Monte's origin and background are obscure, Forgeng argues that likely he was Spanish by birth, but spent most of his career in Italy. Monte made his way among the upper levels of Milanese society. He was an acquaintance, at least, of Leonardo da Vinci and is mentioned in Baldassare Castiglione's »The Book of the Courtier«, published in the early 16th century as one of the foremost instructors in the martial arts of his day. Forgeng's introduction details the little additional information that can be known about Monte's life, before turning to a description of the texts that are translated in this volume.

The translated works include the three books of Monte's »Collectanea«, and the fifth book of his »The Appraisal of Men«. All four of these books apparently were written originally by Pietro in Spanish and subsequently were expanded and translated by him into Latin. The purpose of this translation project was to make Pietro's training methods available to a wider audience. As Forgeng makes clear, up through the end of the 15th century, military manuals of this type predominantly came from Germany. Pietro Monte's works, therefore, represent an early expansion of this genre to the Mediterranean region.

In translating the collection of texts included in this volume, Forgeng made the proper decision, in my view, to attempt a sense for sense rather than a word for word rendition. Because Forgeng was undertaking what was, in effect, a translation of a translation, he had to take great care in untangling Monte's meaning, particularly in those cases when the text included Spanish and Italian as well as Latin terms. Moreover, the highly technical nature of much of Monte's work, including the details of how to hold a sword, train a horse for combat, and how to position the body properly to prepare for particular moves in a wrestling bout, all required Forgeng to adapt the specific phrases in a manner that would make them intelligible to a modern audience.

Forgeng does not, however, use explanatory footnotes in difficult or highly technical passages. As a consequence, a significant portion of the text will be difficult for readers without specialized knowledge of martial arts, horse training, and other complex topics treated by Monte. However, because Monte, himself, was interested in having his work serve a didactic purpose, he did provide a substantial apparatus of terms at the beginning of his »Collectanea«, which Forgeng matches by providing an even lengthier glossary at the end of the volume.

The texts, ably translated by Forgeng, include several hundred subsections that deal with an enormous range of martial and physical activities and are far too numerous and diverse to describe in detail or



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even to summarize here. However, a careful reading of this work will provide specialists with a considerable number of insights regarding the views of a highly regarded soldier and teacher about the necessary preparation for and experience of the battle. Because many of the topics discussed by Monte also had relevance in earlier periods, such as training horses for combat, his detailed discussions may also provide insights regarding the preparation for battle in preceding centuries. Indeed, a comparison of Monte's work specifically on training men and animals for mounted combat with the discussions by Vegetius as well as the Roman general Arrian from the early 2nd century A. D. and the Athenian general Xenophon from the mid-4th century B. C. likely would prove highly enlightening.

In addition to his discussion of numerous aspects of the martial arts, Monte gives his readers important insights into his own understanding of human nature. To give just one example, in book three chapter 15, Monte comments on what a commander should do so that in time of need his men will obey his words. Monte observes that giving speeches was not his forte, but argues instead that a commander should be »a father, brother, comrade and friend toward the entire army« (p. 225) because if he does not act in this manner, the soldiers will hate him or see him as an outsider. Monte adds that if a commander calls up on his men as his brothers right before a battle but has never treated them in this manner before, they will not hear his words.

But, if the commander has shown concern and care for his men consistently, then when the time for battle comes, they will be prepared not only to listen to him, but to follow him even if it means following him to their deaths. Such a commentary would not be out of place in the instruction provided at military academies today or indeed of the training fields of the Roman Empire, where the Emperor Trajan (p. 98–117) emphasized to his officers the important value of *conmilitio*, that is sharing the lives of their soldiers.

In sum, Forgeng has provided a sufficient introduction for this translation to orient specialist readers, and has done an admirable job of turning a very difficult set of texts into highly readable English. It will be up to historians to take this translation and use it to develop a better understanding of the reality of battle in the later Middle Ages and perhaps earlier eras as well.



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