

STRIKING SIMILARITIES BETWEEN 'TAE KWON DO' - SELF-DEFENCE TRAINING - AND THE ROMAN SOLDIER

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The *Epitoma Rei Militaris* of Vegetius - an ancient Latin work which deals with martial matters - incorporates military information from the works of Cato, Celsus, Trajan, Hadrian and Frontinus.¹ It is generally held that Vegetius confuses material from all ages.² Whatever the case, his work had considerable influence upon military thinkers of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.³ More surprisingly it also has relevance to 'Tae Kwon Do' - an Eastern Martial Art which originated in Korea and is practised today in the Western world. Since Tae Kwon Do ('The Way of Hand and Foot'), a powerful self-defence system, was introduced to Australia in the early 1970s, it has grown in popularity with schools springing up all over the country. In 1988 Australians competed in Tae Kwon Do, which was a demonstration sport in the Olympics at Seoul for the first time.⁴

On the surface, it might appear that ancient Roman soldiers and Martial Artists today have very little in common. The words 'ancient Roman warfare' conjure up all sorts of armoured images which might seem a bit outdated now. However, being trained in the disciplines of both Classical Studies (a study of all aspects of ancient civilisations) and Tae Kwon Do,⁵ I was literally struck by certain similarities. In particular, concepts relating to discipline, organisation and martial training philosophy are remarkably similar.

We see that the Roman people have subdued the world by nothing else except the exercise of arms, discipline and experience in warfare.
(Bk.1, ch.1)

Vegetius cites examples of situations in which the Romans were a minority yet prevailed over many.⁶ He attributes the military success of the Romans primarily to 'discipline'. The same principle is at the foundation of Tae Kwon Do. Not all Martial Artists can knock out five

opponents with one kick like Chuck Norris on your video screen. But with skill, correct technique and constant training (to develop speed, power and reflexes), it is possible to outwit successfully a greater number of attackers.

‘Discipline’ is as significant for a person today training in self-defence as it was for a Roman soldier. In Tae Kwon Do, self-discipline and regular training are essential ingredients for success. It is only through constant practice that the necessary fighting skills can be acquired. As Vegetius observes:

In point of fact a small number practised in the struggle of battles is more prone to victory. Inexperienced and untrained multitude is always exposed to slaughter.

(Bk.1, ch.1)

Vegetius strongly recommends regular disciplined training in order to develop expertise.⁷ Tae Kwon Do Masters, too, advise habitual training. Like the Roman soldier, a person training in the art of self-defence must be fit and healthy and prepared to fight to the best ability whenever the need arises. On the health of the soldiers, Vegetius insists that the men must continually exercise; if the weather permits them from undertaking their normal training course, then they must still train under cover:

And so the foot soldiers were willing to exercise continuously under cover during rain and clouds and in the open air on other days.

(Bk.2, ch.2)

At lines 18 and 19, Vegetius continues to write of daily exercise, ‘that nothing might happen to them in the necessity of fight, which they knew not before.’ Similarly, being prepared to fight under any conditions is the essence of Martial Arts training:

For under unequal terms does a weary man enter conflict with a man who has rested, a sweating man with one who is fresh, a man running with him who is standing.

(Bk.3, ch.11)

In Tae Kwon Do, one's energy or fitness levels is an essential condition for victory.⁸ Not only did the Romans rely upon sound disciplined training, but also on thorough preparation! The activities mentioned by Vegetius increase fitness levels. We may compare 'endurance training' in Martial Arts.

Vegetius recommends the use of 'stakes' so that the soldiers may learn 'to strike at the sides, the legs and the heads... they should become accustomed to jumping and striking,... to rise up and to drop back and sometimes to step away quickly, and leap back again.' (Bk.2, ch.23) The development and maintenance of quick reflexes is reminiscent of sparring techniques - one must constantly be alert and ready to spring back away from an oncoming blow or nimbly step to the side to avoid a kick and counteract the attack.

Vegetius, as we observed earlier, stresses the need for constant practice for both physical and mental purposes:

For swiftness is acquired by the exercise of the body, and also the skill in striking the enemy and protecting oneself; especially if fight is at close quarters with swords...
(Bk.2, ch.23)

The benefits of training regularly with other soldiers are recognised by Vegetius. Similarly, Martial Arts practitioners benefit greatly from the discipline enforced in group training. The experience gained through practice in class is invaluable. Moreover, correct instruction and advice is just as important to a Tae Kwon Do student as to a Roman soldier.

Vegetius speaks of the necessity of obedience (Bk.2, Prologue) and of encouragement by the Captain,

However, an army's courage and spirit increase with exhortations and the encouragement of the general.
(Bk.3, ch.12)

It is also important in Tae Kwon Do to train with an authentic instructor with experience who can teach you correctly - expert guidance and encouragement go a long way toward developing a student's confidence in his or her ability. This in turn helps one train with renewed vigour.

Underlying Vegetius' advice is the strong mental aspect of training. He describes techniques for using weapons, but he knew too how the soldier's own attitude was an effective 'weapon'.

On the day when soldiers are going to fight, investigate carefully what are their feelings. For confidence and fear are perceptible from their appearance, their words, their gait, their movements.
(Bk.3, ch.12)

Similarly, not only does Tae Kwon Do teach fighting skills and improve physical fitness, but the concept of the power of the mind is present. In order to perform successfully (in gradings for promotion, demonstrations or tournaments) the mind has to be calm, but alert - able to react intuitively to any situation. A soldier's disposition - his mental preparation - was a vital ingredient for success.¹⁰ So too, any individual facing an attacker must exude confidence.¹¹ Vegetius writes of baffling one's enemies in battle, putting a great fear into them and suddenly striking before the enemy can be ready to resist or defend himself (Bk.1, ch.9). The importance of decisive action in attack in conjunction with the right disposition is pointed out. This is reminiscent of the Tae Kwon Do concept of 'Ilkyuk Pilsal' - first attack, strike¹² - meaning that you must be ready to act effectively when required; there is no second chance in self-defence - the first blow must be accurate.¹³ It is also worth noting that in many cases, the only reason a technique works is the element of surprise.

Good organisation also lies behind victory. In Bk.1, ch.26, Vegetius discusses how soldiers ought to be trained to keep good order and array in battle. The military system of ranking corresponds with the Martial Arts system in which there are gradings for promotion to higher ranking belts. Each system - military and Martial Arts - is well-defined: each member can aspire towards a higher position (or belt in the case of Tae Kwon Do). Certain responsibilities are held by each rank. Both the Roman legionary and the Tae Kwon Do practitioner hold a loyalty towards the highest Command/Master. Unquestioning obedience is essential.¹⁴ Another point of similarity is the notion of identification. Vegetius notes that,

They used to paint different emblems on the shields of different cohorts, as they themselves called them, Digmata, just as is the custom now.

(Bk.2, ch.18)

Moreover, the name of each soldier and the band to which each belonged was written on the shields.¹⁵ Likewise, in Tae Kwon Do a badge denoting affiliation with a particular group gives one a sense of identity and pride. As observed earlier, group co-operation enhances training.

So although you might find it difficult at first to connect an ancient Roman foot soldier, whose feet were planted firmly on the ground, with a Martial Artist whose dynamic high-flying kicks look more like Jumbo jets coming in for a landing, there is a lot more to these fighting systems. Tae Kwon Do in Australia is taught as a sport according to the regulations of the World Taekwondo Federation. But considering that its origins are steeped in Korea's military tradition of the 'Hwarang Do' and army personnel are trained in this art, it's not really that surprising to find common training principles.

An overriding principle in both disciplines is the stress upon consistent training: Vegetius' recognition that in fight, experience avails more than force (see Bk.2, ch.23) and his belief that 'diligence' makes a strong army (Bk.1, ch.28) are sentiments with which Tae Kwon Do Masters would agree.

NOTES

1. I have used the following edition: Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *Epitoma Rei Militaris* (ed.) C. Land (Stuttgart, 1967), facsimile reprint of 2nd edn (1895). See Dankfrid Schenk, 'Flavius Vegetius Renatus: die Quellen der *Epitoma Rei Militaris*', *Kilo*, Beiheft 22 (1930) for a discussion of sources; for another view see: H.M.D. Parker, 'The Antiqua Legio of Vegetius', *CQ* (1932), pp. 137-49. Cf. E. Nischer in Kromayer - Veith, *Heerwesen*, pp. 493f.; and E. Sander, 'Die Antiqua Ordinato Legionis des Vegetius', *Kilo* (1939), pp. 382-391.

2. E.g.: 'His gravest defect is that he confounds periods and usages, the ancients with him signifying sometimes the Romans in their early days...' (Nisard, 'Collection des auteurs latin', Paris, 1851). A more recent scholar is also critical of Vegetius on these grounds: 'he offers a mass of unrelated facts collected from all periods of Roman history and can therefore only be used to supply details', P. Connolly, *Greece and Rome At War* (London: Macdonald Phoebus, 1981), p. 210.
3. J. Warry, *Warfare in the Classical World* (London: Salamander Books, 1980), p.205, acknowledges the importance of Vegetius as a 'source of military information' although 'chronologically imprecise'. Note also as G. Webster, *The Roman Army* (Chester: Pub. of the Grosvenor Museum, 1956), p. 231, observes that other military manuals have not survived.
4. The Australian team will also participate in Tae Kwon Do as a demonstration sport at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.
5. I find it interesting that we can relate certain training principles in Martial Arts to matters discussed by Vegetius so long ago. His work on military science (in his abridgement, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*) was written between 383 A.D. and 450 A.D.
6. See Veg.1,ch.1; see also Frontinus, *Strategamata* iv,2,2 where it is stated that C. Marius chose the army of Rutilius even though it was smaller, because he thought it was better trained.
7. Vegetius emphasises daily practice throughout his work. Egs. see: Bk.1, ch.19,26; Bk.2, ch.18,21,23&24; and Bk.3, ch.10.
8. In tournaments, the 'weary lose strength while the contestants who have built up their endurance can stand their ground firmly and fight competently.
9. Recognised by Webster, *op.cit.*, p.15. Vegetius mentions running, jumping, swimming and carrying heavy packs as part of the physical training of the soldier. On swimming, see: Veg. Bk.1, ch.10, and ch.9 for 'running and jumping'. G.R. Watson, *The Roman Soldier* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p.55, suggests, however, that proficiency in swimming seemed 'desirable rather than essential.' We may compare 'endurance training' in Martial Arts - all these activities mentioned by Vegetius increase and maintain fitness levels. See also Veg. Bk.1, ch.19 on weights. Cf. the use of weights in Martial Arts training.

10. Webster sums it up well: Romans knew victory lay with ‘splendidly trained and equipped soldiers, a well organised commissariat...and, above all, a sense of destiny and purpose...’ *ibid*.
11. At the same time, however, a sense of perspective is also beneficial. Cf. Veg. Bk.3, ch.12: ‘neither ought you to be very bold...’
12. Tae Kwon Do is closely associated with the ‘Hwarang Do’ - Korea’s military tradition, which explains the origin of this notion. However, it should be stressed that in modern self-defence training each situation is different and you need to be able to adjust according to the person involved, the circumstances and the severity of the threat.
13. The ‘kihup’ (traditional yell) in Tae Kwon Do is allied to this concept. That is, one of the functions of the yell is to increase one’s confidence and intimidate the opponent (‘Kihup’ is a short sharp cry at the moment of striking. There are other important functions: performed correctly, the cry ensures that the expulsion of air from the lungs is combined with movements to the best effect).
14. As Watson, *op.cit.*, p.69 points out, Appian (*Roman History*, 6,14,85) said those generals who were strict had followers ‘sullen but obedient, and ready for any emergency.’
15. See also Veg. Bk.2, ch.13 on ‘emblems’ and Bk.3, ch.5 on identification with one’s band.

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