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‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’: the practical and symbolic treatment of the Roman war dead.

Abstract

In literary sources death in Roman battle was often portrayed as glorious, yet how the bodies of the war dead were treated was far removed from this ideal. This paper focuses on this dichotomy, and the seeming contradictions in attitudes and behaviours. In ancient Rome the war dead were little remembered, respected and mourned for. After battle the bodies of dead soldiers were hastily gathered and disposed of *en masse*. There were no war memorials that listed the names of the dead, no military war cemeteries that acted as places of pilgrimage, little battlefield tourism and no annual commemorative rituals. This stands in stark contrast to the tombstones set up by soldiers in peacetime, to the arches and columns that celebrated victories in the city of Rome, to the triumphal processions that filled its streets and the tales of military bravery that formed literary set pieces. On the one hand to die for Rome was presented as glorious, on the other hand the reality was bloody, brutal and seemingly soon forgotten. This paper investigates how the bodies of soldiers were treated post-battle, uniting the limited archaeological evidence with a range of literary texts. Why was the basic treatment of military corpses deemed acceptable, and how were those corpses manipulated in real, and literary, games of power and politics?

Key Words: war, soldiers, military, commemoration, burial, Roman

‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’: the practical and symbolic treatment of the Roman war dead.

Introduction

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,---
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.

Wilfred Owen, *Dulce et decorum est*, lines 21-28 (1917; published 1920)

It’s sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.
 Yet death chases after the soldier who runs,
 and it won’t spare the cowardly back
 or the limbs, of peace-loving young men.

Horace, *Odes* 3.2, verse 4 (late first century BC; translation A.S. Kline)

More than a century after the outbreak of the First World War, the carnage still casts a dark shadow, which shapes debates about loss and remembrance, as well as the human cost of war. Owen’s poem presented the real horrors of dying in combat and the physical suffering that this entailed; for Owen there was nothing sweet or fitting in dying for one’s country. Classical scholars have sometimes been uncomfortable that Horace, albeit writing many centuries before, could suggest ‘dulce’ and ‘decorum’ in military death, and have looked for alternate readings (e.g. Harrison, 1993, p. 91). In Horace’s ode the famous line is followed by an ironic observation that death comes to all alike, even the coward, but the overall message remains: death is a sacrifice demanded by one’s country.

Horace was not alone among Latin authors, in claiming that it was fitting to die for Rome. This paper explores this motif, and sets it alongside the realities of dying on the Roman battlefield. In particular, it will focus on the bodies of dead soldiers, investigating how they were buried and commemorated. How was the ultimate sacrifice characterised in Roman literary sources? And to what extent was this paralleled or contradicted in how military bodies were treated? Recent studies have highlighted the relative rarity of the commemoration of Rome's battle dead (Hope, 2003; Cooley, 2012; Turner, 2013), but hitherto this has not been investigated alongside the literary presentation of such deaths.

The human body is a powerful symbol and the centre of personal and individual identity (e.g. Squire, 2011; Synnott, 1993). Death sees the loss of the self and the destruction of the body, which is physically most apparent in times of war, when death is violent and bloody, and bodies broken and mutilated. Simultaneously dead military bodies can become highly symbolic and politicised (e.g. Laderman, 1996; Verderey, 1999). In conflict, the corpses and names of the dead may be remembered or forgotten, praised or condemned, appropriated or ignored. Understanding the aftermath of death on the Roman battlefield requires the investigation of not just the physical disposal of bodies, but also the symbolic representation of those bodies.

This paper utilises evidence from the late Republic and early centuries of the emperors (the Imperial period). This era saw a shift from an army recruited mainly from Rome and Italy for specific conflicts, to a professional standing force drawn from across the Empire. The evidence employed is mainly literary rather than archaeological or visual. There are few physical remains, such as memorials, associated with Rome's battle dead, and while there is no shortage of depictions of warfare in art, these images tend to portray victorious Roman soldiers and defeated enemies (Ferris, 2000; Hannestad, 2001; Holliday 2002; Hölscher, 2003). The literary evidence cited here ranges across genres, and provides common motifs in how death in battle was presented. Uniting texts of varied genres and periods is not without its limitations, and in addition the literary evidence is largely a product of the wealthy male elite. It becomes clear, nonetheless, that for these authors mundane matters such as how the war dead were disposed of were consistently not mentioned, unless to

make a political or moral comment, whereas the characterisation of death in battle was polarised as either glorious or horrendous.

Battlefield Disposal

One of the most emotive legacies of the First World War, is the organised identification, burial and commemoration of dead soldiers. The current western world ideal is that each soldier is treated as an individual and buried in a separate marked grave. The resulting cemeteries are regimented, and often create a false sense of equality, but are significant foci for both individual and collective remembrance (Mant and Lovell, 2012). Memorials at battlefields and in the soldiers' hometowns also list the names of the dead (see, e.g. King, 1998), and increasingly soldiers killed in action are returned to family for burial. It is worth noting, however, that these are relatively recent trends. In 1815 the British soldiers killed at Waterloo were interred in a mass grave and were not commemorated individually (Laquer 1994, p.151). In the First World War the remains of British troops were not repatriated, although the majority of American soldiers were (Laquer, 1994, p.162; Piehler, 1994; Prost, 2014; Winter, 1995, pp. 22-28). The growth in memorialisation, and repatriation, of the dead has its origins in Victorian and Edwardian sensibilities to death and has been linked to the growing sense of the individual within western society, as well as the devastating losses of the First World War (Hass, 1998 pp. 34-63; Laquer, 1994, pp. 96-135). It is no longer acceptable for soldiers to become the anonymous statistics of war, especially in societies where death of the young is rare. Nevertheless, complex tensions still exist over military corpses; tensions focused on politics, nationalism, individual identity, military identity, collective memory and familial mourning (see, e.g. Bourke, 1996 p. 211; Piehler, 1994; Prost, 2014; Verdery, 1999). The substantial differences between modern and ancient warfare cannot be dismissed, but the values surrounding, and the potential exploitation of, military corpses offer some similarities. How dead Roman soldiers were treated, and how this was represented, could matter.

The disposal of bodies of Roman soldiers killed in war was not codified, and was dictated by the circumstances: victory or defeat, and the number of casualties (Giorcelli, 1995, p. 241; Peretz 2005). Direct evidence for how the bodies were treated is sparse. Few sites of battles have been definitively identified and

archaeological evidence for war graves is limited. One exception is the excavations at Kalkriese (Germany) which have identified the probable site of the Varian disaster (AD 9), including pits containing skeletal remains which may represent the burials subsequently organised by Germanicus (Rost and Wilburs Rost, 2012; see below). In general, the fact that Roman war graves cannot be identified suggests that sites were systematically cleared, bodies efficiently disposed of, and graves left un-marked (Ball, 2014).

Literary sources also rarely detailed the disposal of battle casualties. The most explicit statement is found in a handbook for generals, written in Greek during the mid first century AD,

The general should take thought for the burial of the dead, whether in victory or defeat, using neither the occasion, nor the time, nor the place as an excuse for delay. This is an act of both piety and reverence toward the dead and also a necessary example to the living. For if the dead are not buried, each soldier believes that no care will be taken of his own body should he chance to fall. The soldier observes what happens to the dead with his own eyes, and indignant at the careless neglect of burial, judges the future, believing that if he should die, he will likewise not be buried. (Onasander 36.1; Translation adapted from the Loeb (Illinois Greek Club)).

The ideal, probably based on Greek custom, but current also in Rome, was that dead soldiers were always to be buried. Non-burial dishonoured the dead and offended and de-motivated the living. The responsibility was taken seriously; Julius Caesar delayed the pursuit of the Helvetii after the battle of Bibracte (58 BC) for three days because he was tending the wounded and burying the dead (Caesar, *Gallic Wars* 1.26). ‘Burial’ may infer cremation of the corpses and then burial of the ashes, since the Elder Pliny stated that cremation became popular in Rome (from the first century BC), following its use on the battlefield to prevent military bodies being exhumed by enemies (*Natural Histories* 7.54; cf. Cicero, *On the Laws* 2.24). Yet literary references were confined to brief mentions of corpses being disposed of *en-masse*, rarely specifying cremation or inhumation (e.g. Livy 27.2.9-10; Appian, *Civil Wars* 2.82). The lack of excavated graves means archaeological evidence cannot confirm

which rite was preferred. The skeletal remains found at Kalkriese were inhumed without prior burning, but this burial took place some years later, when the bones were de-fleshed. It can be noted, however, that cremation, especially on a large scale, would have been time, labour and resource intensive (Noy, 2000), and even when the normative rite, may have been challenging to facilitate.

The number of casualties may have affected how the bodies were handled. The Roman army was generally a successful one; in many conflicts it experienced minor casualties. In victory the Roman military death rate was low, perhaps in the region of five to eight per cent (Sabin, 2000, pp. 5-6; Rosenstein, 2004, pp. 107-140; cf. Scheidel 2007, pp. 427-28). Ancient writers suggest the scale of victories, emphasising extensive enemy losses and meagre Roman casualties; at Zama (202 BC), for example, 20,000 Carthaginians were allegedly killed compared to 1,500 Romans (Polybius 15.14). Such statistics highlighted, and often exaggerated, Roman military might and the devastation of the rout. Precise numbers may elude us, but it seems likely that, even in victory, hundreds of Roman soldiers could die and disposing of them was no small task. If battle casualties were low, identification of the dead, and some considered treatment, may have been possible (Peretz 2005; Turner, 2013, p. 293), but in general, it seems probable that surviving soldiers were assigned to burial duty, to collect the corpses, strip them of weapons and armour, and then dispose of them collectively either via cremation or interment. The cremated remains, or interred corpses, were placed in mass graves on or close to the battle site (Giorcelli 1995, pp. 237-8). In defeat, or in difficult terrain, this may not have been possible, and Roman soldiers could sometimes be left un-buried.

It is uncertain how much ceremony accompanied the mass disposal. In civil society expected rituals were followed (Hope, 2009), and it is probable that these were adapted, but there is little secure evidence. Virgil, in the epic poem the *Aeneid*, described a military funeral of several large pyres, which were circled three times by the survivors, who shouted in grief, sounded trumpets, and sacrificed weapons and animals (*Aeneid* 11,183-203). Elements of this are paralleled in descriptions of funerals of the Roman elite, while pyre debris indicates that objects and animals were offered to and cremated with the civilian dead (e.g. Noy, 2000). However, Virgil's poem was set in a mythical past, and it is difficult to judge how much, if any, of the

description pertained to the military of his own day (late first century BC); Virgil may be conforming more to Homeric than contemporary models (see, e.g. Homer *Iliad* 6. 416-18; 24. 776-804). Ceremonial acts may have accompanied the disposal of the battle dead, but elaborate rituals were probably inappropriate at such funerals, especially when held in hostile environments.

Virgil's account noted that the grave, for the cremated remains, was marked by an earth mound (*Aeneid* 11, 210). Tacitus claimed that Germanicus built a mound over the dead of the Varian disaster (see below), but there are no other references to mounds or markers for war graves (*Annals* 1.62). Battle site trophies of piled up weapons were mentioned (e.g. Tacitus *Annals* 2.20), and in the case of a victorious battle, perhaps grave and trophy were associated. Such trophies were, however, impermanent, and it is unclear if and how battle sites were recorded. In the short term people might visit to view the carnage, as the emperor Vitellius did forty days after the battle of Bedriacum (AD 69); and some years later a battlefield, especially if associated with a great defeat or victory, could retain emotional potency (Hope 2015, pp. 168-9). Whether longer term battle site tourism existed, is difficult to gauge. Pausanias (second century AD), reported that people, drawn by ghost stories, still visited the site of the battle of Marathon (490 BC), centuries after the great Greek victory (Pausanias 1.32.4; cf. Pliny the Younger *Panegyricus* 15.4). Even if some sites were remembered, they were rarely physically marked and the graves of the dead lacked permanent memorialisation, and offered no individuality to the fallen soldiers. Celebrating the victory, or rationalising the defeat, was more important than remembering the dead.

Why anonymous mass burial?

Death in Roman battle was far removed from the civilian ideal of dying in one's own bed, with loved-ones present; with the body washed, laid out and lamented over, before suitable disposal (Hope, 2007, pp. 39 - 45; 2009, pp. 50-57). Why was the rapid, and relatively unceremonious, disposal of dead soldiers acceptable?

In terms of law and religion, the treatment received by the soldiers was adequate. The essential requirement was that a corpse should be covered with earth (Cicero, *de*

Legibus 2.22.57). Non-burial was shameful, and exposure or abuse of the corpse feared (Hope, 2001). Non burial was also thought to condemn the deceased to a life in limbo; the spirits of the unburied wandered the earth unable to rest (e.g. Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.320-85; Pliny, *Epistles* 7.27; Felton 1999 pp. 9-12). Many people, however, aspired to more than just a covering of earth, and an individual burial (including of cremated remains) in a marked grave was idealised, as attested by thousands of funerary monuments that survive from across the Roman world, which promoted and preserved individual memory and identity. Nevertheless, a proportion of the population, especially the urban poor, were probably buried in mass graves and even those who were interred in an individual grave, may not have received an enduring marker (Bodel 2000, pp. 128-51; Graham, 2006). Thus the basic treatment received by dead soldiers may have seemed normal, or at least acceptable, rather than shocking.

Did the bloodied corpses of the fallen, and the handling of multiple bodies, raise religious concerns? In civil settings a sense of pollution was attached to the family of the deceased, and those who could afford it may have employed undertakers to minimise contact with the body (Bodel, 2000; Hope 2009, pp. 71-72; Lennon, 2013, pp.136-166). In the context of battle, and the spilling of much blood, both Roman and non-Roman, this sense of pollution was greatly reduced. Soldiers, and their commanders, were not sullied by the blood they shed in just wars against Rome's enemies (Lennon 2013, pp.122-28); and provided the essential rituals were provided, any spiritual pollution attached to the corpses was dissipated. In the case of non-burial of the dead, any pollution (and fear of restless spirits) may have been mitigated by the belief that those killed had a special afterlife status. Virgil suggested that dead soldiers occupied the land of the blest (Virgil, *Aeneid* 6. 660); Cicero argued that the brave were claimed by Mars and would be placed among the pious (Cicero, *Philippics* 14.12.32); and a speech, attributed to the future emperor Titus, noted that death in battle would give immortality, and soldier's souls were set among the stars (Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.46-9.).

The rapid clearance and disposal of the bodies, also addressed physical pollution and practical issues. A battlefield covered with rotting bodies was unhygienic and unsightly; it was an affront for bodies, at least Roman bodies, to be left to decay. Exposed corpses could also be looted and interfered with by enemies. Military

equipment and weapons were valuable items to both the Roman army and its opponents, requiring their retrieval. Cremation, when used, also reduced the risk of corpses being mutilated by the enemy and leaving the site of any pyre, and or the graves, unmarked provided further protection against desecration. In war the Roman army did not tend or defend graves, it moved on leaving its dead behind.

Pragmatic reasons also dictated that the remains of the dead were not individually identified or transported home. For the Imperial Roman army, which was widely recruited and served across the Empire, any repatriation would have been impractical (for exceptions, Carroll, 2006, pp. 163-168; 2009). Under the Republic, when the army was primarily recruited from Rome and Italy, there may have been emotive reasons for disallowing repatriation. Leading families could create political capital through the funerals of family members, celebrating the sacrifices made by kin, in ways that could be competitive and sometimes divisive (Polybius 6.53-54; Cicero, *de Legibus* 2.24.). Equally the return of bodies, especially if in high numbers, risked a negative impact on public morale. During the Social War (90 BC) the Senate ruled that the dead, including generals, should be interred on the battlefield to spare the civilians of Rome from distress (Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.43; cf. Cicero, *de Legibus* 2.24). This suggests that until then bodies, especially bodies of the elite, could be returned to Rome, but thereafter this was unusual.

The disposal of the Roman war dead was then eminently practical, met the essential requirements for decency, addressed religious needs and was not dissimilar to how dead soldiers were treated until fairly recent times. Yet two factors make the impersonal and anonymous burials surprising: the extensive commemoration of peacetime military deaths, and how soldiers were commemorated in ancient Greece.

The remains of soldiers who did not die in battle were often interred in individual graves, frequently marked by stone markers, especially during the first two centuries AD (e.g. Keppie, 2003; Popov, 2015). Tombstones recorded the military career and identity of the deceased, but also promoted the memory of an individual life. The soldier was well placed, socially and financially, to receive such commemoration, since he was integrated into a supportive community, was in receipt of regular pay, and could join a burial club, into which he could make regular payments (Hope, 2001,

p.39). The non-conflict burial of serving soldiers was a private matter; it was not paid for or organised by the military authorities, but by the soldier or his heirs. The army benefited since the men were encouraged to save money, to foster links with comrades (and with others, such as unofficial wives) and thus spared the army the responsibility and expense of disposing of their bodies, even when serving miles from home and natal family. This culture of commemoration was only usual during peacetime and within established military camps. Epitaphs rarely specified causes of death, and although some men may have died from battle wounds or the effects of service, most of the men commemorated probably succumbed to natural causes (Rosenstein, 2004; Scheidel, 2007).

In the height of conflict similar individual graves and tombstones may not have been feasible, but later commemoration was. The Roman Imperial army had the practical and statistical know-how to remember the dead. Records were kept of unit strength and the deployment of troops (Phang, 2007); the numbers of the dead, and their names and units, could have been accessed, and then monumentalised. Triumphal memorials, often in the form of arches and columns, were common, but these celebrated victories, and the military prowess of generals and emperors, not the deaths of individual soldiers. Triumphal art promoted the prosperity brought by victory not the death brought by war. Similarly, triumphal processions filled the streets of Rome with the surviving soldiers and military images, but did not acknowledge the deaths of military personnel (Beard, 2007; Holliday, 2002, pp.22-62).

By comparison in Athens, of the fifth century BC, those killed in battle were returned to the city, given a public funeral and their graves marked and names recorded (Thucydides 2.34.1-8; Pausanias 1.29.4-15; Arrington 2014; Loraux, 1986, pp. 17-23; Low, 2012). This treatment of the war dead could be interpreted as a product of democracy, yet burial and commemoration of the war dead, both at the battlefield and in the hometown, also happened among Greek oligarchies (Low, 2003).

If war memorials, that is memorials to soldiers rather than to victory, were a feature of the Greek landscape why were they not adopted in the Roman world? The Hellenistic period had already seen a shift in how war was commemorated, a change from the recording of communal achievements and contributions, to a greater emphasis on the

commanders and abstract ideals, such as victory and heroism (Rice, 1993; Chaniotis, 2005, pp. 214-44). The different nature of the Roman army, and of warfare, to that in the classical Greek world and its practical implications, also needs to be noted. By the late Republic, Rome fought wars on a scale and at distance previously unknown, and the army became an increasingly professional force. In addition, the extensive commemoration of soldiers as individuals probably did not sit well with Roman political ideology. In peacetime the burial of soldiers was not a state responsibility, in wartime it was and the difference shows in how the deaths were marked. In general, a pragmatic attitude existed toward death in battle. To die for Rome was an aspect of membership of its fighting machine, which exempted the dead from the necessity of full, elaborate or individual burial and commemorative rites.

Exceptions

In all this anonymity there were exceptions when the battle dead were given a degree of individuality. A soldier killed in a minor battle or skirmish might be returned to camp for burial and commemoration, or a cenotaph erected (Hope, 2003, pp.88-89; Carroll 2006, p.168. cf. Low 2012, p. 350). Following the Varian disaster of AD 9, a cenotaph was dedicated to the centurion, Marcus Caelius (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 13, 8648), but such monuments were extremely rare. There was also political capital in singling out some people for special burial at the battle site, especially the bodies of those of rank (cf. Bourke 1996, p.236). The body of a consul killed in 295 BC by the Gauls, for example, was carefully searched for and given appropriate funeral rites (Livy 10.29.19-20).

On only three exceptional occasions, however, were the collective deaths of soldiers marked. In these circumstances individual burial may have been impractical, but the possibility of commemorating a significant loss of men was acknowledged. First, in 43 BC the orator and politician Cicero proposed a monument in memory of the soldiers killed fighting in the civil war against Mark Antony. The suggestion was placed in a speech, one of a series known as the *Philippics*, attacking Mark Antony. Cicero did not describe his monument in detail and it remains unclear whether he envisaged a battle site memorial or a memorial in the city of Rome. Cicero did emphasise that if built it would be an honour never before bestowed (Cicero,

Philippics 14.11-14; Sordi 1990; Hope 2003; Cooley 2012, pp. 64-67). Secondly, in AD 15, Germanicus, nephew of the emperor Tiberius, buried the remains of the dead of the Varian disaster that had occurred six years earlier on the German frontier, and had left three legions dead. Germanicus supervised the collection of the bones and raised an earth mound as a collective marker (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.61-62; Suetonius, *Gaius* 3.1-3; Dio Cassius 57.18; Clementoni, 1990; Pagán, 2000; O’Gorman, 2000, pp. 46-77; Hope 2003). Thirdly, we can note fragmentary evidence for a large stone altar, found at Adamclisi (Romania), which was inscribed with the names of soldiers killed on campaign in Dacia, either under Domitian or Trajan (Hope 2003, pp. 91-92; Cooley 2012, pp. 67 -71; Turner 2013).

On these three occasions soldiers’ deaths were manipulated in troubled times: civil conflict, a great military disaster and uncertain frontiers. There was a political need to justify and even avenge these extensive losses (Sordi 1990, p.176; Hope 2003, p. 92; Pagán 1999, p. 314). Cicero and Germanicus, who both must have been familiar with classical Greek war memorials, made political capital from the dead, making grand gestures with little substance. Cicero’s proposed memorial was never built, and nor was it likely to have been during civil conflict; it was a rhetorical memorial designed to dishonour Mark Antony as much as honour the fallen. Germanicus’ funerary mound was soon destroyed by the enemy and was not restored (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.7.3-4). The names, memories and individualities of the soldiers killed fighting Antony and in the Varian disaster were not ultimately preserved by these acts, although an individual commemoration did record the identity of at least one victim of the Varian disaster (see above). By contrast the memorial at Adamclisi did include names, and in its listing of multiple victims of one conflict, was similar to some modern collective war memorials, and it may have been the focus for annual commemorative rituals (Dio Cassius 68.8.2). It was, however, part of a group of memorials, including a massive stone trophy monument, the overall message of which promoted Rome’s triumph and the extent of empire (Turner 2013). Nevertheless, it did identify the dead individually, and as such it appears to be a one-off, and something not repeated.

In addition to these rare attempts to memorialise the war dead, the possibility of private commemorative strategies can be acknowledged. The disruption of the expected burial rites may have brought distress to surviving family and friends. Virgil,

writing epic against the backdrop of recent civil conflict, pictured a mother complaining that she was unable to perform the expected duties for her soldier son, such as closing his eyes, and washing and dressing his corpse (*Aeneid* 9.480-490). With no tangible remains or memorials, the bereaved may have found comfort in the public commemorations of war; triumphal monuments, histories, anniversaries and oral accounts made war (and loss) part of cultural memory. The physical reminders of war, such as arches and columns, were celebratory; these were not memorials to the dead, were not intended to comfort the bereaved or assuage suffering (cf. Rowlands 2001). However, how viewers, reacted to such monuments was not controlled by their creators; these memorials had no fixed meanings, nor were they ‘immutable over time’ (Winter 1995, p.98). To the bereaved, triumphal monuments may have held more personal messages or have symbolised remembrance. A hint of this duality in public commemoration was found in the emperor Domitian’s triumph (AD 85), which was compared, by those present, to a funeral banquet for the men who had died in Dacia (Dio Cassius (Xiphilinius) 67.9.6.). This was an ironic comment intended to highlight poor leadership and an ill-earned triumph, but it also suggested that celebratory locales could evoke the spectre of dead Roman soldiers.

The army may also have had its own internal methods of recollecting past conflicts, and by association the dead. Soldiers owned their equipment, scratching or punching their names onto it, and some helmets survive with multiple ownership labels suggesting that equipment was recycled, in the process preserving the memory of dead or former soldiers (Bishop and Coulston, 2006, pp. 43-44; Gilliver, 2007, p. 4; Olson, 2013). Military standards and decorations, and unit titles and emblems, could also be entwined with past history, and whether intentionally or not, may have elicited memories of the dead. In the military environment basic duties to dead soldiers were discharged whenever possible. Indeed, the exceptional cases where the dead were memorialised originated in military rather than civil contexts. If dead generals were searched for and buried it was by soldiers; those who buried the dead of the Varian disaster were soldiers; and the memorial at Adamclisi was probably built by military men and would have been seen by few other ‘Romans’ than soldiers.

The Glorious Dead

Cicero sought to give those who died fighting Mark Antony heroic status, they were the saviours of the Republic, valiant men lost for the sake of their country (Cicero, *Philippics* 14.11.30.). Similarly, those commemorated at Adamclisi were recorded as brave men who had died for the state (Turner 2013, p. 279). Those killed in the Varian disaster were described with pathos, defeated and destroyed, they still fought to the end (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.61-62). To die in battle for Rome was the ultimate sacrifice, one that could bring glory and fame to the individual and his family.

The idea that dying for Rome was honourable and admirable was a recurrent theme in literature. The following examples are from varied genres, written between the mid Republic and the first century AD, and each performed an idealising function in its specific context, often by reference to inherited examples of military glory. Polybius (second century BC), in his histories, noted that men were inspired to give their lives by hearing of the great deeds of others (Polybius 6.54; cf. Sallust, *Cataline* 7). Cicero (first century BC) claimed that men exposed themselves to death for their country in the hope of immortality, that the glory of their names would live on (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 1.15.33), and that praise was due to one who died for the Republic, because one should love one's country more than oneself (Cicero, *de finibus* 3.64). Again in the *Philippics*, Cicero spoke of death, a debt to nature, as best being paid on behalf of the state; in victory death was glorious (Cicero, *Philippics* 14.12.32). Livy (late first century BC), in his history, had a former consul (of the fourth century BC) claim that it was admirable to die for Rome (9.4.10). Virgil (late first century BC) in the *Aeneid* described people fighting and dying for their homelands and achieving a 'beautiful death': beauty could come from military heroism (Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.316-317; 6.660; 9.399-401; 11.646-648). The poet Silius Italicus (first century AD) had a Carthaginian general (late third century BC) admire the bravery of Roman soldiers and their passion for an honourable death (*Punica* 2.324). An ideal, largely based on traditional, including mythical, role models, was forged that the individual could gain renown by dying for Rome; and such an ideal could serve to justify military deaths by making them seem heroic, moral and even beautiful.

The extent to which this ideal filled the hearts and minds of rank-and-file soldiers is difficult to gauge (Harris, 1992, pp. 9-53; Coulston, 2013, pp. 11-12). The literary cliché of glory and bravery represented an elite code of conduct, often inspired by the

past. Many fighting men, recruited from the poor and non-privileged, may not have viewed military service in such terms. In describing the Republican army, Polybius suggested that men were spurred on to defend their land and children. However, Polybius also noted the harsh military discipline; the prospect of giving one's life in battle may have been less frightening than the threat of the punishments that awaited cowards, deserters and dissenters (Polybius 6.52; 6.37-38). By the late Republic it is probable that soldiers were fighting for loyalty to individual generals, for booty and reward rather than love of country (Campbell, 2002, p. 24). Moments of mutiny and doubt, suggest that at times the rhetoric of heroism and glory simply failed (Coulston 2013, pp. 25-27).

For the army of the emperors it is even more doubtful that a sense of glory or patriotism made facing death in battle palatable. Imperial soldiers were recruited into a professional army from across the empire, and many would have never seen Rome or the emperor. Local connections and loyalty to the army unit may have been more influential factors in the decision to serve (Phang, 2008; Coulston 2013). Rome itself, and other major cities of the empire, also became increasingly distant from the military and warfare. Soldiers may have still been admired for their fighting prowess, but could also be perceived as uncivilised, uneducated and even threatening (e.g. Dio Cassius 75.2.6). If soldiers were not judged to be self-sacrificing heroes, or paradigms of bravery, there was little need to idealise their memory, beyond the military sphere. Hence when the names of soldiers killed in Dacia were memorialised the location was not Rome, but Adamclisi, in the military frontier zone. Only civil conflict, which blurred the distinction between civilian and soldier, could challenge how soldiers were mourned for and commemorated (see below).

The rhetorical patriotism and literary glorification of battle is difficult to tally with the deaths of ordinary soldiers. For the common soldier death on the battlefield was marked by little acknowledgement of heroic stature or public sacrifice, only the most basic of burials. For the ruling elite the sense of glory to some degree exempted the dead, and now anonymous, soldier from the full spiritual, practical and familial requirements usually associated with burial. Cicero could even claim that if soldiers lay unburied and abandoned, they were not to be pitied since they had died for Rome (*Philippics* 14.13.34). However, such rhetoric reveals little as to how soldiers

rationalised the prospect of death, and whether they found comfort and motivation in patriotism, unit loyalty, the hope of heavenly rewards, personal profit or in a combination, or indeed none, of these things (Goldsworthy 1996, pp. 248-282; Lee, 1996, pp.199-218; MacMullen,1984). Yet whether a soldier subscribed to the ethos of glory or not, it affected how his body was treated. In the name of Rome soldiers were killed, their bodies rapidly disposed of and as individuals they were soon forgotten.

Mutilated Bodies

Even if dying in battle could be portrayed as glorious, the reality was often horrific, and its true nature was widely known. Combat was up-close and personal; men fought face to face using bodily force and weapons to inflict bloody wounds. Battle would have been confused and terrifying, even if the actual fighting was confined to the front lines (Sabin 2000). Bodies were dismembered and trampled under foot, and corpses could lie thickly, impeding onward movement or filling up trenches and ramparts (Hope 2015, p.160). When speaking of glory, patriotism and sacrifice ancient authors could gloss over such battlefield terrors. Cicero in *Philippics* 14, for example, in praising those who fell opposing Mark Antony, did not acknowledge their pain and suffering. However, elsewhere literature revelled in the horrors of war. The anguish and excitement as victory or failure loomed, made for dramatic material, and blood, gore and human agony were central to this (Hope, 2015, pp.158-62), and also devices for illustrating the political and moral successes and failings of Rome and her leaders. Scenes of battle aftermath could be particularly powerful metaphors for the destruction, and corruption, brought by and endured by Rome. Post battle, the field of conflict could be surveyed; the blood, corpses and dismembered bodies telling the story of the fight (Pagán, 2000). In the case of Roman victory this bloody realism underlined the might of Rome, and the futility of opposition; the devastation and the number of enemy dead could be shocking (e.g. Josephus *Jewish War* 69.14; Tacitus *Annals* 2.17-18). When the losses were Roman the descriptions became even more powerful and poignant. The aftermath of Cannae (216 BC), for example, captured the despair, confusion and suffering of the vanquished Romans as the victorious enemy surveyed the field (Livy 22.51.5-8; cf. Tacitus *Annals* 1.61-62). In defeat, death in battle, even literary battle, was far from beautiful. The central ambiguity emerged: on

the one hand to die for Rome was glorious and heroic, on the other hand it was horrific and ugly.

If Roman bodies remained unburied the sense of horror was heightened. The non-burial of soldiers, like the battle, was also interpreted from the perspective of power, politics and morality. Non-burial was not that uncommon, especially in defeat, but in literature rotting corpses were a moving sight often milked to full effect. The symbol of Rome vanquished was the unburied soldier's body. The glory of a military death was supposed to compensate for any hasty, or even negative, treatment a corpse might receive (see above), and in defeat this sense of sacrifice could justify the abandoning of the dead. This expectation was, however, severely compromised during civil war, when distinctions between 'Roman' and 'enemy' became blurred (Breed, Damon, and Rossi 2010; Edwards 2007, pp.19-45; Henderson, 1998). The victors and the defeated were both citizens, and literature made much of the horror of unburied bodies (e.g. Sallust *Catiline* 61.1; Horace *Odes* 2.1; Lucan *Pharsalia* 2.139-220; Dio Cassius 65.1.3). Corpses became politicised and the failure of Romans to bury fellow Romans became part of a moral commentary (cf. Laderman, 1996). The poet Lucan (first century AD), in describing the aftermath of the Battle of Pharsalus (48 BC), contrasted the behaviour of the victorious Julius Caesar with that of Hannibal, Rome's greatest enemy. Hannibal (247 - c.181 BC) had honoured the dead bodies of Roman generals, whereas Caesar, allegedly gazed at the corpse-filled blood-stained field and did not bury the enemy dead, men who were fellow Romans (Lucan, *Pharsalia* 7.760-806; Lovatt 1999). Tacitus similarly painted the emperor Vitellius as a bloodthirsty tyrant for gaping at the carnage at Bedriacum (AD 69), he did not look away or express horror at the mass of unburied Roman soldiers (Tacitus, *Histories* 2.70; Manolarki, 2005, pp. 243-67; Morgan, 1992). The evils of civil war could shake Rome to the core, and people took note of how the dead, friend and foe, were treated; the soldiers and the conflict were no longer so emotionally and physically distant.

Conclusion

Wilfred Owen's famous poem represented only one perspective on the horrors of the First World War. The words strike a chord with readers who equate that carnage to senseless loss, but Owen's view, or what he chose to express, would not have

resonated with all of his contemporaries (Vandiver, 2010 pp. 1-21). For the Roman period the challenge of isolating voices and experiences from the battlefield is even greater. What remains is poetic and rhetorical perspectives, penned by an elite, that tend to either romanticise death in battle or exploit its horrors. However, it is still possible to understand not only why battle scenes, and their aftermath, were powerful metaphors for exploring success and failure, morals and politics, but also gain some understanding of how the bodies of the fallen were treated, and thus expose the mismatch between the rhetoric and the reality.

In the Roman world, war could adversely affect how dead bodies were treated. For the sake of Rome soldiers' corpses could be left unburied. Nevertheless, the ideal existed that, where possible, the bodies of Roman soldiers should be collected and disposed of, albeit in a basic fashion. The battlefield was not the place for individuality or for elaborate commemoration, but the requirements of common decency were generally met. The details of how the soldiers' bodies were gathered and disposed of were generally not recorded. Evidence from archaeology and art reveals little, while authors were rarely interested in dead rank-and-file soldiers, their fate and commemoration. When the war dead and their treatment were commented upon this often formed part of a moral commentary on war, especially civil war, and the exercise of power. The dead bodies, especially if they remained unburied, became symbolic of political failings and were open to manipulation by authors such as Lucan and Tacitus, or public figures such as Cicero and Germanicus. In these circumstances the unburied war dead were as anonymous as their buried counterparts. What the dead represented became more important than who they were; the dead were silent and thus easily appropriated by others.

In the public and civil sphere the individual sacrifices of soldiers seem to have mattered little, even if the communal benefits were acknowledged. If there was honour and glory in the soldier's death it was not visibly marked in public. In the military sphere things may have differed. On the battlefield it was fellow soldiers who either buried the dead or were forced to leave their comrades unburied. How surviving soldiers reacted to the prospect of killing and being killed, the deaths of friends, and the treatment of the war dead remains difficult to gauge, but may have been far removed from the surviving political rhetoric about the glories of serving

Rome. Soldiers may have found their own mechanisms to help them either to remember or to forget the horrors of battle and their fallen fellow men.

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