Vulnus sclopetarium (gunshot wound)

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ABSTRACT

Fading from the vernacular, the Latin phrase *vulnus sclopetarium* is a quaint, mystifying, and fascinating term that is translated as *gunshot wound*. There is a fulminating paucity of published information regarding the meaning of this term and the etymology. Trauma surgeons, military surgeons, and scholars of the medical aspects of the civil war may be familiar with the term. *Vulnus* is easily deciphered from ancient Latin as *wound*, whereas the origin of *sclopetarium* proves more difficult to discern. No guns were present in ancient Rome because guns were not invented until around the 13th century; hence, no Latin word for them existed. Thus, *sclopetarium* is classified as neo-Latin, and deconstruction of the word reveals that *sclopet* means gun, but that destination was arrived at via a convoluted path. The suffix *-arium* implies a place. Remarriage of the two parts suggests that the gun is an instrument of injury, which is typically incurred on a battlefield. An alternative explanation may be that *-arium* may also refer to the anatomical location of the wound.

KEYWORDS Civil war; gunshot wound; *International Classification of Diseases-10*; St. Elizabeths Hospital; *vulnus sclopetarium*

Imagine a word slowly moving toward extinction, its derivation never fully elucidated, and whose absence would leave the world of words a diminished landscape. Such is the case with *sclopetarium*. Further imagine a physician encountering and treating a patient in the emergency room who has been victimized by a gunshot wound, and in the patient discharge process, the treating physician loads the words *vulnus sclopetarium* into the *International Classification of Diseases-10* (ICD-10) finder,¹ only to discover that it shoots blanks. Reload *gunshot wound* into the system and the program will respond with 30 retorts. On the a la carte menu, six variations of gunshot wound, including the officially approved abbreviation “GSW” and the fuzzier “reported gunshot wound” are coded T14.8. The “S” category presents 21 options in our institutional ICD-10 program, all signifying a gunshot wound to a defined anatomical location, an ICD-10 version of the 21-gun salute. For example, “gunshot wound of hip” is S71.009A. In the direction of darkness, an “infected GSW” has its own category, L08.9, balanced by the more comforting option “healing gunshot wound,” W34.00XD.

’Tis a shame that such an edifying phrase as *vulnus sclopetarium* has faded from the medical vernacular. The term came to my attention when a graduate student, speaking at a history of medicine conference, enlightened me about St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, DC.¹ During the Civil War, wartime

conditions necessitated repurposing part of the hospital to treat injured and sick military personnel. The admission log includes numerous entries heralded by two letters, VS, an abbreviation for *vulnus sclopetarium*. The translation for *vulnus* is wound (n.); (plural *vulnera*).²

Translating *sclopetarium* and tracing the etymology presents more challenges. No guns were present in ancient Rome; therefore, the language was bereft of any word for them. The Chinese invented black powder about 900 AD. Over the following few centuries, the firearm, utilizing and weaponizing black powder as the explosive, evolved from prototypes such as the fire lance and hand cannon. By the 13th century, a recognizable gun was making its way westward via the Silk Road, as both merchandise and protector of merchandise.

The word *gun* likely derived from a 14th-century Scandinavian word, *gunhildr*, and an elided version made its way into Middle English by the Welsh (*gwn*) and Irish (*gunna*). The English had christened a huge crossbow-like weapon, installed in the 14th century at Windsor Castle, as *Domina Gunilda* (Lady Gunilda), which hurled its formidable ammunition toward the enemy. *Gunnhildr*, a proper female name in Scandinavia, is the union of two Norse words, *gunnr* and *hildr*, each synonyms for battle.³ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), “gunne, may represent a hypocoristic form of a Scandinavian

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female name compounded with Gunn.”^{2,4} Furthermore, Norse legend has it that many Scandinavian women were feared and respected warriors, apparently inspiring among the English a fondness for christening their daughters with Scandinavian names.⁵ The etymological leap of faith uniting guns and women is supported by recognizing a male tradition of “be-towing [*sic*] personal female names on engines of war” and in more modern times, extending that nominate behavior toward other inanimate objects such as cars or boats. Perhaps marital counseling has its origin somewhere in this hybrid penumbra of weapons and femininity. The popular World War II habit of pilots artistically adorning the front of their bombers with the female form, typically scantily clad, represents another version of juxtaposing the fairer sex with weapons of war.

The verb *shot* arrived on the scene about the same time as the noun gun, as noted in this 1386 quotation from Chaucer: “Whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn with shot.” To be sure, the OED does include the word *gun-shot*, but only in the hyphenated form. The OED does offer a 1471 quotation: “They were so annoyed in the place where they were, as well as gonnes-shott as with shot of arrows.”⁴

Navigating the etymological road from *gonnes-shott* to *sclopetarium* proved to be a difficult journey. Peter Hassler, writing in *The New Yorker*, noted that “when complex ideas pass through so many lenses, distortions are inevitable,” as evidenced by the influence of Arabic translations of classic Greek texts.⁶ These Arabic translations were the texts that came to the Western European world in the 11th century and gave an Arabic-nuanced flavor to the Greek and Latin legacy of language, as it was retranslated into Greek.

Delving into the Internet revealed a dearth of insight on the genesis of *sclopetarium*. Stephen Greenberg, PhD, at the National Library of Medicine, was able to locate one of the earliest known variants of the term, a 1552 book by Bartolomeo Maggi, *De Vulnerum Sclopetorum, et Bombardarum Curatione Tractatus* (translated by Google Translate as “Of His Assault Rifles, Mortars and Healing Treaty”⁷; S. Greenberg, personal communication, August 14, 2017) (Figure 1). Maggi (1477–1552), an Italian surgeon, received a brief reference to his novel thoughts on management of gunshot wounds in a book of essays on early and modern medicine.⁸

Vulnus sclopetarium appeared sporadically in early 20th-century medical articles, such as in “Un cas de vulnus sclopetarium orbitae” from the journal *Acta Radiologica* in 1924.⁹ More recently, a Serbian medical journal presented this description of surgical repair of a gunshot wound:

32-year-old patient self-injured the region of the right lower and upper leg by shotgun during hunting in 2005. The same day the patient was operated on in a tertiary traumatology health care institution under the diagnosis of *vulnus sclopetarium femoris et cruris dex*; *AV fistula reg popliteae dex*; *fractura cruris dex*.¹⁰

Another early use of *sclopetarium* appears in a 1722 book titled *Dissertatio Inauguralis Medico-Forensis qua Vulnus Cerebri Sclopetarium* by Johannes Adolphus Seyffert.¹¹ More recently, singer-songwriter Herbert Mullin released a song, 211 seconds

Figure 1. Title page from one of the earliest published examples of the word *sclopetarium*. From the Italian surgeon Bartolomeo Maggi's book, *De Vulnerum Sclopetorum, et Bombardarum Curatione Tractatus* (Of His Assault Rifles, Mortars and Healing Treaty), published in 1552.⁷

in length, called “Vulnus Sclopetarium,” which is included in the 1991 hardcore rock compilation album, *Killed by the Machinery of Sorrow*, a truly poignant reference to guns.

Various Civil War-era hospital admission logs also demonstrate use of the term. Specifically, at the National Archives and Records Administration, perusal of the Register of the Sick and Wounded at St. Elizabeths in Washington, DC, showed 1864 admissions between November 2, 1861, and April 29, 1864.² For 162 cases, the admitting diagnosis was “V.S.” Inexplicably, in a series of admitting diagnoses, V.S. variations were interspersed, such as *vulnus sclop* (three times), *vulnus sclopet* (once), and *G.S.W.* (twice). The site of the injury was sometimes entered, such as “*vulnus sclop* (left foot)” (Case 752, p. 19, June 29, 1862)² (Figure 2). Use of the term *vulnus sclopetarium* seems to have reached a zenith during the American Civil War. Why the term has fallen from favor is uncertain.

Deconstructing *sclopetarium* provides insight. *-arium* as a suffix is defined by the OED as a “thing connected with or employed in place for” and evolved into the suffix *-ary*. The original version, *-arium*, remains associated with “a few terms of classical and ecclesiastical antiquities, or of learned use.”⁴ Words such as *planetarium*, *vivarium*, *herbarium*, and *aquarium* come to mind as places to attend for study, learning, and observation.

a self-described “free-range artisan and scholar,” seemed in order. He noted, from studying a *Random House Dictionary*, that *-arium* had a cousin, *-orium*, “a suffix occurring in loan words from Latin, denoting a place or an instrument: *emporium*; *mortatorium*.”¹⁶ My learned colleague further opined:

This would seem to place equal emphasis on the idea of instrument (the gun), and, by extension, the place where the instrument was used (the gun-battlefield). For example, *scriptorium* (instrument = writing) or *crematorium* (instrument = burning). The idea of a place of activity related to the first part of the compounded word would seem to strengthen this postulated derivation. As far as the Latin goes, the two parts appear to be two nouns in the nominative case. These parts are connected only by juxtaposition, rather than any case ending (ablative) (Personal communication, William Fletcher, July 12, 2017).

In other words, two nouns, *gun* and *battlefield*, with no apparent lexical connection to each other, are now wed to one another as a neo-Latin word, *sclopetarium*: the gun is the source of the wound that was typically but not necessarily sustained on the battlefield. Perhaps unwittingly anticipating future ICD-10 requirements for anatomical specificity, in 1885, the Royal College of Physicians revised its nomenclature of diseases, which had three descriptive stipulations regarding wounds in general and gunshot wounds in particular:

In all cases of such injuries the system of classification requires the origin to be specified, whether the gunshot wound is accidental, judicial, homicidal, self-inflicted or received in battle. The particular agent by which the injury has been effected is also required to be stated. Injuries and wounds are further distinguished according to their locality . . . of the body in which the injuries have happened to occur.¹⁵

The above quote provides a formal precedent that further cements our etymological conclusion: proper description of a wound (in our case a gunshot wound) requires an instrument or agent (gun), origin or method (battlefield or other), and location (anatomical). The *-arium* suffix fulfills the latter two needs, which is consistent with an explanation offered by a legal scholar: “*-arium*, inferring place, represents not just the battlefield but the anatomic site of bodily injury” (T. R. Todd, Jr., personal communication, September 5, 2017). *Sclopet* and *-arium* are now married, and their “originally distinct meanings have become merged.”¹⁷ Accomplished grammarians would call this the associative-instrumental case. This writer just calls it his best shot at translating and understanding the etymological genesis of *vulnus sclopetarium*.

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