War Memorials

The continuing “celebration” of the centenary of the First World War has evoked renewed interest up and down the land in war memorials. Such was the scale of the slaughter that there can be very few communities which don’t have such a memorial. Individual family historians use them to seek to make sense of the sacrifice of a grandfather, whilst local history groups explore the wider impact of the sudden loss of so many young men on a community. In the years since “the war to end all wars” other names have been added, victims of World War Two, Korea and, more recently, Afghanistan. The war memorial is as much an accepted part of the village scene as the post office, the focus every November of quiet contemplation and sorrowful regret.

In fact, the war memorial as we know it is a new phenomenon, very much a product of the First World War, a reaction to, and acknowledgement of, the colossal loss for the first time of so many civilians dragged into the fighting by conscription. There are no memorials for those who fell at Waterloo. They were professional soldiers who died unnamed. The risk of death was an accepted part of the deal. It was bad luck, if not exactly an honour, to die on behalf of the homeland.

This is an attitude very much reflected in the world of the Roman legion. To die fighting for Rome was a privilege. Whilst there are many surviving private family gravestones for those who died in battle for Rome, public memorials in our modern sense were unthinkable. There were no Roman military cemeteries such as we have in France to-day for the fallen of the First World War. After a legionary battle the dead, friend and foe, were often left lying to rot where they fell, forgotten and then replaced. Life went on.

But there is one, probably unique exception, to this general rule. In 86/7 AD Roman legions suffered a serious defeat and loss of life in a battle with King Decebalus of Dacia (modern Rumania). As a result the emperor Domitian seems to have commissioned this

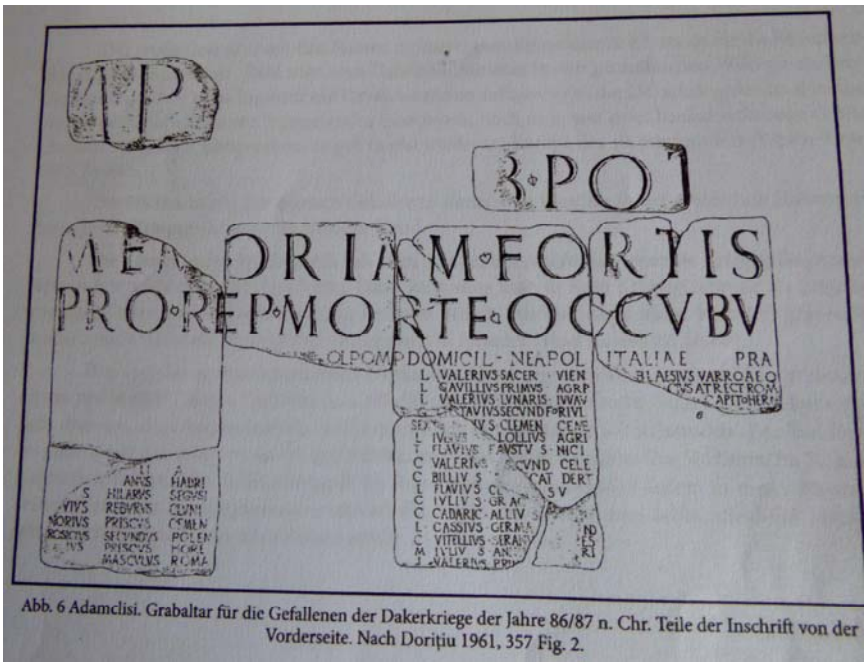

Abb. 6 Adamclisi. Grabaltar für die Gefallenen der Dakerkriege der Jahre 86/87 n. Chr. Teile der Inschrift von der Vorderseite. Nach Doriţiu 1961, 357 Fig. 2.

war memorial very much in the style of our World War One memorial tributes.

It survives in this fragmentary form only at Adamclisi in Rumania, but there is enough of the Latin to make its meaning clear:

(……in) memoriam fortis (simorum virorum)
(qui…) pro re p(ublica) morte occubu(erunt…..)

in memory of the bravest of men
who laid down their lives for their country

There then follows a long list of the names of all of those who fell in battle, in exactly the kind of format we find in modern military cemeteries. It is estimated that there were probably between 3500 and 5000 names of the dead on the complete memorial. Why Domitian chose to honour them in this unique way we will probably never know. It appears totally out of character with the traditional mind-set of the Roman military, who even regarded Roman soldiers taken prisoner by the enemy as contemptible cowards. You were expected to fight to the death. Being taken prisoner was not an option. The Geneva Convention was a long way off!

(Reference: Dr. Ernst Künzl: "In Memoriam Fortissimorum Virorum" from a Festschrift in honour of Professor Aleksandar Jovanovic of Belgrade University.)

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