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**Journal Title:** Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings

**Volume:** Volume 31, Number 2

**Publisher:** Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas | 2018-04-01, Pages 231-234

**Type of Work:** Article | Final Publisher PDF

**Publisher DOI:** 10.1080/08998280.2018.1444299

**Permanent URL:** <https://pid.emory.edu/ark:/25593/s9c6c>

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Final published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08998280.2018.1444299>

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*Accessed December 11, 2023 9:50 AM EST*

# *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,<sup>1</sup> 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 fuzziest “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.<sup>1</sup> 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*).<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), “gunne, may represent a hypocoristic form of a Scandinavian

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Received November 8, 2017; Revised December 31, 2017; Accepted January 4, 2018.

female name compounded with Gunn.<sup>2,4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup>

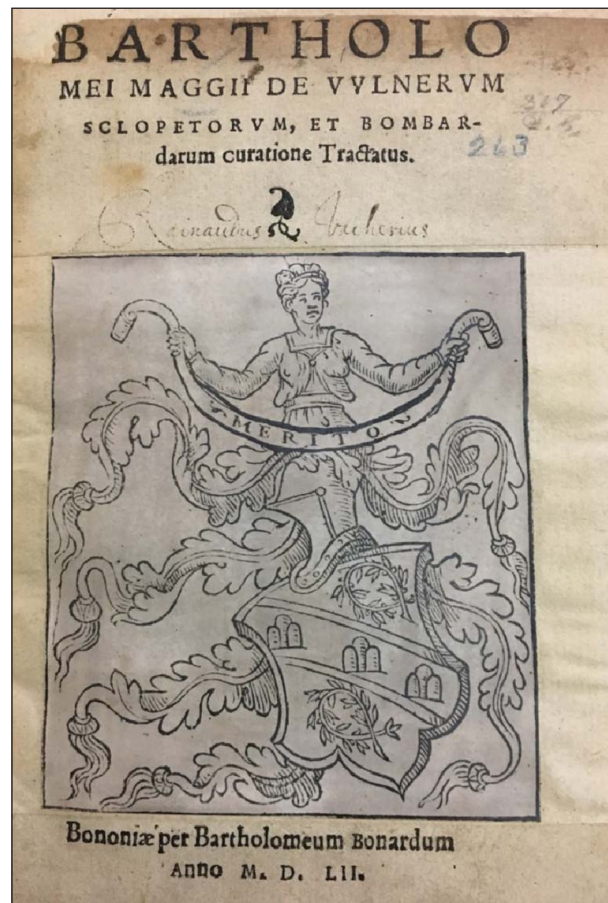
Navigating the etymological road from *gonnes-shott* to *sclopetarium* proved to be a difficult journey. Peter Hassler, writing in *The New Yorker*, noted that “when complex ideas pass through so many lenses, distortions are inevitable,” as evidenced by the influence of Arabic translations of classic Greek texts.<sup>6</sup> 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”<sup>7</sup>; 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.<sup>8</sup>

*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.<sup>9</sup> 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.*<sup>10</sup>

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

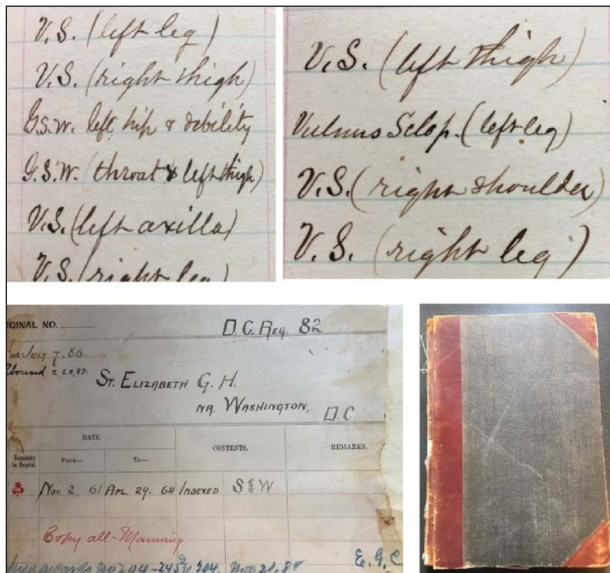


**Figure 1.** Title page from one of the earliest published examples of the word *sclopetarium*. From the Italian surgeon Bartolomeo Maggi’s book, *De Vulnerum Sclopetorum, et Bombardarum Curatione Tractatus* (Of His Assault Rifles, Mortars and Healing Treaty), published in 1552.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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)<sup>2</sup> (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.”<sup>4</sup> Words such as *planetarium*, *vivarium*, *herbarium*, and *aquarium* come to mind as places to attend for study, learning, and observation.



**Figure 2.** Variations in hospital admission ledger entries utilizing V.S., G.S.W., and *Vulnus Sclopet*. Ledger records for 1890 admissions from November 2, 1861, to April 4, 1864, from the Register of the Sick and Wounded.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to the OED, in search of words similar to *sclopet*, I was rewarded with this find: *sclopetta*. Perhaps the plural of *sclopetta* was a variant spelling of the singular *sclopette* or *escopeta*. *Sclopetta* appeared in a 1709 quotation from Sir Richard Steele’s *Tatler* No. 34, F: “His [the antiquary Don Saltero,] double-barreled Pistols, Targets, Coats of Mail, his *Sclopetta*, and Sword of Toledo.”<sup>†</sup>

This ensemble of words—pistols, targets, coats of mail, sword, and *sclopetta*—holds promising connections. The next word in the OED is *sclopette* (also spelled *esclopette*—a small holstered gun used in the time of Charles I, and *escopette*—a carbine used in Mexico), which is a hand-culverin or hand-gun used in the late 14th century. The culverin developed into a longer version known as a cannon, a word used interchangeably with gun in earlier times. Culverin may have its roots in *colubro*, meaning snake-like, referring to the length of later culverins, up to 13 feet, and that may explain why cannons once carried the nicknames of reptiles (Figure 3).

Further mining of an array of dictionaries provided unexpected etymological treasures. From the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, the onomatopoeic *scloppus* is defined as the “sound made in striking something full of air.”<sup>‡</sup> This could be construed to represent the pre-gun-era equivalent of words such as *bang* and *pow*. Embellishment of this whimsical notion is encountered in an 1895 tome regarding gunshot wounds. “The term *sclopetum* was selected as indicative of the sudden noise produced by the discharge of a gun, and was derived from the Roman *sclopus*, signifying the explosive report produced by a person quickly striking his two cheeks after they have been extended by holding his breath,<sup>‡</sup>” as reported by

\*Don Saltero’s Coffeehouse in Old Chelsea, known for its collection of curiosities and artifacts, is immortalized in Sir Richard Steele’s *The Tatler*, No. 34, June 27, 1709. See the description on the website of Pascal Bonenfant: [www.pascalbonenfant.com/18c/clubs/jt\\_donsalteroscoffeehouse.html](http://www.pascalbonenfant.com/18c/clubs/jt_donsalteroscoffeehouse.html). Accessed July 27, 2017.

†Swords made from unusually high-quality and hard steel alloy from Toledo, Spain.



**Figure 3.** Vasa cannon, Vasa Museum, Stockholm, Sweden. A lengthy demonstration was given of why cannons were named for reptiles and typically with female overtones. Photo by author.

the military surgeon Longmore. Longmore further stated: “The adjective *sclopetarium* was taken from the word *sclopetum*, a gun—a term which appears to have been first employed about the date of the application of gunpowder to destructive weapons.”<sup>‡</sup> He also quoted the revered Italian anatomist and surgeon Fabricius ab Aquapendente (1537–1619), who referred to bullets as “*globuli plumbei a sclopetis emissi*” and to gunshot wounds as “*vulnera e globulis sclopetorum facta*.”<sup>‡</sup> Longmore offered more insight, noting that what to call battlefield wounds was once a topic of nomenclature debate and evolved its own history. The Registrar-General of England had compiled a nosological classification incorporating “Lessons from violence leading to sudden death,” a subsection being *Polemici*, which “included all lesions resulting from battle; and among them, of course, the particular lesions produced by gunshot, which were at the time designated ‘Vulnera Sclopetaria.’”<sup>‡</sup>

There is a botanical angle to *sclopetum* to explore. An 1826 lexicon identified a salve, *sclopetaria aqua*, “so called for its supposed virtues in healing gun-shot wounds. Arquebusade. It is made of sage, mugwort,<sup>§</sup> and mint, distilled in wine.” In *Pharmacopeia Bateanna*, *balsamum sclopetarium* is described as “a balsam for gun-shot wounds.”<sup>‡</sup> The next entry after *sclopetaria aqua* is *sclopetoplagia*, succinctly defined as a “gun-shot wound.”<sup>‡</sup>

Now presented is a plausible hypothesis for the etymology of *vulnus sclopetarium*. What remains unclear is the marriage of *sclopetta* with the suffix *-arium*. Having torn asunder *sclopetarium*, reconstruction proved vexing. Wound and gun seem clear. What *-arium* has to do with gun is murky. To say that gunshot wound victims are objects of medical scrutiny and that the battlefield or associated field hospital is the “*-arium*” seems plausible but may be an etymological stretch. Seeking a path out of this lexical crevasse, consultation with William Fletcher,

‡Longmore<sup>13</sup> offered this embellishment in his Notes and References: “Also *scloppus*. Persius, in his 5th Satire, censuring a pompous style of declamation, writes, ‘Nec scloppo tumidas intendis rumpere buccas.’ See Delphin edition, London, 1786, p. 363. The word appears to have been sometimes written *stloppus* or *stlopus*” (p. 783).

§In *Culpepper’s Complete Herbal & English Physician* by Nicholas Culpepper, published in 1814, there is no mention of *sclopetaria aqua* or *Arquebusade*. Mugwort is discussed on pp. 122–123 as an herb of Venus. There is no specific mention of its use for wounds or trauma. This is the book J. K. Rowling consulted regarding potions while writing the *Harry Potter* novels.

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*; *mora-torium*.”<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.”<sup>17</sup> 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*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author gratefully acknowledges the following people for editorial and/or research contributions: Herbert W. Benario, PhD (Professor

Emeritus, Emory University); William Fletcher, PhD (formerly of Emory University); Stephen Greenberg, PhD (National Library of Medicine); Zachary Parker (PhD Candidate, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill); Michael D. Russell, JD (retired, Department of Homeland Security); Hannah Rutledge, PhD, MLIS, AHIP (Emory University); Crystal Smith (reference librarian, National Library of Medicine); Thomas R. Todd, JD; and Sally Wolff-King, PhD (Emory University).

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