Chapter 1

Battle Trauma in Medieval Warfare: Wounds, Weapons and Armor

Robert C. Woosnam-Savage and Kelly DeVries

The Battle of Campaldino, fought on 11 July 1289 between the Ghibelline forces (those ostensibly loyal to the Holy Roman Empire, largely drawn from the Italian city of Arezzo), and the Guelphs (those loyal to the Papacy, drawn primarily from Florence, Pistoia, Lucca, Siena, and Prato), might not be as well remembered had Dante Alighieri, Florence’s already renowned poet, not been on the field that day. What is certain is that what he saw there completely changed his life. In Canto V of his *Purgatorio*, Dante meets Buonconte da Montefeltro, a Ghibelline who fought against him:

Another spoke: “So may the Lord Divine
fulfill the wish that draws you up the mountain,
for sweet compassion, lend your air to mine.
I am Buonconte, once of Montefeltro.
Because Giovanna and the rest forget me,
I go among these souls with head bowed low.”
And I: “What force or chance led you to stray
so far from Campaldino that your grave
remains to be discovered to this day?”
And he: “There flows below the Casentino
a stream, the Archiana, which arises
above the hermitage in Appennino.
There where its name ends in the Arno’s flood
I came, my throat pierced through, fleeing on foot
and staining all my course with my life’s blood.
There my sight failed. There with a final moan
which was the name of Mary, speech went from me

1 The authors wish to express their appreciation to Michael Livingston and Larissa Tracy for reading previous drafts of this article and offering suggestions to improve it. Kelly DeVries wishes also to thank Niccolò Capponi for taking him to Poppi Castle, from where we were able to see the battlefield, observe the distance Buonconte would have traveled between receiving his wound and his death, and discuss what Dante would have observed that unfortunate day.
I fell, and there my body lay alone.

... The saturated air changed into rain
and down it crashed, flooding the rivulets
with what the sodden earth could not retain;
the rills merged into torrents, and a flood
swept irresistibly to the royal river.
The Archiana, raging froth and mud,
found my remains in their last frozen rest
just at its mouth, swept them into the Arno,
and broke the cross I had formed upon my breast
in the last agony of pain and guilt.
Along its banks and down its bed it rolled me,
and then it bound and buried me in silt.” (ll. 88–108, 121–135)2

Dante was on the victorious side. Buonconte da Montefeltro was on the losing side. Although not one of the highest of Ghibelline leaders he led a contingent of cavalry into the middle of the battle where he became one of its casualties, pierced through the neck, probably by a crossbow bolt.3 Dante is not more specific, which may mean that he did not see the actual wounding, but he does seem to have followed the trail of blood – “staining all my course with my life’s blood,” are the words he put in Buonconte’s mouth. The distance between the battlefield and the convergence of the two rivers where Buonconte fell is about a kilometer. Obviously fleeing for his life – he was running in the direction of his home – it took one kilometer for him to exsanguinate, to “bleed out.” There he fell into the river and was swept away; his corpse was never discovered.

Exsanguination was the fate of most killed on the medieval battlefield. In the premodern world, the main weapons used were sharp- or blunt-edged, and wielded or thrown by hand, or shot, ball or lead from a mechanical device, by a bow, crossbow, sling or gun. Battlefield victims could suffer sharp-force trauma wounds from being cut or stabbed; penetration-force trauma wounds

---

3 Both Giovanni Villani and Dino Compagni, in their excellent accounts of the battle, indicate that the Ghibelline cavalry were struck by a hail of crossbow bolts. See: Villani, *Croniche di Giovanni, Matteo e Filippo Villani*, 2 vols. (Trieste: Sezione letterario-artistica del Lloyd austrico, 1857–1858), 2:361–62; and Compagni, *La cronaca fiorentina*, ed. Domenico Carbone, 8th ed. (Florence: G. Barbèra, 1905), 8–12. However, it is difficult to say for certain whether these were the cause of Buonconte’s wound. It could also have been a dagger wound, a sword, or hafted weapon not able to “pierce through,” as Dante describes the wound.