Stoned Immaculate

Western Conceptions of Victory in War

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Five years ago, I was asked to lead a class on the Afghanistan conflict, with a specific emphasis on its *jus post bellum* dimensions. While preparing for the session I took time out to watch a BBC panel show that promised to tackle the question of what victory in Afghanistan would look like and whether it was feasible. As is its wont, the BBC rolled out the great and the good connected with British Afghanistan policy. Decorated generals, former ministers, and thrusting Oxbridge types josted back and forth over the various issues for little short of an hour. Yet, when it was over, I was no wiser about what form a victory in Afghanistan might assume and how it could be achieved. My hour spent in front of the television had been wholly unenlightening in this respect. The next day, when I spoke with my class about this experience, we agreed that not only did the panellists on the previous night’s show draw a blank on victory in Afghanistan, they also failed to provide us with any insight as to what victory itself means in this context. What can winning mean in relation to war? How should we understand this concept? Strategic Studies offers us a certain style of answer to this question, but it reduces the challenge to an abstract equation that matches objectives, outcomes, force, and counter-force against one another. Yet the human toll of war, the losses it necessarily exacts upon societies, and the value and urgency of the causes for which it is fought cannot be captured by such formulae. Other bodies of literature are equally disappointing. Even the just war tradition literature, from which we might reasonably expect a little more, says next to nothing about the topic of victory. This paucity presumably owes much to the fact that the challenge of winning rather than avoiding wars is still relatively novel, having only (re-)emerged as a going concern since the conclusion of the Cold War.
What then does victory mean? How should we think of it in relation to war? These are grandiose questions that I cannot hope to address substantively here. What I can do, however, is narrow them down and re-formulate them so that we can gain some purchase on them. I propose, then, to ask how victory has been symbolized and presented at various junctures in western history. That is, how have ideas of victory been rendered at different moments in the history of the western tradition? The term ‘rendered’ is load-bearing: it refers to how conceptions of victory have been given material form through statues, sculptures, and other art-forms. It is this concern that gave rise to the title of this essay. ‘Stoned immaculate’ alludes directly (albeit facetiously) to the subject of its first section, the manner by which the concept of victory is treated in modern (i.e. post-First World War) war memorials—the vast majority of which are, of course, hewn from durable marble and stone. The second section peers into the history of the symbolic form that appears most frequently on modern war memorials: the cross. More specifically, it examines how in the fourth century CE, at the hands of Constantine and early Christian propagandists like Eusebius, the cross was re-inscribed as a symbol for military victory that was to be borne as a standard into battles. The third section follows this by illuminating the connections—and the ruptures—that link Constantine’s cross-emblazoned banners to the wooden battlefield trophies erected by the Greeks of the fifth century BCE to mark victory. My reasons for focusing on these practices will hopefully become apparent as the argument progresses. Essentially, I claim that attention to these cases reveal the perplexity afflicting modern conceptions of victory in war. I conclude that it exposes the modern tendency to view victory in transcendental rather than strictly military or functional terms.
1. The Great War and Modern Memorials

War memorials represent one of the primary, and certainly most visible, means through which societies seek to come to terms with war, celebrate its victories, and reconcile themselves to the losses it exacts. Often so commonplace as to blend into the background, war memorials dot the countryside the world over. Glasgow, where I work, is home to a particularly regal monument, which sits in George Square, directly in front of the City Hall. A less striking memorial to World War I is a short walk from my home in the small town of Berwick upon Tweed. This proximity to war memorials is not unusual; they are in abundance across the United Kingdom and other western countries that have partaken in major wars. The vast majority of memorials commemorate the First World War. The decade following the so-called ‘Great War’ witnessed a boom in memorial construction. Alan Borg, who has compiled an exhaustive survey analysis of war memorials, supposes that ‘it was the unprecedented scope of the First World War and its appalling statistics of death which caused the greatest upsurge in memorial building’.¹ A generation later, countries acknowledged the losses from World War Two by adapting or extending World War One monuments. There were exceptions—Great Yarmouth and Weston-super-Mare erected Second World War monuments to stand alongside existing First World War monuments—but they were relatively scarce.² There have of course been monuments erected in commemoration of other conflicts: for instance, the Vietnam War and the Korean War are both the subject of famous memorials in Washington DC. However, as Alex King observes, the monuments erected in memorial of World War One are both most numerous and the model for the commemoration of later wars fought by western powers.³
What is the function of these World War One memorials? Jay Winter describes them as a key element in the efforts of communities to make sense of and transcend the losses of war. Where other scholars—for example, James Mayo and the aforementioned King—focus on their ideological symbolism or the politics of their production, Winter treats war memorials as sites of mourning and an integral part of the healing process that must follow every war. He proposes that war memorials should be understood as artistic artefacts that testify to the ‘catastrophic character of war’ and actualise the efforts of the community of survivors and bereaved ‘to understand what had happened to both their lives and to those who had died in the war’. The communal or collective element here is of great moment. War memorials, according to Winter, must always be ‘collective symbols’ insofar as they ‘speak to and for communities of men and women’. This view is endorsed by Katharyn Mitchell, who argues that the study of war memorials can tell us a lot about the societies that produced them.

Yet the meaning of the memorial, what it seeks to commemorate, is not always easy to discern. To begin with, different cultures attach different meanings to war and encourage us to remember it in different ways. In many cases, the memorials themselves abound in ambiguity. The Cenotaph in London is a good example, as is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. The impression these monuments impart is obtuse, not straightforward. Indeed, Jenny Edkins, applying a Lacanian reading to both monuments, perceives in them an ‘anti-symbolic’ encirclement of the ‘real’, that is, an acknowledgement of the traumatic character of war and the impossibility of ever representing or even apprehending it. More generally, it is obviously the case that the meaning of a
memorial is never quite fixed in stone, so to speak, but rather is open to contestation and renegotiation over time. As David Lowenthal remarks, memorials, like the past itself, must always be in some sense incomplete, pending a new perspective or revised interpretation.¹

Winter notes these difficulties but argues that a basic commonality underlies all World War One memorials: they confront the ‘simple truth that people die in war, and that in the Great War their number was legion’.¹¹ ‘The harsh history of life and death in wartime is,’ he writes, ‘frozen in public monuments throughout Europe and beyond’.¹² The italics here are mine, but we shall return to their significance later. For now, it is important that we attend to Winter’s contention that memorials were designed to be sites where people could come together, both individually and collectively, to address the pain and suffering caused by conflict. They were designed to be sites where people could gather to grieve the fallen in war. In Winter’s awkward but useful formulation, they function as the ‘foci of the rituals, rhetoric, and ceremonies of bereavement’ pursuant to war.¹³ The laying of wreaths at the Cenotaph and the changing of the guard at the tomb of the unknown soldier in Arlington Cemetery are two examples of how they fulfil this role. Borg concurs with this reading. He writes that, following the Great War, modern memorials reflect a desire to meditate upon ‘the sacrifices of war,’ and to mourn ‘the loss of young life in the defence of freedom’.¹⁴ Following Winter and Borg, it appears relatively sound to suppose that one of the principal functions of war memorials is to provide a symbolic space for coming to terms with the harsh realities of death in war. They play a major role in how a society negotiates a host of vexing questions that bear on victory and loss in war and how they relate to one another.
The form that these memorials take is obviously of considerable importance for how they achieve this. Their aspect, imagery, symbolism, and composition offer insights into how societies approach the need to both obtain closure on the recently concluded war and embrace the peace that succeeds it. Three norms stand out in respect of this. The first is that war memorials rarely feature the enemy in any meaningful way. Occasionally, there is some allegorical representation of a foe to be confronted, but there is almost never any direct or hostile reference to the actual rival belligerent. Derwent Wood’s ‘Canada’s Golgotha’ is a notable exception in this regard—but the furore it created led to its removal from displays of official Canadian war art.<sup>xv</sup> Typically, the only soldiers featured are one’s own, and they are usually portrayed in relaxed but vigilant poses. Expressions of anguish, hatred, or jubilation are notable by their absence. If they betray any emotions at all, their faces reflect courage and readiness but not aggressive intent. They do not extol the excitement of battle, but rather warn of the hardship and sacrifice that it brings. Their swords and guns usually feature only in inverted form.<sup>xvi</sup> The French Memorial at Ypres is an excellent example that combines these traits, as is the memorial in St. Jame’s Park, London.

The second norm is that memorials are built of imperishable materials such as stone and marble. That is, they are built to last. This is what Winter was alluding to—see above—when he wrote of the harsh history of death in war being *frozen* in public monuments. For example, the Cenotaph, which was initially a temporary construction rendered of wood and plaster, was, by popular demand, re-cast in stone in 1920 so as to achieve permanence.<sup>xvii</sup> The aim in so doing was that it should last for as long as is humanly conceivable. The Trench of Bayonets memorial near Verdun (erected to commemorate the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company of
the 137th French Infantry Regiment wiped out on 12 June 1916) was designed with a similar ambition in mind. Andre Ventre, the chief-architect, promised his patrons that the structure of his design would be 'heavily enforced with steel and everything possible to ensure durability will be done. I guarantee the monument to last for at least 500 years'.xviii This quest for eternity, or at least endurance, is further affirmed in the inscription (a quote from Ecclesiasticus chosen by Rudyard Kipling) carved upon many war memorials, including the one in Glasgow mentioned earlier: 'Their name Liveth For Evermore'.xix

The third (and perhaps most pertinent) norm is that memorials treat victory in a very subdued manner. Rather than celebrate victory as something that is achieved at the expense of a corporeal enemy, memorials tend to depict victory in transcendent, highly Christianised terms—as victory over war or even over death itself. Thus construed, victory is frequently portrayed as symbiotic with peace. Indeed, peace borne of victory is a motif that appears prominently on a large number of memorials, like the Exeter monument. In these instances, peace, which is borne of victory, is denoted by an angel, who appears as a winged female figure, clothed in a long robe and (often) bearing a wreath, crown, or sword. The appearance of this figure—who is an appropriation of the Greek goddess of victory, Nike—also conveys that Christ, the Prince of Peace, confers his divine blessing upon both those commemorated by the monument and the cause for which they died. Victory, then, as it features in modern war memorials, is given a transcendent and spiritual character, rather than just a military connotation.xxi An excellent illustration of this is the inscription that marks the tomb of the unknown soldier in Westminster Abbey:
Thus are commemorated the many multitudes who during the Great War of 1914-18 gave the most that man can give life itself for God for King and Country for loves ones home and Empire for the sacred cause of justice and the freedom of the world.

Closely associated with peace, these brief few lines invoke triumph over death and the achievement of life everlasting through sacrifice and self-giving other-regard, as exemplified by God giving his only son to die on the cross to redeem humankind.

I wish to argue in the remainder of this paper that this transcendental and spiritually and morally freighted conception of victory is central to the way we think about and approach the transition from war to peace today. I aim to do so by focusing in more detail on the symbolic form that is most closely associated with the war memorials of the post-First World War era: the cross. This will be the subject of the next section (Section 2). Following this, I aim in the final section (Section 3) of this paper to demonstrate that the Ancient Greeks pursued a different conception of victory, a functional rather than moral vision. I will do so via a brief but detailed account of their practice of erecting battlefield trophies to mark victory. The wager is that the Greek practice will provide a useful counterpoint against which to problematize contemporary ways of thinking about victory in war.
2. Constantine’s Cross of Sacrifice

The cross is undoubtedly the symbol to appear most frequently in the context of war memorials and memorialisation. Military orders the world over award medals either in cruciform or embossed with crosses to their most courageous soldiers, while small wooden crosses are the standard marker of a military grave in the western world. The British government encourages people who wish to pay tribute to family members killed in war to plant a small wooden cross with a poppy in its centre in the ‘Field of Remembrance’ at Westminster Abbey on Remembrance Day. But it is Sir Reginald Blomfield’s design, the Cross of Sacrifice, that is the most iconic memorial form. Both ‘Christian and martial’, it is essentially a tall, long-shafted cross that is inlaid with a bronze cruciform sword pointing downwards upon its face. Though criticized for being too redolent of Christian triumphalism, the design was a great success, and thousands were erected in cemeteries across the world. I am interested here in examining in more detail the meaning and history of the cross, especially as it bears on the commemoration of military activities and warfare. By so doing, I hope to delve deeper into the transcendental conception of victory that we encounter in modern war memorials and which accompanies the efforts of western societies to make sense of the mechanized slaughter that is modern combat.

According to George Willard Benson, the cross is the oldest symbol in the world, actually predating the Christian era. While its origins are hazy, it appears to have been widely used as a spiritual symbol even before the coming of Christ. Druids, for example, took as a symbol of their god, the sun, a living tree—usually an oak—and lopped off all its branches except for two on opposite sides, forming thereby a crude but giant cross. This lineage echoes in the early
Christians predilection to refer to the cross upon which Christ was crucified as the ‘accursed tree’. \textsuperscript{xxiii} And of course, as the example of Christ indicates, the cross was the Romans’ select instrument of execution for criminals of foreign, that is, non-Roman extraction. The customary height of crosses used for executions was not more than ten feet, and it was part of the disgrace upon the condemned that he should have to bear his own cross to the place of his execution. It is Christ’s triumph that the cross is no longer thought of it in relation to execution, but rather as a ‘glorious symbol of Christ’s sacrifice for all mankind’, a testimony to faith in life eternal, redemption, and resurrection through belief in god. \textsuperscript{xxiv} As the Catholic profession of faith testifies: ‘By dying He destroyed our death’.

The cross has long held martial associations. Scholars point to the Crusades, the ‘wars of the cross’, as evidence of this. \textsuperscript{xxv} The Crusades were a case in which the term \textit{milites Christi}, soldiers of Christ, shed its metaphorical allusion to spiritual quest and assumed belligerent form in the guise of massed armies marching on the enemies of Christendom to wrest Jerusalem from their power. To crusade was, of course, to ‘take up the cross’, that is, to bear its burden as Christ did and to serve and sacrifice and suffer for the wellbeing and indeed redemption of others. \textsuperscript{xxvi} It was fitting, then, that the emblem of the Christian nations, the cross, was emblazoned, not only upon the flags they carried, but also upon the tunics and shields of those who fought its battles. The crusaders disclosed their country of origin by the colour of the cross that they displayed: English knights identified themselves by a white cross, the French favoured a red cross, and so on. However, it is with Constantine, the fourth century Roman Emperor often credited with the Christianization of the west, that we meet the most influential expression of the transcendental conception of victory.
Following the death of his father, the Emperor Constantius Chlorus, Constantine was acclaimed a Tetrarch, one of four Roman emperors ruling a divided empire, in 306 by a Roman legion at York. Intent on unifying the empire, he marched on Rome in 312 in an effort to eliminate his chief rival, Maxentius. On the eve of the decisive battle, which took place at Milvian Bridge in October of the same year, he offered a prayer to the Christian god. Being aware of his precarious position in military terms, he beseeched the Christian Deity for his ‘Divine assistance’, to act as Constantine’s patron as well as his ‘Saviour and Protector’. While bowed in supplication, he experienced a vision. The story comes down to us from Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea and his chief chronicler.

And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvellous sign appeared to him from heaven ... He said that about mid-day, when the sun was beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which happened to be following him on some expedition, and witnessed the miracle.

Divinely visions were of course nothing new for emperors, and Constantine had his wits sufficiently about him not to be excessively awe-stricken or stunned by his vision, but to focus his mind on ascertaining its message. Reflecting on the meaning of this apparition, Eusebius reports that, with the aid of a further revelation, Constantine soon determined exactly what it was the Christ of God required him to do. The Christ of God, he inferred, wished him to ‘procure a standard made in the likeness of that sign [the cross that had appeared in the sky that day], and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies’.
At first dawn, Constantine gathered his most skilled craft-workers to him, and set them to replicating the standard of the cross as it had been revealed to him both in the midday sky and in his dreams. Fashioned of gold and precious stones, Eusebius describes its manufacture in detail:

A long spear, overlaid with gold, formed the figure of the cross by means of a piece transversely laid over it. On top of the whole was fixed a crown, formed by the intertexture of gold and precious stones; and on this, two letters indicating the name of Christ, symbolized the Saviour’s title by means of the its first characters, the letter ρ [rho] being intersected by χ [chi] exactly at its centre ... From the transverse piece which crossed the spear was suspended a kind of streamer of purple cloth, covered with a profuse embroidery of most brilliant precious stones ... This banner was of a square form, and the upright staff, which in its full extent was of great length, bore a golden half-length portrait of the pious emperor and his children on its upper part, beneath the trophy of the cross, and immediately above the embroidered streamer.xxx

Constantine then commanded that this standard, which would later come to be known as the labarum, should be carried at the head of all his armies to ward off every adverse and hostile power.xxxi Putting this conviction into practice almost immediately, he took up the standard and marched his army there and then against Maxentius. Eusebius commentates: ‘Assuming therefore the Supreme God as his patron, and invoking His Christ to be his preserver and aid, and setting the victorious trophy, the salutary symbol, in front of his soldiers and bodyguard, he marched with his whole forces, eager to reinstate the Romans in the freedom they had inherited from their ancestors’.xxxii Constantine’s forces duly swept all before them, winning a famous victory at the Milvian Bridge.
When Rome was secured in Constantine’s name, he lost no time in offering a ‘thanksgiving to Him [God] as the Author of his victory’. He did so by erecting a monument that was to serve as a ‘great trophy of victory over his enemies’ in the heart of the imperial city. The form of the monument would be no surprise: a statue of Constantine himself bearing in his hand a lofty spear in the figure of a cross—the same ‘salutary sign’ as had appeared to him in revelation and which he perceived as a guarantee of the Christian god’s patronage and protection of both him and his empire. The inscription read:

BY VIRTUE OF THIS SALUTARY SIGN, WHICH IS THE TRUE SYMBOL OF VALOUR, I HAVE PRESERVED AND LIBERATED YOUR CITY FROM THE YOKE OF TYRANNY. I HAVE ALSO SET AT LIBERTY THE ROMAN SENATE AND PEOPLE, AND RESTORED THEM TO THEIR ANCIENT GREATNESS AND SPLENDOUR.

Constantine later had the labarum conspicuously displayed upon all of his standards and banners, and also ordered them placed upon the altars of churches. Eusebius posits that he also had it embossed upon his helmet. Still in evidence today, the phrase ‘CONQUER BY THIS’ adorns a window over the Scala Regia, adjacent to the statue of Constantine in the Vatican. It appears as a motto on an unfurled ribbon, with a passion cross to its left. Constantine’s sure way with iconography ensured, scholars have observed, not only that the labarum-trophy-cross came to be perceived as the physical representation of the victorious alliance between Constantine and the Christian god, but that it married religious and military symbolism. Courtesy of Constantine's efforts, the cross had become a sword, and the sword a cross.
Paul Stephenson has argued that we should not interpret Constantine’s interest in the cross as an idiosyncratic affair. He proposes that it is of a piece with what he and others have referred to as the Roman theology of victory.\textsuperscript{xxvii} As such it offers us insights not just into the disposition of Constantine, but into the set of values that informed Roman understandings of war. Indeed, by the time of Constantine, it was standard for emperors to conceive of themselves as enjoying a special relationship with the gods, who were presented as their divine companions and protectors. In fact, the emperor’s affinity with the gods was a source of currency for him as he sought to impress upon his (historically fickle) army that, commanding support from on high, he was not to be trifled with by either external or internal foes. ‘The onus’, Stephenson writes, ‘was on the emperor to prove that he enjoyed the patronage of a powerful god, who, if propitiated by correct ritual, would deliver victory’.\textsuperscript{xxviii} Accordingly, it was important for the emperor to find a way of convincing his kinsmen that he more than any other commanded patronage of this kind. Emperors responded to this challenge through symbolism and imperial art, modes of expression in which they were able to depict themselves as the gods’ favourite or chosen one. It is in this spirit that many emperors had themselves depicted in the company of the goddess Victoria—a Romanized Nike—and battlefield trophies. And it is in this spirit that we should read Constantine’s devotion to the Christian god and his zealous use of the cross to advertise the patronage that he in turn received from Christ. What we have here then, symbolized by the cross, is a conception (or theology) of victory in war that frames triumph not in functional, military terms, but in a transcendental register that invokes the grand themes of sacrifice, redemption, eternal life, and the spiritual overcoming of death.
3. Battlefield Trophies in Ancient Greece

There is an obvious continuity between the theology of victory that Constantine subscribed to and the modern war memorials we surveyed earlier. Yet close inspection of Constantine’s theology of victory also reveals something else—something that looks backward to an earlier age, rather than forward to our own time. The reader may have observed a few references in the preceding pages to the cross as a ‘trophy’. It occurs in Eusebius’ accounts of the vision at Milvian Bridge and Constantine’s standard. In the Christian tradition at the time, this connection was not unusual. Tertullian referred to Christ’s triumph by the trophy of the cross, while a 3rd Century text, The Martyrdom of Saints Montanus and Lucius, declared: ‘Death is nothing when the Lord crushes its sting, conquers its struggle, and triumphs by the trophy of the cross’.xxxix The trophy referred to in these instances was, of course, the battlefield trophy, a kind of monument that the Romans erected to mark major military victories. With roots in Ancient Greece, where it was known as a tropaion, the trophy was originally a pole or tree-trunk with a cross-beam from which were hung the arms and armour of the vanquished foe. Roman Emperors from Gallienus on were keen that any coins bearing their image would depict them with such a trophy—a marker of their prowess in battle and the favour the gods bestow upon them. Intriguingly for our purposes, Constantine modified this particular tradition: coins bearing his image showed him toting, not a trophy, but a cross. There appears, then, to be a continuity, or at least connection, between the Christian cross and the tropaion. This final section will pursue that possibility. It will conclude, however, that the tropaion presents a perspective on victory in war that challenges the way it is framed by Constantine and in modern memorials.
Records suggest that the Greeks began to erect *tropaion*—I will use this term interchangeably with battlefield trophies, or just trophies—in earnest only in the decade following the Persian Wars. The first trophies that we know of are the ones erected by the Athenians to mark their victories over the Persians at Marathon, Salamis, and Psyttaleia. At Plataea, the Athenians were joined by the Spartans in erecting a trophy—an indication, perhaps, of the mounting rivalry between these powers. Yet another trophy was erected at Delphi at the site where a landslide had halted a Persian attack. In terms of conflicts between Greeks, the 547 battle between the Spartans and the Argives over Thyrea famously involved a trophy. This was a battle waged by 300 champions from each side. By the time dusk fell, only two Argives and one Spartan were left standing. The Argives, assuming victory, departed the battlefield. The lone remaining Spartan, Othryades, took advantage of their lapse to despoil the Argive corpses they had left behind and raise a trophy proclaiming a Spartan triumph. This led to a very unusual situation in which both sides claimed victory. An all-out war, from which the Spartans would emerge as winners, soon followed. In documentary terms, the historians Thucydides, Xenophon, and Diodoros attest to the practice of erecting *tropaion*. Tropaion are also commented upon in the dramatic work of Aeschylus, and in the later literature of Plutarch and Cicero. Looking beyond the written word, they appear frequently in art, where they are frequently attended by images of Nike. The earliest representation of a battlefield trophy occurs on a fragment of vase found in the sanctuary of the Kabeiron near Thebes; it dates to the first half of the 5th century. Conversely, there is no reliable evidence of the *tropaion* practice prior to the Persian Wars.
Descriptions of trophies vary, but we can piece together a fairly reliable picture of them. Setting aside the permanent commemorative trophies like that at Marathon, I wish to focus on its more common cousin, the battlefield trophy. These typically took the form of a tree-stump or wooden post, fastened with a cross-beam from which the captured arms of the slain enemy were hung. Weapons were, of course, a source of prestige in Greek life: nothing symbolized a glorious triumph like the sight of a now dead but once feared enemy’s shield dangling from a trophy. Trophies also bore inscriptions that conveyed information pertaining to the site of the battle and its protagonists alongside a dedication to a god, frequently Zeus Tropaios. Designed so as to be visible from afar, they cast an intimidating silhouette. The troops on the winning side often went to great lengths to ensure that a trophy was erected as soon as possible following a victory. This usually meant the same day, or, if fighting had dragged on till dusk, as it sometimes did, the trophy would be set up the next morning. The process by which the trophy was raised is quite interesting. As soon as the defeated party began to withdraw, soldiers on the victorious side would gather their own dead for identification and burial and plunder the corpses of the enemy fallen, despoiling them of their weapons and tunics. These spoils would then be lashed to a tree or wooden pole, as described above, which would then be mounted in the earth. Occasionally, the singing of a paean and the playing of flutes heralded the erection of the trophy. A prayer of thanks would also usually be offered up at the trophy to Zeus by the victorious army. Finally, when the vanquished side acknowledged both its defeat and the victorious side’s control of the battlefield, by sending a herald to ask for permission to retrieve their dead, they would in normal circumstances be granted that courtesy.
The question of the exact positioning of the *tropaion* has provoked some controversy. Though all concur that the *tropaion* was erected in a prominent and visible position on the battleground, some contend that it was situated so as to mark the site where the opposing armies first clashed, while others argue that it occupied the spot where the defeated side first broke ranks and turned to flee.\textsuperscript{iii} Because the latter site—the turning-point, or *trope*, from which we derive *tropaion* and *trophy*—is where combat would have given way to rout and the majority of men would have fallen, this seems the more plausible answer. But it must not be overlooked that the visibility of the trophy was also a key consideration. As we will see later, the conspicuousness of the trophy was essential to it fulfilling its function. So it is most likely that the tropaion was positioned on a bluff or rising proximate to the point where the defeated side first broke ranks.

Once in place, the trophy was inviolable: it was forbidden to tamper with them. Proof of this is the behaviour of Agesilaus, reported by Xenophon. Following a disagreement with The Boeotians, he wreaked havoc upon everything he could get his hands upon in their lands but dared not lay a finger upon an old battlefield trophy that stood in the middle of a field.\textsuperscript{iv} Agesilaus’ actions in this instance were driven, Pritchett supposes, by his awareness that any action taken against the trophy would be a major violation of Hellenic custom.\textsuperscript{iv} Josiah Ober lists the inviolability of trophies as one of the twelve ‘unwritten conventions governing interstate conflict’ in Ancient Greece.\textsuperscript{v} It is likely that their protection stems from their association with Zeus and the Olympian gods, to whom they were a thanksgiving tribute.\textsuperscript{vi}
If it was illicit to tamper with or destroy a trophy, it was also forbidden to seek to prolong its life by restoring or replacing it. By contrast with modern memorials, Greek battlefield trophies were not cast in stone or any other form of durable material; rather they were constructed of wood and other perishable materials. It was proscribed to renew or repair trophies when they decayed.\textsuperscript{lviii} Proof of this is served by the trouble the Thebans found themselves in before the Amphictyony following their decision to mark victory at Leuktra with a bronze trophy: it was not right, they were chastised, for Greeks to set up a permanent trophy to mark a victory over fellow Greeks.\textsuperscript{lix} Similarly, Plutarch extolled the practice of permitting trophies to ‘disintegrate with the passage of time’. He implies that the restoration of a trophy indicated a refusal to let an old grudge fade away and should thus be regarded as an ‘invidious and malicious’ act.\textsuperscript{lx} Diodoros quotes the Syracusan Nikolaos to much the same effect:

For what reason did the ancestors of all the Greeks ordain that the trophies set up in celebrating victories in war be made, not of stone, but of any wood at hand? Was it not in order that the memorial of the enmity, lasting as they would for only a brief time, should quickly disappear?\textsuperscript{lxii}

There is some question as to whether the ban on repairing trophies also applied to \textit{tropaion} that marked victories over non-Greeks, or whether it applied to all cases equally.\textsuperscript{lxii} What is certain, however, is that they were designed to be transient. Like the antagonisms of warring opponents, they were intended to be subject to ‘inevitable erosion and decay over time’.\textsuperscript{lxiii} This stands in stark distinction to the quest for permanence that underlies modern war memorials.
The reason for this distinction lies in the purpose behind the practice of erecting battlefield trophies. Unlike modern memorials, they were not initially intended as commemorative devices, designed to exalt the victor and elevate his cause. Rather they were an intrinsic part of the process by which the Greeks determined victory in a given conflict. The successful erection of a trophy confirmed that one side, and not the other, controlled the battlefield and, by extension, the dead and the dying that still lay upon it. We can now see why the visibility of trophies was so significant that they had to be positioned in prominent spots and erected in daylight. The ability of the victorious side to demonstrate their command of the field in such resounding terms to their enemy functioned as both a proclamation of their triumph and the proof of it. It also advertised that the vanquished side could only now gain access to the battlefield to retrieve their dead—a requirement of Greek custom—by sending a herald to cede defeat and arrange for a formal end to hostilities. Such a request—a tacit acknowledgement of powerlessness—amounted to nothing more than an act of supplication. For the losers then, defeat, signalled by the appearance of the enemy’s *tropaion* festooned with the captured weapons of one’s own fallen and the concomitant need to collect their now-despoiled dead, involved ‘humiliation and a recognition of martial inferiority’. Thus the battlefield trophy lay at the heart of a set of practices that combined to produce a ritualized and final determination of victory. This was not, however, a transcendental and highly moralized vision of victory in war, but a strictly functional and military one.
Conclusion

This essay has reflected upon the question of how we think about victory in war. This is a question that is frequently overlooked by exactly those scholars whom one would expect it to interest. For instance, so far as I am aware, there has been no robust consideration of victory in war in the contemporary just war tradition literature. This essay has hopefully made a contribution to opening up this interesting and important area of concern. The manner by which it has attempted to prise open this question is significant too. Rather than being devoted to textual or conceptual analysis, it treats the material and symbolic forms through which victory has been represented at various junctures in western history. What findings might we take from all of this spadework? I would like to suggest that this essay illuminates the stories of change and continuity that connect the historically disparate renderings of victory it surveys. On the one hand, it demonstrates the homologous relation between the Christian cross and the tropaion of the ancient Greek battlefield. On the other, it reveals the disjunction that was produced once war memorials began to be cast in stone. Where once, made manifest in perishable materials, victory was acknowledged as fleeting, the arrival of granite and marble reflected a view of victory tied to longevity. Above all else though, this essay, and especially the survey it supplies of Greek tropaion, furnishes us with a counterpoint from which to reflect upon the assumptions that inform the way we approach the concept of victory in war today. In particular, it exposes the transcendental character of the modern way of thinking about victory in war, and shows that there are other ways of approaching it. I would not wish to push my argument further than this, save to say that it invites us to think anew about victory in war and what it means to us.

Borg, *War Memorials*, x.


Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 51.

‘The traces of memory left in the landscape point to the political, cultural, and economic forces which cohered at that moment to produce a vision of the way a (dominant) society perceived and represented itself to itself.’ Katharyne Mitchell, ‘Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory’, *Urban Geography* 24 (2003), 448.


Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 78.

Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 78.

Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 78.

Borg, *War Memorials*, x.

Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 92.

King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain*, 176. Additionally, Borg's study contains an excellent collection of photographs of war memorials. This is a very useful source to consult.

Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 64.


My analysis here owes a lot to King's work. Writing of First World War memorials, King says: 'When victory was mentioned in imagery or inscriptions, it was frequently given an ethical rather than a military connotation by invoking the Christian, and distinctively ethical, idea of victory over death through self-sacrifice'. King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain*, 176. I depart from King in respect of his use of labels, most notably his decision to set the 'ethical' apart from and against the 'military'.

Borg, *War Memorials*, 73.


Pritchett, The Greek State at War II, 259.


This example derives from Cicero and is quoted in full by: Stroszeck, ‘Greek Trophy Monuments’, 312.

Plutarch is quoted in: Pritchett, The Greek State at War II, 253.


Pritchett, The Greek State at War II, 257.


On the failure to retrieve one’s dead, consider the hot water the Athenian generals who left men behind in 406 at Arginusai found themselves in subsequently.

Rawlings, The Ancient Greeks at War, 99.