

VICTIMARII IN ROMAN RELIGION AND SOCIETY*

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This paper brings together literary, epigraphic and iconographic evidence for the victimarii — the attendants responsible for slaughtering sacrificial animals in ancient Rome. It aims to explore the problematic status of victimarii in Roman society, and argues that the often hostile views of the aristocracy have led to the continued marginalisation of this prominent group within scholarly discussions of religion and society. It argues that when the various strands are considered together a far more positive view of victimarii within Roman society emerges, suggesting that this was in some respects one of the most respectable of professions among the slave and freedman communities.

Il saggio raccoglie la tradizione letteraria, epigrafica e iconografica relativa ai victimarii — gli addetti all'uccisione degli animali sacrificali nella Roma antica. Lo studio mira a esplorare lo status problematico dei victimarii nella società romana. In particolare si sostiene come la frequente ostilità dell'aristocrazia abbia avuto come conseguenza la sostanziale marginalizzazione di questo gruppo di spicco della società romana nell'ambito del dibattito accademico sulla religione e sulla società romane. Il saggio inoltre mette in evidenza come, considerando unitariamente i vari filoni di fonti a disposizione, emerga una visione molto più positiva dei victimarii all'interno della società romana, suggerendo in questo modo come questa professione fosse per certi versi una delle più rispettabili tra le comunità degli schiavi e dei liberti.

In ancient Rome the *victimarii* were responsible for the practical side of animal sacrifice and were a frequent feature of iconographic scenes depicting the religious procession to the altar. During religious festivals *victimarii* were responsible for leading and controlling the sacrificial victims, the act of slaughter itself, and the post-sacrificial dissection of animals either for the ritual meal or for the practice of extispicy, the inspection of the internal organs for the purpose of divination. As such, their presence in reliefs immediately signals the theme of sacrifice, even when the victims themselves are not in view. The safety and success of the ritual and everyone involved in it depended to a large extent on the *victimarii* performing their duties swiftly and effectively. Yet despite the frequency with which they appear across reports and depictions of religious processions and sacrifices, and the relative importance of their role, the *victimarii* typically have been relegated to the fringes of modern studies of Roman religion, animal sacrifice and visual representation. Discussion of their duties and position typically has been summative, with little attention paid to

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understanding their seemingly inconsistent status within the source material and Roman society as a whole.¹ This situation would seem to reflect the similarly marginal position they held within Roman religion itself, although it is unclear whether this was a consequence of the nature of their profession or the lowly social status of those chosen to serve as sacrificial attendants. *Victimarii* remain a poorly understood constituent of Roman society, and the evidence for this group has rarely received focused attention. There is no reason for this to be the case, however, since we possess a wide variety of evidence for *victimarii* across literature, epigraphy and iconography (albeit across an extensive chronological and geographical expanse), which allows us to explore, with some confidence, their social background, dress, appearance and ritual duties. An attempt to provide a detailed overview was attempted by Friederike Fless (1995: especially pp. 70–8), but his work focused predominantly on the iconographic evidence and failed to take into account the considerable quantity of commemorative inscriptions for the group.

The aim of this paper will be to consider how the various strands of evidence relating to *victimarii* may be drawn together to demonstrate the complex and at times contradictory picture we have of sacrificial attendants within Roman society. Literary reports offer dismissive or even hostile perspectives, reflecting the views of those higher up the social ladder, who performed different, but clearly defined, roles within the sacrificial process, which emphasized their pre-eminence. Outside of aristocratic circles, however, the position of *victimarius* appears to have been one that carried great prestige within the slave and freedmen communities. It is therefore necessary to consider the ways in which *victimarii* viewed and presented themselves. To do this we must turn to the epigraphic record. Consideration of this evidence also highlights many of the more subtle intricacies of the position, and reveals that the role of *victimarius* could be a source of pride for those involved. Finally, by considering the portrayals of *victimarii* in iconography, the paper will highlight the ways in which the ambiguity of the position and the conflicting views surrounding it were demonstrated to a wider Roman audience. Many of the images depicting *victimarii* performing their duties are well-known, but it is only by considering these images in the light of our other sources that the complexity of their position may be understood fully. In some ways, the *victimarii* may be said to have held marginal social positions and status. This was repeatedly reinforced and restated, both through their depictions within Roman iconography, where they were often pushed to the background or sidelines, and in the parallels that occur between *victimarii* and more reviled

¹ Weinstock's work of 1958 is still the most thorough compilation of the literary and epigraphic evidence, but beyond listing the various references offers little in the way of interpretation of the group. More generally, see: *ThesCRA* 1.39, 197; Wissowa, 1912: 417–18, 498; Brendel, 1930: 199; Ryberg, 1955; Latte, 1960: 383–4; Speidel, 1965: 75; Piffig, 1975: 60–1; Elsner, 1998: 93–4; Beard, North and Price, 1998: I, 330–1; Huet, 2005: 97–9; Prescendi, 2007: 35–9; Aldrete, 2014 (especially note 4).

professions, such as executioners. Even when they appear prominently in iconographic scenes, their lower status is repeatedly made apparent through their dress, appearance, stance and stature during sacrificial procedures. Furthermore, we rarely see the *victimarii* during either the process of slaughter or the aftermath of sacrifice. Instead, they are seen most commonly either within the wider religious procession, leading the animals to the altar or, in many cases, paused at the final moment before the sacrifice.² As a result, what we see is a deliberately sanitized version of events in depictions of Roman sacrifice, because the full extent of the *victimarius*'s duties could not be incorporated easily into the artistic landscape.

This is perhaps the more pessimistic interpretation of the position held by *victimarii* in ancient Rome, but it represents only one side of the argument, seen from the point of view of the Roman aristocracy who viewed the *victimarii* as workers employed to carry out the sacrifices offered by others. An alternative reading of the *victimarii*, which considers them in the wider context of working slaves or freedmen within Roman society, may offer a far more positive view — one that sees the *victimarii* as not only present within depictions of prominent religious rituals (whatever their placement within the scene), but also as figures who were often depicted in an exceptionally impressive manner. To illustrate these seemingly opposing images, this paper will focus on a select number of examples that demonstrate wider patterns of representation. When considered alongside our literary and epigraphic evidence, such images will be shown to highlight the conflicting views of the *victimarii*, who remain one of the foremost low-born groups to have a widespread and strong iconographic presence in ancient Rome. Before we may begin to assess these issues, however, we first must consider who the *victimarii* were, as well as the various roles that they might play within religious proceedings.

THE ROLE OF THE VICTIMARIUS

The *victimarii* appear to have been drawn exclusively from Rome's slaves and freedmen, and, thanks to the abundance of friezes that include depictions of them, we are able to build a fairly clear picture of their duties within public sacrificial rituals. We are also fortunate enough to possess a number of epigraphic references to *victimarii*, which, when combined with literary reports, provide further insight into their duties, background and, most importantly, the ways in which they chose to present themselves, providing a counterweight to the (often disapproving) views of the literary élite. One of the most revealing elements of the epigraphic record concerns naming practices among *victimarii*. According to various literary sources those who served as *victimarii* were

² Valérie Huet (2005: 93–4) has highlighted the scarcity of scenes choosing to depict the moment of death, or to show the carcass of the sacrificial victim after the slaughter had taken place.

typically required to have ‘auspicious’ names. By examining commemorative inscriptions of named *victimarii* we see widespread evidence to support this practice, with names commonly referring to divinities or, alternatively, to particularly prized qualities or attributes, as illustrated by the tombstone commemorating the freedman and *victimarius* Lucius Valerius Victor, whom we shall discuss in detail below (p. 74).³ Other examples include names such as Eros, Serapio, Ingenus, Fortunatus and Felicissimus.⁴ Cicero refers to the custom of lucky names in the *De divinatione*, in which he lists the founding of a *colonia*, the inspection of the army by a general, and the purification of the populace by the censors as occasions in which it was important for those who led the sacrificial victims to have ‘good names’.⁵

When assessing their role within religious rituals it is particularly advantageous that *victimarii* are clearly identifiable in sacrificial scenes, both by their position alongside the sacrificial victims and through a number of other signs. The most obvious indicator is their clothing. *Victimarii* typically appear stripped to the waist in preparation for the moment of slaughter, unlike the priests, other religious officials and onlookers, who appear fully clothed, usually with their heads veiled by the toga. *Victimarii* often carry the tools of their trade prominently, revealing the particular role played by each man. The three main tools displayed in processions are the axe and the hammer, both of which were used in the initial striking of the victim, and the sacrificial knife (*culter*) which was used to slit the animal’s throat immediately afterwards, ensuring (in theory) a quick and controlled end to the sacrifice. The *popa* carried the hammer used to stun the victim, while the *cultrarius* wielded the knife (although *victimarius* often is used as a more general term for all sacrificial attendants) (Latte, 1960: 383–4; Gilhus, 2006: 116; Kraft, 2009: 63 n. 208; Horster, 2007: 333–4).⁶

³ CIL X 3501.

⁴ Eros (AE 1964: 134), Serapio (see n. 20), Ingenus/Ingenuus (CIL VI 9088, 31149), Fortunatus (CIL VI 1057), Felicissimus (CIL XII 533), Primitibus (CIL VI 9087), Firmidius (CIL VI 1057). Cf. Marangio, 1990: 214; Weiss, 2004: 139. On the importance of auspicious names in Latin literature, see Plin. *HN* 28.22; SHA *Get.* 3.8–9. We see similar attempts to ensure the auspiciousness of certain rituals/offices through the selection of children who were chosen partly on the basis of their still having both parents alive, and so untainted by the misfortune of death: Cic. *Har. resp.* 23; Livy 37.3; Gell. *NA* 1.12.1; Festus, *s.v.* ‘patrimi et matrimi’; SHA *Heliogab.* 8.1, *Aurel.* 19.6; Macrob. *Sat.* 1.6.14; Wissowa, 1912: 491. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.22.1 refers to such children as ἀμφοθαλεις. Cf. Arn. *Adv. nat.* 4.31; Le Bonniec, 1974: 505–11.

⁵ Cic. *Div.* 1.102 (*itemque in lustranda colonia ab eo qui eam deduceret, et cum imperator exercitum, censor populum, lustraret, bonis nominibus, qui hostias ducerent, eligebantur*).

⁶ Other attendants might carry a jug, used in sacrificial proceedings to pour libations (Stewart, 1997: esp. pp. 171–3). As well as those involved in the act of sacrifice itself, other attendants such as flute-players also commonly featured in religious processions in order to drown out any sound or words that might be interpreted as ill-omened. While they were not members of the social élite, flute-players were part of a long-established tradition with their own *collegium* and a degree of respect and importance; CIL VI 2191; Cic. *Har. resp.* 23; Festus, *s.v.* ‘tubicines’; Fless, 1995: 85; Fless and Moede, 2011: 252–3.

Their role, however, began with the procession to the altar, where they were tasked with leading and controlling the sacrificial animals, most commonly sheep, pigs and cattle, which together comprised the *suovetaurilia*.⁷ Larger sacrificial animals such as oxen could be steered by a *victimarius* holding onto either a halter or the animal's horns, as we see in the case of the Mattei Relief, in which a sacrificial bull, complete with full sacrificial decoration, is restrained by two *victimarii* who appear to be exerting considerable effort to keep control of the animal (suggested both by their tensed muscles and pronounced expressions of concentration) (Ryberg, 1955: 130–2, plate 46).⁸ The importance of this duty must not be underestimated. The behaviour of the animal on the way to the altar was thought to be highly significant, as it might reveal whether the goodwill of the gods had been achieved in the build-up to the sacrifice. In theory, the animal was supposed to come willingly to the altar and to give its consent.⁹ If the victim struggled it was interpreted as a sign that the offering was already deemed unacceptable and that the *pax deorum* had not been successfully assured (Tromp, 1921: 60).¹⁰ We see a number of instances where the sacrificial animal stumbled or escaped during the procession to the altar or, worse still, broke free during the sacrifice itself. In some instances the bull even died before it reached the altar.¹¹ Such failures were invariably interpreted as unfavourable omens, and so often were used for considerable literary effect by Roman authors. When imagining a sacrifice performed in the build-up to the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, Lucan (1.609–13) described the animal struggling against the unwelcome sacrifice, eventually having to be forced down by the disrobed attendants (*succincti ministri*), a reference to the *victimarii* that Lucan clearly expected his audience to understand without issue. A similar scenario occurs at 7.166–7 on the eve of the battle of Pharsalus, in which the sacrificial bull again struggles, but this time breaks free and overturns the altar as it escapes from Caesar's camp. Lucan uses such scenes to underscore the extent of the impiety of the civil war and the extent of the gods' anger at the scale of the division that has overtaken the aristocracy. In this context the seriousness of the omens serves to highlight the significance of the *victimarii* within sacrificial rituals. Their failure to control or secure the victims could result in a most serious prodigy.

There was also, of course, the more practical danger that accompanied the sacrifice of larger animals, vividly demonstrated in Livy's narrative on Gaius

⁷ For the *suovetaurilia*, see Cato, *Agr.* 138–41. Nathan Rosenstein (1990: 63–4) suggested that it was also the *victimarii* who oversaw the initial *probatio* in which the prospective victims were inspected to ensure they met the stringent criteria for selection. Cf. Moede, 2007: 173.

⁸ See also: Fless, 1995: 70–1; Siebert, 1999: 145.

⁹ Luc. 7.165–7; Mart. 9.31.5; Festus, *s.v.* 'piacularia auspicia'; Serv. *Aen.* 9.624; Macrob. *Sat.* 3.5.8; Fless, 1995: 72.

¹⁰ On the maintenance of the *pax deorum*, see: Rasmussen, 2003: esp. 242–9; Santangelo, 2011; Santangelo, 2013: 81, 203.

¹¹ For example, Julius Obsequens 16, 47.

Flaminius's assumption of the consulate before his death in 217 BC at Lake Trasimene:

paucos post dies magistratum iniit, immolantique ei vitulus iam ictus e manibus sacrificantium sese cum proripuisset, multos circumstantes cruore respersit; fuga procul etiam maior apud ignaros quid trepidaretur et concursatio fuit. id a plerisque in omen magni terroris acceptum.

A few days later [Flaminius] began his magistracy, and while he was offering the sacrifice the calf escaped from the hands of the sacrificers after it had been struck, spattering many bystanders with blood. The escape caused even greater fear and disorder among those further away who did not know what was happening. Many viewed it as a terrible omen.¹²

The potential dangers involved in animal sacrifices therefore extended to both the religious and practical spheres. The practical dangers often may be underestimated due, in part, to the ordered depictions of sacrifice that survive in Roman iconography, which represent an idealized picture of sacrifice rather than reflecting the reality. The relative scarcity of reports of animals struggling or breaking free may point either to the need for literary and artistic representation of sacrifice to stress order and serenity, or to the skill with which the duty was performed by the *victimarii*. Both scenarios, however, highlight the key role played by these attendants.

Once the victims had been slaughtered, it appears that the *victimarii* were also required to assist with the post-sacrificial skinning and butchery of the animals, but although we have literary descriptions of these duties, we have very little visual evidence on the subject, and rely primarily on a relief from the Forum of Trajan dating from the early second century AD.¹³ The scene appears to be unique among the images to survive from antiquity. The *victimarius*, still stripped to the waist, crouches over the dead bull, cutting it open to examine the internal organs, while another figure, possibly the *haruspex*, stands close by, holding what appears to be an extispicy tool, similar to the bronze cross-section of a liver discovered at Piacenza, which was used as an aid in the reading of signs during sacrifices (Ryberg, 1955: 128–30, plate 45; Beard, North and Price, 1998: II, 150, 178–9).¹⁴

We hear of only one other duty performed by the *victimarii* in an exceptional circumstance, when the so-called books of Numa were discovered buried in a grave at the foot of the Janiculum. After much deliberation the Senate decided that certain elements of the books were dangerous, and so they should be burned publicly. Both Livy and Valerius Maximus state that it was the

¹² Livy 21.63.13. See also: Rasmussen, 2003: 251; Lennon, 2013: 103–4.

¹³ See p. 83. Also, Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 7.72.15–16; Warrior, 2002: 40–3.

¹⁴ Cf. Schilling, 1962; MacBain, 1982: 48; van der Meer, 1987; North, 1990; North, 2000: 45; Barton, 2002: 34; Rosenberger, 2011: 300; Scheid, 2011: 266; Santangelo, 2013: 253–4 (with bibliography).

victimarii who were ordered to carry out the Senate's instructions.¹⁵ Such a duty appears especially unusual for the *victimarii*, given the specific role they played within sacrifices. The scene has come under recent scrutiny by Roger Woodard (2013: 68), who sees significance in the role of the *victimarii* as 'cultic specialists in the immolation ... of sacrificial victims', arguing in this context that the books were "sacrificed" by the cult personnel who are conspicuously associated with the masses and the military' — a point of significance within the context of a dispute over the potential revelation of dangerous knowledge to the wider populace.¹⁶ The decision underscored the Senate's authority, as well as emphasizing the status of the *victimarii* as easily recognizable public servants who obeyed their orders.

LITERARY EVIDENCE FOR VICTIMARII

Taken at face value, the practical importance of sacrificial attendants within public rituals suggests that this should have been a position that brought with it a degree of importance and prestige. However, such a view is not immediately apparent within the surviving literary texts, all of which were written by members of the élite, who perceived these men as being socially beneath them. Such superiority certainly is suggested by Cicero in the *Pro Milone* (65), in which he deals with the testimony of a *popa* named Licinius regarding a plot to murder Pompey. Cicero expresses incredulity that the words of such a man would be heeded, citing both his profession and unknown background (*nescio qui*) as reasons to suspect his statement. Asconius's commentary on the *Pro Milone* refers to this Licinius as a *sacrificulus* (minor priest), and similarly stresses his lowly background (*de plebe*), as well as adding the curious detail that his duties involved the purification of households.¹⁷ We also see a hostile satirical reference to sacrificial attendants in Persius (6.73–4), in which the narrator rails against various forms of miserliness, asking why he should be forced to go hungry while a *popa* should have a fat belly, once again drawing attention to the shared perception of those who worked as sacrificial attendants as belonging to the social underclass, but at the same time revealing their prominence as a

¹⁵ Livy 40.29.14; Val. Max. 1.1.2. See also: Dumézil, 1996: 522; Turfa, 2012: 134.

¹⁶ Cf. Plut. *Num.* 22.5; Plin. *HN* 13.84–8; Lactant. *Div. inst.* 1.22.5.

¹⁷ Asc. *Mil.* 51C; Clark, 1895: 56; Fotheringham, 2013: 169, 308. R.G. Lewis (2006: 254) has asserted that 'sacrificulus' refers to a 'petty-priest' who was engaged as a 'private-enterprise diviner' of the sort typically frowned upon by the state. This follows the generally hostile usage of the term in Livy (25.1.8; 39.8.3; 39.16.8). However, the hostile interpretation is not used exclusively even in Livy (consider, also, the *rex sacrificulus*; Festus, s.v. 'Sacrificulus'). Furthermore, this does not fit with the details that Asconius provides about Licinius's purificatory duties. These appear closer to those of the lictor mentioned in Ovid's *Fasti*, who might be employed to perform the purificatory rites for households that had suffered a bereavement; Ov. *Fast.* 2.23–6; Festus, s.v. 'Everriator'; Frazer, 1929: II, 279–83; Lennon, 2013: 143.

professional group (Harvey, 1981: 202).¹⁸ This perception of *victimarii* as ‘inferior’ resulted in considerable embarrassment for one leading aristocrat:

eximiae vero nobilitatis adulescens Cornelius Scipio, cum plurimis et clarissimis familie suae cognominibus abundaret, in servile Serapionis appellationem vulgi sermon inpactus est, quod huiusce nominis victimarii <per> quam similis erat. neque illi aut morum probitas aut respectus tot imaginum quo minus hac contumelia aspergeretur opitulata sunt.

Cornelius Scipio, a young man of truly exceptional nobility who was well-placed with many famous family names, was forced by public gossip into the servile name of Serapio because he looked very much like a *victimarius* of that name. Neither the honesty of his habits nor respect for so many ancestral images brought him relief from this sordid abuse.¹⁹

The low status of those engaged as *victimarii*, combined with the relative danger and dirtiness of the role, meant that it was not a seemly profession or role for a member of the élite — a fact that was exploited in the literary representation of vilified emperors. Suetonius (*Cal.* 32.3) recounts that Caligula once attended a sacrificial ceremony dressed in the guise of a *popa*, and that when the victim was brought forward, instead of striking the animal, he raised the sacrificial hammer and murdered the *cultrarius*. Donna Hurley (1993: 128) took this to be an indication of Caligula’s unpredictability and bloodthirstiness, but it also demonstrates his willingness to dress in inappropriate attire and act in ways that were unseemly for an emperor — facts that Suetonius repeatedly went out of his way to highlight (*Cal.* 52). Such disapproval is apparent also in the *Historia Augusta*’s description of Commodus, who would dress in the garb of a *victimarius* and make the sacrificial offerings in person, which is mentioned as part of a catalogue of unacceptable behaviour on the part of the emperor, including the more famous staged fights in the arena.²⁰ Much later, in the fourth century AD, the last pagan emperor Julian tried to demonstrate his piety publicly by performing what even his loyal supporter Ammianus Marcellinus sees (22.12.6) as an excessive number of animal sacrifices in the run up to the invasion of Persia. While making preparations at Antioch, his actions and demeanour led to his being mocked for many reasons, including his behaviour during sacrifices: ‘itidemque victimarius pro sacricola dicebatur ad crebritatem hostiarum alludentibus multis, et culpabatur hinc oportune, cum ostentationis gratia vehens licenter pro sacerdotibus sacra ...’ (‘The number of his sacrifices earned him the nickname of *victimarius* instead of *sacriocola*, and he was rightly criticized for the ostentatious joy which he took in carrying the sacred objects himself instead of leaving the task to the inferior priesthood ...’).²¹ Given the overt hostility of the city towards Julian during his stay, such a

¹⁸ Prop. 4.3.61–2 shows a similarly hostile view of *popae*, who benefit financially from every sacrifice that is offered.

¹⁹ Val. Max. 9.14.3. Cf. Quint. *Inst.* 6.3,57.

²⁰ SHA *Comm.* 5.5 (*inter haec habitu victimarii victimas immolavit*); Rike, 1987: 120.

²¹ Amm. Marc. 22.14.3 (trans. W. Hamilton (1986), adapted).

nickname was obviously intended as an insult, while the criticism he received was based on the fact that by carrying the sacred instruments he had stepped outside the expected role of an aristocratic male.²²

The picture offered by literary reports is revealing, but also unsurprising. Jobs that were considered to be dirty, dangerous, or both, were regularly assigned to slaves or freedmen, especially if they required a level of practical expertise. But despite the constant exposure to the blood and filth of sacrifices, the *victimarius* was not classed in the same bracket of unclean professions as pimps or undertakers, and their function was undoubtedly considered to be essential. Moreover, condemnation by the literary élite does not point automatically to their position being one that led to social exclusion, sanction or criticism. On the contrary, the epigraphic evidence for the *victimarii* indicates a structured, respected and hierarchical system in which their profession was viewed as something to be stated proudly. At times this is observable in even the most basic ways, for example on a tombstone from Brundisium commemorating the public *victimarius* Eros, which uses the rough images of the *culter* and the axe to announce the trade of the deceased to the viewer.²³ Like the flute-players that accompanied the animals on the way to sacrifice, the *victimarii* were organized under the auspices of a *collegium*.²⁴ Within the city of Rome they were based within the *castra victimariorum*, the location of which regrettably is unknown, but which again indicates a high degree of organization within the profession at least at the level of state rituals.²⁵

Bringing together these various sources of information for *victimarii*, Stefan Weinstock (1958: 2,484–5) identified three core areas in which sacrificial attendants performed their duties. The first was within the administration of public religious rites during the Republic, carrying out sacrifices on behalf of the state. The second branch came later, and was connected specifically to the service of the emperor, and Weinstock included in this category iconographic depictions of *victimarii* sacrificing during rites performed by, or attended by, the emperor himself. Weinstock also pointed to a number of epigraphically attested cases that may relate to imperial slaves or freedmen who served as *victimarii*.²⁶ Finally, Weinstock highlighted the repeated references from the

²² Lib. 12.79–83, however, praises Julian's remarkable piety in this instance, demonstrating that his performances were at least open to interpretation (but also that such behaviour was exceptional). Cf. Rike, 1987: 57; Smith, 1995: 18–19; Testa, 2006: 244–5, n. 16.

²³ AE (1964: 134).

²⁴ CIL VI 971 (*colleg(ium) victimarior(um) qui ipsi et sacerdotibus et / magistr(atibus) et senatui apparent*); Latte, 1960: 383–4; *ThesCRA* 2.a 116; Gladigow, 1972: 302.

²⁵ Lawrence Richardson (1992: 79) noted that the *castra victimariorum* was 'listed ... in the addenda to the regional catalogues', along with several other *castra*, but singled out the *castra victimariorum* as most curious, since it implied that this aspect of religion placed such demands on the state that it was felt to require special organization. Cf. Canina, 1841: 314; Jordan, 1871: II, 71–2; Nordh, 1949: 106; Evans, 1994: 10 n. 42.

²⁶ CIL VI 9087 (Aurelius Primitib(us)); VI 9088 (Ingenuus); VI 33781; VI 33799 (Antigonus). Cf. Sablayrolles, 1996: 231, 243.

epigraphic evidence to men serving as *victimarii* within the Roman army, and it is in the military examples that some of the most revealing information can be found. *Victimarii* are referred to in the *Digest* where they are described (along with butchers, hunters and others) as being exempt from certain duties in the military.²⁷ References to such men appear in connection with the city of Rome itself, but examples also survive from Puteoli, Lambaesis and Colonia Agrippinensis.²⁸ The military case from Puteoli (*CIL* X 3501) also suggests a degree of hierarchy within the profession, as Lucius Valerius Victor held the title of *victimarius principalis* when he died.²⁹ It also reveals that he began serving in the army at the age of eight, and continued to serve for 23 years until his death (*militavit annis XXIII vixit annis XXXI*). His young age at the beginning of his military career, combined with the stipulations about *victimarii* in the *Digest*, rules out the possibility that he served as a regular soldier, performing religious duties only when required. Instead, it seems likely that he was brought into the position specifically to be trained in the practices and procedures of religious sacrifice, and to take part in festivals and rituals observed by the legions throughout the year, which would include the military lustration referred to by Cicero.³⁰ Since we know that new arrivals in the army might be given new Roman names, he is likely to have been assigned the auspicious name of Victor (an especially appropriate name for a *victimarius* serving in the army) on arrival, with his future sacrificial role in mind.³¹ Such a scenario would fit with Michael Speidel's theory that the *victimarii* held a specific rank within the army, which Ulrich Kraft has suggested continued in practice until *c.* AD 330, at which point the prohibition of sacrifices by the army would have made their position redundant (Speidel, 1978: 46; Kraft, 2009: 64–5).³²

Despite Weinstock's summary division of the evidence into the three groups discussed, a number of depictions of *victimarii* performing sacrifices on behalf of the emperor also occur within military contexts. Across the visual narrative of Trajan's Column, for example, *victimarii* appear in a number of scenes, typically in connection with the lustration of the military camp. However, in the context of a campaign led by the emperor, the sacrifices also contribute towards honouring Trajan himself.³³ Weinstock also did not discuss an important yet anomalous example, which falls outside the boundaries of his three main categories, but which raises further questions. This concerns the curious case of the freedwoman Critonia Philema, whose tombstone records

²⁷ *Dig.* 50.6.7; Sara Phang (2005: 209) has viewed this as an exemption for these groups from general military fatigues on account of their specialized duties.

²⁸ *CIL* X 3501; VIII 18085; XIII 8292; Wheeler, 2008: 187.

²⁹ Cf. *CIL* VI 9087, which describes Aurelius Primitiv(us) as *praepositus victimariorum*.

³⁰ Cic. *Div.* 1.102. On the recruitment of religious specialists within the Roman army, see: Herz, 2002: 92.

³¹ Cf. *BGU* 423 in: Campbell, 1994: 13–14.

³² Cf. Rüpke, 1990: 173–4.

³³ Cf. Coarelli, 2000: especially plates 9, 55, 124.

that she was the ‘*popa de insula*’.³⁴ Whether *insula* refers in this case to an island, possibly the *insula Tiberina*, or to apartment blocks is unclear (Hemelrijk, 2009: 263). Regardless of the location, Jörg Rüpke (2005: II, no. 1,419) has assumed that the woman’s duties were identical to those of the state *victimarii*, and that she therefore assisted with, or personally performed, the animal sacrifices. Emily Hemelrijk has suggested an alternative possibility — that Critonia Philema was a trader in sacrificial livestock or seller of sacrificial meat. This explanation hinges, in part, on Hemelrijk’s uncertainty over whether a woman could perform the act of slaughter herself, and she has questioned whether it should be assumed that Critonia Philema ‘was a *popa* in the usual sense: a sacrificial assistant who felled the victim with the axe or mallet?’ (Hemelrijk, 2009: 263–4).³⁵ The issue is unclear, and Hemelrijk has been right to raise the possibility of an alternative explanation. All the evidence from visual representations of *victimarii* point to the profession being undertaken entirely by men, but outside the realm of grand state-sponsored sacrifices there is no clear evidence to suggest that women could not perform the act of slaughter, which was, itself, separated from the actual offering of the sacrifice — this was typically reserved for members of the élite. The issue of physical strength revolves primarily around the sacrifice of oxen, which were used only for the most lavish of offerings, whereas for the slaughter of smaller animals offered, crucially, without pomp or procession, physical strength may not have been such an obstacle. Equally, it is highly likely that male *victimarii* and *popae* outside of the military had a similar variety of duties or professions beyond the role of slaughterers, most probably as butchers, but possibly as any number of other professions. In discussing Cornelius Scipio’s physical resemblance to the slaughterer Serapio, Pliny the Elder describes the latter as *suarius negotiator*, possibly indicating that those who slaughtered sacrificial animals also might have worked as livestock traders.³⁶ Similarly, this may explain why Cicero’s *popa*, Licinius, was said to have overheard the plot to assassinate Pompeius while the conspirators were getting drunk at his establishment.³⁷

³⁴ CIL VI 9824: Critonia Q(uinti) l(iberta) Philema / *popa de insula* / Q(uinti) Critoni / (mulieris) l(iberti) Dassi / scalptoris VCLARI(i) / sibi suisque poster(isque) / eor(um).

³⁵ Cf. Foxhall, 2013: 139.

³⁶ See n. 19. Cf. Livy 22.25.18–19, and Val. Max. 3.4.4, on the ‘sordid’ (*sordidus*) origins of C. Terentius Varro (cos. 216 BC) who, according to Livy and Valerius, was the son of a butcher and in his youth worked in his father’s shop.

³⁷ Cic. Mil. 65 (*apud se ebrios factos*); Asc. Mil. 51C. Asconius’s reference to Licinius’s role of purifying families points to a similar extension of the *popa*’s religious duties (n. 17). Such ambiguity also appears in Greek dramatic representations of the *mageiros* in New Comedy. John Wilkins (2000: 369–71) highlighted three key roles for this stock character: ‘He dismembered sacrificial animals; he sold meat in the market, and he was available for hire as a private cook’.

SOCIAL STATUS

When we consider the role, position and responsibilities of the *victimarii*, it is clear that the profession entailed a number of duties that could be viewed as essential to religious life in Roman society, and in this area the aristocracy may be said to have depended on the *victimarii*. Considering them alongside other officials involved in Roman religion, Marietta Horster (2007: 334–6) has placed these sacrificial attendants slightly lower down the social ladder from the *apparitores*, those men who served Roman magistrates in positions such as *scribae*, *lictors*, *viatores* and *praecones*, all of whom were required to perform specialist roles and who, unlike the *victimarii*, were paid a fixed salary at the expense of the state.³⁸ A far more detailed exploration of the social position and significance of the *apparitores*, provided by Nicholas Purcell (1983), demonstrated the potential for advancement that came with such offices and the draw that such opportunities had for those originally from outside the city of Rome, as well as stressing that the aristocracy took care to prevent their gaining too great a degree of prominence (Purcell, 1983: esp. 131–4, 138–42). The majority of *apparitores* were freedmen who accompanied magistrates, not just within Rome, but also in the provinces, where they might serve on a governor's staff (Purcell, 1983: 130–1). Nor were they limited to administrative positions; they might also hold religious offices that similarly came with social prestige and the opportunity to garner further favour and contacts.³⁹ While evidence for the *victimarii* is relatively sparse in this area, some have highlighted specific examples from the epigraphic evidence from outside Italy which may point to *victimarii* who were part of the entourage of provincial governors, for example in the case of the military *victimarius* commemorated at Colonia Agrippinensis, who David Breeze argued was likely to have been attached to the staff of the governor of Germania.⁴⁰ As such, the position of *victimarius* should be viewed as comparable to other offices held by those lower down the social ladder — a position that came with possibilities for advancement and potential access to the sorts of additional offices that were so essential for freedmen who wished to progress within Roman society.

Yet despite the importance of their role and the need for them to possess specialist knowledge in order to perform their duties with precision and skill, it is also clear that it was a profession that entailed a degree of disdain from the

³⁸ Cf. Purcell, 1983; Purcell, 2001; Fuhrmann, 2012: 61–6. The potentially greater degree of organization of the *victimarii* as a group (suggested by the existence of a *castra victimariorum*) does, however, raise the possibility that the office was one that received considerable recognition from the state. The use of the *victimarii* as the officers tasked by the senate with burning the books of Numa (see n. 15) also suggests that the group could be viewed, more generally, as the servants of the magistrates.

³⁹ For example, *ILS* 8833; Purcell, 1983: 131.

⁴⁰ *CIL* XIII 8292; Breeze, 1969: 115. Cf. Breeze, 1969: 319; Eck, 1992: 154; Rives, 2013: 134.

upper classes, who would not stoop to performing such duties themselves, and who would pour scorn on those from their ranks who did. The position was not reviled, but nor was it entirely respectable from the point of view of the aristocracy, and so the extent to which *victimarii* constituted a marginalized group becomes a necessary but complicated question. It is also important to consider how such marginalization by the élite might be achieved, since it was not a straightforward process. We have already seen one key method of marginalization in the literary reports, which treat *victimarii* with disdain, or otherwise as an afterthought.⁴¹ Such treatment continued within visual depictions, as well as within the sacrificial rituals themselves, and it appears that in the performance of their role, *victimarii* took on a number of personal or professional aspects that overlapped with less favourably viewed groups or individuals.

We have observed already that the *victimarii* were most clearly recognizable in visual depictions of sacrifice through their dress, stripped to the waist in anticipation of the extremely bloody work that would soon follow. When referring to the *victimarii*'s semi-naked depiction in Roman iconography, John North (2012: 73) has viewed this as indicative of their slave status, yet this is unlikely to have been a firm rule, given the number of freedmen *victimarii* attested in the epigraphic record.⁴² This does not change the fact, however, that their dress marked them out in this context as lower than others within the sacrificial scene. In addition to their semi-naked portrayal, the robe that was worn by the *victimarius*, the *limus*, was itself associated with those of low status.⁴³ The striking image of the stripped *victimarius*, wearing a garment that was designed primarily for its practicality, automatically appears to be in contrast to the élite, who we are told would attend sacrifices in pure, white robes that emphasized their piety and their physical and ritual purity, but that, in this context, also emphasized their social superiority.⁴⁴ Regardless of the accuracy of their depictions, the use of dress within artistic representations is, as Jaś Elsner (1998: 92–4) observed, a key means of communicating status to the viewer.⁴⁵ Even the name of the robe itself was tainted by ambiguity, because although it was commonly used to refer to the garment, the word *limus* was used by a wide range of

⁴¹ Cf. SHA *Hadr.* 14.3.3.

⁴² The view that *victimarii* were always slaves has been implied also by Francesca Prescendi (2008: 36). Cf. Huet, 2005: 99; Ekroth, 2014: 328. Walter Eder (1980: 43–4) attempted to argue (using insufficient data) for diverging practices in this regard between the city of Rome and the provinces. For a detailed rebuttal, see: Weiss, 2004: 139–40.

⁴³ See: Weinstock, 1958: 2,483 ('eine Version des Lendenschurzes der Sklaven'). Cf. Rodenwaldt, 1935: 12–13; Pollini, 2012: 245; Rüpke, 2007: 140, 147.

⁴⁴ See Festus, *s.v.* 'pura vestimenta', which specifies that the robes worn by priests (*sacerdotes*) who offer sacrifices must be free from any stain (*macula*), which offers a further contrast with the *victimarii*, whose clothes inevitably would be stained by the nature of their profession.

⁴⁵ Cf. Madigan, 2012: chapter 1.

Republican and early Imperial authors to refer to mud, filth or other non-specific forms of dirt.⁴⁶

The connection between the *limus* and slavery has been restated recently by Alan Cameron (2011: 601–2), who has referred to a stipulation found within the decree from the *municipium* of Irni in Spain (the same decree that outlined the salaries for *apparitores*) that ruled that aediles could be accompanied by ‘public slaves . . . girded with a *limus*’ (*servos communes . . . limo cinctos*), following a similar formula to that of the *Lex Coloniae Genetivae* (LXII.16–17), which also refers to public slaves wearing the *limus* (*publicos cum cincto limo*).⁴⁷ Servius describes the *limus* as being designed to cover a *popa* from their navel to their feet, and states that it was bordered with purple.⁴⁸ We see similar uses of colour, and especially the use of red/purple as a means of marking out those involved in bloody professions in the Roman world. The *lex Puteolana* specifies that torturers and executioners should be forced to wear red clothing while on business within the city, making them deliberately conspicuous, and thus avoidable for those groups who had to avoid contact with death.⁴⁹ Everything about the *limus* could serve as a reminder to onlookers of the lower status of those who wore it.

When the moment of sacrifice arrived another drama was acted out, and in a way that drew further comparison between the *victimarii* and unclean groups — this time by making them analogous to the executioner. Before beginning the processes of slaughter the *victimarius* was required to pause and ask permission from the priest making the offering to perform the deed, speaking the word ‘agone?’ (Shall I strike?). Ovid implies that the *victimarius* could not strike until ordered to do so, and offers this as one of a number of possible origins for the name of the festival of Agonalia.⁵⁰ The actions of the *victimarius* in this case

⁴⁶ Lucr. 5.496 draws a comparison with *faex*, in which the removal of *limus* leaves other elements pure (*pura*). Cf. Livy 2.5.3–4; Verg. *G.* 1.116, 2.188; Hor. *Sat.* 1.1.59; Ov. *Fast.* 3.759; Ov. *Pont.* 4.217. Hor. *Sat.* 2.4.80 views *gravis limus* as a source of revulsion, this time in connection with an unclean slave serving food on unclean dishes.

⁴⁷ See also: González and Crawford, 1986: 153, 202; Crawford, 1996: I, 400, 433; Horster, 2007: 335; Griffith, 2013: 237.

⁴⁸ Serv. *Aen.* 12.120 (*limus autem est vestis, qua ab umbilico usque ad pedes prope teguntur pudenda poparum. haec autem vestis habet in extremo sui purpuram limam*). Cf. Gell. *NA* 12.3.3; Gladigow, 1972: 313.

⁴⁹ *AE* (1971: 88), in: Gardner and Wiedemann, 1991: no. 22. William Warde-Fowler (1911: 194–5) raised the possibility that the authority to perform sacrifices might have been one of the origins of the purple stripe on the borders of the senatorial toga (although cf. Reinhold (1970: 9)). Alison Griffith (2013: 237) sees the switch to the purple-bordered *limus* as occurring at the same time as slave attendants began to be used as *popae* in sacrifices. A scholion on Servius’s commentary on the *Aeneid* notes also that soldiers in the Roman army were referred to as *russati* because of their red cloaks, which masked the stains of blood (*aspersiones sanguinis*); Thilo and Hagen, 1884: 172–3; Lennon, 2013: 151. Conversely, the Samnites are criticized in Livy for their gleaming armour, which inevitably would have been made ugly (*deformia*) by the bloodshed of battle (Livy 9.40.6).

⁵⁰ Ov. *Fast.* 1.319–22. Cf. Michels, 1967: 73, 182; Scullard, 1981: 60–1; Miller, 1992: 19–20; Frazel, 2002: 89–90; Scheid, 2011: 266.

appear to follow a similar pattern to that of the executioner, who, before carrying out his duty, was required to receive the order to strike from a magistrate, who would speak the words ‘age lege’, commanding the sentence to be carried out in accordance with the law. The comparison between the sacrificial attendant and the *carnifex* was drawn also by Burkhard Gladigow (1972: 312–13), who noted Seneca the Elder’s use of ‘age lege’ for rhetorical effect within a *controversia*, referring to an unlawful execution.⁵¹ These comparable examples suggest that the low-born citizens employed within the various occupations connected to ritual killing shared some degree of overlap, since neither had the power or authority to act on their own initiative. Instead, both the *victimarius* and the *carnifex* were servants of those above them, and both of their professions required them to act only under exact circumstances where all rituals and procedures had been observed under the supervision of those in authority.

VICTIMARII IN ROMAN ICONOGRAPHY

Various factors combined to ensure that the *victimarii* were recognized as members of a profession that was fit only for members of the lower ranks of Roman society, even if they were not reviled or stained with *infamia* as others might have been. We must now move on to consider the various ways in which *victimarii* were presented in Roman iconography. While we must confine ourselves to examining only a small selection of the evidence, a number of revealing points may be made based on some of the most common forms of representation, in which the status of the *victimarii* can be viewed on the one hand as being hindered or diminished, but on the other revealing a socially prominent and prestigious profession. We have noted already the role of the *limus* in drawing attention to their low status, since this allowed the *victimarii* to be identified easily or, rather, ensured that they were not confused with the priestly members of the social élite. However, when representations of the *victimarii* are examined a number of other socially revealing factors become apparent.

The visual depiction of *victimarii* is one of the few areas where there has been some degree of focused study, most notably in Fless’s *Opferdiener und Kultmusiker auf Stadtrömischen Historischen Reliefs: Untersuchungen zur Ikonographie, Funktion und Benennung* (1995), which considers the *victimarii* within the broader context of sacrificial attendants and ritual procedures (pp. 70–8). Rather than focusing on the social position of *victimarii*, Fless attempted to match literary descriptions of the *victimarii*’s clothes, tools, stance, and so on, with the evidence provided by visual representations, and to map changes in procedures over time. Such an approach has its hazards

⁵¹ Sen. *Controv.* 9.2.22. Cf. Livy 26.16.3–4; Prieur, 1988: 179.

due to the scarcity of literary evidence as well as the chronological and geographical diversity of the visual material, and the possibility of stylistic variations (problems that accompany any attempt to study such an underrepresented group in Roman society). As Elsner has restated recently (2012: 157), ‘in dealing with imagery we are dealing not with sacrificial realities but with sacrificial representations — with ideology as opposed to actuality’. However, Fless’s approach also failed to consider the extent to which these representations themselves contributed to the generally shared perceptions about the social status of *victimarii*. Not only is this an important issue within the debate about how *victimarii* were portrayed, but it also helps to explain precisely why *victimarii* were depicted in the various ways that we most typically see. Since, as Elsner has noted, we are seeing ideology, not actuality, the messages about social identity and superiority/inferiority may be seen to be enhanced even further in visual representations.

While there does not appear to have been a single standard way of depicting *victimarii* during sacrifices, their lower status is asserted in a variety of ways. A particularly revealing example of this appears on the sacrificial scene of a sarcophagus from Mantua (second century CE), depicting a series of events connected to a military commander (Ryberg, 1955: 164–5, plate 58).⁵² The altar is positioned in the centre of the scene and the *victimarii* are shown to be in the process of sacrificing the bull. Their dress, pose and equipment all follow established patterns of representation.⁵³ The crouching *victimarius* forces the bull’s head down not only by holding its horn with his right hand, but also by apparently hooking the animal’s nose with his left thumb. A decorative border is clearly visible around the edges of the *limus*, and attached to this is a pouch containing the sacrificial knives to be used after the bull has been stunned by the strike about to be delivered by the second *victimarius*, who is only visible from the waist upwards, and who is equipped with an axe, rather than a hammer. Aside from the relative crowding of the scene the depiction is, in many ways, exemplary of the standard sacrificial pose, and serves to illustrate the contradictory status of the *victimarius* within these social, religious and iconographic contexts.

In visual terms, the *victimarii* are marked out as socially inferior to others within the scene not only by their clothes, but also by their posture. The *victimarius* at the forefront of the image is, out of necessity, crouching while holding down the bull’s head before the killing stroke, but this also serves to reinforce his status as he looks directly up towards the sacrificing general for instruction. This is made all the more apparent when the wider scene is considered, because the *victimarius*’s pose most closely resembles that of the barbarian suppliants to the left of the sacrificial ceremony. The result is that

⁵² Cf. Reinsberg, 2006: 202.

⁵³ Natalie Kampen (1981: 52–3) noted the striking similarity in pose between the figures on the Mantova sarcophagus and other, similar scenes from sarcophagi of this era. Cf. Rodenwaldt, 1935: 10; Loeffler, 1957: especially fig. 1.

neither group is presented as being in control within the scene (Dowling, 2006: 266–7).⁵⁴ The kneeling stance therefore holds both practical and artistic meaning. However, both *victimarii* within the scene also display a commonly occurring feature that, in artistic terms, lends them a greater degree of prominence and power, in that both possess highly muscular physiques, and in the case of the *victimarius* situated behind the bull, his pose and position with the axe undoubtedly make him one of the central points of focus. The muscular forms of *victimarii* are a ubiquitous feature of their representation, and while this would have been the natural result of a profession where strength would often be a necessary prerequisite, it also imbues their portrayals with a heroic quality, making them a particularly striking and eye-catching feature. As a result, even in scenes where they are stripped to the waist, the *victimarii* hold a degree of attention that must, to a certain extent, translate into visual prestige.

The significance of the kneeling *victimarius* is emphasized most clearly in the *lustratio* scene led by Marcus Aurelius, located on the Arch of Constantine (Ryberg, 1955: 115, plate 40). While the emperor sacrificing at the altar unsurprisingly commands the centre of the scene, he is flanked on either side by two crouching *victimarii*, controlling a ram (left) and a boar (right). On the far left is a standing *victimarius*, identifiable by the axe that he carries in the left hand, which is no longer visible. With the right hand this *victimarius* holds by the horn a bull, which stands directly behind the emperor himself. This crowded scene allows all three animals to be shown, suggesting that a *suovetaurilia* sacrifice is taking place, presumably for the lustration of the army (one of the occasions where attendants with lucky names had to be used). In this instance none of the three *victimarii* is fully stripped to the waist, but all three wear loose-fitting garments that leave the shoulder and upper chest bare and once again mark them out from both the aristocrats and the soldiers within the scene. Unlike the majority of figures, the two crouching *victimarii* are positioned facing directly outwards. Their crouching pose automatically makes them seem diminutive next to the upright emperor and surrounding soldiers, but, in addition, they also appear to have been deliberately further reduced in scale. One possibility is that this is intended to highlight the young age of the attendants, as in the case of the standing *camillus* to the right of the emperor who holds an incense box (a traditional role of some prestige, reserved for the children of noble families).⁵⁵ This seems unlikely, however, since the faces of both crouching *victimarii*, although badly faded, appear originally to have been portrayed with short beards — a common artistic feature of *victimarii*, which

⁵⁴ F.S. Naiden (2013: 17, 185) examines similarly hierarchical elements within ancient Greek animal sacrifice, stressing not only the relationship between priests/officials and attendants, but also between participants and audience members.

⁵⁵ Serv. *Aen.* 11.543; Macrob. *Sat.* 3.8.7; Wissowa, 1912: 496; Boschung, 2012b: 312. Cf. Gordon, 1990: 203; Mantle, 2002: 91–9; Madigan, 2012: 84.

served to distinguish them from other participants, especially in images dating from before the second century CE.⁵⁶

Reduction in size is an especially effective way of undermining the prestige or prominence of groups or individuals.⁵⁷ A clear example of this appears within a Pompeian wall-painting honouring the household *Lares* and *Genius*, in which the scale of the various characters appears to reflect their perceived importance within the scene.⁵⁸ The largest figures are the *Lares* who flank the scene, followed by the primary sacrificer at the altar, who is identifiable by the fact that his head is veiled as he places an offering on the altar. Slightly smaller is the flute-player who stands to the left of the altar, while the smallest two individuals are the *camillus* on the right, who holds the various sacred implements on a tray behind the main sacrificer, and the *victimarius*, who is slightly further removed on the left, and who is guiding a decorated boar towards the altar. Despite his small stature, some attempt has been made to indicate his muscularity even here as he approaches the altar. These two figures are by far the smallest in the picture, in spite of the integral roles they play within the ritual procedure, and once again this must, in part, be the result of their perceived lesser importance within the scene — a factor that can even lead to the reduction in scale of the sacrificial victims themselves (Clarke, 2003: 82–4, especially p. 84). However, in images such as these, regardless of their size or crouching stance, the *victimarii* possess an essential attribute that brought with it considerable cultural currency, namely proximity to power. In each of the depictions examined we see that despite the various interpretations that may suggest that they were marginalized, in fact sacrificial attendants were constantly engaging with members of the élite, and might even appear prominently displayed alongside the emperor himself, who required their services to complete the sacrifices successfully.

These conflicting images and ideas do not come as a surprise, given our knowledge of Roman iconographic patterns. In assessing the wider patterns within Roman sacrificial reliefs, Richard Gordon noted (1990: 205–6) that:

Sacrificial reliefs are only about sacrifice in a very peculiar sense. They allude to a familiar public event in a schematic fashion which enables them to highlight the role of the sacrificant ... To be sacrificant in this type of sacrifice is not to labour. Just as the Roman elite owned slaves to perform the labour required to produce their lives of spectacular idleness, so ‘sacrificing’ meant to introduce the ceremony by making the preliminary offerings... The labour involved in sacrifice is, in the visual record, vividly performed by only muscular slaves; the social status of the sacrificant is marked by his separation from that labour.

⁵⁶ Paul Zanker (1995: 218) and Dietrich Boschung (2012a: 296) both have noted the presence of beards in representations of members of the military. Given the particular context of the scene, the *victimarii* present likely would have been attached to the legion in question.

⁵⁷ Similarly, on the use of scale as an indicator of status among *ministri* for the *Lares Augusti*, see: Madigan, 2012: 6.

⁵⁸ See: Ling, 1991: 163; <http://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=1285> (last consulted 17.06.2015).

As a result, it is perhaps natural that iconographic reliefs, which were intended to focus on the élite, should choose to try to relegate the importance of the attendants, no matter how vital to proceedings they may have been. However, an additional aspect of Roman iconographic convention hindered portrayal of *victimarii*, which concerned the long-standing reluctance to portray scenes of extreme violence in detail. Based on surviving evidence, this appears to have extended not only to the actual slaughter of the sacrificial victim, but also to its post-sacrificial dissection, which, as we have noted, is shown in only one example from the reign of Trajan. Even in this scene the dissection of the bull is performed at the fringe of the image, while the central *victimarius* himself looks away from the victim and towards the procession of the great and the good, which has continued on its way towards the temple, simultaneously drawing the viewer's gaze to the same point of focus (Ryberg, 1955: 128–9, plate 45; Beard, North and Price, 1998: II, 179 (7.4d); Lennon, 2013: 105).

The reluctance to show the moment of death has been discussed extensively by Huet (2005), who has presented a number of possible interpretations as to why this may have been the case. One particularly intriguing suggestion, similarly noted by Gerhart Rodenwaldt, is that the pause before the moment of death not only creates heightened anticipation, but also captures the moment of query from the *victimarius* to the presiding official — *agone?* (Huet, 2005: 103; Rodenwaldt, 1935: 10–12). If correct, such an interpretation would stress once again the social and religious dominance of the élite over the lowly attendant. What is more certain, however, is that to depict the process of slaughter and the physical killing of the victim would be to make the *victimarii* unequivocally the central figures of the scene, which would work against the idea that, regardless of who performed the act of slaughter, the act of sacrifice, as Gordon and Huet rightly stressed, was completed by priests (albeit from a safe distance). Therefore, by avoiding depictions of the process of slaughter or the dissection of sacrificial victims for extispicy or butchery, Roman society ensured that the *victimarii* were rarely seen to be engaged in one of their most important and prominent roles within ritual procedures. In an especially perceptive discussion of the purposes of sacrifice, John Scheid (1998: 528–9; 2005: 276) pointed to elements within the act of sacrifice that establish or reinforce hierarchies between superior and subordinate groups. Scheid's particular argument relates to the relationships between gods and humans or, alternatively, between humans and animals. Based on how we see groups such as the *victimarii* represented in sacrificial scenes, we see further evidence that within the human realm, specifically, considerable effort is given to acknowledging and prominently displaying a clear gradient of social superiority, which prevented the *victimarii* from becoming the undisputed focal point within visual representations of sacrifice.

The essential role of sacrificial attendants cannot be denied, yet by emphasizing the role of the élite this automatically resulted in a degree of deliberate marginalization of *victimarii* within iconography. Their status and position within such scenes may be read in both positive and less positive ways. For

while they are shown to be physically powerful and an essential element within sacrificial scenes, positioned in close proximity to those considerably further up the social ladder, their inferiority next to these figures is reasserted frequently. While this could be achieved through obvious methods, such as the reduction in size within the sacrificial scene, we see that even with something as practical as the pose they adopted for the slaughter of cattle it is possible to see the subservience of the attendants to the presiding officials, who would ultimately have the final authority to carry out the sacrifice without having to stoop to carrying out the act of killing. Such a situation would seem to reflect the differing pictures offered for *victimarii* across our other ancient sources.

CONCLUSION

As was noted at the start of our study, the evidence for *victimarii* in the Roman world is at once revealing and, at times, contradictory. However, these contradictions enhance rather than hinder our understanding of the role and status of sacrificial attendants in the Roman world because they allow us to see them from a variety of social vantage points. Like so many other groups and professions, the *victimarii* could be said to have been marginalized in numerous ways through both literature and art, being subjected to humour, derision or casual dismissal by various writers. Aristocrats and, in the cases of Caligula, Commodus and Julian, even emperors could be ridiculed for looking or behaving too much like those engaged in this profession. The role of the *victimarius* was seen to be beneath their dignity partly because of both the mess and danger accompanying it, and partly because, as the élite carried out the role that made the entire sacrifice ‘official’, to perform any other function would be to take on a lesser role, diminishing their status and public prominence. The close similarities at times between *victimarii* and more reviled groups, such as executioners, reinforced these views and would be noticed more publicly, since the overlapping features of sacrifice and execution were acts that were played out for all to see.

Unlike some other groups, however, the *victimarii* were not, and indeed could not be, hidden from view due to the essential roles that they played in religious proceedings. These roles required expertise and precision, not only to assure the success of offerings through the careful avoidance of ritual errors, but on a more practical level, also to ensure the physical safety of all others present (which would often include the emperor himself). In artistic portrayals of the *victimarii*, whether they are involved in leading the animals in procession or preparing to slaughter them at the altar, their appearance serves to remind the viewer of their lowly status, which is emphasized all the more explicitly when they appear alongside the aristocrats who will be completing the sacrifice by making the preliminary offerings. At the same time, however, the strength required to perform these duties and the fact that the *victimarii*, because of the

limus, had to appear semi-naked, meant that *victimarii* were presented in a more idealized manner that emphasized their muscular frames, and gave them a heroic attribute that otherwise might be denied to them.

Some of our most revealing evidence comes from tombstone commemorations written and erected by the sacrificial attendants themselves. These corroborate various statements from the literary evidence, such as the recurring use of ‘lucky’ names which, due to their slave/freed statuses, could be assigned to them specifically with their role as *victimarii* in mind. Such names could even be tailored to suit the context in which they performed their duties, as with the recruitment of L. Valerius Victor to serve in the legions. Those who did serve in the army did so as a specialist division whose status and importance were recognized in law, and might be found anywhere where the Roman army was present, even in the prestigious Praetorian Cohort or on the staff of a provincial governor. Moreover, from the view of the *victimarii* themselves, this was not a profession to be kept hidden. Rather, the evidence from tombstones (status symbols in and of themselves) points to it having been a profession that came with its own hierarchy, which could be revealed proudly to passers-by both through words and images of the axe and *culter*. As a result, there appears to be a need for greater attention to be paid to the *victimarii*, and for them to be incorporated more fully within wider discussions not only of sacrificial procedure but also, more generally, religious life and experience in ancient Rome. The position offered one of the best opportunities for men and women of lower birth to become involved more directly in some of the most prominent rites of the state, and for an ex-slave to stand shoulder to shoulder with the emperor himself.

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