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Tibullus, the Gauls, and Anti-War Elegy

This paper addresses some themes of Roman elegy and in particular Tibullus' noted poem 1.10. In the 1970's it had been popular to ascribe an anti-war sentiment to the genre of elegy but, more recently, there is a tendency to reject any anti-war principle in the Tibullan corpus, and to regard the antipathy to bloodshed voiced in the poems as a personal preference rather than a general prescription.

Tibullus 1.10 begins with an expression of horror at the invention of weaponry, goes on to renounce war in favor of love and closes with a vision of the goddess Peace proffering her bounty. These meditations are occasioned by the fact that the narrator has just been summoned to war. Many readers have seen an autobiographical note here, for we know that Tibullus took part in his patron Messalla's campaign against the Aquitanian Gauls ca. 29-28 BC. However, this inference is largely based upon one line, "fend off from me the bronze missiles!" (*nobis aerata...depellite tela*, 1.25), which is taken as referring to Aquitanian weapons, as the Aquitanians were noted copper-miners, and the Romans employed iron weapons. But such reasoning overlooks the fact that the Aquitanians did not use bronze weapons either; these had disappeared from Europe for centuries (see Diodorus 5.30.4). In fact the poet is archaizing, speaking of the bronze spears of the Homeric epics. The line does not reflect any personal experience of Tibullus, but expresses his rejection of the traditional hero's role. Further, 1.10 cannot be called anti-war in principle without taking account of another of Tibullus' poems, 1.7, dedicated to Messalla, which celebrates his triumph over the Aquitanians in strongly militaristic terms ("the Aude trembles, conquered by mighty soldiery", *tremere fortis milite victus Atax*, 1.4). To accept 1.7 and 1.10 as depicting the same event is to accept a very great contradiction in Tibullus' mindset.

The matter is best explained by understanding 1.10 not as autobiography, but as a lament over the Roman civil wars, and thus belonging to the tradition which includes Horace's Epodes 7 and 13. The desire voiced in 1.10, that the bucolic pursuits of the Italian countryside be kept safe from war, fits such a theme. Tibullus' poems, and Roman poets in general, object to fratricidal civil war, not to wars against barbarians at the borders of the Roman realm. However, the "anti-war" strain is more extensive than might appear from such an analysis. The theme goes back as far as Aristophanes and continues through the fourth century, where it developed into the antithesis of peace among Greeks vs. war against barbarians, and went through further mutations in Hellenistic philosophy; all of these stages have influenced the Roman perspective. We must consider the opening of the poem, where wars and weapons are classified as a woeful invention *per se*, and where Tibullus envisions a primordial state of blissful peace (following Lucretius). War may be necessary, even glorious for those suited to it by nature. But it is a vile necessity, a sort of compromise. Tibullus does more counsel its avoidance to sensitive and amorous souls. War is an unnatural condition and the ideal human society would avoid it altogether. His aversion to warfare must be considered more than a personal preference.