Introduction

Roman military decorations, which had the collective name of *dona militaria*, literally "military gifts", spans about the millennium from the founding of the Roman Republic in 509 BC to the reign of Justinian during 527-565 AD. The earliest organized system of military decorations in the western world, *dona militaria* originated from the Greek custom of awarding a crown of laurel branches in recognition of achievement, from the gathering of spoils on the battlefield, and from the arms and equipment of the Roman army itself.

For the Romans, *dona militaria* brought to the recipient considerable personal recognition; and not unlike modern decorations, the symbolic value of the award far exceeded any intrinsic value it might have. The two highest ranking decorations, the *corona obsidionalis* and the *corona civica*, were crowns of foliage and had no intrinsic value at all.

During the period of the Republic (509-27 BC), *dona militaria* were tied to a specific feat of arms, such as the *corona muralis* which was awarded to the first man over the wall of an enemy city, and the military deed itself and not the rank of the recipient determined the nature of the award. However, a number of decorations were clearly intended for the troops, and the deed associated with several decorations was such that only senior officers could possibly qualify. Following the Republic and after the establishment of the Empire, a hierarchy of decorations based upon rank was developed whereby the more prestigious decorations were reserved for senior officers. A modern parallel is the U.S. Legion of Merit which is rarely awarded below the rank of colonel. Towards the end of the Empire, the hierarchical system broke down, and decorations were awarded sporadically and without much regard to formal rules.

The historical distance of ancient Rome has resulted in significant gaps in reconstructing *dona militaria*. Nonetheless, scholars have developed a partial picture from literary sources, inscriptions on tombstones and honorific statuary, sculptural representations of *dona militaria* including images on coins, and from those very few archeological specimens of *dona militaria* that have survived. Compounding the study of *dona militaria* and outside of the scope of this brief survey is the complex and changing rank structure and organization of Rome's military forces. Not strictly *dona militaria* and also omitted is the subject of *ornamenta triumphalia* or the triumphal ornaments of victorious generals.

The Dona Militaria

The evidence indicates there were fourteen separate decorations. With possible exception of the *clipeus*, all of the decorations appeared during the Republic, although several of these had died out by the end of the period. Each decoration is described as follows:

*Corona Obsidionalis* or *Graminea* (pl. *Coronae Obsidionales* or *Gramineum*)

The *corona obsidionalis* or siege crown was the most prestigious of the *dona militaria*. It was awarded to the officer responsible for saving many lives by lifting the siege of a city or military force. The *corona obsidionalis* was bestowed by the rescued and was made of grass or vegetation common to the site as a symbol of the soil that had been restored to the besieged. Another name for the *corona obsidionalis* is the *corona graminea* which is a crown of grass. The *corona obsidionalis* was probably the first of the specialized crowns, the earliest known example is from the 6th Century BC, but it was discontinued in the later years of the Republic. The *corona obsidionalis* was also one of the rarest decorations. Writing in the 1st Century AD, the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder could list only six recipients since the founding of the decoration.
Coruna Civica (pl. Coronae Civicae)

The corona cívica or civic crown was second in importance only to the corona obsidionalis. It was made of oak leaves, possibly because of the availability of the oak tree at nearly every front, and it was awarded to the man who saved the life of a Roman citizen in battle and then held his ground for the remainder of the day. Like the corona obsidionalis, the corona cívica was awarded to a rescuer, and its value was purely symbolic. All were eligible for the corona cívica, and its use spanned from the early part of the 2nd Century BC to the very end of dona militaria. Among the privileges attached to the corona cívica, a recipient had the right to sit with the senators at the games, who were obliged to rise at his entrance.

Beginning with the reign of Augustus (27 BC - 14 AD), the corona cívica was also adopted as an imperial emblem. The emblem was displayed over the palace of the Emperor and marked him as a savior of the people.

Corona Navalis, Classica, or Rostrata (pl. Coronae Navales, Classicae, or Rostratae)

The corona navalis was a naval crown awarded to a fleet commander who had won a significant sea battle, but it has been suggested that the crown was also awarded to the first sailor or marine to board an enemy ship in an engagement. The crown was made of gold laurel leaves interspersed with gold ships’ prows which incorporated a protruding beak or rostra used to ram enemy ships. Among the least awarded of the dona militaria, the only attested recipient is Marcus Agrippa, who earned a corona navalis for defeating the fleet of Sextus Pompeius in 36 BC.

Corona Muralis (pl. Coronae Murales)

During the Republic, the corona muralis or mural crown was awarded to the first man to scale the wall of an enemy city, enter the city by force, and survive the experience. The Romans did not grant dona militaria posthumously; and given the hazards associated with the deed, there could not have been many recipients of the corona muralis. Following the Republic, the conditions for its award were drastically changed. Instead of a decoration to any rank for being the first to successfully scale a wall of an enemy city, the corona muralis became a general-purpose decoration reserved for senior officers, although it was occasionally awarded to a centurion (a centurion led a century, an infantry formation of eighty men). The crown itself consisted of a cushion base which supported a circular representation in gold of a fortified wall with a gate, an outline of masonry, and crenelations at the top.
Coruna Vallaris or Castrensis (pl. Coronae Vallares or Castrenses)

The equivalent of the corona muralis for the first man to successfully scale the ramparts or vallares of a camp of enemy soldiers is the corona vallaris; and in the same manner as the corona muralis, the conditions for its award were altered after the Republic. The corona vallaris was also very similar in appearance to the corona muralis, except the replica of the fortified wall was square rather than round in shape. An alternate name for the corona vallaris is the corona castrensis or camp crown.

Coruna Aurea (pl. Coronae Aureae)

Lowest in status among the crowns is the corona aurea, which was a crown of leaves, probably laurel, made of gold. This crown was likely the earliest passing form Rome's Greek and Etruscan heritage. The corona aurea was an all-purpose decoration, and no limitations were placed on the rank of the recipient. It appears the corona aurea was a sort of generic crown from which the more prestigious crowns for specific deeds evolved.

Vexillium (pl. Vexilla)

The vexillium was a replica of the flag carried as a standard by legionnaires and auxiliaries. Typically, the vexillium consisted of a square or rectangular flag, sometimes with fringe along the bottom, that hung from a horizontal cross-bar attached to a shaft. When the vexillium was adopted as a decoration or the conditions for its award are not clear. Depending upon the source, the beginnings of the award can be placed as early as the late 3rd Century BC. As to the circumstances of its award, the only well-documented example pertains to Marcus Agrippa, who won a blue vexillium for defeating Marc Anthony and the Egyptian fleet at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. However, it is evident that the vexillium was a prestige award limited to officers in the rank of senior centurion and above, and that the award survived until the late 2nd Century AD or towards the end of dona militaria in general.

Hasta Pura (pl. Hastae Purae)

The decoration of the hasta pura or honorary spear, was inspired by the importance of the spear as a weapon and by its symbolism as an instrument of power. The hasta pura was awarded for wounding an enemy in single combat entered into voluntarily, and to cavalrymen who slew and stripped an enemy, until such recognition to cavalrymen was later changed to phalerae. The paucity of evidence suggests the hasta pura was primarily a post-Republic award, restricted to senior centurions and above, there being only one reference of the award during the Republic and only one example to a man in the ranks. Early awards of the hasta pura might have been an actual weapon, while it is known that a number of later awards were made of gold or silver. There appears to have been no standard design for the head of the hasta pura. Alfoldi in his article on the Roman spear (see the Bibliography) illustrates 48 different types of heads.