

How can Battlefield Archaeology contribute positively to the process of Bereavement commemoration and reconciliation?

When it comes to battlefield archaeology it is important to realize that it encompasses not only the physical remains of conflict but how those remains affect society today. This is not limited to the distant past but can also include more recent conflicts such as the First and Second World Wars, the Cold war ectera. What is recovered and how it is subsequently treated greatly impacts the representation of conflict in museums. As part of the public consciousness battlefield archaeology will always be part of the public domain and as such it can be used to bring healing and reconciliation to survivors as well as the following generations.

Medieval

Heritage of a particular area can be very important to local identity. One such example of this is the case of what to do with Richard III after his remains were positively identified in 2013 under a car park in Leicester. Two camps quickly emerged as plans to rebury the king were made, those who believed that it was the desire of the last Yorkist king to be buried in York and those who believed he should be interred with the rest of the kings in Leicester. In this debate the ideas of belonging and memorialization came to the forefront as both sides argued that they had more claim to the fallen king than any other. ¹



Fig 1²

A digital recreation of the original tomb of Richard III in Greyfriars

Church. The image is based on a combination of historical and archaeological evidence.

Another medieval example of how battlefield archaeology has effects on commemoration in society today is the site of the Battle of Agincourt. A monumental day in the history of Britain there is little evidence remaining after the intervening centuries to exactly place the battle, allowing room for alternative sites to be suggested.

Modern

In Russia an entire culture of digging has sprung up around the fallen of the Second World War. With so many thousands of men spread over such a large area it will be the work of many generations to recover them all. Those that choose to spend their time searching for the fallen, fall into two camps: White Diggers who do what they can to treat the dead with respect and identify them, and Black Diggers who look to strip the saleable items from the dead with a particular focus on identity tags as the personal focus can drive up the price. The actions of the illegal or semi-illegal 'diggers' have an impact not only on the archaeological integrity of a site but also on those survivors still waiting for news of their loved ones.

'My granduncle Heinrich had not been identified. In the years between my visit and that of the exhumation party Russian black-diggers had struck and by retrieving valuables, equipment and dog-tags had efficiently destroyed the identities of more than 119 German soldiers. By stealing their names and identities they were killed a second time. They are now gone forever.'³ Steep fine of up to one million rubles and seven year prison terms affect both white and black diggers⁴ as both are operating outside of government supervision. However, due to the size of the available terrain and the vast number of war dead these deterrents are difficult to enforce. An increase in funding,

³ Schafer

⁴ vice

equipment, and training for sanctioned archeologists would help combat the problem and allow more families the chance to experience closure.



Fig 2⁵: Two young volunteers stand in the forest taking break from searching for the war dead from 6 decades ago.

In contrast the White Diggers do everything in their power to identify the fallen and bring closure to their families. The sheer number of the dead coupled with the scale of the conflict means that recovery and reburial will be the task of generations.

“A total of 2.7 million German soldiers died on the Eastern Front, and 1.4 million German civilians were killed [...] These numbers are dwarfed by the 11.4 million missing and killed Soviet soldiers, including 3.5 million prisoners of war who died in captivity. Soviet civilian losses were even higher at 15.2 million, says Pfeiffer.’⁶

Despite the hardships, the white diggers continue to recover war dead and their efforts can bring long overdue closure to family members still grieving the loss of a loved one decades later. Through archaeological practises members of the community are given the tools to begin healing.

‘One of these is Valentina Aliyeva who came to bury the father she had not seen since she was four years old. Throughout the seven decades that passed, the only connection she had with with the lost dad she longed for was a black-and-white photograph of their old family home.’

⁵ Anon 1970

⁶ Crossland

In the United Kingdom World War II battlefield archaeology has a different tone than in the former U.S.S.R. due, in part, to the much smaller number of war graves on British soil. Airplane crashes are the most common sites of archaeological focus from The Second World War in the U.K.. There have been many changes in policy regarding ownership of crash sites and what should be done with the dead both during and after the war. In the 1960s and 70s it became exceedingly popular for amateur groups to excavate the remains of planes, with land owners selling the planes in pieces as war memorabilia. This was a dangerous hobby to undertake as unexploded ordinance was still present in the planes, costing many their limbs or lives. As more and more planes were uncovered war dead were also brought to the surface, eventually the public outcry forced the Ministry of Defence to take ownership of the crash sites as the demand for further commemoration mounted.

Museums

When speaking of commemoration it would be remiss not to at least scan the debate within museums in regard to preservation vrs restoration. When it comes to conflict it is incredibly difficult to convey the true experience of war to those simply viewing objects in a museum context. One way to demonstrate the horrors of war is to preserve items with all the damage accrued over various confrontations in order to demonstrate the power of the weapons being used. These items can become touchstones to the public, but it can also be seen as disrespectful to leave items of such important public heritage in such poor condition. In the end it comes down to the institution the items are being held by and the available funds. Through excavating sites and recovering items the memory of conflict is kept alive, for good or bad.

Within battlefield archaeology and of particular importance, Holocaust archaeology has particular challenges in that many areas were razed in an attempt to remove evidence as the Nazi army was pushed back. This has left a large number of sites where it has fallen to the local population to chose their path forward. "In some cases, single sites have been chosen as a symbol for all those in the area, thus providing a focus for commemoration and education. In others, this appears to stem from a desire to

support a particular narrative of events, to prevent whole areas being characterized by Holocaust sites or because of financial demands of preserving each and every site.”

⁷This focus on particular sites as the loci of commemoration allow the surrounding areas to recover while still respecting the memory of what happened. However, there are also opportunities for archaeologists to discover more within the abandoned and razed sites, as well as in the surrounding areas, than previously thought. “For example,

in the vicinity of all the major extermination and concentration camps throughout Europe lie dilapidated Jewish cemeteries, many of which were also used as killing and body disposal sites by the Nazis.” ⁸ These are prime examples of where battlefield archaeology can do the most good towards the process of commemoration.



Fig 3:⁹ The front gates of Auschwitz Birkenau German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp as they stand today.

⁷ Collis pg 303

⁸ Collis pg 303

⁹ Centre

Anon (1970). *Battlefield Archaeology* [Online]. Available at: <http://battlefieldarchaeology.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/battlefield-archaeology-of-world-war-ii.html> [Accessed: 27 March 2018].

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