

## Scales of Memory in the Archaeology of the Second World War

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The growing interest in archaeologies of the recent past has included attempts to link archaeology with memory in its various forms but has lacked a coherent theoretical and methodological approach. This paper outlines a model for engaging with memory in the archaeology of the Second World War, drawing on recent work in memory studies and oral history. One of the principal pitfalls in memory work is the conflation and confusion of individual and social memory: in this paper I attempt to identify and outline different forms or scales of memory: individual memory, group narratives, and social memorialisation. If we distinguish between these models in relation to Second World War archaeological sites we can assess their accuracy and usefulness and begin to trace the intricate power relations implicit in memory work. The sites in question, a Nazi prison in Berlin and a Prisoner of War camp in Poland, illustrate the contested and highly politicised nature of memory-based work and archaeological studies of this period. By opening up such sites to the popular gaze, archaeologists have the power to bring these debates into the public sphere, potentially undermining the hegemony of officially sanctioned memory and making the production of meaningful pasts a more inclusive process.

### Keywords

Conflict archaeology, historical archaeology, memory, public archaeology, Second World War

### Introduction

For the First and Second World Wars, we occupy a unique moment in time – the furthest edge of living memory, the cusp upon which history becomes archaeology.

(Saunders 2004: 5)

While the First World War may be rapidly fading from living memory, the Second World War is approaching the brink: in another generation the veteran combatants with their first-hand memories of battles and campaigns, and others with memories of the home fronts, will have disappeared. Over this period we will see a unique and irreversible change in the ways in which the Second World War is remembered, and in attitudes towards the memorials, sites and physical remains. This is a remarkable and important time to be working on the archaeology and material culture of the Second World War in conjunction with the wealth of first-hand memories that will not be available to future generations.

The vast number and global distribution of these relics and remains of the Second World War make them a promising subject for archaeological investigations, as well as for the increased involvement of the public in the research process. I believe that the potential for public interaction with memory and materiality in the public sphere constitutes a unique contribution of archaeology to the popular and scholarly understanding

of the Second World War and other 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts. The foundation of this has to be a more sophisticated understanding of memory in all its forms, and with all its problems and potentials.

### **Complicating Memory**

Memory has been a theme in a number of archaeological approaches to the recent past (Hall 2001; Saunders 2002; Shackel 2003; Stone 2004; Tarlow 1997). This is an important development, highlighting a potentially fruitful field for interdisciplinary research. However, I believe that in many cases memory has been under-theorised and over-simplified, relying on a relatively small number of sources (cf. Connerton 1989). Three recent major works on historical archaeology have considered the uses of oral history but failed to critically engage with oral history theory or concepts of individual and collective memory (Funari et al. 1999; Hall and Silliman 2006; Orser 2002).

Memory as an object of research in the social sciences and humanities has its origins in the work of Freud, Benjamin, Halbwachs and others, as well as in studies of the Renaissance and of writers such as Proust (Leslie 1999; Lucas 1997; Yates 1966). An up-to-date theoretical consideration of memory as it relates to recent historical archaeology can best be derived from the fields of cultural studies, oral history and the History Workshop movement, where a great deal of work on memory has taken place (Hodgkin and Radstone 2005; Perks and Thomson 1998; Samuel 1994, 1998). Memory in these contexts is an integral element in debating gender, identity, history and anthropology, focusing on issues such as witnessing, narrative, mediation, trauma, time and place (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003; Plummer 2001; Popular Memory Group 1998; Radstone and Hodgkin 2003).

Archaeologists seeking to engage with the recent historical past need to pay close attention to these developments, particularly the elements that relate to material culture, sites and memorials. A good example of this is Martin Hall's work on the archaeology of Cape Town's District Six, which uses ideas of memory and heritage developed in the work of Raphael Samuel, focusing on the reworking of social memory by each generation in turn as part of social and political strategies (Hall 2000: 153; 2001).

One of the most interesting and sophisticated attempts to theorise memory emerged from the Popular Memory Group at the University of Birmingham. The group approached memory as both an object of study and a dimension of active political practice, looking beyond history to consider the diverse ways in which a sense of the past is created, maintained and manipulated in society. According to this model, dominant memories are created and disseminated through the media of nationalist or sectarian narratives in education, film, literature and museums (Green 2004). These can be challenged by examining the alternative forms of memory highlighted by the group: those embodied at an individual level in diaries, photographs and artefacts with strong associations with the past. This highlights the complex relationship between individual and collective memory (Popular Memory Group 1998: 77).

Within this model it was argued that the national shared memories of the Second World War had been appropriated by reactionary forces in the media and in government, for example to bolster support for the Falklands War (Popular Memory Group 1998). The Group highlight this theme in the works of the socialist historian E.P. Thompson, who found his memories of wartime service marginalised in a society whose collective memories of the war were formulated in the “Hollywood blockbusters and spooky paperbacks and television tedia” of the “authoritarian right which is... the proper inheritor and guardian of the present nation’s interests” (Popular Memory Group 1998: 77-78).

The key to the work of the Popular Memory Group, and to my general understanding of memory in its social context, is that:

[...]the study of ‘popular memory’ is concerned with *two* sets of relations. It is concerned with the relation between dominant memory and oppositional forms across the whole public (including academic) field. It is also concerned with the relation between these public discourses in their contemporary state of play and the more privatised sense of the past which is generated within a lived culture.

(Popular Memory Group 1998: 78)

In archaeologies of the Second World War both of these conflicts can, I believe, be played out in a public arena.

### **Memory Themes in Conflict Archaeology**

In studying and experiencing the archaeology of the Second World War I have become increasingly aware of the complexity and force of memory as a factor in the communication and understanding of the past and its impact on the processes of discovery. To unite these intricacies into a coherent approach I suggest a model based on three themes in the memory of the war as it relates to archaeology: individual memory, group commemoration and social memorialisation.

Firstly, for individuals who lived through the war, the archaeological site is part of a *milieu de mémoire* or environment of memory, a place of significance that represents memories reified in places and objects (Nora 1989). In exploring their memories, these people can use artefacts and buildings as mnemonic aids in oral testimonies and discussions. For these people the process of archaeology, in which they may or may not take part directly, is a process of remembering, and the focus on a discrete site is a key factor in this.

Secondly, for local communities and other interest groups, as well as the archaeologists, who may have only second or third hand knowledge of the war, the dig is a *lieu de mémoire*, a site of memory encounter (Nora 1989, 1996). Through their involvement in the creation of the archaeological site and in their engagement with the first hand memories of others, these people are actively commemorating the war producing shared narratives and raising questions that can be developed and addressed through discussion and debate.

The third theme is the social and political process of memorialisation which is centred around the site and which takes place on a national level. Memorialisation is an active process, reflected in the uses of the archaeological site in the creation and recreation of cultural scripts. These scripts are formed by popular accounts of the war in film, literature and popular history, as well as through memorial practices such as Remembrance Day ceremonies that focus on local and national symbols of conflict such as the cenotaph or traditional village green war memorials (Black 2004; Rowlands 1999). The role of the archaeological site in memorialisation on this scale is dictated in part by the media and government bodies that can choose to represent it as symbolic of the conflict in general. In these officially sanctioned processes that seek to tie the archaeological work into cultural scripts or schema, forgetting some aspects of the past is in many cases as important as remembering other parts (Lucas 1997).

The following sections present some case studies with which I can critically assess the uses and importance of these scales of memory and their interrelation.

### **Archaeologies of the Second World War**

The excavation of sites of recent and contemporary conflicts is undoubtedly one of the most complex and controversial issues in archaeology today, particularly in the field of forensic archaeology of crimes and human rights abuses (Cox 2001; Crossland 2002). Historical archaeologies of the Second World War have been undertaken for a great variety of reasons. Some are surveys aimed at characterising and measuring surviving remains, such as the Defence of Britain Project, promoting a conservation agenda (Kelly 1991; Lowry 1995; Schofield 2005). The physical remains of the Second World War and other conflicts are in many areas super-abundant, and protection and preservation are often not considered until it is too late. A small amount of rescue work takes place on development sites, including the recovery of human remains, but this remains rare (Russell and Fleming 1991; Saunders 2002).

Some attempts have been made to improve our historical understanding of an area or an event in the Second World War through archaeological work, including some that have integrated memory data into the research process. The detailed survey of a sunken flying boat near Pearl Harbour, destroyed during the historic Japanese attack on the base in 1941, was carried out in part to trace and interpret the exact sequence of events that day (Rodgers et al. 1998). The crash site was investigated using traditional underwater archaeological techniques, and the aircraft was found to have sunk as the result of strafing and damage from depth charges. In addition, seven oral history interviews were carried out with former aircrew and ground staff from the base, and these were used to help interpret some of the archaeological findings. However, the relatively uncritical use of the oral histories reinforces the need for more theoretically informed memory work in historical archaeology.

The account of Pierre Legendre's excavation of an RAF Avro Lancaster heavy bomber from its wartime crash site in France is notable for the misinformation provided by local people who remembered the event in different ways. The "abundant but contradictory information" (Legendre 2001: 130) included the identification of the British

aircraft variously as American, German and a V-1 rocket. While no human remains were found, one local reported finding a foot in the wreckage in 1945 which might or might not have been buried, but there are no clear records. After prompting, some locals revealed that the majority of the wreckage had been removed illegally by scrap dealers after the crash. This earlier treatment of the human and material remains and the vague, distorted memories of the crash contrasts markedly with the veneration and attention to detail of the archaeological excavation and subsequent memorialisation of the site (Legendre 2001).

The archaeology of the Second World War raises a number of ethical issues that must be carefully considered. It is easy to provoke painful and traumatic memories amongst those who lived through the war, particularly in areas where issues of collaboration, resistance and responsibility are very much alive. At this point it is helpful to consider some examples of archaeological projects that have engaged with Second World War sites and have found themselves interacting with memory in its sometimes troubling forms. These case studies demonstrate the difficulties and complexities in using and manipulating individual or social memory.

#### **The Prinz-Albrecht Palace**

The notorious SS, SA and Gestapo headquarters at the Prinz-Albrecht Palace was known as “the most feared address in Berlin” (Baker 1988: 94; Koshar 2000). The palace was largely destroyed in the later stages of the war and in peacetime the site remained derelict, covered in rubble that concealed the cellars where prisoners were held and tortured. In the early 1980s, in response to a competition, a memorial was designed for the site which emphasised its role as the administrative centre of the Nazi atrocities. However, before it could be constructed the Mayor of West Berlin cancelled the project and a new plan was put forward, which included the reconstruction of the palace and the construction of a children’s play park. Meanwhile, the East German government imprisoned two architects for merely submitting a design for the memorial (Baker 1988; 1990).

In response to this, a voluntary group called the Active Museum of Fascism and Resistance conducted an unauthorised excavation on the site, uncovering various parts of the building. The excavation was largely symbolic and protested against both the planned use of the site, and the collective amnesia which it represented (Baker 1988). “GRASS MUST NEVER BE ALLOWED TO GROW OVER IT”; “THE WOUND MUST STAY OPEN”: the slogans of the Active Museum express a clear understanding of archaeological excavation as remembrance in action, contrasting the mute material remains with the socially contingent and politically constructed official histories (Baker 1990: 58). In this context the excavation of the Prinz-Albrecht site was “not a ‘neutral scientific’ exercise, but a statement, an act of active remembrance, or defiance, a weapon of the weak individual to counter the powerful state assessment of historical value” (Baker 1988: 105).

The protest excavation was fundamentally the result of a dispute between advocates of the two kinds of memorial. For both the East and West German states the need to con-

control the memory of the past led to partial and politically loaded memorials. The level of protest in 1985 demonstrated that individual memory could still challenge public narratives of the war. A remarkable and highly significant element in this is the presence among the excavators of people who had been imprisoned on the site by the Gestapo: for these individuals the excavation was a complex process of remembering and commemorating, and the physical removal of the soil was both a personal act of defiance and a metaphorical refusal to let the past lie buried. The Active Museum's protest excavation spurred a full-scale, government-funded excavation of the site leading to a permanent exhibition (Koshar 2000; Till 2005).

### **Stalag Luft III**

The Great Escape from Stalag Luft III, near the town of Zagan in Silesia, is probably the best known escape from a Nazi Prisoner of War camp. The excavation on the site of the camp in 2003 was aimed at locating one of the three tunnels of the Great Escape, codenamed 'Dick', for a television documentary. During a week's work on the site a ten metre deep hole was dug to find the tunnel, previously located with ground penetrating radar, while other areas of the camp were examined by surface survey and test pitting, and artefacts of various kinds were recovered (Doyle et al. 2003).

For several days we were joined on the site by three former inmates of the camp, including one of the escapees. Their responses to the excavation, the artefacts and the site in general were of great interest. One of the intentions of the television programme was to present the three men with the tunnel uncovered and with a selection of original and reproduced artefacts, and record their reactions and memories. Implicit in this is the assumption that the site and objects could act as mnemonics:

[...]people visit the battlefields and places of mass murder and torture, of suffering and deprivation, specifically to remember, and to use the physicality of the landscape, and the ruined buildings... to imagine and through imagination to remember past lives and personalities.

(Schofield 2005: 95)

The former prisoners' primary responses were surprise, excitement and interest: they willingly discussed the specifics of the site under excavation; the hut, the tunnel, the hidden entrance and their creation. When objects were presented to them they attempted to give expert analyses of them. Artefacts as diverse as a watercolour set and a toothbrush sparked memories of different people in the camp and specific events (Doyle et al. 2003). They were also willing to talk about the generalities of the camp and the escape when asked, and as hoped their responses made good television.

However, after a time all three gave an impression of unease, and increasingly questioned the validity and necessity of the archaeological work. They appeared to find the bagging and labelling of finds particularly discomfiting and repeatedly challenged us about it. The archaeologists and the film crew treated the artefacts, even old nail brushes and discarded tins, with care and respect which we felt was important to demonstrate, particularly in the presence of the former prisoners. This response highlighted a conflict between the prisoners' desire to remember the past with the help of 'liv-

ing' objects as the physical embodiments of memory, and our wish to commemorate the events with objects recovered from buried contexts, which they found problematic (Doyle et al. 2003: 1). Our reverence towards the material was certainly based in part on our knowledge of the Great Escape from books and the popular film, which have shaped public awareness of these events.

The site itself promotes a different set of memories: the Soviet-era museum and war memorials are largely devoted to memorialising the thousands of Soviet prisoners who were murdered in the camp, rather than the British and American prisoners. This focus is itself gradually shifting as Great Escape tourists from Western Europe and the United States visit the site in growing numbers: no doubt the new museum displays using material from the excavation will contribute to this adaptation.

### **Discussion**

In light of these brief examples, what are the strengths and weaknesses of my hypothesised formulation of war memory in archaeology? Can the individual, group and cultural/national scales of memory be identified in these scenarios, and if so how do they interrelate?

At the site of the Prinz-Albrecht Palace the archaeological work is clearly in opposition to the national memory schema, but within the Active Museum the formulation of memory is more complicated. The best analysis of this popular movement draws on Winter and Sivan's (1999: 9-11) suggestion that individuals form small-scale memory communities for the purposes of projecting their views of the past into the public sphere. The Active Museum is in many ways the perfect example of this model, particularly as Winter and Sivan's work focuses on contested memories of war. Further work on the group might explore this idea by focusing on individuals and their motivations for taking part (Till 2005).

At Stalag Luft III the overlap between the scales of memory is even more pronounced and difficult to unpick; the apparent tension in the project had its roots in the conflicting aims of the different memory forms it represented. The mechanisms for projecting individual memories into the popular consciousness were not controlled by the former prisoners but instead reflected the priorities of documentary making. Similarly the archaeological work, which aimed to provoke remembering, was to some extent rejected by the former prisoners. Perhaps they recognised it as a tool of the documentary makers rather than a mechanism for remembering that they could use. Perhaps they recognised the project as a whole as something separate from themselves and their memories: a reification not of their experiences but of an iconic film.

The three scales of memory that I have identified certainly appear to have value in discussions of Second World War memory and archaeology. However, it is equally clear that the key to this work lies not merely in identifying these different forms but in tracing the connections and power relations that link them in an intricate web of politics, social forces and individual agency.

### **What Role for Archaeology?**

In this politically and socially charged environment, archaeological work on Second World War sites can never be value free: what to dig and what not to dig is an ideologically loaded decision. The power of archaeological interventions to act as a giant highlighter pen on the pages of history is great: where holes are dug people come to stare and ask questions, and the press usually show an interest. The opportunity to use this power as the voice of the forgotten has been successful in some cases (Ludlow Collective 2001; Wood 2002).

Thus archaeology can participate cautiously in the struggle between hegemonic and subaltern memories of the past. What, though, can it offer in the second arena identified by the Popular Memory Group, in situating this conflict in the real world and improving our understanding of it? I believe that archaeology is uniquely capable of this: by conducting excavations and surveys in public, and making them accessible and inclusive, we can create sites of memory negotiation in which the forces of remembrance and commemoration can come into contact: “the reality of being there, on location as it were, is crucial to ratifying the immediacy of the past” (Carr 2003: 67). More than most working spaces, the site offers the possibility of memory work such as oral history, local historical research and participation across all sections of the community. The outcomes and products of the interdisciplinary work can be shaped in consultation with the participants:

Subordinate groups who wish to be involved in archaeological interpretation need to be provided with the means and mechanisms for interacting with the archaeological past in different ways. This is not a matter of popularising the past, but of transforming the relations of production of archaeological knowledge into more democratic structures.

(Hodder 1992: 186)

Drawing again on Winter and Sivan’s (1999) model of agency in war memory I would suggest that the archaeological project can serve as a mechanism for small or local memory communities to advance their memory narratives within a public arena.

### **Conclusions**

Taking a broader and more complex view of memory, its intricacies and flaws, provides an opportunity for archaeological work to contribute to the creation and negotiation of memory narratives of the Second World War and other conflicts. Archaeology as a process of commemoration can be used to draw out individual memories and make memorialisation a collective endeavour. The distortions of memory and the problems of memory work make this difficult, but the potential for inclusive and interdisciplinary work cannot be ignored. However, this controversial and potentially radical work is time limited.

The archaeology of the Second World War in Europe is a massive and diverse field: the study of archaeology and memory in different places, periods and social contexts will require a range of different methodologies tailored to the specific circumstances. As the

need for a more intricate appreciation of memory and the advantages of engaging with public memory become more obvious a wider range of models will begin to emerge including discussions of ethics as well as practical and analytical approaches. I have begun to formulate a basic model for memory work and analysis in the archaeology of the Second World War; further work in this field will suggest ways in which it might develop.

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