Anthropology and archaeology of the First World War

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Abstract

The role of archaeology has been neglected for almost eighty-five years in the study of the First World War of 1914-1918. The beginnings of a modern, scientific archaeology informed by material culture studies began in 2002 with an initial focus by both disciplines on the material culture of war. This new kind of archaeology is multidisciplinary, and investigates landscape, remembrance, cultural heritage, museums, and tourism, as well as military history in the development of a distinctive methodology for investigating the multifaceted nature of the world's first global industrialised conflict and its legacy. This new approach is called Modern Conflict Archaeology, and is empirically and theoretically distinct from the more traditional military history practices of Battlefield Archaeology.

Keywords: Modern Conflict Archaeology. Material Culture Studies. First World War.

Introduction

In the study of the First World War of 1914-18, the role of archaeology has been neglected for almost eighty-five years. Since 2002, there are the beginnings not only of a modern, scientific archaeology, but also one which is informed by anthropology through the focus of both disciplines on the material culture of war (Saunders 2003a,b). This new kind of archaeology is a multidisciplinary endeavour that includes issues of landscape, remembrance, cultural heritage, museums, and tourism, as well as military history in the development of a distinctive methodology for investigating the multifaceted nature of the world's first global industrialised conflict and its legacy. This new approach has become known in recent years as Modern Conflict Archaeology (MCA) and is quite different from the more traditional ideas and practices of Battlefield Archaeology (Saunders 2010, 2012).

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Over the past two decades, the study of the First World War has become increasingly sensitized and multidisciplinary in response to changing public attitudes and expectations and to advances in academic scholarship and understanding. It is ironic that as the generations who had first-hand experience of the war and inter-war years have disappeared, so anthropology and archaeology are becoming engaged with the material legacy of the world's first international industrialised war.

Here, I will focus on the beginnings of what can be called an anthropological archaeology of the First World War, and outline some of the problems as well as potential of recent developments. As this new kind of archaeology has only recently begun to take shape (Saunders 2002), this essay is not intended to be a comprehensive review of developments to date (see Saunders 2007 for overview). Neither is it an outline of the rigorous investigative methodologies that need to be formulated as a matter of urgency (see Saunders 2011). Instead, it is a personal view of what, from an anthropological perspective, appear to me to be some of the more challenging,

interesting, and complex issues with which this new archaeology will have to engage. Some issues are obvious, others less so - but all can be approached under the heading of what is called 'material culture studies'.

The aim of a 'material culture studies' approach is to explore the relationships between people and objects (e.g. Buchli 2002; Miller 1994, 2005, 2010; Tilley et al 2006). From the perspective of constructing a modern archaeology of twentieth century war, it is often the relationships between people, objects, and landscape (itself a cultural artefact) that embody many important (if often unacknowledged) issues (Audoin-Rouzeau 2009; Saunders and Cornish 2009). In this respect, it is an extraordinary if sobering thought that

> The human cost of creating First World War battlefield landscapes was described day-by-day, sometimes hour-by-hour, in memoirs and regimental war diaries. This surely produced the most exhaustively documented, intimately personalized, and spiritualized areas ever to be subject to, or considered for, archaeological investigation. (Saunders 2002:106).

Archaeology, Material Culture, and War

It is a sign of changing times that the second issue of the journal *14/18 Aujourd'hui.Today.Heute* published in 1999 by the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne (Somme) France, was dedicated almost exclusively to the nascent archaeology of the First World War. Although essentially a snapshot of ideas and discoveries rather than an in-depth analysis, this landmark publication represented also the beginnings of original and creative thought about what an archaeology of the First World War might look like.

Virtually every article made important points, made even more remarkable by the fact that most of the contributors were historians rather than archaeologists, and that the archaeologists involved were not First World War specialists. Eminent scholars such as Alain Schnapp, Annette Becker, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Gerd Krumeich all argued the need and potential for an archaeology of

the Great War; Claire Reverchon, Pierre Gaudin, and Henri Duday stressed an ethnological and anthropological perspective, and Yves Desfossés and Frédérique Boura offered detailed archaeological case studies. Considered together, these diverse articles made for an important and timely statement of intent.

The First World War remains ambiguously 'recent' in European imagination - hovering on the boundary between 'living' oral history, military history, museology, and issues of tourism and cultural heritage. Yet the archaeology of the war is, in a professional and scientific sense, even more recent. First World War archaeology is a new kind of archaeology - a poignant challenge to the sensitized multidisciplinary approaches of modern archaeological investigation and discourse. Anthropologically informed, it offers, at the very least, the opportunity to investigate: a/ a conflict hitherto known mainly from historical sources, b/ the reconstitution of post-war landscapes, and c/ the evolution of commemorative materialities, both large and small (i.e. large monument to small personal souvenir). Such an archaeology offers a framework for illustrating the material ways in which the 'war to end all wars' in fact shaped many subsequent twentieth century conflicts, and, reflexively, is itself increasingly being re-interpreted and re-presented in a changing present (Saunders 2007; and see González-Ruibal 2008). This process is gathering speed as we approach the centenary of 2014-18 – an epochal event which will, in turn, change the physical and symbolic landscapes of the war.

Unlike most kinds of traditional archaeology, the excavation of First World War sites is a complex memory-making activity (Saunders 2003a, 2007). It is part of a process that sees excavators, landowners, and innumerable tourists struggling to imagine today's verdant woods and fields as monochrome images of Hell, just as returning refugees in 1919 struggled to see devastated landscapes as fertile pastures and farms (Saunders 2002:107). The intensity and interplay of emotions and actions that the war engaged (and continues to engage) makes its archaeology a vital yet hitherto largely unacknowledged and un-theorized area of investigation. In the nascent archaeology of what is also known as the Great War,

imagination is everywhere, and so, ironically, are 'The Missing' – a concept which originated between 1914-18 and which resonates throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century – most recently with the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre on 9/11. The mixing of reality and imagination mediated by the material culture of modern technological war reinforces the need for an archaeological methodology that is informed by anthropology from the beginning, rather than mobilized subsequently as but part of the post-excavation interpretive process.

Reinforcing the need for an anthropological dimension in the formulation of a scientific archaeology of the Great War (and indeed all modern conflicts) are many complex issues that include:

1/ an increasing awareness of battlefields as national and trans-national cultural patrimony, and, uniquely, as the nexus for the origin of modern Europe.

2/ the commercialization of battlefields and associated areas stimulated by burgeoning tourism.

3/ the increasingly sophisticated activities of two major museums along the old Western Front (L'Historial de la Grande Guerre on the Somme, and In Flanders Fields Museum at Ypres), and the creation and rejuvenation of many smaller private museums and café-museums in the same area.

4/ the ongoing incorporation of places and events into the general, and recently revitalized trend for public war remembrance.

5/ the existence of large areas still saturated with unexploded First World War munitions that makes excavation a potentially lethal undertaking.

6/ the presence of many private collections of First World War related artefacts and their role in a/ the continuing despoliation of battlefields and b/ the articulation and rejuvenation of memory through their ornamenting of the home.

These issues, and others, illustrate that any archaeology of the First World War has to proceed simultaneously on many different fronts

- or at least should acknowledge the existence of these complex and interwoven issues. While a methodology for surveying and excavating First World War sites is of primary importance, the existence of 'social archaeology' must also be addressed (Gilchrist 2003). As recent work along the projected route of the A19 motorway in Belgian Flanders has shown, it is possible to combine groundbreaking scientific archaeology with associated ethnographic enquiry (M. Dewilde and M. de Meyer, pers.comm. 2003).

Without doubt, a unique challenge to an archaeology of the Great War is posed by the speed of post-war reconstruction that left whole war landscapes intact - systems of trenches, dugouts, tunnels, craters, *matériel*, souvenirs, personal belongings, and human remains - all of which lie variably preserved sometimes only centimetres beneath the modern land surface. These layers themselves are superimposed over, and can intrude into an area's pre-war archaeological record, that may extend back to Medieval, Roman, or prehistoric times. These characteristics of the archaeological landscape offer unique opportunities for investigation yet at the same time can be academically, ethically, politically, and religiously problematic.

One indication of the recent (but far from universal) shift of attitudes towards Great War archaeology focuses on this point. For some eighty years, archaeologists have regarded 'archaeology and the Great War' in terms of the damage done to medieval and prehistoric sites in the war zone by military action. Since around 2002, slowly but surely, a more informed and holistic approach is emerging - one that sees the remains of First World War activities as not only amenable to archaeological research, but also as an important and integral part of the archaeological record per se.

Until recently, Great War archaeology along the Western Front had been in the hands of various groups of enthusiastic amateurs, often knowledgeable about the war, but less so about archaeological techniques. Their work was often compromised by this lack of expertise but also by unidentified 'visitors' who appeared on site with metal detectors after the diggers had left. Only occasionally, and mainly in France, did professional archaeologists become

involved in rescue excavations along the routes of motorways, the TGV, or in advance of urban development (see for example, articles by Y. Defossés and F. Boura in 14/18 Aujourd'hui Today Heute 1999; Desfossés and Jacques 2000; Desfossés et al 2008 ; Saunders 2002, 2007). Currently, this successful and professional engagement has been reactive not pro-active, and there is not yet any official programme of investigations focused on Great War sites. This will undoubtedly come in future years, at which time the wealth of practical experience of French archaeologists will prove invaluable.

In Belgium, especially around Ypres, the situation has been complicated further by being politicised around personalities belonging to different amateur groups and that came to a head in 2001 with sensationalist media coverage in Britain and Belgium. However, since 2002, there have been significant positive developments, the most important of which has been the direct involvement of the *Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium* (IAP) in archaeological excavations of First World War sites, notably the A19 motorway extension mentioned above (Saunders et al 2004). It is clear that this is the most important advance in investigating Great War material culture in Belgium in eighty years. Significantly also, this has been reinforced by the attitudes of archaeologists at the University of Ghent where First World War archaeological issues are taken seriously.

In the space of just a few years, the archaeology of the First World War has been put firmly on the agenda, although these are still early days. Equally important for the future is an acknowledgement of the international nature of the archaeological record of a conflict (on the Western Front) that involved not just French and Belgian soldiers, but British, Germans, Americans (of European, African and native descent), Russians, Australians, New Zealanders, and Canadians, as well as Africans, Afro-Caribbean peoples, Hindus, Sikhs, Maoris, Vietnamese ('Annamites') and Chinese labourers (see Dendooven and Chielens 2008). The involvement of at least some of these groups (their descendants or representatives) will be an important feature of any trans-national anthropologically sensitive archaeology in the years to come. The broadening remit of modern archaeology beyond

a 'science of excavation' will eventually also attract an international range of archaeology students to participate in joint investigations, at which point First World War archaeology's capacity to contribute to the ongoing development of archaeology itself will become evident.

Yet, as archaeology comes to terms with the Great War, it is venturing into a physical and symbolic terrain shared, at least in part, by other disciplines. Military and cultural history, art history, tourism studies, heritage studies, museum studies, cultural geography, and geology have all laid claim to parts of the war's multifaceted legacy. However, it is archaeology's critical relationship with anthropology through their shared focus on material culture that unites them with the diversity of other disciplines, and offers a powerful, interdisciplinary, and essentially hybrid investigative approach.

Illustrating the complex interrelatedeness of such issues is the assessment of the significance and 'social life' of one kind of object (Appadurai 1986) - personalized memory-items that have been displayed in the home for ninety-five years, identical objects exhibited or stored in museums, and similarly identical materials excavated from Great War archaeological sites - some of which feed the international trade in military memorabilia, and consequently stimulate further illegal digging. The finds from such illegal or quasi-legal activities sometimes become the centrepiece of a new or rejuvenated private museum that is subsequently incorporated into tourist itineraries, or the focus of an exhibition in an official museum. In both cases, issues of authenticity, and the legal status of objects and the activities that yielded them become blurred, as does their role in educating future generations - particularly schoolchildren.

In this instance, an inclusive anthropological approach to material culture is required if we are to elicit the variety of meanings and the associated theoretical underpinnings of such objects. Even the illegal or quasi-legal activities of battlefield looters and the more respectable amateur groups over the past ninety-five years is a significant historical phenomenon that requires documentation and analysis as they form in a very real sense an integral part of the cultural legacy of the Great War (see Saunders 2007).

Associated with these issues, and perhaps of a generational nature, is the changing of public attitudes amongst the population of Belgium and France along the line of the Western Front. Since 1918, returning refugees were faced with economic deprivation that was alleviated in part by inter-war battlefield tourism. Unable to return to their farms and pre-war occupations, local people inhabited landscapes devastated by four years of bombardment. One way to survive was to collect abandoned war matériel and armaments from the battlefields and to sell it for the scrap value, or use it as the raw material from which to make war souvenirs for visiting battlefield pilgrims. During the course of this activity, corpses of all armies were encountered and yielded their own harvest of military memorabilia - badges, guns, uniforms etc. From 1919 until the present, this kind of activity has been regarded almost as an unofficial inheritance by some. The idea that this was desecration of the war dead seemed sublimated to the 'right' to be able to dig up objects as and where an individual pleased. Whatever the legal and moral 'rights' and 'wrongs' of this situation, such activities constitute an integral part of the early history of archaeology on the Western Front. The social dimensions of these activities for local inhabitants and the families of those whose remains were encountered are anthropological in nature and require sensitive but detailed documentation.

A further layer of complexity is that which involves the archaeology and anthropology of memorialization, i.e. battlefield cemeteries and landscapes, and war memorials. Although much has been written on Great War memorials, an archaeological and anthropological dimension has largely been absent. Linked to this is the issue of war museums and their role in creating and perpetuating new public engagements with the war. Leaving aside the 1992 establishment of the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne on the Somme, and the 1998 and then 2012 refurbishments of In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres, an important and undocumented issue is that of the historical and ongoing creation of private museums and café-museums in Belgian Flanders and along the entire length of the old Western Front in France. The processes by which these

small museums are created, their commercial/historical stimulus, and the ways in which they obtain and display their exhibits are in need of documentation and analysis, as is their role as repositories of some of the best preserved material culture of the war – a situation paralleled in other places too, such as the Great War battlefields of the Italian Front (Balbi 2008; Nicolis et al 2011) and along the Isonzo Valley in what is now the border region between Italy and Slovenia (Macdonald and Cimprić 2011).

A further issue needs to be considered, and this concerns the recent renewed interest in the archaeology and anthropology of domestic space. The home is a poignant (if so far unacknowledged and uninvestigated) legacy of war in the sense that it is a repository of memories, emotions and objects. Crucially, the home is one locale of the 'missing' - it is where the missing are missed most. Emotions surrounding those who did not return are often articulated through objects - souvenirs, mementoes, memorabilia - and in many homes these are still on display though in many more they are hidden away in attics and garages. Today, these items belong to grandsons, great grandsons and the like - yet each has its own biography within which aspects of its original owner's experience of war are embodied. An anthropologically informed social archaeology of domestic space as it pertains to the Great War is yet another area in need of investigation, both in its own right, and also because it extends the boundary of what an archaeology of the war should include.

Concluding comments:

There is little doubt that in recent years the study of the Great War has undergone (and continues to undergo) rapid change - change that is beginning to dissolve traditional disciplinary boundaries. After eighty-five years of neglect, disinterest, or embarassment, archaeology is coming to terms with the First World War and its legacy – often in the form of television documentaries (of variable quality). This legacy is found on the battlefield, in the museum, in peoples' homes, in the tourist imagination, in the commercialization

of patrimony, and in the international market for militaria (itself revolutionised over the past decade by Ebay) (Isyanova 2009). In the past, these areas of interest have been regarded as distinct, compartmentalized, and perhaps ultimately irreconcilable. Today, there are indications of a new understanding - a new perception of how these diverse issues form an integrated whole. While it is certain that the development of what may be called a 'broadband' archaeology of the Great War will transform our knowledge of that conflict, it seems equally likely that archaeology itself will benefit from the experiences of those who contribute to its definition.

In 2013, we are at that point in time where history has become archaeology, when the oral tradition of living participants is not longer within reach. In one sense, the battlefields of the Western Front (and elsewhere) have become archaeology - or at least recognized as being legitimate archaeology - beneath our feet and as we talk. Future generations will look back to this time and judge how well we respond - and perhaps wonder why it took so long to get to this point in investigating the war that created the modern world in which we all live. They may also wonder why it is still taking so long for these same lessons to be applied to other more recent modern conflicts – from Vietnam to Chechnya, Bosnia to Gaza, and Iraq to Afghanistan.

The First World War was described at the time as the 'Great War for Civilization'; but, with the advent of the Second World War, the Cold War, and innumerable smaller twentieth century conflicts, this has increasingly been seen as an ironic description. Yet irony is a slippery concept and can reconfigure itself with the passage of time. The Europe in which we live, the technological culture which underpins it, and the kind of trans-national European civilization of which we partake had its origins in the war of 1914-18. We are the civilization that emerged from the Great War, and like any civilization it is only through knowledge of our past that we can understand who we are and how we came to be. There is surely no greater justification for developing a modern, scientific, and anthropologically informed archaeology of the war that created us and affected so many different peoples around the world.

Note

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Resumo

O papel da arqueologia tem sido negligenciado por quase 85 anos em estudos sobre a Primeira Guerra Mundial (1914-1918). Uma arqueologia moderna e científica informada por estudos de cultura material nasceu em 2002 com um foco inicial na cultura material de guerra. Este novo tipo de arqueologia é multidisciplinar e, estuda o papel da paisagem, memória, patrimônio cultural, museus e turismo, bem como a história militar no desenvolvimento de uma metodologia distinta para investigar a natureza multifacetada do primeiro conflito industrializado do mundo e seu legado. Essa nova aproximação, chamada Moderna Arqueologia do Conflito, é empiricamente e teoricamente distinta das mais tradicionais práticas de história militar da Arqueologia do Campo de Batalha.

Palavras-chave: Moderna Arqueologia do Conflito. Estudos de Cultura Material. Primeira Guerra Mundial.