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Digging Up Cataclysms

by Boris Valentin

A new archaeology has emerged whose contributions to our understanding of twentieth-century mass violence oscillate between history and memory. A specialist in the field provides an impressive overview that sounds very much like a plea.

About: Vincent Carpentier, *Pour une archéologie de la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, Paris, La Découverte, 2022. 368 p., 24 €.

"The time had surely come for this"—so writes Vincent Carpentier in the conclusion of his book, as he discusses the archeological exploration of the foundations of the gas chambers at Sobibór, one of the extermination camps in eastern Poland. There the Polish archaeologist Wojciech Mazurek has embarked on a fight against the "assassination of memory"—to borrow the words of Pierre Vidal-Naquet—which the Nazis had attempted by levelling the camp to the ground following the prisoners' revolt in 1943.[1] Little can be hidden from archaeologists, which is why they are now being asked to investigate mass crimes other than the Shoah—in Argentina, in Rwanda, and soon no doubt in Ukraine.

[1] See also Arnaud Sauli's magnificent film "Shéol."

The Genesis of a New Archaeology

In 1945, a series of excavations were improvised in Europe to gather evidence for the first trials of perpetrators of crimes against humanity. One can therefore speak of the early emergence of a spontaneous archaeology of the Second World War. In a sense, the patrimonialisation of Oradour-sur-Glane also constituted a kind of archaeological project, as did writer Henri Calet's inventory of the graffiti left behind by resistance fighters[2] and architect Paul Virilio's later observations on the Atlantic Wall.[3] In the UK, a methodical and professional approach was launched in the 1980s, as part of a program that listed 20,000 sites built during the war to defend Great Britain against a potential German invasion.

The investigation of the traces of mass violence in France truly—and timidly—began in the early 1990s with the archaeology of the First World War. The latter emerged along with a preventive archaeology that soon became a prerequisite for major land development projects in the country. Excavations in large areas located in former conflict zones unearthed vestiges of the war, which were initially regarded as pollution that disfigured older sites and sometimes even as a threat because of the important presence of unexploded munitions. Very quickly, however, a number of archaeologists began to conduct original research on the remains of 1914-1918, in particular on the funerary practices improvised by men under fire.[4]

The French archaeology of the Second World War emerged in the wake of these developments, and its value was recognized in the Ministry of Culture's scientific program in 2013. Carpentier, a researcher at the *Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives* (INRAP), campaigned for this recognition. He also led by example,[5] including by exploring the quarry of Fleury-sur-Orne, on the outskirts of Caen, where a thousand people had found refuge in early summer 1944 during the bombing of Normandy. There he collected numerous testimonies of a very precarious life and asked a former female refugee, aged 11 at the time, to comment on them.

[2] Henri Calet, *Les murs de Fresnes,* Héros-Limite, 2021 [1945].
[3] Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology,* Princeton University Press, 2007.
[4] The results of the project are available at https://www.700000.fr/
[5] Vincent Carpentier and Cyril Marcigny, *Archéologie du débarquement et de la bataille de Normandie*, Ouest-France, 2014.

Between History and Memory

Other excavations—including at Westerbork, the transit camp for Dutch Jews on their way to extermination—are now helping to reactivate the memory of a few Shoah survivors, at a time when the generation who lived through the cataclysm is fast disappearing. More broadly, the entire archaeology of the conflict is contributing to the creation of a new, and soon witnessless, memory for the generations to come.

We are already seeing the occasional resurfacing of forgotten events. This is the case at the labor camps in the Channel Islands, where the Germans concentrated deportees of twenty-seven nationalities—some of them Jewish—in extremely harsh conditions and used them as slaves to build the Atlantic Wall. The systematic mapping of the wall since 2015 has shown that archaeology serves not only to remember the past, but also to gather new knowledge. The chronology of the constructions is becoming clearer, and we now see just how much those of 1944 deviated from the norm, reflecting a time of urgency and shortage of materials.

Ultimately, the main scientific contribution of archaeologists lies in revealing the bricolage of historical actors—which is to say, all that has left only a few traces in the other archives. This is particularly evident with respect to the inevitable improvisations that took place in the theaters of war. Carpentier takes us to the most researched ones: the D-Day Landing and the Battle of Normandy, but also the Battle of Peleliu, during which Americans and Japanese fought fiercely all the way to the mountain caves. What archaeologists capture in these contexts is a "micro-history" of the fighting.

Between Knowledge and Emotion

However, these and many other battlefields continue to yield human remains today: Giving the latter a burial and, if possible, an identity is one of the missions that archaeology has taken on everywhere. And where, as in the case of Sobibór, the remains consist only of charred heaps, one finds plenty of personal effects whose owners can occasionally be identified. At Sobibór, archaeologists have also located the gas chambers and the site where arrivals were stripped of their hair before being sent to their death. They have also managed to trace the barbed-wire fenced path that led

from the train to the chambers—a path that the SS had nicknamed the "way to heaven."

The excavations at Sobibór give us a sense of the extreme cynicism of the purveyors of death, who also paved the first gas chambers at Treblinka with the type of bricks traditionally used to decorate Jewish ritual baths in the region. Time will tell whether such "reality effects" enable the transmission of knowledge. We can also hope that this transmission will be facilitated by the links being established with the disappeared who are emerging from anonymity. Here one thinks of the inscriptions etched on the walls of the Drancy internment camp, but also of those engraved on the bark of trees in Poland—the only testimonies to the presence of prisoners of war used by the Todt organization to build defenses.

Challenges and Frontiers

Such vestiges are obviously very fragile, and archaeology surely finds one of its primary justifications in the safeguarding of a highly endangered heritage. This fragility is primarily explained by the urgencies of the immediate post-war period. There was then a tendency to recycle—for instance aircraft, which can only be studied in the form of wrecks today—and a desire to forget or to sanctuarize.

A few deep ruins are now being explored in Caen and Warsaw. In Hiroshima, archaeology has so far yielded only vitrified micro-particles. The same is true at Omaha Beach, where the other remains were methodically looted by collectors of militaria. The looting also targeted shipwrecks, which are incidentally a huge potential source of oil pollution.

Here ecological issues are intertwined with heritage conservation, which is sometimes threatened by rising sea levels. Thus, the urgent need today is to preserve all that can be preserved. The questions that this raises are discussed in the book. Should we continue to convert archeological sites—as was done with the German submarine base in Bordeaux, which now serves as a cultural space? How can we conduct an archaeology of extermination without desecrating the immense mass graves that are unearthed in the process? Must we excavate everything—including Hitler's bunker in Berlin, at the risk of creating a place of pilgrimage for his admirers?

Carpentier's overview raises many other, sometimes implicit, questions. In our current phase of data accumulation, a very concrete analysis of the management of the masses of remains uncovered by archeological investigations would have been appreciated. However, one understands that time must be allowed for epistemological reflection. Besides, as other specialists in the archaeology of the very recent past have noted:

> In our discipline, practice has often preceded theoretical reflection. Archaeology [of the contemporary era] is no exception in this regard: It remains opportunistic, as all is grist to its mill.

This new frontier of the discipline calls into question both the definition and the scope of archaeology. Is archaeology concerned only with what is physically buried or hidden? Or does it also take an interest in what has been repressed—the remains at Rivesaltes being a particularly good metaphor for the strata of oblivion given that Spanish Republicans, Jews, and Harkis were successively interned at this camp?

Or is archaeology more broadly concerned with all the material waste that historians have neglected because they concentrate on other sources? What is the opinion of historians on the matter? Have they changed their manner of engaging with their own documents since archaeological sources were first used to write about the proximate past? These questions remain open, as do archaeological projects, which are as fascinating as they are necessary.

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