

# From Battlefield Archaeology to Conflict Archaeology

## Abstract

This article briefly presents the origins and development of battlefield archaeology and its transition to conflict archaeology. The history of the development of these disciplines can be divided into two main periods. The first was in the early 19th century when historians, amateur historians, archaeologists and amateur archaeologists became interested in the physical site of a battle, not just in a battle as a historical event. It was then that people started paying attention to sources other than simply written or cartographic. Over time, the circle of researchers narrowed down to professional archaeologists, along with the general development of the field of archaeology itself. The second is the period in which the discipline became named and defined. This occurred in the mid-1980s. Now, in the early 21st century, is a time of rapid development and redefinition, as battlefield archaeology has become part of the discipline of conflict archaeology.

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Within the discipline of archaeology - as in other fields of science - various research specializations with different specificities arise. These are usually related to specific periods or epochs which have been distinguished by archaeologists. Sometimes they are distinguished by methodology - e.g. underwater or aerial archaeology - or by specific topic, such as forensic, industrial or conflict archaeology.

The development of conflict archaeology can be divided into two main time periods. The first dates back to the beginning of the 19th century, when historians and archaeologists (professionals and amateurs) became interested in the physical site of a battle, not only in the battle as a historical event. These researchers went out into the field in search of sources other than simply written or cartographic. During the period of general development of archaeology, the circle of field researchers narrowed down to include professional archaeologists only.

In the second period, beginning in the mid 1980s, the discipline of battlefield archaeology became named and defined. The beginning of the 21st century was a time of rapid development and redefinition of battlefield archaeology, when it became part of conflict archaeology.

Material traces left behind by an armed encounter became the subject of interest very early on in history. One example is the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. Tacitus, one of the greatest Roman historians, described the moment when the Roman army led by Germanicus, visits the battlefield in the Teutoburg Forest - the site of the defeat of three legions in the year 9 CE. The Romans had got there six years after the fighting and here's what they saw:

The first camp of Varus, with its spacious perimeters and the designated headquarters for the three legions, clearly indicated from the half-collapsed embankment and the shallow ditch that the already decimated remnants of the army had camped here. In the middle of the plain, whitening bones - as the men had fled, or had fought back - were lying scattered or piled up. Fragments of weapons and skeletons of horses lay nearby, in addition human skulls could be seen nailed to tree trunks. <sup>1</sup>

Although the reason for this visit was the desire to bury the fallen Roman soldiers, before beginning the work careful observations of the site were made. Attention was drawn to the remains of fortifications, the concentrations of human and horse bones, scattered equipment and other elements related to the battle and to the intensity of the fighting. Although this expedition was not intended to be scientific, but military, Tacitus's message is one of the first ever reports made from an inspection of a battlefield.

The sites of historic armed clashes have always been more or less present in human consciousness. The more time passes from any event, the more mysterious and legendary it becomes. On the one hand, it becomes less and less real, but on the other hand it could be made tangible due to finds that are associated with any specific battle.

Although comments about artifacts from battles can be found in writings by Wincent Kadłubek or Jan Długosz, it seems that the one who particularly liked them was historian and poet Maciej Strykowski <sup>2</sup>. He lived in the sixteenth century, and in his *Chronicle of Poland, Lithuania, Żmódzka and all Russia* he writes about the battlefield of Vilnius in 1390: "Today, in these fields, they still find old-fashioned daggers, helmets and swords, as well as rusty spurs, and in Werkach in the bishop's court, a few weapons hang, which peasants had plowed up." <sup>3</sup>

Strykowski describes accidental discoveries in his works, however, there is probably more fantasy than truth here, he points out that the battle had left behind real remnants. <sup>4</sup>

Even before armed conflicts started to play a major role in the field of archaeology, battlefields had already been 'discovered' by history buffs - mainly amateurs. One of these history enthusiasts was a Pole, General Michał Sokolnicki, who in 1810 was searching for the site of the defeat of the Roman legions in the Teutoburg Forest. The results of his search were printed in a book, published in Paris in 1812. <sup>5</sup>

In England, in 1842, Edward Fitzgerald, a local history enthusiast, began intensively gathering together information on the 1645 Battle of Naseby which was one of the key battles of the English Civil War. Fitzgerald recorded the location which by tradition were associated with the battle. He studied the local terminology and the topography of the area, painted and sketched the landscape, and collected all the information he could about any objects found that could be related to the battle. His work finally resulted in the carrying out of excavations, which resulted in the discovery of a mass grave containing the remains of the fallen <sup>6</sup>. At the same time, Richard Brooke, a lawyer and regional historian, was dealing with the Battle of Stoke of 1487 in a similar way, which he then followed up by researching other battles from the War of the Roses (1455-1487) <sup>7</sup>. His work

was finally crowned with his publication entitled *Visits to Fields of Battle, in England, of the Fifteenth Century*, where - in addition to historical sources - the author addresses the problems of how to identify battlefields and analyze their landscapes <sup>8</sup>.

For obvious reasons, the subject of battlefields has always been an occupation of historians, who have written countless works on wars and individual battles. It was mainly historians who first set out to see with their own eyes the locations where battles of their interest had taken place. One of these was the Nobel Prize winner, Professor Theodor Mommsen, an eminent expert on Roman law and history. In 1885, he was the first to associate Roman coins found by farmers near Osnabrück with the battlefield in the Teutoburg Forest. Archaeological research carried out over 100 years later eventually confirmed his hypothesis. <sup>9</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many scholars, mostly former German and French military officers, visited classic battlefields in Spain, France, Italy, Greece and Turkey, and subsequently published numerous books and articles on what they found <sup>10</sup>. At that time, research was also being carried out by professional historians, including one eminent military historian and British Academy member, Charles Oman. He personally visited over ten battlefields, later on using his knowledge to publish one of his classic works; *The Art of War in the 16th Century*. <sup>11</sup>

Archaeologists, including amateurs such as Heinrich Schliemann, were discovering remains of armed conflicts too - at such legendary sites as Troy, Alesia and Olint.<sup>12</sup> Battles from a less distant past were also becoming of interest. This included the site of a battle near Poltava (1709), at which in 1911 Swedish officers carried out amateur excavations of the graves of the fallen. <sup>13</sup>

In the interwar period, battle sites were still sporadically being investigated by both amateurs and professionals. There were mass graves discovered, including on the battlefield of Mohacz in Hungary <sup>14</sup> and also in the famous Visby in Sweden. <sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the 1930s, similar research was also being undertaken in the United States, incl. in the area of Fort Necessity, Pennsylvania, where George Washington, the future first president, faced French troops in battle in 1754. <sup>16</sup>

Although research from the late 1950s in Portugal at Aljubarrota (1385) <sup>17</sup> is often mentioned as the first work carried out on any battlefield after World War II, there was also research carried out in 1952–1953 in the United States, again at the Necessity Fort location. This was basically a continuation of the research from the 1930s. <sup>18</sup> It was not, however, research on a battle fought in the open field, but on fighting in defense of fortifications. Work on a specific battlefield was also carried out during this decade in Poland. In the Autumn of 1956, probing excavations were marked out in search of the location of a clash between the troops of Bolesław Krzywousty and the German king Henry V in 1109 at Psie Pole. <sup>19</sup> In modern times, this area is now a district of the city of Wrocław, which significantly hindered the effective identification of the remains of the fighting in the field. Although it is believed by many historians that this battle was probably never fought or was merely a skirmish <sup>20</sup>, this does not change the fact that archaeological research was undertaken to determine its location. During the research <sup>21</sup>, metal detectors were used with the help of a unit of sappers from an officers' military engineering academy.

Unfortunately, the research did not bring about enough concrete results and despite some announcements, the work was ultimately abandoned.

In 1958, along with the above-mentioned research at Aljubarrota, work was simultaneously beginning in Poland at the battlefield of Grunwald (1410). <sup>22</sup> Initially conducted on a large scale, the research has continued - with a few breaks - to this day. The periodic nature of the work is related to various anniversaries of the battle itself, which has had a rather negative impact on the entire research program. <sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, this still remains

the largest-scale research to have taken place in Poland so far.<sup>24</sup> At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, work began on the battlefields at Mohacs (1526) in Hungary and at Varna (1444) in Bulgaria.<sup>25</sup>

During the following decades, research was carried out sporadically in Poland near Cedynia (972), Legnica (1241), Świecin (1462) and Lubiszew (1577).<sup>26</sup> In Czechoslovakia it was Třebel (1647)<sup>27</sup>, and in the Ukraine at Beresteczko (1651).<sup>28</sup>

In the United States, similar research projects have been carried out since the 1950s. In addition to the above-mentioned Fort Necessity, initially historians, and then archaeologists, dealt with both battlefields and the relics of fortifications, mainly from the American Civil War.<sup>29</sup>

A real breakthrough came in the mid-1980s with research on the battlefield of Little Bighorn (1876) in the United States. During this legendary clash between American troops and native Americans, mainly from the Dakota tribe, all the soldiers from a detachment which had become separated from the 7th cavalry regiment were wiped out. The commander, Colonel George Custer<sup>30</sup>, also died during the battle. The research included the use of metal detectors, modern for that time, and the exact location of each relic that was found was determined on the basis of geodetic measurements<sup>31</sup>. The methods used and the presentation of the research results became a model for other similar projects all over world.

The second half of the 1980s through to the 1990s brought many similar research initiatives. Researchers reflected on the number, the scale, the thematic and chronological scope of the research and a new discipline of archaeology was created, which was called battlefield archaeology.<sup>32</sup>

In 2000, the first international conference on the new discipline was held in Glasgow, which resulted in a publication<sup>33</sup> on the subject being published a year later. Since then, the conference has been organized in various places around the world annually or every two years.

The beginning of the 21st century was a time of further research and development in the methodology of battlefield archaeology. Initially, it was defined as one of the disciplines of archaeology whose area of interest covers ancient and historical armed conflicts. Instead of 'battlefield archaeology', which suggests research focuses on the sites of the battles themselves, a new term 'the archaeology of battle' has been proposed, which describes this discipline more precisely, highlighting the battle itself as a historical event.<sup>34</sup>

It became clear relatively quickly that battlefields should not be the sole objects of interest for archaeologists. In addition to sites of armed clashes such as battles, skirmishes or sieges, the relics of military camps<sup>35</sup>, prisoner-of-war camps<sup>36</sup>, the remains of field and permanent fortifications<sup>37</sup>, death camps<sup>38</sup>, as well as both individual and mass graves<sup>39</sup> have also been the objects of research. Military camps, fortifications or graves, for example, could be related to a battle and located at the site of a conflict, but others, such as prisoner-of-war or extermination camps may not be associated with any battle. Any of the places listed above may sometimes be located on a battlefield or may be entirely unrelated to any specific battle (e.g. the mass graves in Katyn). It was becoming clear that the name of the entire discipline was insufficient and had to be changed and defined much more broadly than in the current terms.

The term "conflict archaeology", can be understood as a discipline of archaeology that focuses on the material traces of past conflicts between people. This very broadly understood definition allows topics of human military activity to be dealt with, regardless of chronology<sup>40</sup>. The question has also arisen in countries around the world, if the term should not be clarified in other languages (such as Polish). Since research first began on the physical traces of human military activity, the term "archaeology of armed conflicts" has emphasized the general character of conflicts that have taken place between human societies in the past. However, it is possible to imagine a situation in which physical remains and traces of intra-group conflicts which may not

necessarily be of an armed nature, could also be investigated. Therefore, the name "conflict archaeology" seems more flexible.

Such a flexible definition for this sub-discipline also means that previous research can now be included along with current research, in particular that concerning prehistory <sup>41</sup>. There are now references to these older chronological periods in newer publications, of which the books of John Carman are particularly worth mentioning, as well as the publications of Anthony Harding <sup>42</sup>, Jean Guilaine and Jean Zammit. <sup>43</sup>

Due to the wide range of topics that make up conflict archaeology and the specializations within it, the term "conflict archaeologies" is often used <sup>44</sup>. By using the plural, it is intended to emphasize the multiplicity of issues raised by researchers <sup>45</sup>. In accord with this approach, battlefield archaeology should be considered part of the discipline of conflict archaeologies.

As concerns Polish literature on the subject, the first broader thoughts on research conducted on battlefields was presented by professor Andrzej Nadolski on the subject of the Battle of Grunwald. Describing the methodology of the research, he draws attention to the necessity of its interdisciplinarity. Professor Nadolski briefly characterizes the categories of finds as well as the post-depositional processes which they were subject to. Very important in his work are elements related to the landscape (watercourses and water reservoirs), contemporary road systems and networks of settlements related to the battle. <sup>46</sup>

The first compilation of archaeological research conducted on Polish battlefields was produced by Krzysztof Wolski. <sup>47</sup> In my opinion, however, this work makes no reference to conflict or battlefield archaeologies when it comes to methodology. Wolski sees battlefield archaeology as an auxiliary science of military history. <sup>48</sup>

A calculated approach to conflict and battlefield archaeologies has not yet been fully elaborated. Possibly, the only such attempt could be considered in the work of John Carman <sup>49</sup>, Carman, however, only goes so far as to outline the subject matter in question. There have been rather more publications presenting case studies <sup>50</sup>. Among some of the articles, there are, of course, reflections on methodological approaches, but most of the articles are dominated by analyzes of individual battlefields, fortifications, mass graves, various categories of movable heritage, etc.

Against this background, a publication presenting these issues as discussed in Germany by Thomas Brock and Arny Homann stands out as a modern approach to the subject, in very different way to Wolski's work <sup>51</sup>. Among other numerous publications, it is also worth noting works devoted to individual conflicts <sup>52</sup> or battles <sup>53</sup>.

Conflict archaeology, however, now has its own periodical publication. It has been published since 2005 by the Journal of Conflict archaeology, with articles about the discipline <sup>54</sup>.

Although, as mentioned above, there is as yet no calculated approach to the subject, it should be noted that there have been two books with the title Battlefield Archaeology published, 20 years apart. The first was by John Laffin <sup>55</sup>, the second by Tim Lynch and Jon Cooksey <sup>56</sup>. They are deliberately mentioned here at the end because they are a little difficult to incorporate into what is known properly as battlefield archaeology.

This is because, first of all, none of the authors is an archaeologist by training. Secondly, both publications, to varying degrees, do not discuss archaeology as a science, while paradoxically using the name of the discipline in the title. This is particularly glaring in the work of Laffin, who defines battlefield archaeology as his own activities that he carries out on the battlefields of both world wars, especially the First. These activities involve digging up relics from trenches, missile craters, tunnels and craters created after mine explosions and various types of combat artifacts from so-called 'no-man's land' locations. The author also recommends for this purpose searching areas related to front lines, such as military staging sites or modern

farms, the current owners of which collect various military finds on their property. Laffin shares his reflections on older battlefields, writing that any searching carried out on them can be very difficult due to modern infrastructure (roads, buildings, etc.) getting in the way. Finding anything in these places, he states, is considered more of an accident rather than the result of "knowledge and hard work". Finally, he states his opinion that battlefield archaeology should not only be the domain of professional military historians, but also of amateurs.<sup>57</sup>

Overall, this work is a contradiction of what we now call battlefield archaeology, and is more of a guide for military collectors interested only in movable heritage items.<sup>58</sup>

Lynch and Cooksey note the achievements of the archaeology of armed conflict and consider it to be a part of the science of archaeology. However, one of the main themes of their work is how amateurs can actively engage in conflict archaeology, while avoiding the risk of damaging the work of professionals<sup>59</sup>. This of course brings them closer to Laffin's position as presented above. The authors by far devote most of their space to the conflicts of the 20th century, focusing especially on both world wars. Their descriptions of their approach to research (or perhaps rather their approach to searching) leaves much to be desired, being rather a kind of handbook for people who want to make their own searches on battlefields.<sup>60</sup>

Conflict archaeology is currently developing very dynamically, covering various aspects, not just including the study of physical objects, but also the cultural and social aspects of past conflicts. This is especially true in modern times, where often anthropological analysis may have become more important than the physical relics of wars. Researchers reflect on the multifaceted nature of conflicts, their impact on societies and their consequences, which can be just as important as the conflict itself. As a result, research now requires an interdisciplinary approach in which archaeology is just one of the fields involved.<sup>61</sup>

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