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# Between Memory and Materiality: An Archaeological Approach to Studying the Nazi Concentration Camps

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# BETWEEN MEMORY AND MATERIALITY: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO STUDYING THE NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS

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## ABSTRACT

By its very nature, historical narrative that is rooted exclusively in textual sources is destined to be more linear, more univocal, and less equipped to deal with the problematic. On the other hand, due to its unique abilities and approaches, historical archaeology thrives on the tensions inherent to any attempt to understand past and present experience. In this article I negotiate between two approaches to studying the concentration camps of the Third Reich—one canonical the other experimental. It is suggested that when studying the camps, we are faced with a series of tensions: between past and present, between remembering and forgetting, and between live human actors and the material record. This article explores two research paradigms: first, the traditional text-centric historical approach, and second, an approach that might be called ‘historical archaeological’. I embrace the inherent tensions between the two approaches, and put forward some innovative ways for coming to terms with these places of internment.

In such places there is a terrible presence of absence—not the dead bodies of pre-twentieth century conflicts, but human beings vaporised into nothingness by technology, a community of ‘the missing’ in our midst (Saunders 2004: 1)

If anything, this is an archaeology of the future, if we take such an oxymoron seriously (Buchli & Lucas 2001: 9)

## *Introduction*

Two illustrations from contemporary Germany provide a fitting entrée for a discussion as to how we might approach the history and archaeology of one of the defining experiences of the 20th century, that of the concentration camps of the Third Reich. In August 2006, a controversy erupted in Germany that quickly gained worldwide attention. Nobel Prize-winning author Günter Grass, an outspoken critic of the way Germany has dealt with its Nazi past, admitted that he had been a member of the elite *Waffen-SS*, the combat arm of the *Schutzstaffel*. In the days that followed, an intense and emotion-driven debate played out in the press. Literary, historical, and political heavyweights such as John Irving, Joachim C Fest, and Lech Wałęsa publicly asserted their views, from praise for his present honesty to condemnation for his past lies and hypocrisy. In one piece entitled *Snake in the Grass*, critic Christopher Hitchens (2006) first likened Grass to ‘a high horse, always tethered

conveniently nearby' and then opined that he may have even 'uncork[ed] the hideous revelation to enhance the sale of his latest memoirs'. Everyone had an opinion, and no one with a podium at hand could resist airing it.

The second illustration is provided by a graffiti enthusiast who spotted and photographed a stencil on a wall on *Oranienburger Strasse* in Berlin (Duncan Cumming, pers comm.). The simple, monochrome piece depicted waif-like concentration camp prisoners, one standing, the others laying, in their wood bunks (Figure 1); a shadowy recreation of one of the most famous photographs of the Nazi Judeocide. The photograph (Figure 2) was taken in April 1945 in Buchenwald by liberating American troops, its fame surely due in part to the fact that Elie Wiesel, another Nobel Prize-winner, is visible in the photo. In the *Oranienburger Strasse* stencil, Wiesel's placid visage is hauntingly plain.

Each of these two illustrations evokes themes with repercussions both influential and potentially insidious. What is intriguing about the recent dispute over Grass is not the moral character of an elderly man and his relationship with his country's past *per se*. Important as this may be, more fascinating is the fact of the debate itself, that it even occurred in the first place. It is clear from the incident that Germans, and others around, the world still care passionately about events of over 60 years ago. And what of the stencil graffiti; what are the meanings and repercussions of its existence on a wall in Berlin? I would posit that to some Berliners, this subversive street art, in its dreadful and stark simplicity, speaks to them more clearly about the Holocaust than any textbook ever will.

These recent events illustrate not only the critical relevance of a not-so-distant Nazi era—the Second World War was recently described by historical archaeologists as 'arguably the most significant event of world history' (Schofield & Johnson 2006: 111)—but more importantly, they demonstrate both the continuity and the 'series of tensions' between past and present, between 'remembering and forgetting', and between live human actors and the material record (Johnson 1999; Buchli & Lucas 2001). The intent of this article is to compare and negotiate between two approaches to studying the camps, one canonical and the other experimental. It is to be hoped that the tensions between the two may begin to be resolved through this process.

The paper will explore and debate two research paradigms: first, the traditional text-centric historical approach, and second, an approach that might be called 'historical archaeological'. The historical archaeological approach treats texts as just one manifestation of material culture among many. It also draws on previously unconsidered, or little considered, avenues for dealing with the recent and contentious 'contemporary past' of the Nazi era (Buchli & Lucas 2001). As such, the historical archaeological approach may or may



Fig. 1. Berlin stencil (Courtesy of Mr. Duncan Cumming)

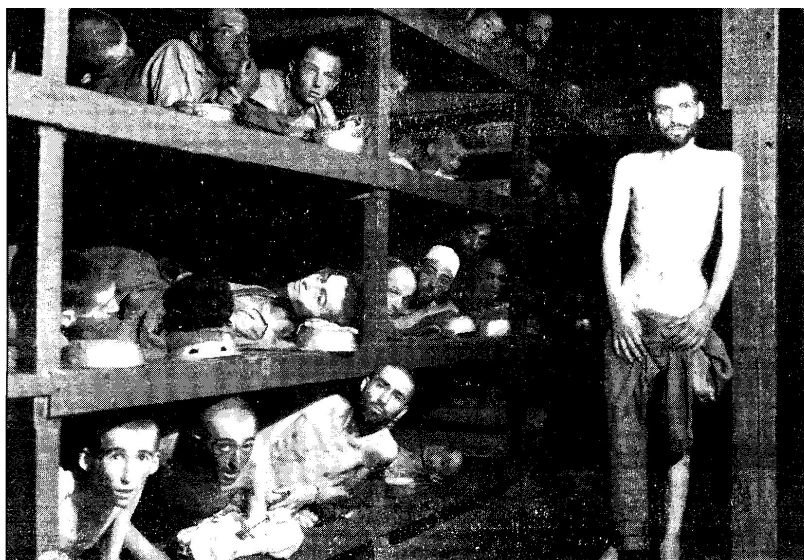


Fig. 2. Buchenwald at liberation (work of the US government in the public domain, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration)

not include excavations in the traditional sense of the word. Working with, and even embracing, the inherent tensions between the two approaches, should reinvigorate attempts to better understand both the world of the concentration camps as they were once-lived and the world today where, in another sense than the past, they clearly still live.

### *The Context and Materiality of Text*

As Hicks has suggested, conventional historical studies have been exposed as

...reliant upon a purely arbitrary selection of one source of evidence ('texts', or documents stripped of their materiality), disregarding the superabundance of other material sources of evidence (Hicks 2003: 316)

While weaknesses inherent to conventional historical studies have long been discussed among historical archaeologists, some conventional archaeological approaches still need to be challenged as well. Certain archaeologists still treat texts as somehow apart from the subaltern people *they* study. They make certain use of texts, but

in ignoring the engagement between texts and the 'people without history', they deny themselves the possibility of fully understanding the mechanisms through which the later were exploited (Moreland 2001: 96).

Unquestionably, it is no longer possible to study only texts. However, neither can material culture and text be studied independently, as though different lines of evidence:

For if it is the case that material culture should be seen as a product of human creativity, as an active intervention in the social production of reality, then it must follow that this applies to *all* human creations—including written sources (Moreland 2001: 83; emphasis in original).

Following Johnson's (1996) call to treat texts as artefacts, it binds the researcher to the challenge of dealing with the 'context and materiality' of those written sources (Moreland 2001). The primary texts that emerge out of the concentration camp experience are highly problematic, and it is only with an approach that deals with these texts' context and materiality that we might breathe fresh air into what has become a stale historical discussion.

### *Presence of Absence at Sites of Genocide*

Buchli & Lucas state that

the elimination of the body by murder and its secret burial always leaves its trace, if only in the gap left by its absence, an absence as physical as any presence (2001: 122)

Their insight seems especially apropos with regard to murder on a mass scale. Buchli & Lucas refer to the presence of absence of a single human, the gap left by a single murder. Consider then what size gap, and how strong a presence of absence, could be expected when there has not been only one murder, but hundreds of thousands of murders. Not surprising is the sense of emptiness that many visitors to Holocaust sites experience.

If an overwhelming absence is present at the sites of concentration and extermination, then it follows that this absence is also present in the primary textual record that has grown out of the camp experience, the body of work labelled Holocaust literature. It is this condition of overwhelming absence that exposes the one fundamental and inherent bias shared by every memoirist of the concentration camp experience: the fact that the author survived. This bias has remained largely unchallenged.

It is well documented that the social organization of camp life was dominated by a pernicious social hierarchy. Every prisoner fell into a rigid category ranging from the highly powerful ethnic German professional criminals and 'politicals' to the piteous and usually powerless Jews. This social hierarchy maintained the disparity between classes of prisoners that formed the framework for a hegemonic system dominated by a core of elite prisoners (see Glicksman 1953; Gutman 1984; Sofksy 1999). Both survivors and historians often credit luck with strongly affecting the outcome of who survived and who did not. However, survival was also contingent on the prisoner's position in this hierarchy, which determined access to food and trade goods, and their resulting socio-economic power. In the blunt words of one survivor, in the camps 'whoever has grub, has power' (Borowski 1976: 31).

In the context of the concentration camp experience, the subaltern, the people without history, are those that did not survive. There are vast numbers of people who perished without ever writing anything of their experience. The logical response to this observation is that those who did survive the experience and who took the opportunity to write their memoirs are a kind of elite, comparable to the elite described in larger paradigms of historical archaeology. In a disconcerting similarity, the class system not only existed in the lived past of the camps, but has been carried through and perpetuated by the literary record. After the war, survivor Ella Lingens-Reiner (1948: 50) admitted that those who were among the camp elite are 'the only ones who can still give a comprehensive report on the camps'. It was largely the elite who survived, meaning that the emphases and biases in the written record have been largely formed by that group. Hence, the history of the camps (both its formation by survivors and historians and its consumption by the public) has relied on documentary and oral evidence drawn from an inherently 'flawed' sample.



If the canon of historical research on the concentration camps is deeply rooted in this particular sample, then it is a body of work that has overlooked a large cross-section of its past actors. However, if historical archaeology is specially suited to bringing to the fore populations forgotten or overlooked, by making the 'familiar unfamiliar' (Buchli & Lucas 2001), it may provide the appropriate framework needed to put these forgotten past actors back into the lived past. Concentration camps and the material culture therein must be seen as sites and objects made, used, and experienced by not only the people who survived to tell about them, but also by those who did not survive.

The story of the concentration camps of the Third Reich is overwhelming, in spatial distances and distribution, in the sheer number of actors and their differing personal experiences, and in difficulty in comprehension. A comprehensive comparison of the textual and archaeological ways that the camps can be studied is, of course, impossible here. Rather, the goal is to explore certain key examples of how this new approach compares to the dominant textual approach. Looking in depth at a select few representative areas should illuminate some innovative ways for coming to terms with this overwhelming absent-presence of the concentration camps.

### *Victim and Perpetrator: The Space Between*

The more challenging writings on life in the camps attempt critical readings of Holocaust memoirs to try to tease out the intricacies of the internment experience. Such writings confront a commonly told version of the camp experience, one that does not allow for the fallibility of those murdered by the Nazis. Revered Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg (1993: ix) discusses the 'perpetrators', 'bystanders', and 'victims', three groups 'distinct from one another': 'Each saw what happened from its own, special perspective and each harbored a separate set of attitudes and reactions'. Hilberg sees the three categories as totally unambiguous:

In this text, perpetrators, victims, and bystanders will appear separately. The twenty-four chapters, each dealing with a segment of one of the three groups, are written as modules. They are intended to be self-contained and may be read in any order (1993: xii)

Unfortunately, this neat moral division is not a viable interpretation of the camp experience, for such an approach reduces highly complex social relationships into a series of too simplistic moral polarities. Despite the fact that it would be more palatable to believe that the 'perpetrators' were all sadists and the 'victims' either died as martyrs or survived morally unblemished as

heroes, this evidence demonstrates that the reality of the camps was never quite that simple.

A few key Holocaust memoirists remind us that in the concentration camps there was often no clear-cut division between the perpetrators and the victims. Memoirists such as Tadeusz Borowski (1976) and Primo Levi (1986; 1988) describe how they often found themselves in complex and morally ambiguous situations where the roles of the perpetrators and the victims were distorted or overlapping. Combining these exceptionally frank memoirs of survivors with careful readings of other memoirs and documents, sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky managed to produce a more nuanced version of life in the camps. Sofsky (1999) emphasized the influential social hierarchies and black markets that dominated the prisoners' daily lives to highlight the fact that not all prisoners were equal.

It is apparent from this more recent scholarship that careful work with textual sources can provide keen insight into the camp experience. But what of an approach informed by historical archaeology—might we add to the interconnected stories of social hierarchies and black marketing by thinking about the camps in an archaeological way? While the entire body of work on hierarchies and black marketing draws exclusively on a textual evidentiary base, the two themes are clearly intertwined with the traditionally archaeological conceptions of spatiality and material culture.

### *The Spatiality of the Camp*

The complex system of power relations in the camps was established and reified by both real and conceptualised spatial boundaries. From the electrified and very tangible barbed-wire fencing (Figure 3) which separated the prisoners from the civilian world, to the sometimes unmarked divisions within an individual bunkhouse that delineated the personal area of the infamous *Kapos*, boundaries and conceptions of boundaries played large in hierarchical systems and power relations. The black marketing of the camps was of course fundamentally rooted in materiality. While services (human labour) were also part of the systems of trade, series of exchanges were never far removed from material culture. The ultimate goal of each trader was to increase his chances of survival by increasing his caloric intake; thus, smuggled and stolen goods of every description were traded for consumables in trade networks involving prisoners, guards, and civilians. If discussions of social hierarchies and black marketing are intertwined with those of spatiality and material culture, then it is clear that historical archaeology has something to contribute.



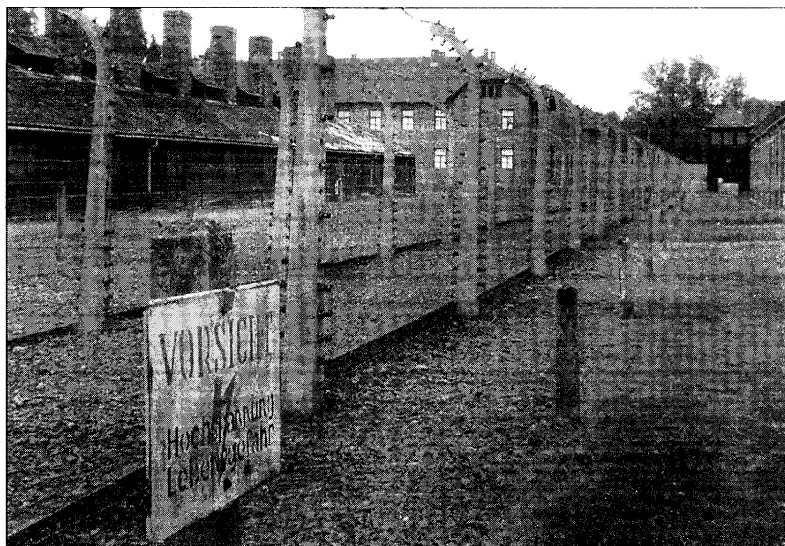


Fig. 3. Auschwitz-I fence (author)

Detailed archaeological survey of the above-ground remains of the concentration camps—beginning at landscape scale, and then down to the interior layout of individual bunkhouses—could provide new information about the nature of, and the relationship between, spatiality and power. In her exploration of the potential for archaeological work at the Long Kesh/Maze prison site, McAtackney states that

a reflexive archaeological investigation of the Maze site has the ability to tell the stories of the lowly, the disenfranchised and the subversive through their negotiations with this institution of the dominant.

Archaeology could be used to

examine the negotiation of the prisoners and the prison officers with the material culture that surrounded them, both structural and movable, through examination of the buildings and artefacts connected to the site (2005b: 23).

A partial test of how power relations might have affected the built environment could compare the original documentary plans for the construction of the camp with how it was actually built and possibly adapted over time:

we can ascertain how the buildings were originally conceived, and what alterations by the prison authorities and subversions by the prisoners occurred (McAtackney 2005a: 14).

The early stages of survey and recording of the concentration camps would benefit from recent work by Schofield *et al.* (2006), who have developed a preliminary methodology for the recording of modern English army camps.

### *The Materiality of the Camp*

Inside the concentration camps, despite the most extreme conditions, and despite the landscape of death and deprivation, interaction between humans and material goods was continuous (Myers 2007). Combining data obtained from landscape and building survey with data obtained through representative, targeted subsurface testing will reveal not only something of the spatial distribution of artefacts, but also how this distribution relates to larger hypotheses about spatiality and power relations. Such a study of the context of excavated artefacts would reveal fascinating, problematic, and possibly subversive, evidence about resistance and collaboration, the different classes of prisoners, and their economic interaction (see also Casella 2000).

Following Cochran & Beaudry's comment that

understanding and interpreting material culture has become more important than simply identifying and classifying excavated objects (2006: 191)

an approach to artefact analysis is needed that focuses on the potential of small finds, and indeed, 'the small stories' that follow. Ronald Hirte's *Buchenwald Found Objects* project has perhaps inadvertently demonstrated the potential to apply the small finds approach to the concentration camps. Hirte (nd) excavated war-era Buchenwald middens, 'resulting in a collection of several thousand found objects, primarily simple articles of everyday life in the camps':

The majority of them were made or improvised by the inmates themselves from scraps of various materials; many of them changed hands more than once. They include makeshift toiletries and medical articles, cutlery and dishes often bearing initials, inmate numbers and engravings, factory and identification tags, jewellery, game pieces and religious objects.

There is great potential in a biographical approach to interpreting the personal artefacts of such an assemblage. Not only will this approach 'provide intimate portraits of individual lives and of the construction of personal and social identity' (Cochran & Beaudry 2006: 192), it may also contribute to wider questions about black marketing and the socio-economics of the camps.

### *The Subtlety of Resistance*

Another theme apt for comparison is that of resistance. Unlike the previous themes of social hierarchies and black marketing, the notion of resistance

in the camps has been intensively covered by historians. The writing of a history of resistance developed partly in response to the early conception that the victims of the Nazis (and especially the Jews) went to their deaths like sheep to the slaughter. Survivors, theorists, and historians empowered the prisoners by beginning to look at their active resistance to the Nazis. In *Fighting Auschwitz: The Resistance Movement in the Concentration Camp*, memoirist Józef Garliński made it clear that the camp had a widespread and structured resistance movement. The most famous act of resistance occurred in October 1944, when a group of prisoners working at the crematoria complex at Birkenau successfully blew up one of the crematoria buildings. Although the explosion was a success, every participant was apprehended and executed.

Another resistance theme covered by memoirists and historians is that of escape. Though extremely rare relative to the total number incarcerated, the few key escape stories prove inspiring to readers of Holocaust literature. One celebrated instance is the successful escape from Auschwitz of Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler, who in April 1944 managed to flee the camp in a bid to apprise the Allies of the ongoing genocide. Vrba's escape and its aftermath are covered in his powerful memoir, *I Cannot Forgive*, and was the subject of recent scholarly attention by Ruth Linn of Haifa University (Vrba 1997; Linn 2004). A resurgence of interest in Vrba was evidenced by the widespread, worldwide, media coverage of his death in March 2006.

While memoir and historical writing on resistance have most often focused on discernable events and specific acts of resistance in the camps, resistance can be more subtle concept. Under the 'extremity' of the concentration camp (as described by Des Pres 1976), simply staying alive was a form of resistance. In a very real sense, any minute act that bettered the prisoner's situation, that provided benefits physical or psychological, must be considered as an act of resistance. Thus, if the aim is to deal not only with the big events of resistance, such as the blowing up of a crematorium, or an escape from Auschwitz, then a historical archaeological approach may be particularly suitable. While resistance, and thus perhaps agency could be investigated in a multitude of ways at the camps—and is related to the above discussion of personal artefacts—the present research is limited here to two potentially fruitful avenues: concentration camp graffiti and the research potential of the camp privies.

### *Grffiti in the Camp*

In the summer of 2002, while at Birkenau, I took a picture of a row of bunks in a wood block house (Figure 4). Only recently did I look at the picture again; I saw hundreds of markings covering the wall in the picture. What

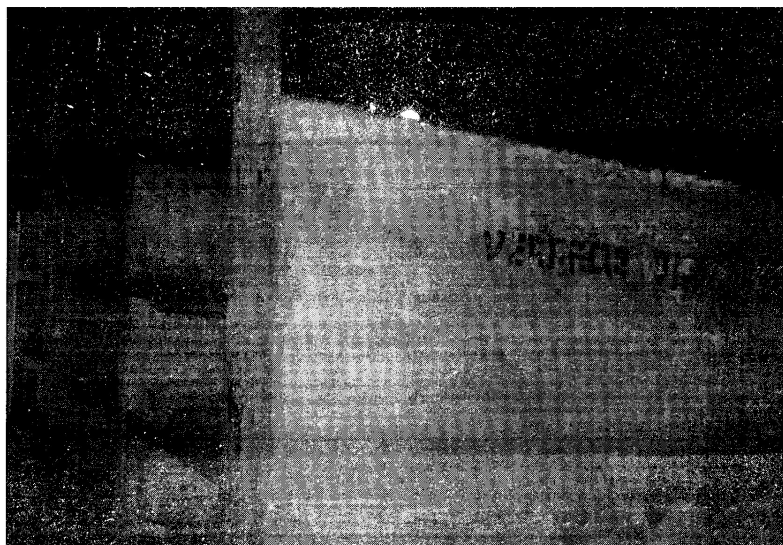


Fig. 4. Auschwitz-II birkenau bunks (author)

I had barely noticed when I had taken the picture is now much more interesting to me than the original subject of the photograph. While the extent and nature of markings on the walls of standing buildings at the concentration camps is unknown, some of it is obviously still extant. Cocroft *et al.*, discussing graffiti in the modern context of English military bases, state:

People have always decorated their surroundings. Whether on walls in prehistoric caves, Roman villas or medieval churches, paintings are motivated and inspired by forces as diverse as the images. Murals, graffiti and casual doodles connect directly with a moment in time and with past residents, be these ancient Egyptian artists, Roman soldiers or recent service personnel (2006: 44).

Graffiti in the concentration camps could be used to study a range of themes, such as Nazi oppression (through a close look at the official painted murals and slogans); however, the avenue seems especially suited to an investigation of resistance. As Cocroft *et al.* suggest: 'Spontaneous graffiti are . . . effective at communicating a message of protest or subverting a hated structure' (2006: 47).

The study of graffiti at concentration camps can not be treated as a study of graffiti produced between 1933 and 1945. The history of the camps did not end at liberation, and the creation of new graffiti certainly did not end either. While the study of pre-1945 graffiti will reveal life during that critical era, post 1945 graffiti will reveal the changing reception of, and reactions to,

the camps since the end of the war. Not only can art 'create a dialogue between the past and the present' (Cocroft & Schofield 2003: 44), but it can also contribute to a larger goal of the archaeology of the recent and contemporary past, that of 'serving as a critique on the world we ourselves have created' (Schofield 2006: 2). Recent developments in the study of graffiti by historical archaeologists are encouraging. With innovative work in both military and civilian contexts pushing the boundaries of both method and theory, a precedent has been set for the development of similarly critical work at the concentration camps of the Third Reich (see for example, Buchinger & Metzler 2006; Cocroft & Schofield 2003; Cocroft & Wilson 2006; Cocroft *et al.* 2006; Cole 2006).

### *Privies in the Camp*

In the daily life of the camp, the privies were of central importance, as excrement played a primary role in the life of the common prisoner. The combination of diet and disease was such that the majority suffered from potentially lethal diarrhoea for the duration of their incarceration. Those who were able to wait lined up for the cruelly inadequate privies (in both number and cleanliness). Those who could not wait, or could not get up from their bunks, defecated where they stood or lay. Thus, survivor and theorist Terrence Des Pres (1976), in his seminal work *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* appropriately devotes a chapter to his concept of 'the excremental assault'. Accepting Wheeler's (2000: 12) description of the privy as an 'opportunistic midden', it seems very likely that the camp privies would have been used for the disposal of the material culture of resistance. In the highly controlled environment of the camps where bunks were inspected daily, the privies were likely used as the final repository for illicit items when the margin of safety had become too thin. While there are accounts of prisoners cleaning out the privies, and other accounts of murder by drowning in the privies, it is nearly inconceivable that any authority in the camps would have gone near the fetid liquid in the privy shaft.

Any privy excavation at a concentration camp requires a special set of considerations. Survivor testimony consistently confirms that everything had value to the inmates; any bit of string, piece of paper, lump of grease, was secreted for future use or held for its trade value. It is unlikely that privies were used to deposit common refuse. In fact, it is unlikely that the prisoners produced much, if any, refuse at all. It is far more likely therefore that camp-era privy deposits consist primarily of two classes of materials (other than human waste): items lost accidentally, and illicit items deliberately deposited. A final consideration is the possibility of a deposit stemming from an abandonment event.



While the happenings of the closing weeks of the war differ vastly from camp to camp, we can nevertheless make certain generalisations. In a relatively consistent pattern, the camps were abandoned by the Nazis days or hours ahead of the approaching allies, and to varying degrees, and with varying success, the former camp rulers attempted to destroy the evidence of their crimes. At Birkenau, the crematoria were set with explosive charges and destroyed, and many of the wood block houses were burned. Thus, it is possible that the Nazi administration used the privies as 'opportunistic' evidence dumps too. Any distinct privy abandonment deposit might provide a fascinating window into the final hours of the Nazi era of the camp.

### *Conclusion*

The concentration camps cannot be seen as a phenomenon of the 1930s and 1940s. The history and legacy of the camps is far too complex and far too intertwined with the very fabric of the 20th and 21st centuries to relegate such sites to a time now past. As Wilkie (2001: 11) suggests, as we 'dive into the archaeology of the early twentieth century, we will find the past and present more difficult to extricate from one another'. While some historians continue to aim for a higher standard of critical textual interpretation, by its very nature narrative that is rooted exclusively in textual sources is destined to be more linear, more univocal, and less equipped to deal with the problematic. On the other hand, due to its unique abilities and approaches, historical archaeology thrives on the tensions inherent to any attempt to understand past and present experience. Historical archaeology is specially suited to challenge that which is taken for granted, to deal with conflicting interpretations, 'contradiction rather than consistency' (Hall 1999: 193), and to subvert dominant methods and interpretations.

The series of tensions between past and present, between remembering and forgetting, between live human actors and the material record, and between the recent lived past and the textual record of the recent lived past have spawned a new tension. This new tension is between a text-centric approach and a more holistic, historical archaeological approach—the canonical versus the experimental. As the necessarily limited examples in this article demonstrate, the story of the concentration camps is multi-layered, multi-vocal, and messy. If we are to continue to try to understand the concentration camp experience and to probe the relevance of that experience to the present day, then a new perspective that is grounded in recent developments in method and theory in historical archaeology provides a way forward. Such an approach, rather than relying on the singular 'excavation' in the traditional sense of the word, might include a series of excavations: into the soil, the texts, the imagery,



the landscape, and the memory. Such an approach might negotiate between the canonical and the experimental.

The Nazi Holocaust—with little debate the moral nadir of the 20th century—is part of our collective heritage, a ‘negative heritage’ perhaps (Meskell 2002), but our heritage nevertheless.

As time distances the personal contact and the number of visitors with personal sensitivities to be respected diminishes, we move towards an era when the concentration camps will be sites of education, warning and remembrance, but no longer places where the heritage hurts quite so much (Beech 2002: 205).

Continuing to deal with the events of the Holocaust, the sites of the Holocaust, and the repercussions of the Holocaust that are noticeable daily as we advance into this new century remains our responsibility. Historical archaeologists, on the cutting edge of the theory and practice of questioning our world, are uniquely equipped to lead the way.

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