

COMMEMORATING THE 'COMMON MAN' AS AN ETHICAL RESEARCH GOAL IN CONFLICT ARCHAEOLOGY

History shows that social status or class not only shape individual and collective experiences of war, but also how those lost in war are remembered. Before the emergence of the nation-state, mass burial was standard for the common soldier killed on the battlefield, with commemoration limited at best to the family circle. Public ritual and marked burial were reserved, where possible, for prominent casualties, usually members of the nobility [1].

Since destinies other than those of military leaders were seldom recorded in pre-modern wars, the fate of the common fighting man is mainly a subject of archaeological research. If historical archaeology aims to "challenge and reassess the apparent familiarity of the recent past...and to address themes and social groups that [are] undocumented" [2], then the forgotten participants in past conflicts surely merit attention. For studies of popular resistance in feudal and colonial societies this holds especially true due to the hostile tenor of written sources. With violent suppression and criminalization being the official legacy of many resistance movements, archaeology can help examine conventional attitudes towards events which people in the past may have been able to commemorate only selectively or clandestinely [3].

A good example is the Peasants' War of 1525. Numerous historical studies illustrate the sociopolitical complexity and lack of clear-cut battle lines in this series of regional uprisings in southern Germany and adjacent areas in the mid-1520s. Some historians use the contemporary term 'common man' to reflect the social diversity in the rebel camp. In the specific context of military encounters the term refers to all those peasants, vintners, artisans, traders, etc., who were crushed by the ruling elites on the battlefield. Period accounts routinely depict these encounters from the victors' perspective only. Regional differences exist in modern Peasant War historiography and also in popular reception. In some areas, sympathy for the rebel cause runs high even today [4].

Archaeologically, the various uprisings are essentially unknown territory. The only excavation to date of a Peasant War site is that of several grave pits at Leipheim on the Danube in September 1994. The pits, discovered during road construction, held 26 skeletons, many with unhealed blade and blunt-force lesions. Location, artifacts, and forensics leave little doubt that the skeletons represent some of the 2,000-4,000 rebels killed in battle near Leipheim on 4 April 1525. Public reaction to the discovery showed that the events of 1525 were far from forgotten. Just six months after the excavation, the local community unveiled a large memorial on the occasion of the battle's 470th anniversary. Composed of an oak trunk propped up by three steel lances and split by an iron plough, the memorial symbolizes the old feudal order, its military underpinnings, and the 'common man's' struggle against it. A scythe towering over the assemblage proclaims that developments since have undone the rebels' defeat [5].

The Leipheim excavation and memorial indicate how even relatively limited archaeological work can provide insight into a historical period for which the written record is sketchy and/or one-sided. The fact that the material recovered came chiefly in the form of the remains of some of the otherwise undocumented protagonists on the rebel side helped spur efforts to erect a memorial to the vanquished. Archaeologists studying past conflicts are well placed to promote such commemoration and therefore might, on general research as well as ethical grounds, do so by directing attention at the 'common man'. Though as a group the 'common man' may look differently from region to region or period to period, long-term collective memories of war suffering run deep in many places. At Leipheim, local memory and archaeological discovery combined to encourage permanent commemoration of an event that had traumatized many communities in the area, and for which no public memorial yet existed. While the Leipheim experience today informs the planning of an archaeological project on a battlefield from the Franconian theater of the Peasants' War [6], its social and ethical implications may apply to similar contexts of conflict archaeology elsewhere.

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