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Considering Second World War Archaeological Heritage in France

Vincent Carpentier

The archaeology of the Second World War has existed since the 1980s in English-language research. However, the vestiges of this conflict were only officially included in French national heritage at the end of 2013. Only since 2014, the year of the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy, do preventive archaeology operations prescribe for World War II (WWII) sites. Public research programmes have also been set up to identify and characterise the heritage linked to the conflict, in particular the numerous remains of the Atlantic Wall on France's western seafront. During this decade, several archaeological operations have revealed the strong scientific potential attached to WWII sites throughout the country. At the same time, researchers from the National Institute of Preventive Archaeological Research (INRAP) have drawn up a general research theme based on these remains which now form part of an international discussion framework. There are three main lines of research based on the typology of material traces from the conflict.

The first of these is dedicated to battlefield remains, which are currently being used to compile an archaeology of military operations in Normandy. The second is the study of defensive structures (bunkers on the Atlantic Wall and passive defence constructions) that are also the subject of exciting discoveries in Normandy and other French regions. The third area of research addresses remains linked to internment and mass crimes. In particular, this concerns the search, currently underway, of the only Nazi concentration camp on French soil, the [KL Natzweiler-Struthof](#). This houses the European Centre of Deported Resistance Members (CERD) and performs important research on other deportation or internment memorials (e.g. Drancy, Mont-Valérien) and on a series of prison camps across France. These sites, long threatened by soil and coastal erosion, development or the looting of militaria, are now crystallising as powerful heritage assets, even though the expression and sharing of this archaeological memory of World War II comes in response to high levels of national and international public expectation.



1. Introduction

Although the archaeology of the Second World War has existed since the 1980s in English-language research, the vestiges of this conflict were only officially included in French national heritage at the end of 2013 by the Minister of Cultural Affairs and Communication. So only from 2014, the year of the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy, has preventive archaeology operations been prescribed for French World War II (WWII) sites. Just ten years after French archaeologists began focusing their efforts on the material remains of the World War I, it was finally time for them to study those of World War II (Carpentier [2022](#)).

Remnants of this conflict are notoriously numerous in northern France, particularly in Normandy where intense fighting deeply affected both urban and rural landscapes. There have been countless discoveries of wartime remains in this region since the late 1940s (Carpentier and Marcigny [2019](#)). Even back then, the first collectors, passionate about militaria and military history, wandered the coast and countryside to expand their collections. Some of them even founded museums or associations that still exist today. In the early 1970s, 'bunker archaeology' was founded not by an archaeologist, but by a French architectural historian, Paul Virilio ([1975](#)). Until the early 21st century, French archaeologists had left others to explore battlefields, Atlantic Wall bunkers, military aerodromes or plane crash sites, and publications by the regional archaeological services mention almost no discoveries relating to the Second World War. Remains were regularly discovered but most of the time they were not described or only mentioned in passing.



Figure 1: Touffréville, Calvados, Normandy. German dugout in 'Eastern front style', the first foxhole excavated in Normandy (N. Coulthard, SDAC)



2. Towards a French World War II archaeology: the beginnings

This situation changed gradually towards the very end of the 1990s, a decade after the discovery and excavation of certain emblematic archaeological sites of the First World War, such as the common grave in which the French writer Alain-Fournier, the author of the 1913 novel [Le Grand Meaulnes](#) had been buried (Adam [2006](#)). In 1997, Jean-Pierre Legendre (Minister of Cultural Affairs and Communication(MCC)) found and studied the remains of an RAF Lancaster heavy bomber in Fléville-devant-Nancy (Meurthe-et-Moselle, Grand-Est; Legendre [2018a](#)). The following year, during the excavation of an Iron Age settlement in Mosles, near Bayeux (Calvados, Normandy), the remains of a British camp were discovered, built at the end of the war to house German prisoners (Marcigny [2021](#)). That same year, a German dugout was also excavated in Touffréville, east of Caen (Figure 1). This was the very first 'fox-hole' to be studied by archaeologists in France (carried out by Nicola Coulthard, SDAC, the Calvados departmental archaeological service; see Carpentier and Marcigny [2019](#), 73). However, it was not until 2006 that the first 'preventive excavation' project was carried out on the camp for German prisoners in La Glacerie (Figure 2), near Cherbourg (Manche, Normandy; Early [2013](#); Fichet de Clairfontaine [2013](#); [2016](#)). At the same time, French historians, following the work of Denis Peschanski, dug into the subject of internment camps in France (Peschanski [2002](#); Schneider [2013a](#); [2013b](#); Théofilakis [2014](#)). Other excavations followed and at the end of the year 2013, the Minister of Cultural Affairs, Aurélie Filipetti, finally declared that the remains of the 19th and 20th centuries, among them those of the two world wars, should benefit from the same consideration and protection as other elements of archaeological heritage (Legendre [2021](#)). Since 2016, the programme set out by the French National Council for Archaeological Research (CNRA) now includes a new section on the 'archaeology of military contexts' (CNRA [2016](#), axis 14, 185-95).





Figure 2: La Glacerie, Manche, Normandy. One of the prisoners' huts in the camp, with its manufactured stove (DRAC-SRA Normandie)

During the last ten years, a growing number of operations have been implemented throughout France on remnants of the last global conflict, mainly as part of preventive archaeology (60 to 80%). There are nonetheless obvious differences from one region to another and research mainly focuses on the north-western and north-eastern parts of France, which were much more marked by occupation and fighting. In total, however, few discoveries have occurred compared with other periods: 20 to 30 discoveries have been reported every year since 2005 for all of France, 90% of which are in Normandy (Figure 3) (Carpentier and Fichet de Clairfontaine [2022](#)). So, what kind of archaeological sites and remains are we talking about?

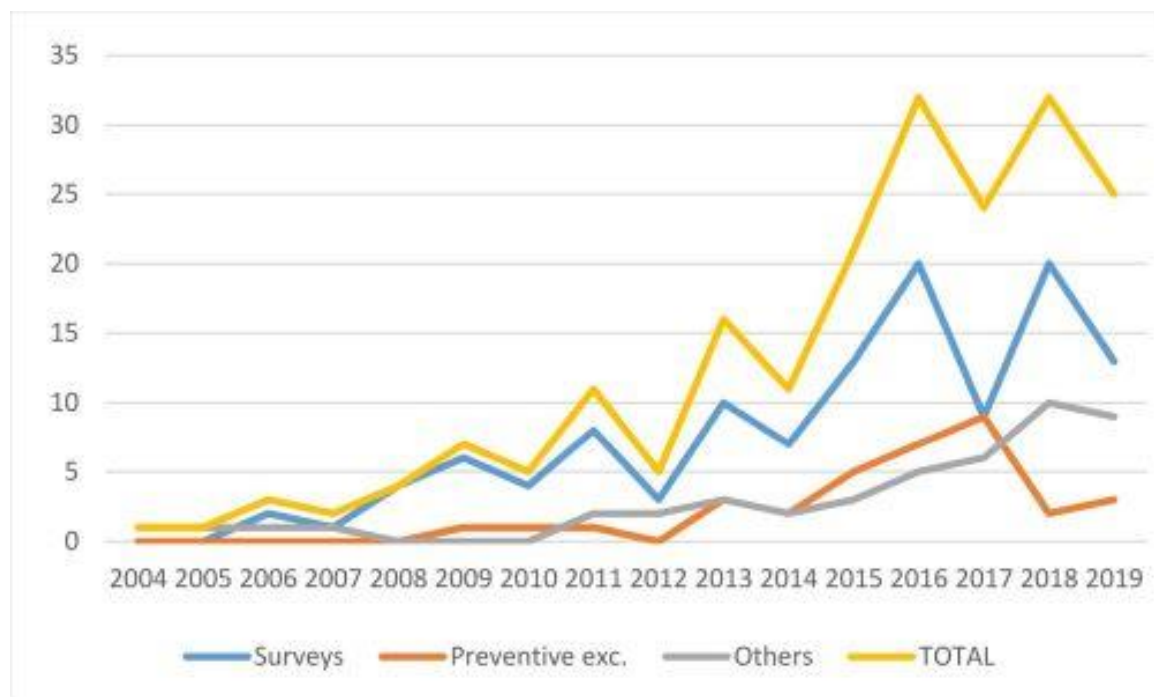


Figure 3: Graphs showing the increasing number of archaeological operations (surveys and excavations) in Normandy, 2004-2019 (V. Carpentier, INRAP)

3. Archaeology of World War II: theatres of operation

These remains are primarily those of the battlefields. Concentrated namely in Normandy, WWII French battlefields have revealed a large number of archaeological structures and objects linked either to combat (air raid shelters, artillery positions, parachute dropping and glider landing zones, etc.) or to its consequences (temporary tombs, bomb craters, destruction, etc.). In some areas of Normandy, archaeologists are now able to study these military remains at a historical scale by considering the many theatres of operations. To date, the sites located around Caen, where town- and country-planning is very dynamic, are the best documented. These included dropping and landing zones (Figure 4); battlefields with villages occupied and liberated by Anglo-Canadian troops; carpet-bombing areas; and encampments,



some of which were designed to accommodate entire divisions such as the Assembly Area of the 2nd Canadian infantry division in Fleury-sur-Orne. In this village alone, dozens of gun-pits, slit-trenches and foxholes (Figure 5), the last remains of an extensive camp for German prisoners (Figure 6) and a refuge-quarry where hundreds of civilians took shelter from the bombings above Caen (Figure 7), have been excavated and studied by archaeologists since 2014 (Carpentier [2022](#), chapter II).



Clockwise from top left. Figure 4: Blainville-sur-Orne, Calvados, Normandy. Parts of the dismantled wreck of a Horsa glider of 6th Airborne Division, that landed on D-Day. These were used as raw materials by gunners of the Royal Artillery to build and provide comfort in their foxholes (V. Carpentier, INRAP)

Figure 5: Fleury-sur-Orne, Calvados, Normandy. Excavation of a German machine-gun pit, later filled with Canadian metallic garbage (E. Ghesquière, INRAP)

Figure 6: Fleury-sur-Orne, Calvados, Normandy. The sewers of the camp for German prisoners of Caen, La Grâce de Dieu, made of Canadian ammunition boxes (V. Carpentier, INRAP)

Figure 7: Fleury-sur-Orne, Calvados, Normandy. Some of the preserved remains of civilian shelters in the quarry beneath the Canadian military camp. Among them, some toys and other objects linked with the presence of many children (V. Carpentier, INRAP)

In addition, some human remains, those of the fallen soldiers, abandoned on the battlefield after the end of the war, are sometimes found during archaeological operations, as at Maltot at the foot of Hill 112 (Figure 8). Throughout all north-western France, several discoveries of makeshift graves, as well as the remains of soldiers killed in action, have made it possible to observe the care that went into the



inhumation and exhumation of the fallen ones. National war grave commissions are responsible for retrieving, identifying, and reburying such remains.

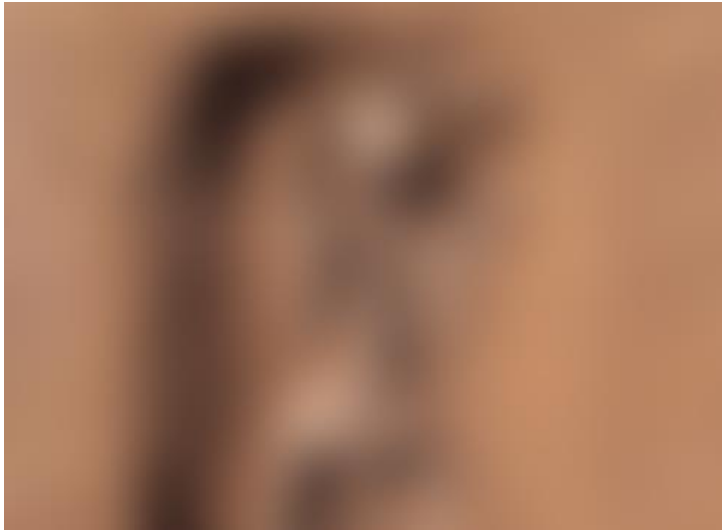


Figure 8: Maltot, Calvados, Normandy. At the very foot of the Hill 112 battlefield, a long-forgotten buried German soldier was found during the excavation of an Iron Age settlement (V. Carpentier, INRAP). *This image has been blurred as it contains an image of human remains and preserved clothing. Clicking the thumbnail will open the unredacted version.*

Archaeology focusing on plane crash sites is also being deployed across France in association with various partners, American universities, veterans and memory associations. Several examples have shown that contributions by archaeologists may establish objective facts about these crashes. Sometimes, their work makes it possible to identify lost crew members who have been missing since the war through historical data and DNA analysis.

Underwater remains dating back to the D-Day landings and air-naval operations have also been mapped and studied by diving archaeologists from the French Department of Underwater and Submarine Archaeological Research (DRASSM). The same kind of work is currently taking place off Dunkirk (Nord, Hauts-de-France), further north of the English Channel, on the underwater remains of Operation *Dynamo*.

The numerous discoveries made in Normandy and elsewhere in France have allowed for unprecedented comparisons between archaeological data and historical sources, including testimonies of soldiers and civilians. They also demonstrate the urgency of studying these very last remnants of the conflict, in areas that have been densely urbanised since the 1980s where militaria-looting has been relatively dynamic for several decades (Carpentier *et al.* [2019](#)). Within just a few years, archaeologists have begun to focus on new issues, and a scientific dialogue has been initiated with historians and museums such as at the [Caen Memorial](#). Subjects pertaining to material culture in times of war, specific behaviour of soldiers or civilians, or the violence of war itself as a whole, have already appeared in a few recent publications and were synthesised in a book entirely dedicated to the archaeology of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy (Carpentier and Marcigny [2019](#) first published in 2014; Carpentier *et al.* [2021](#)). Other studies are



currently in progress, dealing with, for instance, waste management by troops at the frontline (Carpentier and Labbey [forthcoming](#)), or with the experience of civilians, namely children and women in the refuge-quarries of Fleury-sur-Orne (Carpentier and Marcigny [forthcoming](#); Morvant [2023](#)).

4. Archaeology of the *Atlantikwall*

Research is also currently underway on major defensive and logistical structures, in particular on the Atlantic Wall fortifications, concrete bunkers, radar stations, and artillery batteries. In Normandy, all these structures are currently being listed and mapped as part of a collective research project led by Cyrille Billard (MCC) and Jean-Luc Leleu (CNRS, University of Caen Normandy), which brings together researchers from the French State, universities and INRAP. Along the western coasts of France, from the cliffs of eastern Normandy to the Royan pocket, a network of young archaeologists including Benoît Labbey (INRAP), Antoine Le Boulaire (INRAP) and Théo Aubry (Département de Charente-Maritime), are currently conducting preventive operations upon various sites of the Atlantic Wall. In particular, during the past ten years, several archaeological operations have been carried out on some of the largest coastal batteries in Normandy, which today are among the most visited WWII sites in the world (Figure 9). This work, accompanied by significant documentary research, demonstrates the heterogeneity of the Atlantic Wall, and specifies for the first time its exact composition, listing the destruction of bunkers and the erosion of sites since the end of the war.



Figure 9 (left): Merville-Franceville-Plage, Calvados, Normandy. Trenches opened during an archaeological survey near the bunkers of one of the best-known Atlantic Wall batteries in Normandy. An unknown gun-position was found in this part of the complex, outside the extent of the museum (V. Carpentier, INRAP)

Figure 10 (right): Pointe du Hoc, Calvados, Normandy. Actualised map of the battery and US Rangers' Memorial, made by INRAP after LiDAR and geophysical surveys, showing every concrete and earth feature as well as bomb-craters (V. Carpentier, INRAP)

In 2021, at the [Pointe du Hoc](#) memorial site, above the western flank of Omaha Beach, an INRAP team carried out an archaeological survey at the request of the American Battle Monuments Commission, including an archive study, photo interpretation, LiDAR and georadar surveys (Figure 10). For the first time ever, the



chronology and configuration of the battery and bomb craters as they stood on 6 June 1944 were specified. This method is currently being applied to other much less known, but nonetheless very well-preserved coastal batteries. Several other kinds of sites are also being studied in other parts of France. Among the most original ones, two Flak-positions of the Luftwaffe have been excavated in Normandy and Occitany, at Bretteville-sur-Odon (Calvados) and Azereix (Hautes-Pyrénées), near the Caen and Tarbes airports in 2020 and 2022 (by Benoît Labbey, INRAP and Guillaume Seguin, ÉVEHA). Moreover, several surveys and prospecting operations have been conducted on the German logistics sites located in the forests of western France (Passmore *et al.* [2017](#)), as well as in several areas of the Südwall, where the majority of WWII concrete bunkers still exist. In the old port of Marseille (Bouches-du-Rhône), for instance, German prisoners drew large frescoes on the internal walls of the huge U-Boat *Martha* base, which are now published and protected (Chazette [2019](#)).

5. Archaeology of World War II internment camps

Since 2006 and the excavation of the camp for German prisoners at La Glacerie, work on internment sites has also progressed throughout France. The first results are credited to researchers from eastern regions, namely Alsace and Moselle, once annexed to the Great Reich, who conducted the first prospecting operations on various sites of detention and forced labour (Jacquemot and Legendre [2011](#); Landolt [2018](#)). In addition, Jean-Pierre Legendre was one of the first archaeologists to take an interest in the forgotten camps of the French 'Zone libre' (Free zone), in particular those used by the French government in 1939 for Spanish refugees of the *Retirada* during the Spanish Civil War (Legendre [2017](#); [2018b](#)). These sites were subsequently used by the French then German authorities for the detention and deportation of Jews, and used again after 1945 during the Algerian War to house Harki families who had crossed the Mediterranean to France. Some were still in use a few years ago (like Rivesaltes, used until 2007; Figure 11) for illegal immigrants.

During the last few years, the main camps linked to deportation and the Shoah have been reclaimed as national memorials: Compiègne-Royallieu (Oise, Hauts-de-France) in 2008; Les Milles (Aix-en-Provence, Bouches-du-Rhône, PACA) and Drancy (Seine-Saint-Denis, Île-de-France) in 2012; and Rivesaltes (Pyrénées-Orientales, Occitanie) in 2015. On these occasions, archaeological studies of buildings or less-known features such as escape tunnels, and surveys of graffiti drawn by deportees, prisoners, Resistance fighters and hostages, were conducted in Drancy (Pouvreau [2013](#); [2014](#)); Compiègne-Royallieu (Ziegler [2009](#)); Le Fort de Romainville (Les Lilas, Seine-Saint-Denis, Île-de-France; Fontaine *et al.* [2012](#); Fontaine [2013](#)); and Fresnes (Val-de-Marne, Île-de-France) prison. This last site is well known for its graffiti, saved from oblivion by the journalist Henri Calet at the beginning of 1945 even before the very end of the war (Calet [1945](#); Schmitt [2011](#)).



Figure 11 (left): Rivesaltes, Pyrénées-Orientales, Occitany. One of the ruined barracks of the camp, before the foundation of the memorial in 2015 (J.-P. Legendre, MCC)
Figure 12 (right): KL Natzweiler-Struthof, Natzwiller, Bas-Rhin, Communauté européenne d'Alsace. The new memorial of the gas-chamber built after the archaeological surveys, Summer 2022 (V. Carpentier, INRAP)

In 2020, another ambitious archaeological programme was launched on the only genuine Nazi concentration camp in the current French territory - the [KL Natzweiler-Struthof](#) in Natzwiller (Bas-Rhin, Collectivité européenne d'Alsace, Grand-Est). Several archaeological surveys have been carried out there since 2018, alongside redevelopment and renovation works on the [European Centre of Deported Resistance Members](#) (CERD). One of these surveys was led by Alexandre Bolly (Archéologie Alsace) in front of the entrance to the gas chamber where works were carried out in 2022 to create a new memorial. Two headstones, listing the names of the 86 inmates murdered there on the pretext of so-called 'medical experiments', were inaugurated by the President of the Republic (Figure 12). In 2020 and 2021, Juliette Brangé (University of Strasbourg) and Michaël Landolt (MCC) led prospecting operations throughout the camp with the aim of identifying and mapping all its developments. In 2022, excavations took place in the granite quarry, where industrial facilities and tunnels are currently being studied (Figure 13). This research is still underway, as part of a doctoral thesis conducted by Juliette Brangé on the KL Struthof and its sub-camps located in France. This research supplements a programme sponsored by the University of Baden-Württemberg on these external camps located in France and Germany (Hausmair and Bollacher [2018](#); [2019](#)).



Figure 13 (left): KL Natzweiler-Struthof, Natzwiller, Bas-Rhin, Communauté européenne d'Alsace. The 2022 excavation team working on one of the industrial buildings in the quarry (V. Carpentier, INRAP)



Figure 14 (right): Montreuil-Bellay, Maine-et-Loire, Pays de la Loire. The remains of the camp for Roma people are still well preserved, thanks to M. Jacques Sigot who saved them from destruction (V. Carpentier, INRAP)

Many internment sites have completely disappeared from the current landscape, while others are still entirely preserved, including the camp and memorial of Roma deportation at Montreuil-Bellay (Maine-et-Loire, Pays de la Loire; Figure 14). The camp of Le Vernet (Ariège, Occitanie) was partially explored during a recent preventive survey, resulting in the discovery of a vast pit containing numerous objects left on site by Spanish internees. Such surveys have also revealed, like everywhere in France, several forgotten camps for German prisoners: Vandœuvre-lès-Nancy (Meurthe-et-Moselle, Grand-Est; Legendre [2011](#)); Stenay (Meuse, Grand-Est; Vermard and Adam [2014](#)); Poitiers (Vienne, Nouvelle-Aquitaine; Leconte [2014](#)); Miramas (Bouches-du-Rhône, PACA; Lemaire [2017](#)); Bétheny (Marne, Grand-Est; Garmond *et al.* [2015](#)); and Coyolles (Aisne, Hauts-de-France; Desplanque *et al.* [2019](#)). Some of them, like the camp of Savenay (Loire-Atlantique, Pays de la Loire), excavated by Antoine Le Boulaire (INRAP) in 2015 (Figure 15), were founded during the First World War by the American Expeditionary Forces. German occupation authorities later used this camp again as a 'Frontstalag', a special camp for colonial French prisoners of war (Le Boulaire and Varennes [forthcoming](#)).



Figure 15: Savenay, Loire-Atlantique, Pays de la Loire. The excavation area of the camp of La Touchelais. Founded during the Great War by US Expeditionary Forces, it became a 'Frontstalag' for the internment of French colonial soldiers between 1940-1944 (A. Le Boulaire, INRAP)

6. Digging into the violence of war

French archaeologists specialising in World War II have finally joined the European and international community by developing and focusing on subjects suited to France's own heritage. The works undertaken and the first published books and papers are now leading French archaeology towards scientific maturity. This field of



research can no longer be regarded as trivial. The archaeological data gathered over the last ten years has contributed to the renewal of the subjects and the overcoming of the heroic myths associated with the so-called 'Longest Day' (Carpentier *et al.* [2021](#)). In the context of an interdisciplinary approach, data on material culture is now systematically compared with historical archives, photographs and testimonials. As for the World War I a decade before, World War II archaeology brings us closer to an objective materiality of combat and behaviour specific to the context of the modern violence of war (Audoin-Rouzeau *et al.* [2002](#)). Information on combat techniques, everyday life of troops, hygiene, diets and related subjects like alcohol consumption (Carpentier [2020](#); Figure 16), but also urban destruction, air-defence measures, bomb-shelters for civilians, refuge-quarries or the treatment of human remains on the battlefield, has been published and is fuelling ongoing research. The same applies to the study of defensive megastructures like the Ligne Maginot or the Atlantic Wall, and of the numerous French internment sites of World War II, including prisons or concentration camp complexes like KL Struthof and its sub-camps.

There is little doubt that this still-nascent research will give rise to many developments in the coming decades that we, French archaeologists, ought to share with the largest international public and scientific community.



Figure 16: Langrune-sur-Mer, Calvados, Normandy. Excavation of a deep German dugout into which the soldiers of 48 Royal Marines Commando buried and burnt their waste after the bitter fighting of 6-7 June 1944. Among the various objects were dozens of English beer and other alcohol bottles (E. Ghesquière, INRAP).

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