Beyond the Battlefields
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Synopsis

The study presented here was an analytical and technical exploration of the potential of conflict archaeology in the Netherlands. This study contained three implicit research goals. To start with, as explained in chapter 1, this study is to be viewed as fundamental research with regard to an interdisciplinary approach consisting of heritage, archaeology and spatial development perspectives. Secondly, by assessing and validating the academic value of conflict archaeology in the Netherlands, it was a valuation study. And last, by implementing a non-invasive technique on sites of modern conflict to verify their condition and to map these remains, it can be considered methodological research. Explicit research goals were the development of archaeological research questions for conflict archaeology in the Netherlands. Is conflict archaeological research possible at all? How can sites of recent conflict be identified? How essential is the availability of historical sources and should they always be validated? Do we need a special heritage policy for (modern) conflict-related sites? The intention is for readers to be able to understand the great potential of sites of modern conflict, their archaeological heritage and the necessity of further research.

One of the main drivers for modern conflict archaeology has been community interest, as demonstrated with the example of Mont Cornillet. Interest shown by the general public has been of major importance for the acceptance and development of conflict archaeology in many countries, including the United Kingdom, Belgium (in particular Flanders) and France. Conflict archaeology is firmly rooted in the Anglo-American world. For long, academic archaeologists only had a limited interest in the heritage and archaeology of landscapes of war. Although older conflict sites, ranging from prehistory up to Napoleonic times, were usually investigated within the framework of another sort of research, this has not often been labeled conflict archaeology. Various academic research projects, archaeological excavations and exhibitions would not have been possible without the increasing archaeological interest in the topic shown by the general public. The perception of archaeology focused on more recent eras and conflict has changed significantly over the past decades.

Chapter 2 delves into the historical roots and theoretical background of conflict archaeology, outlining the three main categories of conflict: prehistoric, historic and modern. Each conflict site and every historical era requires its own specific set of methods and techniques. Conflict archaeology is geographically divided and, in the case of historic and modern conflict, has a strong nation-specific character. Research on prehistoric conflict often has a social-anthropological character and focuses on the nature of warfare. Historic conflict investigations usually take a more nation-specific perspective. Such sites of conflict are often identified and researched on the bases of historical data. In studies conducted abroad, historic terrain reconstruction and metal-detector surveys turned out to be the most promising methods for modern conflict research, indicative of its status as a new field. Conflict-archaeological studies have shown that several historical sites were, in fact, bigger, have reconstructed movements across a battlefield, have demonstrated the interaction and connection between individual sites and have improved our knowledge of violent past events in a general sense.

Academics are sensitive to trends. In the post WWII-era, prehistoric archaeologists pacified the past. In the 1970s, a dominant view was that violence occurred rarely and only had minimal social effects. Over the past three decades, archaeologists have turned away from this view and started discovering human remains and archaeological features of conflict throughout prehistory. Although it is difficult to prove that the concept of ‘war’ existed in the earliest eras of humankind, much evidence have been collected to prove the existence of collective violence throughout history. Although many historians share the opin-
ion that archaeological research is unnecessary on sites of modern conflict since so many other historical sources are available, these historical datasets have been expanded, or have even been proven incorrect by archaeological investigations – most notably by the study conducted at Little Bighorn, Montana, United States. Archaeological narratives are often different from historical narratives. In contrast to history, conflict archaeology provides a narrative ‘from below’ and reveals information about brief moments in time. Furthermore, archaeology can play an important role in the contemporary experience of a former site of conflict. As living memory fades, material heritage takes on more significance. Archaeological research can also be significant in the creation of new ‘memories’ of a conflict. The impact of conflict–archaeological research should not be underestimated, as it can even change political attitudes, just like it did after several excavations at sites of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939).

Of course, the character of collective violence, or war, changed throughout the centuries. The Roman Empire first used warfare as a method of gaining and controlling new territories. Later, war was used to protect its borders. War remained an important source of income for the nobility in the following centuries. Industrialised or modern warfare embodies the extremes of war. Above all, modern war is characterized by vast territories and battles fought over a long period of time, which can transform entire landscapes. No matter the age, however, tragedy is at the very heart of every violent conflict. Children lose their parents, parents bury their children, wives become widows and deceased fathers become distant memories.1

Key notions in chapter 3 are heritage, landscapes of commemoration, authored landscapes and dimensions of time, remembering and forgetting. Wars are etched on the memories of nations, communities and individuals. What people remember, and how, changes with time, especially now that historic events are disappearing from living memory. The history of a landscape can be updated constantly, influenced by (present) popular memory, and landscapes of memory, therefore, are subject to constant change – affecting heritage management. Heritage is not restricted to material remains, but also includes oral history, traditions, memories, stories and experiences. All social structures, ranging from world-wide cultural communities to local networks of individuals, develop more-or-less specific memory cultures to connect places, buildings and land to memories and notions of ancestry and origin. One can focus on several histories in the landscape or emphasise just one moment in time.

Commemorative practices are of great significance during archaeological studies into the recent past. The landscape-biographical approach is used to demonstrate a multivocal past with complex, overlapping layers of social, economic and political history and to analyse how nations, local communities and individuals reshape their violent past through time. The landscape-biographical approach was developed as an alternative to the traditional methods for valuation and selection in cultural history and is used to study the historical layeredness of a landscape in the past and in the present. Archaeological research on sites of modern conflict has a commemorative function in and of itself and may have an effect on memory narratives.

The 20th century saw a considerable increase in commemorative landscapes. Heritage has been used and abused as a tool by nations, societies, communities and individuals to construct, regulate, legitimise and express a sense of belonging and identity, as presented in two case studies in chapter 3. At Ypres, commemorative practices focuses entirely on WWI. Although official memory was not as state-sanctioned as in East Germany, collective memory was still politically coloured. Monuments are a very powerful expression of the past and they are usually placed in locations where their meaning become clear automatically. By concentrating German war graves at just four locations, for instance, the sacrifice made by the Commonwealth nations was underlined, with over 300 military cemeteries. Over the years, the narrative shifted from glorification of the fallen to victimisation.

The Potsdamer Platz, Berlin, expresses a more multivocal past, as a dramatic sequence of events transformed both its material and immaterial appearance. Some histories were part of key moments of the identification of the German nation, as well as for individuals and social groups. East and West Germany had

1 Wiest 2015, 188.
different commemorative agendas. In East Germany, ‘official’ memory remained stable for decades, since alternative versions of past events were not tolerated. The meaning and expression of multiple histories of this square changed through time for individuals, social groups and even the nation as a whole. Remembering is a truly dynamic and active, social process that can also be influenced by archaeological research.

Due to several successful projects, the number of specialised conflict archaeologists in Europe has grown over the years and the significance of the field is recognized to an increasing extent. Conflict archaeology is now an accepted field that features frequently at international conferences and is the subject of a growing number of publications. Chapter 4 is a descriptive effort towards indicating the current state of conflict archaeology in the Netherlands. Who are the key players, where do they work, what do they investigate? What are the most important intellectual and methodological currents? What is the rationale for archaeological investigations? What are the similarities and differences between the Netherlands and the selected other countries in terms of approach and narratives? What is the general level of preservation of sites of modern conflict? How can they best be maintained for future generations? How different are the focus areas and approaches in the Netherlands to other countries? And, first and foremost: How has conflict archaeology developed as an academic specialisation in the Netherlands?

The United Kingdom was selected for this chapter because of its role as one of the front runners in the implementation of conflict archaeology. In Flanders, Belgium, the former battlefields of WWI are considered an influential and specific part of (inter)national heritage. In Germany, researching post-medieval sites is relatively new, and research on WWI and WWII is still contested, but, remarkably enough, this era was subjected to archaeologic research at a relatively early stage. Finally, Poland was included as a point of contrast with Western-European heritage practices. Any interest in military history here was viewed with suspicion, which is hardly surprising after two world wars and decades of occupation by the Soviets. Nonetheless, archaeological fieldwork into battlefields had already started in the 1960s. During research projects at such contested sites, archaeologists have to deal with various tensions between past and present and between remembering and forgetting.

The popularity of conflict archaeology in the United Kingdom can be explained by virtue of its longstanding tradition of military history and the many wars in which it was involved. In the United Kingdom itself, most conflict-related studies focus on medieval, historic battlefields of which the exact location was not known. Although research is also conducted abroad, for instance at the former battlefields of WWI, most conflict-related archaeological research takes place within the United Kingdom’s borders. Some of the most representative excavations that led to new insights, developed new techniques or contributed to wider research agendas on memory and heritage were selected and examined in this study.

Several projects have proven the effectiveness of resistivity surveys (Givenchy-lès-la-Bassée), despite the massive extent to which WWI disturbed the soil, and have demonstrated the potential of using metal detectors on sites related to modern warfare (Fromelles). Live ammunition was found frequently during these projects. In contrast to the Netherlands, archaeologists in France and Flanders can work on sites with unexploded ordnance. Archaeologists also recover human remains. Although the police have to be informed, and legal procedures must be followed, the excavation is, crucially, allowed to continue. On the other hand, excavations are not always necessary: remote sensing techniques, and image warping in particular, have been used to map numerous important archeological sites of modern conflict.

For a long time, archaeological features and findings from WWII were, if they were recorded at all, constituted chance finds and were considered bycatch in the Netherlands. Some of the earliest artefacts of WWII recovered by archaeologists were, however, mentioned as early as 1984. Over the next three decades, the archaeological record has demonstrated that features and findings from this era are well preserved both in the landscape and below the surface. Most archaeological research in the Netherlands has been the result of the Valetta Convention (16 January 1992). The greater part of WWII-related research, however, was beyond the traditional scope of most archaeologists. This lack of interest has resulted in a major deficit in the
field of academic research, in the conservation and management of military heritage, and in the development of methodologies and theories. As a result, no explicit research questions were formulated.

Several recurring themes can be identified in the regions discussed. It can be concluded that conflict archaeologists prefer excavating locations associated with famous battles (Towton, Somme) or famous persons (Alain-Fournier, Wilfred Owen). On top of that, the general public served as a driving force behind many studies. Furthermore, most, if not all sites of modern conflict are affected by looting and artefact hunting. Finally, artefacts of both world wars have a highly emotional value that goes beyond their academic value. Conflict archaeologists should broaden their scope and investigate the wider context of the organisation and management of military activities by shifting their attention to the wider landscape and look beyond the mass graves.

Chapter 4 already announced the main problems researchers face when excavating sites of modern conflict in the Netherlands: unexploded ordnance and human remains. The scientific and societal importance of research into this era was underlined in the following chapter. Chapter 5 delves into the legal problems and questions facing Dutch archaeologists who work on modern conflict. First, the Dutch valuation and selection system, known as the Archaeological Monument Care (AMZ)\(^2\) cycle, was explained, as well as the laws and legislations affecting conflict archaeology. Selection is needed since long-term preservation of all known archaeological remains is impossible. After the Valetta Convention of 1992, the Dutch archaeological system was completely transformed. Dutch heritage management is concerned with the identification, protection, management and preservation of features and artefacts of human activity, ranging from prehistory up to modern times. As discussed in chapter 3, heritage is selective. Experiences and opinions are based on and coloured by modern political events, nation states, (local) heritage management and multiple other social factors. However, contested heritage is also part of a country’s cultural history and should be given serious attention.

Archaeological sites related to WWII are a rare category and can be linked directly to historical events. How should this heritage be valued? Which criteria are applicable to decide if preservation in situ is preferred? How should archaeologists respond to the quantity and quality of the remaining features and findings of WWII? Although such sites are now considered more valuable than in the past spatial development projects, erosion and looting still threaten these landscapes, hampering academic research and proper recording. A difficult aspect of the current selection process with regard to modern conflict is the fact that the meaning of features and findings of WWII should not be limited to their academic value only. However, in general, the valuation system can be used to select sites of modern conflict.

During the ‘Buried Past of War’ project (2011), which was the first academic project to systemically record features, artefacts, and records of WWII in the Netherlands, it became apparent that there were large differences on how conflict archaeology was approached by the various commercial excavation companies, provinces, and municipalities involved. It was also striking that much of the material was collected with metal detectors – not only operated by professional archaeologists but also by amateur metal detectorists. Metal detectors can locate sites of modern conflict quickly and effectively. However, metal detectors locate objects regardless of their archaeological context. Without an archaeological methodology underpinning the use of the device, a metal detector can lead to the incorrect assessment of a site’s archaeological potential and even damage the site.

Metal detecting remains highly controversial in both academic as well as commercial and amateur spheres. In the Netherlands, amateurs are permitted to search the topsoil with a metal detector on publicly administered land. Although this practice had been tolerated for a very long time, it was officially regulated in 2016 and it is still banned at certain particularly sensitive sites. Using a metal detector on registered archaeological sites without explicit governmental permission remains strictly prohibited. On privately owned land that has not been designated as an archaeological monument, metal detectorists need the land-
owner’s permission. On top of that, important archaeological finds must always be reported to the authorities. The under-utilisation of metal detectors by professional archaeologists can be explained by the fact that some archaeologists consider metal detecting to be synonymous with looting. Despite this reluctance, there are cases in which professional archaeologists and amateur metal detectorists cooperated effectively and harmoniously, such as in France (Cambrai), the United Kingdom (Towton) and the Netherlands (Westerbork).

It is evident that archaeological artefacts inform us about meaningful differences in the material culture and habits of individuals engaged in war, and also that they have an emotional and commemorative value for individuals and groups within present-day societies in addition to their main historical value. The difficulties involved in conducting conflict archaeology in the Netherlands, with an emphasis on excavations, can be obviated by the use of non-invasive techniques, such as topographic surveys, aerial photographs, metal detecting surveys, field surveys and documents, each of which is valuable in its own way. As demonstrated in chapter 6, these techniques can cause a shift from a site-oriented approach towards a landscape-oriented approach. So far, little research has been carried out into the nature and extent of conflict sites on a macro-scale. More so than when studying isolated sites or categories of material culture, this puts conflict archaeologists in a better position to understand the complexity of militarised landscapes. Although it is a dynamic and quickly evolving field of research, Airborne Laser Scanning or Light Detecting And Ranging (LiDAR) is a relatively new technique for most archaeologists. Digital Elevation Models (DEMs), derived from the LiDAR-data, make it possible to improve the prospection, mapping and monitoring of archaeological sites. This technique is particularly useful on forests and heathlands that conceal well preserved landscapes of earthwork field fortifications, military support structures and craters. A provisional classification in woodland settings divides military sites into hardened (concrete) structures and non-hardened (earthwork) structures. Hardened structures include fixed defensive positions (such as bunkers and anti-tank features), weapon installations, headquarters, barracks and administration sites, radar and communications sites, airfield sites, logistical sites and camps (prisoner-of-war camps, labour camps, concentration camps). Non-hardened structures, on the other hand, include defensive positions and field fortifications (foxholes, trenches), logistical sites, temporary camps, craters and munition disposal sites.

Basically, conflict sites with unknown or uncertain locations can be located with predictive modelling. However, the objective of this study was not to tackle the problem of automatic detection but to determine the academic potential and the cultural-historical value of WWII features. In the Netherlands, WWII sites are often not recognised as archaeological heritage that should be protected and preserved and for this reason, WWII was an underexplored field of study for a very long time. At least some of these sites should be retained for future generations in order to inform us about a darker side of the past.

The final chapter summarises the main conclusions and discussion points of this study, including heritage management and research potential of conflict archaeology, community and academic interest in WWI heritage, the drawbacks of a site-oriented approach versus a landscape approach and lastly, a research agenda on modern conflict. In order to develop specific research strategies, a multidisciplinary approach is needed. Non-invasive techniques should be standardised as instruments for the practice of heritage preservation and development. New research would be beneficial for institutions of higher education, non-governmental organisations and even private-sector parties. Lesser known aspects of modern conflict can be illuminated, and a thorough mapping of these structures will provide detailed information on specific combat events and bombing operations – a micro-history. The first results have already demonstrated the large spatial expanse of militarised landscapes and opens up new perspectives for further multidisciplinary research. Archaeological analysis has much to offer to evaluations of the effectiveness, strategy and landscape impact of the Allied and German campaigns, especially where historical sources are lacking or fragmentary. The archaeological archive of WWII is under continuous threat from erosion, ploughing, development and looting. Archaeologists must act proactively in order to tap into the full value of such sites. Serving as a reference point for future research on modern conflict sites in the Netherlands, both the necessity of further research and the great potential of sites of modern conflict are hopefully underlined by this study.