

Groundwork of Violence: Archaeology, Memory and the Camp Landscape

Introduction

Archaeologists are familiar with the idea that beneath the visible landscape lie numerous layers that are not visible at first glance. The fact that virtually the entire landscape is contaminated by the history of terror—its use for the exclusion, exploitation and, ultimately, the annihilation of people—is a thought that comes to mind when attempting to trace the sites of terror in the landscape (cf. Bernbeck 2017, 7; Pollack 2014, 53). The omnipresence of the concentration camp (Benz 1999) is both a fact and a task for archaeology. Yet, they represent only a part of the variety of archaeological remains from the war-torn twentieth century that have been preserved in Brandenburg's soil (Fig. 1.1). All of the examples listed here have already been investigated by the state archaeological service in Germany over the past 25 years.

The twentieth century is considered the century of camps (Kotek/Rigoulot 2001). This work aims to make available the archaeological knowledge collected and stored by the Archaeological State Office in Brandenburg on camp sites from modern history in its area of responsibility. It does not replace a scientific analysis of the relevant features and finds, the spatial distribution of the phenomena, the

internal structures, a possible chronology and chorology or other conceivable research avenues. Nor can the inclusion of or comparison with historical sources be thorough here. Drawing on numerous archaeological investigations and excavation records since the 1990s, this work seeks to highlight a prominent archaeological site and make it more easily accessible to the interested public.

The excavators in the field tackled an entirely new topic—for which none of them had been trained at university—with energy and commitment. They are frequently referenced here (especially in the Catalogue), and this compilation owes much to their patient, thorough, and meticulous work: Matthias Antkowiak, Rainer Bartels, Rene Bräunig (†), Torsten Dressler, Axel Drieschner, Anja Grothe, Lisa Kirsch, Hartmut Lettow, Gunhilt Merker, Wolfgang Schmiederer (†), Barbara Schulz, Eberhard Völker, Johannes Weishaupt and many others.

Anne-Kathrin Müller was the first to present an evaluation of camp finds in Brandenburg, in 2010. Her supervisor, Professor Claudia Theune (then at Humboldt University Berlin, now at the University of Vienna), had already begun her work on the archaeology of contemporary history in Brandenburg in the early 2000s. I would like to thank both

A Challenge for Archaeology: The Monuments of the 20th Century... are mostly Relics of War and Terror

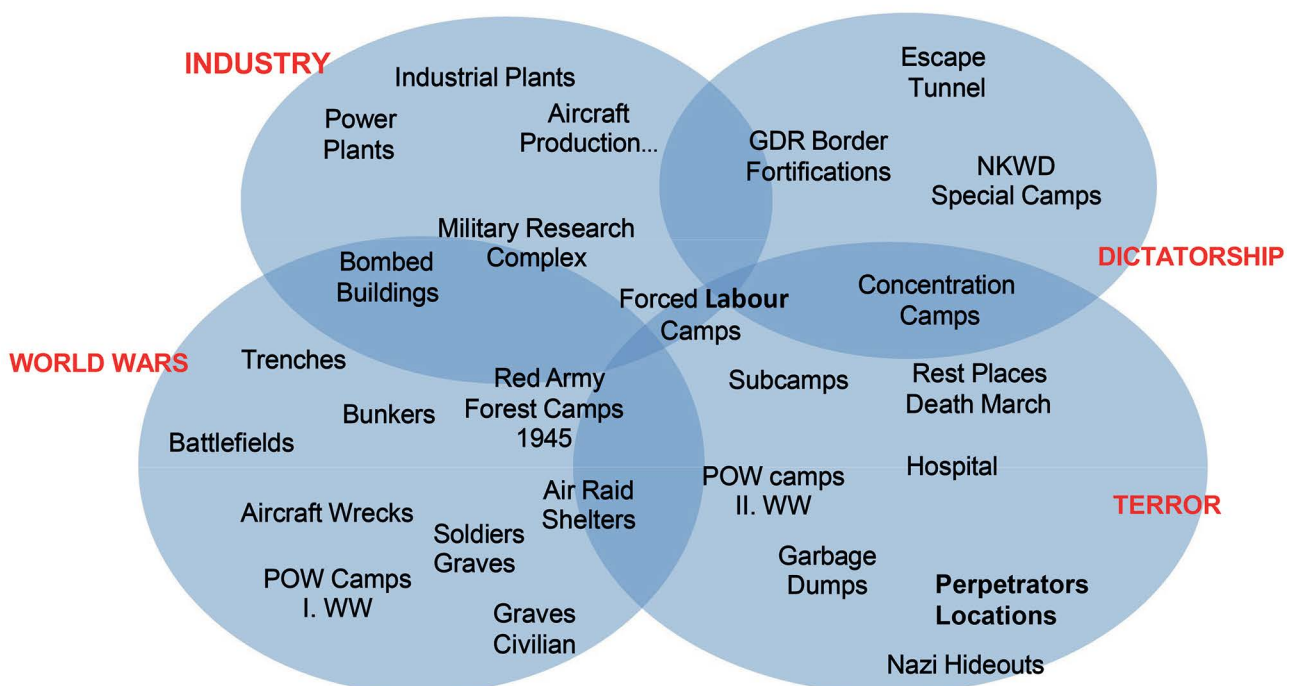


Fig. 1.1 Modernist landmarks, graphic by Th. Kersting

of them for their close collaboration since then. I am also grateful to Lena Sommerfeld and Juliane Hauboldt-Stolle for the enjoyable and enriching experience of jointly curating the exhibition *Exclusion—The Archaeology of Nazi Forced Labour Camps* (from April 2020 at the Nazi Forced Labour Documentation Centre in Berlin-Schöneeweide; from May 2021 at the Brandenburg State Museum of Archaeology in the Paulikloster in Brandenburg an der Havel; 2022–23 in Falkensee near Berlin; 2024–25 at the Archaeological Museum in Frankfurt am Main). Finally, I would like to thank Franziska Ferdinand, Anja Sbrzesny, and Silke Schwarzländer from the Archaeological Information and Documentation Centre at the Brandenburg Heritage Authority for their meticulous examination of documentation and numerous find reports, their compilation of queries, assistance with GIS handling, and final checks in registering find sites, potential sites and areas with archaeological sites. Lastly but not least I have to thank the copy-editors Laura Coltofean and Jane Burkowski for their great work.

1.1 Internment Camps

This book brings together various categories of camps represented in the state of Brandenburg. While these differ in function and historical context, their material remains can be examined collectively from an archaeological perspective—without losing sight of the historical and theoretical frameworks that have been developed around the topic (Kotek/Rigoulot 2001; Greiner/Kramer 2013).

At their core, these camps are always defined by temporarily bounded spaces that delineate an inside and an outside (Kersting 2021), where groups of people were simultaneously included and excluded. Internment camps, in this sense, represent a reversal of the inside–outside principle: those inside the boundary were not the ones who had drawn it. If boundary-making is, normally, about protecting one’s own and excluding outsiders—about establishing exclusivity—then the camp landscapes of the Nazi era represent an intensification, or rather a perversion, of this logic. These were *un-landscapes*, to which only perpetrators and victims had access—and for the latter, there was generally no possibility of escape. This is how a *terror landscape* is defined (Kersting 2015b). As sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky puts it: “The closed border is indispensable for the dissolution of boundaries of absolute power” (Sofsky 1997, 70). In this way, spaces were created that became non-places, rarely entered by the local population and largely erased from their consciousness. Within them, an entirely new map was drawn—one that continues to exert its effects today, as shown by interviews with contemporary witnesses (analysed as representative of countless similar cases by Betscher 2004, 42ff.).

In Brandenburg, examples exist from all phases of modern internment. Aside from the first accommodation of prisoners of war from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 at Quenzsee near Brandenburg an der Havel, early camps were also established during the First World War

in a context of supposedly enlightened and progressive military planning (not only in Wünsdorf). Yet, even there, the foundations were being laid for later perversions. The transitional period between the two world wars is reflected in, for instance, a camp for the internment of so-called undesirable foreigners in Cottbus-Sielow (Doßmann/Wenzel/Wenzel 2007, 230). However, the main focus lies on the Nazi period, with its internal development: early concentration camps, the later large camps and their satellite camps, prisoner-of-war camps of the Second World War, forced labour camps, labour education camps and other categories originating in the Nazi system. Archaeologists should approach these terms with caution, firstly to avoid reproducing the euphemistic and obfuscating terminology of the period itself; secondly, it recognises that the same camp often served multiple functions and housed diverse groups under varying conditions, either simultaneously or concurrently. There were forced labour camps established specifically for Jewish people, often building on former *Hachshara* training sites (e.g. Neuendorf im Sande), as well as a euthanasia centre with an associated crematorium in Brandenburg an der Havel, among other examples.

1.2 Historical Context

Around 13 million men, women and children—most of them from abroad—were forced to perform labour in Germany during the Second World War. From a historical research perspective, major foundational works and more recent exhibition catalogues provide insight into the broader context of this phenomenon. Key works on forced labour and the associated camps include books by Ulrich Herbert (1985) and Mark Spoerer (2001), as well as two catalogues: one for the major international travelling exhibition on the subject from 2010 (*Zwangsarbeit. Die Deutschen, die Zwangsarbeiter und der Krieg*, Knigge/Lüttgenau/Wagner 2010), and another from the Nazi Forced Labour Documentation Centre in Berlin-Schöneeweide, *Alltag Zwangsarbeit* (“Everyday Forced Labour,” 2013). Regarding Soviet prisoners of war, Christian Streit’s book (1978/91) is foundational, together with the more recent exhibition catalogue *Dimensions of a Crime* (Blank/Quinkert 2021). The experiences of Eastern workers are discussed in the publication *Berlin für immer gezeichnet* (“Berlin Forever Scarred,” 2019), by Memorial International (Moscow) and the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Berlin). On concentration camps, volumes 3 and 4 of *Der Ort des Terror* (“The Place of Terror”) by Benz and Distel (2006) are essential. The system of concentration camp subcamps is examined by Marc Buggeln (2012b). For the Berlin-Brandenburg region, the work of Helmut Bräutigam (2003) and the collections of source materials by Rainer Kubatzki (2001) and Frank Schmidt (1998) are indispensable. My remarks here follow those made in the exhibition catalogue *Ausgeschlossen* (“Exclusion,” 2020, 56f.).

The National Socialist authorities and security services were highly reluctant to bring *Fremdvölkische* (foreign nationals) into the country, fearing racial mixing, sabotage and other hostile acts. However, the growing labour

shortage ultimately led to the decision to employ foreign workers—a move that ran counter to Nazi ideology. To ensure their exclusion from the *Volksgemeinschaft* (German national community; cf. Bernbeck 2017, 53), and to better control them, these workers were housed in camps wherever possible.

For the philosopher Karl Jaspers, exclusion was a defining feature of National Socialist terror, which permeated all areas of life—state, economy and society (Jaspers 1960, 94f.). In fact, in Berlin and the province of Brandenburg alone, there were around 4,000 National Socialist forced labour camps in which the excluded were made to live. Even in Nazi terminology for instance, one was dishonourably “excluded” from military service (not “liberated,” as was long the interpretation in the Federal Republic of Germany) by means of an exclusion certificate (see fig. 57 in Stein 2014, 68).

The National Socialist forced labour camps are the focus of this work (this section draws on *Ausgeschlossen* 2020, 56ff.). Nazi ideology classified people according to a racial hierarchy, placing them on a fictitious scale that determined their value and social rank. At the top were the so-called Aryan Germans, to whom Nazi ideology assigned a dominant role; at the bottom were Jews and Sinti and Roma. Under Nazi rule, these groups were excluded not only from German society, but gradually also from European society—first disenfranchised and marginalised, then interned and ultimately deported to concentration and extermination camps or execution sites, where they were murdered.

Eastern European peoples were regarded as inferior, and Soviet prisoners of war were considered *Untermenschen* (subhuman). Poles, like the civilian population from the Soviet Union who were deported for forced labour, were subject to discriminatory laws. They were to serve the Germans as slave labourers. All these supposedly racially inferior groups were to live as separately as possible from Germans, in order to preserve the supposed purity of the “Aryan” race. A major concern of the Nazi government, the SS and the police was the possibility of contact, friendship or even romantic relationships developing between Germans and members of other races or foreign peoples. Such contact was severely punished as “forbidden contact”—romantic relationships were prosecuted with particular harshness, including death sentences for Slavic men who had contact with German women.

Under these ideological conditions, forced labour camps served as a means of keeping forced labourers separated from the German population. They made it possible to isolate and control people while exploiting their labour. Forced labour camps—including subcamps of concentration camps, prisoner-of-war detachments, and camps for civilian forced labourers—were often established directly next to workplaces and industrial sites. As the war progressed and labour shortages among German workers increased, the use of forced labour

expanded rapidly, leading to the establishment of some 30,000 forced labour camps across the entire Nazi-occupied territory. In Berlin alone, there were around 3,000 camps and collective accommodation facilities for forced labourers. At certain production sites, concentration camp inmates, civilian forced labourers and prisoners of war were used simultaneously, resulting in overlapping and adjacent camps.

The administration of forced labour camps varied widely. From 1935 onwards, concentration camps were controlled by the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps, under the authority of both the SS and the Gestapo. Prisoner-of-war camps were the responsibility of the Wehrmacht. Forced labour camps were established and operated by those who profited from forced labour: private companies, municipal authorities, state institutions and even church congregations. Labourers were allocated via 24 so-called transit camps across the Reich, where they were first registered and then distributed to requisitioning parties. The transit camp in Berlin-Wilhelmshagen was most likely responsible for Brandenburg (Baganz 2009, 252f.). From 1942 onwards, the Reich’s General Building Inspector (GBI), Albert Speer, constructed and operated forced labour camps in Berlin and Brandenburg. These camps housed labourers who worked for the GBI, but also rented out rooms and beds to other companies (on the 1942 camp construction campaign, see Bräutigam 2003, 37f.).

Prisoners were identified and managed through a system of numbering. Prisoners of war were issued *Stalagmarken*: stamped metal tags with a serial number and the code of the *Stammlager* (main labour camp) where they were first detained. According to international law, the location of prisoners of war had to remain traceable. The Wehrmacht officially attempted to comply with this regulation, at least for Western European prisoners. Soviet prisoners of war, whose lives were treated with utter disregard by the Wehrmacht, often went unregistered. Civilian forced labourers were typically assigned an identification number upon arrival, although this was not centrally recorded. However, they retained their names, which were entered into labour books indicating their assignments. In contrast, concentration camp prisoners were stripped of their names and assigned a number instead—a deliberate attempt to erase their identity and self-worth.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, existing camps continued to be used, and new ones were built to detain Nazi perpetrators and other stigmatised individuals, as well as to manage the massive population displacements. From mid-1945, NKVD special camps were established, including Mühlberg (Special Camp No. 1), Sachsenhausen and Jamlitz (Special Camp No. 6), and Fürstenwalde Ketschendorf. At the same time, displaced persons’ camps and reception centres were created—typically without the possibility of escape.

A coercive character cannot be ruled out for the so-called forest camps of the Red Army either: the soldiers did not

stay there voluntarily, and the sites also served to reintegrate repatriated soldiers returning from across Germany into the Soviet army (Kersting et al. 2016). Consequently, the border fortifications of the German Democratic Republic (henceforth GDR) must also be considered as linear forms of exclusion, enclosing a (very large) group of people; in fact, archaeological excavations have been carried out at such sites (Kersting/Dressler 2021).

1.3 General Considerations

Brandenburg State Archaeology is working in what was once the very centre of Nazi terror, where all types of internment camps—as well as the remains of the war and its immediate aftermath—are concentrated around Berlin, the capital of the Third Reich. State Archaeology, therefore, has a special responsibility for these remains (Fig. 1.2; unless otherwise noted, based on Kersting et al. 2018b).

Two major Nazi concentration camps were located in what is now the state of Brandenburg: Sachsenhausen near Oranienburg and Ravensbrück near Fürstenberg an der Havel. In total, over 100 satellite camps were gradually established in connection with these two main camps (see map 6.1 in Theune 2018b, 68). Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück officially became memorials to Nazi crimes in 1959 and 1961, respectively. After German reunification in 1990, extensive investigations, research and restoration projects were undertaken on these memorial grounds—mostly in the context of redesigns—and these increasingly applied methods and questions from the field of archaeology (Morsch/Ley 2016; Morsch 2016).

Roughly 25 years ago, archaeology played almost no role in researching Nazi legacies. In the meantime, however, following a series of successful excavations at former camp sites in Brandenburg (and beyond), archaeology has become an integral part of research into this history (cf. Schute 2017, 594). A comprehensive analytical overview of what has been achieved is still lacking—both at the federal and state levels—and cannot be provided here. However, it is informative to consider the public response (Kersting 2015a; Kersting/Müller 2015; see Meller/Bunnefeld 2020).

In general, it is unlikely that contemporary documentation exists for all the modifications, extensions and new constructions carried out at the former camps. In many cases—especially with temporary structures—there was no documentation. It is precisely here that archaeology can provide crucial insights. Although extensive written source material exists on the events and crimes of the Nazi era, there is a marked lack of documents, maps, plans and visual material—especially construction files—from the period during which the camps were built and in operation (Oebbecke 1995; Antkowiak/Meyer 2007; cf. most recently Bernbeck 2017, 51).

Many documents were deliberately destroyed by the perpetrators in 1945—out of guilt, a desire for secrecy or

attempts to conceal evidence—and are no longer available as historical sources. The Allies secured some written records as evidence, but these are still not fully accessible to historical researchers today. The company archives of businesses involved in camp operations are rarely opened to scholars, and oral testimonies form only a small and subjective portion of the overall historical picture. The archaeological remains in the ground must therefore be made to “speak” for themselves. Excavations at camp sites in Brandenburg have repeatedly shown discrepancies between contemporary plans and the actual construction features revealed through archaeology.

Because of the exceptional density of such traces recognised as heritage sites in Brandenburg, the state’s archaeological heritage authorities took on a completely new task in the 1990s and have acquired a pioneering role in Germany in dealing with sites of this type (VLA 1995). The new heritage protection law of 1991—the first passed in the new federal states of eastern Germany—with no time limitation on the age of heritage sites, made it possible (and necessary) to identify and designate all camp sites discovered as archaeological sites. This was linked to maintaining the list of heritage sites as a new responsibility for the heritage authorities. In cooperation with research institutions, the full potential of historical and archaeological methods can now be used to examine the complex Nazi camp system—still in the early stages of research—and to communicate the results to the public.

These sites of injustice are not neutral research objects; they are often contested due to the involvement of various interest groups (heritage authorities, memorial institutions, landowners, developers and civil society groups such as victims’ and survivors’ associations; see Fig. 1.5, below in this chapter). For an institution such as the State Office for Heritage Preservation, their political character plays a significant role. Precisely because they are sites of victimhood, they can now be more readily placed under official protection—without much opposition, as no one wants to be seen as supporting the wrong cause. In fact, in present-day Brandenburg, municipalities and their citizens often feel compelled to take a clear stand against neo-Nazi and other far-right movements, and they welcome the designation of such sites as archaeological sites in their role as places of remembrance.

Raising public awareness of the importance of contemporary historical sites linked to war and terror is a necessary and useful task for regional archaeology. Targeted public outreach can support this effort. Often, valuable information about camp sites is not passed on to the heritage authorities because individuals, associations or institutions—motivated by laudable efforts to establish memorials quickly and visibly (e.g. in the Uckermark camp; see fig. 3 in Morsch 2016, 19; fig. 2 in Kersting 2016a, 57)—are unaware that these sites also fall within the jurisdiction of state archaeology and heritage preservation. Again and again, it becomes clear that wherever archaeological methods are applied to close

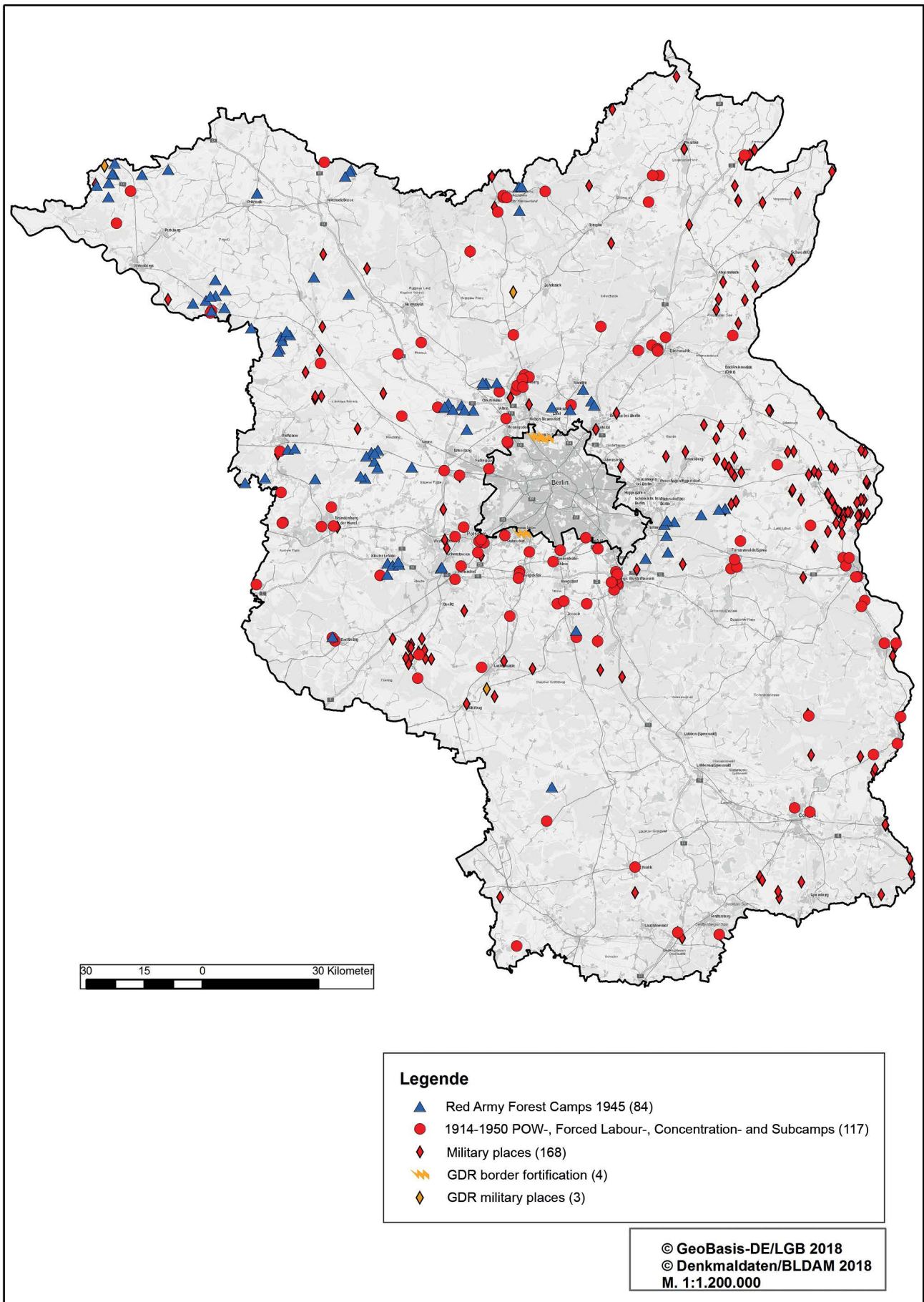


Fig. 1.2 Map of twentieth-century archaeological monuments, S. Schwazländer AIDZ BLDAM

gaps in contemporary historical research and to make the invisible visible, new questions arise (cf. Gaede 2016, 131ff., on visibility and invisibility at the camp sites). Beyond its scientific relevance, this work generates a public response that far exceeds that seen in conventional prehistoric archaeology.

In 2010, the organisers of a major travelling exhibition on forced labour still believed they could dispense with material remains to convey their content—and even considered them potentially misleading (cf. Knigge/Lüttgenau/Wagner 2010, 9). This ignored the fact that original finds are often key to individual fates—and thus central to public engagement. Elsewhere in the volume by Knigge, Lüttgenau and Wagner (2010), the “Grabe, wo du stehst” (“excavate where you are”) movement is praised, though seemingly without realising that the role of archaeology in this context lies outside the author’s viewpoint. The authors praise the grassroots activists somewhat condescendingly for localising not the camps in the landscape, but their history in the memory of the community (Heusler 2009, 196). Structural remains of the camps are seen only as memorials, not as subjects of heritage protection.

Nevertheless, since 2013, the permanent exhibition at the Nazi Forced Labour Documentation Centre in Berlin-Schöneweide has drawn on current archaeological findings, including from Brandenburg (*Alltag Zwangsarbeit* 2013, 114, 138, 164). The heritage authority recognises the powerful aura of the finds and structures and is, therefore, proactive in affirming its responsibility for sites of war and terror. These are brought into the focus of state archaeology not only on the basis of the legally defined public interest, but increasingly in response to genuine public concern. This aligns with the mandate formulated in Brandenburg’s cultural development concept, which tasks the heritage authority with contributing to identity-building—without excluding other public interest actors such as the memorial institutions (Gedenkstätten; see <https://mwfk.brandenburg.de/sixcms/media.php/9/Kulturbericht.pdf>, accessed 1 July 2025).

Not least for this reason, a major exhibition on the archaeology of the Nazi forced labour camps was developed jointly starting in 2018 with the Nazi Forced Labour Documentation Centre in Berlin-Schöneweide (under the umbrella of the Topography of Terror Foundation, Berlin), the Berlin State Heritage Office and the Chair of Contemporary Archaeology at the University of Vienna. It opened in May 2020, marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the camps (*Ausgeschlossen* 2020). The exhibition presents archaeological finds and features from Berlin and Brandenburg and has been touring ever since. Designed in two languages and accompanied by a comprehensive volume in both German and English, it aims to demonstrate the social relevance of this research. Following its debut at the Nazi Forced Labour Documentation Centre in Berlin-Schöneweide (May 2020–April 2021), the exhibition was shown

at the Archaeological State Museum in Paulikloster Brandenburg an der Havel (May–October 2021), the Museum of Falkensee near Berlin (2022) and finally the Archaeological Museum in Frankfurt (November 2023–December 2024).

1.4 Research Base

Research into the material legacies of war and terror in twentieth-century Brandenburg is carried out in cooperation with the universities of Berlin and Vienna, in order to develop internal expertise. Special mention should be made of the evaluation of site and functional characteristics in collaboration with the *Terrorscape* project at the University of Vienna under Professor Claudia Theune, which focuses on the Mauthausen camp system (Theune 2015), as well as joint projects with Professor Reinhard Bernbeck of Freie Universität Berlin (Bernbeck 2017).

This research serves both the social mission of heritage protection and scientific inquiry, with the aim of systematically recording camp sites in Brandenburg. A wide range of sources is used for this purpose—provided by diverse institutions and social groups and collected for a variety of reasons and motives. In addition to the socially prominent themes of victim suffering and perpetrator guilt, the precise localisation of the sites is of particular importance for state archaeology, as it is only in this way that the material sources can be recorded and protected as archaeological sites (Fig. 1.3).

To obtain this often hidden information, all sources must be carefully analysed and correlated, as the exact locations of these crime scenes—because that is what they are—are often not given priority in written records. One key issue is that works dealing with concentration camps and satellite camps frequently ignore other types of sites, such as forced labour or prisoner-of-war camps—and vice versa—even when referring to the same location. It seems that historians sometimes remain constrained by the terminological system of Nazi camp classifications. While understandable and practical in terms of archival sources, this categorisation can obscure a broader understanding of the camp system.

The sources that archaeologists use range from bureaucratic documents, specialist literature, historical maps, plans, images and stories to aerial surveys and terrain models created using the latest technology.

- The standard works on subcamps in Brandenburg (Benz/Distel 2005–2009, especially volumes 3 and 4 on Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald) rarely provide precise location details.
- The major databases of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington offer little location-specific data. The freely accessible *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos* includes a comprehensive checklist for contributors (see Reader’s

such as remnants of camp buildings, pathways or fire-water ponds, most of which are no longer visible above ground today.

- Local initiatives often supplement these materials. Knowledge about such places has often been passed down through generations within local communities (cf. Pollack 2014, 71).
- So-called grey literature—privately printed publications with small circulation, often without a publication date—can be particularly valuable, since the authors are often closely connected to local history.
- These publications are increasingly complemented by websites created by amateur researchers, some of which offer helpful localisation data. However, this is also the entry point to a grey area of dark tourism, in which sites from the Nazi period are marketed to a curious public (see Bernbeck 2017, 415).
- In recent years, information has also come from the geocaching community. Some camps previously unknown to researchers have been revealed in this way (e.g. the Märkische Walzwerk in Strausberg or Stalag Groß Schulzendorf).
- Local initiatives frequently organise youth projects, often with support from the Landesjugendring Brandenburg, which offers various funding schemes such as *Zeitensprünge* or *überLAGERt*. These enable school pupils to research their local histories, often including camp sites and eyewitness accounts. The heritage authority has recognised this potential and invites youth groups to the Archaeological State Museum, where they learn how contemporary archaeology works, engage directly with original artefacts, and contribute to their local knowledge. Several camp sites have been recorded as archaeological sites as a result of these collaborations (e.g. in Königs Wusterhausen, Biesenthal and Lanke).
- Finally, numerous volunteer archaeologists and detectorists take an active interest in the topic. They submit reports on finds from internment camp sites to local archives, which can then be professionally confirmed, protected or excavated if necessary.

All of these efforts contribute to the documentation of camp sites as discovery sites, potential sites or archaeological sites for inclusion in the Brandenburg State Heritage List, ensuring their long-term protection. Equally important is the communication of this information—whether at the original locations, in the State Museum or through suitable formats at the memorial sites. Researchers on the remains of German internment camps on the British Channel Islands describe their own methods in similar terms—as non-invasive approaches (Sturdy-Colls 2012; Sturdy-Colls/Colls 2014, 128ff.; Carr/Jasinski 2014).

1.5 Archaeology of War and Terror

The approach to this topic in this book is the typically pragmatic and largely non-theoretical one of archaeological site preservation (as per Lobinger 2015). For preservation, the decisive factor for identifying something as a site, as

usually formulated by heritage protection laws, is that the material remains say something about human history. This includes the sites of the Nazi dictatorship, which are important in the communication of history and the culture of remembrance. In future, these sites will also serve as substitutes for contemporary witnesses, of whom only a few are still alive. They authenticate and visualise historical events through their materiality.

1.5.1 Perspectives on Memory

The 2015 conference *Archäologie und Gedächtnis* (“Archaeology and Memory”), organised together with the memorial foundations of Berlin and Brandenburg, and the accompanying 2016 conference proceedings, already had this in mind: we deliberately used the ambivalent term *memory* in the title in order to utilise its range of meanings, from remembrance to commemoration (Kersting/Theune et al. 2016; cf. in this synonymous sense Knigge 2010, 11f.; cf. Hansen/Heitzer/Nowak 2016, 11). However, in order to understand the significance of these sites for memory—which does not speak for itself—we need further source analysis. Sources must always be critically scrutinised, and this process of reflection must be made accessible to the public visiting the memorial sites and engaging with our research. Questions such as *What do we preserve? What do we convey? What do the relics tell us?*—and thus, indirectly, *What are we researching?*—should highlight the narrative aspect. Visitors to the sites should not be left alone with symbolic interpretation and self-interpretation.

Reconstructions often stand next to or on top of original architectural remains, resulting in a visible patchwork of historical layers and outlines (as Jens Christian Wagner, historian and director of the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, noted at the 2015 conference). From the perspective of heritage preservation and mediation, it is essential to present all layers of a site’s history. Archaeological heritage preservation requires an open-ended approach to interpretation: time-bound interpretations must always be presented as the result of an ongoing, open process.

1.5.2 Perspectives on Methodology and Legitimation

Archaeological heritage conservation engages little with methodology; its primary task is to protect existing sites—though it must first be aware of them and acknowledge its responsibility (unless otherwise noted, this section is based on Kersting 2020c, 2020d). As early as 1999, Ronald Hirte (Education Department of the Buchenwald Memorial) noted that prehistorians are justified in addressing this issue, particularly as archaeological heritage conservators. Avoiding the subject or neglecting such objects seems untenable today (Hirte 1999, 12, note 15).

The reasons for the often reactive (as opposed to proactive) activities of state archaeology generally come from external sources:

- Construction plans at former camp sites are often only discovered once they are being implemented.
- Changing museum-focused and ideological conceptions of memorial sites frequently lead to redesigns involving ground interventions.
- Educational work camps dig into the soil with good intentions.
- Looting excavations at specific sites (e.g. Göring's Carinhall) leave destructive traces.
- Some interventions are required to clarify facts at Nazi crime scenes.
- Applications for search licences are made for private belongings from wartime.
- Local initiatives request to conduct excavations—proper academic research remains the exception.
- Even installing information boards requires ground intervention and documentation.
- The State Heritage List is an ongoing systematic inventory project led by the Archaeological Heritage Conservation Department.

Only since the early 1990s have Nazi-era legacies come into focus—first through the Brandenburg Heritage Protection Act of 1991, which defined archaeological sites without an age limit, and second due to changing memorial concepts at former concentration camps. After the political transformation (*Wende*) that led to German reunification, a shift in memorial perspectives became inevitable for ideological reasons—manifesting almost immediately in construction measures and, consequently, archaeological interventions. In this context, then state archaeologist Jürgen Kunow said: “We first had to understand that until then, only the memorial site designs from the 1950s were under heritage protection, not the original remains of the camps in the ground” (quoted at a departmental meeting, 1995).

Gradually, archaeological preservation began to raise awareness among other responsible parties about the significance of these ephemeral structures and to develop its own methodological framework (Kunow 1996, 2000). Despite methodological progress, the protection, preservation and presentation of these sites continue to raise questions—particularly the issue of quantity: how to handle the sheer number of sites and finds? Practicable standards must be developed for excavation and preservation involving non-professionals, along with their integration into educational work—anchored in an ongoing dialogue between memorial sites and archaeology. Long-term, continuous professional archaeological supervision of memorial sites is essential.

It is often noted that archaeology of the Nazi era faces a patchy (and thus typical) source situation: wherever rules were broken or illegal actions occurred, documentation is lacking (Oebbecke 1995). Precisely because of these documentation gaps, the physical remains in the ground are of enormous scientific value. Further sources are unlikely to emerge—though unseen archive materials might still exist.

In terms of conservation, the central question is: (How) can the find sites be preserved? Primary conservation means preservation in situ, which may be visible (raising questions of presentation and long-term stability) or invisible—by protecting structures buried just below the surface, possibly with surface markings. Secondary conservation refers to preservation through documentation and artefact recovery, sacrificing the original substance. New materials with unusually short lifespans and narrow dating ranges are frequently encountered. Moreover, the problems of restoration, conservation and storage of finds must not be prematurely resolved based on limited capacities in state offices (Müller 2016).

The analysis of the twentieth-century finds is hindered by a lack of specialised archaeologists (e.g. Poggel 2020, 11), but such specialist analyses of the finds are emerging. Precise dating is sometimes required to identify a site as a Nazi camp. Often, identifying site function or interpreting findings depends on resolving issues of later use, especially by Allied (in Brandenburg, Soviet) military, who repurposed or built over camp sites (e.g. the Uckermark camp). In some cases, this led to the emergence of new constellations of perpetrators and victims, as with Soviet special camps established on former concentration camp sites—raising specific commemorative challenges (“double history”). Such contexts can ultimately justify the establishment of heritage sites. So-called perpetrator sites are more problematic as heritage sites, and their mediation is more difficult, because of the absence of public support—hopefully this will not change. Victim sites receive greater acceptance, though this distinction is not codified in the Heritage Protection Act (Kersting/Müller 2015).

Victim barracks were usually built with primitive materials, reflecting racial hierarchies. This made them more susceptible to decay, and their traces can often only be detected by archaeologists. Perpetrator sites, by contrast, were constructed with self-aggrandisement in mind and are often still in use today; they have only exceptionally become the subject of archaeological heritage preservation (Kersting 2025).

Before excavations—which in future should no longer be undertaken for educational or research purposes, but solely for heritage preservation—methodological concepts must be developed for managing exposed features and finds, including criteria for selection, preservation and restoration. For objects of industrial mass culture, documentation of selection and disposal is vital. Excavations at forced labour camps must be supervised by experts, but few archaeologists, especially in the state offices, are currently specialised in this field. Trained personnel are also needed at memorial sites to professionally interpret archaeological remains. Since the first excavations at forgotten camp sites (cf. Schute 2017, 595), and their successful public presentation in exhibitions (Antkowiak/Keil/Götze 2002), state archaeology in Brandenburg no longer faces a legitimisation problem.

1.5.3 Perspectives on People and Material

Archaeology inevitably deals with material—that is inherent to its disciplinary definition. It does not need a *material turn* to investigate history (cf. Bernbeck 2017, 222); that is its default approach. It has often been stated that the focus of archaeology is not on pots but on people. For archaeologists engaging with the material legacies of war and terror, knowing the fates of the “research objects” can be emotionally taxing—but it is also an opportunity, particularly in terms of public engagement (see Meller/Bunnefeld 2020, 103). Although archaeological heritage conservation operates in the “public interest” in legal terms, public interest in these chronologically recent topics is markedly different from that in “conventional archaeology” (with the familiar adage: “gold always attracts, and Nazi gold is best”).

The material remains are always directly connected to people and their fates. This is not exclusive to the historical phase considered here, but here the historical context is exceptionally well documented (for a discussion of the ethical implications of archaeology’s engagement with such material, see Bernbeck 2017, 92ff.). The structures of archaeological sites are “charged with fate and history”—a notion already articulated by Hirte (1999, 77) and echoed by Hansen, Heitzer and Nowak (2016, 10; Fig. 1.4). This affects both the character of the find material and the

structures of the archaeological site—right up to the fact that finds may constitute legal evidence and features may mark crime scenes (see Wagner 2016, 170; cf. Schute 2017, 594). Archaeology of contemporary history is thus increasingly taking a *forensic turn* (Schute 2017, 598), responding to the disappearance of living witnesses. In this context, “forensic education” may better describe the potential of these remains than the more traditional concept of civic education (Heyl 2010).

Unlike conventional archaeological sites, these sites often attract premature interest in being turned into memorial sites. Their supposed authenticity offers a powerful emotional connection, serving both to validate the site’s status and as a point of entry for interested parties. Many finds can even be personalised (e.g. via inscriptions), linking them to specific individuals and, in some recent cases, even forming the basis for legal compensation claims. There is a risk of unnecessarily sacralising archaeological remains, elevating them to the status of relics. However, the conservation principle of archaeological site preservation is not a form of fetishism (Wagner 2016, 169)! Drieschner (2016) defines the cognitive functions of archaeological finds and features as ranging from indicators and orienting tools to correctives.

Groups of prisoners and forced labourers—categorised according to political and racial criteria—spent a significant

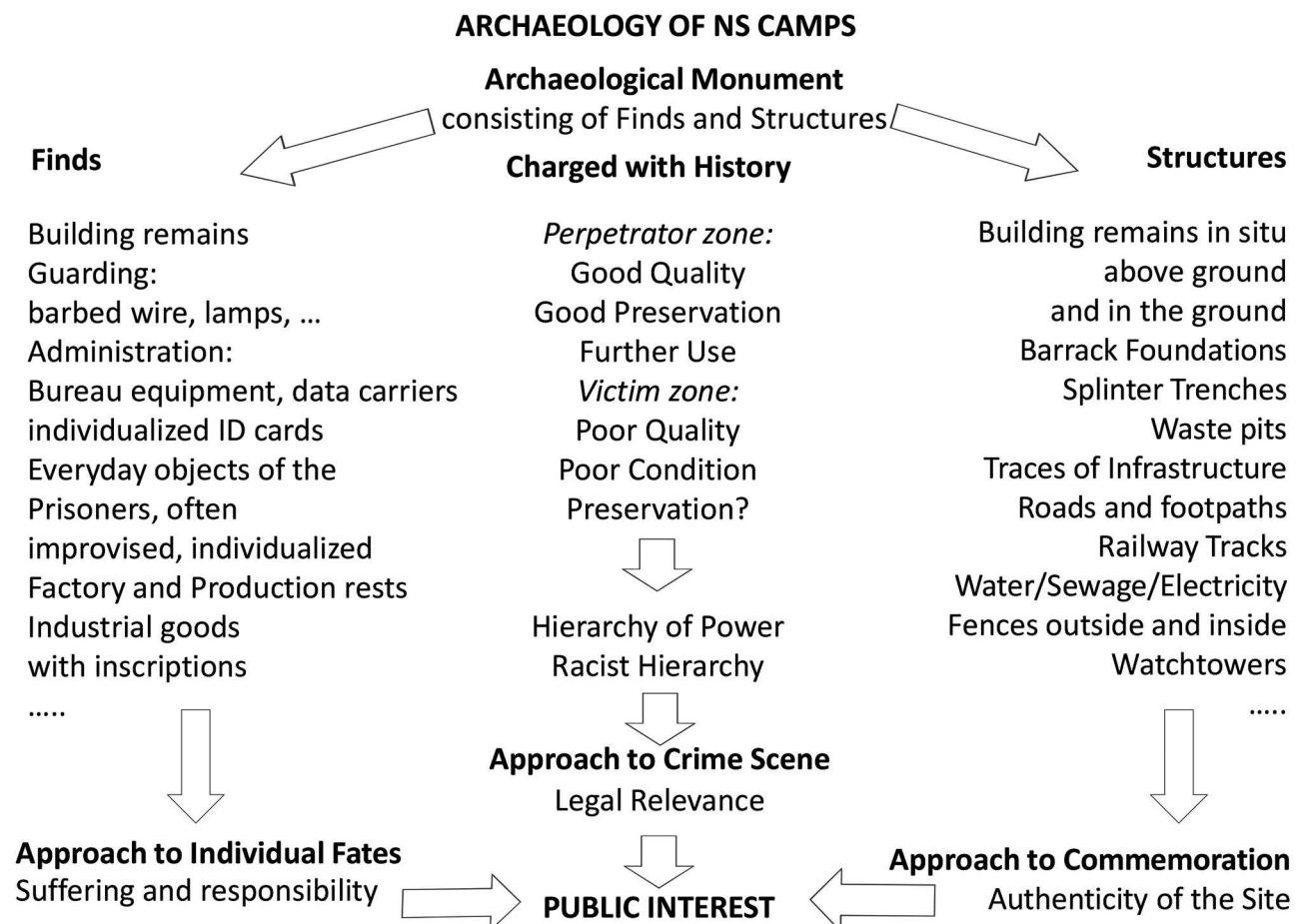


Fig. 1.4 Archaeological monument camp site: Charged with history, graphic by Th. Kersting

part of their lives in the camps. The construction, layout and organisation of these camps directly influenced their chances of survival. Therefore, their spatial distribution and functional differentiation must be carefully analysed (see most recently Legendre 2017, 51 on architecture and everyday life). Due to their emotional charge, original Nazi camp sites generate overlapping fields of interest, and activate various public actors seeking to use and interpret the archaeological site for their own purposes (Fig. 1.5).

The sites are often subject to commercial use, which must be reconciled with conservation priorities. The site's authenticity is what grants it its status as a heritage site, but it also generates emotional responses—ranging from commemoration to, at times, denial. Political education actors, in particular, benefit from the testimonial value attached to such sites.

1.5.4 Perspectives on Violence and War

Archaeology—and historical scholarship more broadly—has always been heavily involved with evidence of war and violence, simply because these played central roles in (almost?) all ancient societies. Warlike elites left their mark in the form of tombs and fortifications (unless otherwise noted, this section is based on Kersting et al. 2018b). For decades, earlier generations of researchers were fully focused on such traces, likely because these aligned with their own political and social realities.

History and archaeology have long been “victors’ histories” (cf. Bernbeck 2017, 434). Only recently have war and violence become something of a taboo topic in German archaeology—a development easily understood against the backdrop of their instrumentalisation under the Nazi regime and the traumatising experiences of the Second World War, which was in no way comparable to earlier wars. Fortunately, these topics are now being reapproached from a new perspective.

Today, the archaeology of contemporary history focuses intensely on war, terror, Nazi rule and, in Germany, sometimes also on the subsequent dictatorship. There is, in theory, no reason why other aspects of the twentieth century could not be researched archaeologically—and indeed they are (see Jürgens/Müller 2020). From a heritage conservation perspective, intervention depends on the presence of material remains—buried under soil or water—that possess historical and scientific value, and are therefore worthy of protection, according to the Brandenburg Heritage Protection Act. This includes refugee reception camps or abandoned industrial sites from the GDR period.

In Brandenburg, Nazi-era remains are comparatively easy to manage today, as they can finally be protected, researched and excavated without public resistance. The public not only tolerates this work—it actively demands it. These original sites and their material legacies are

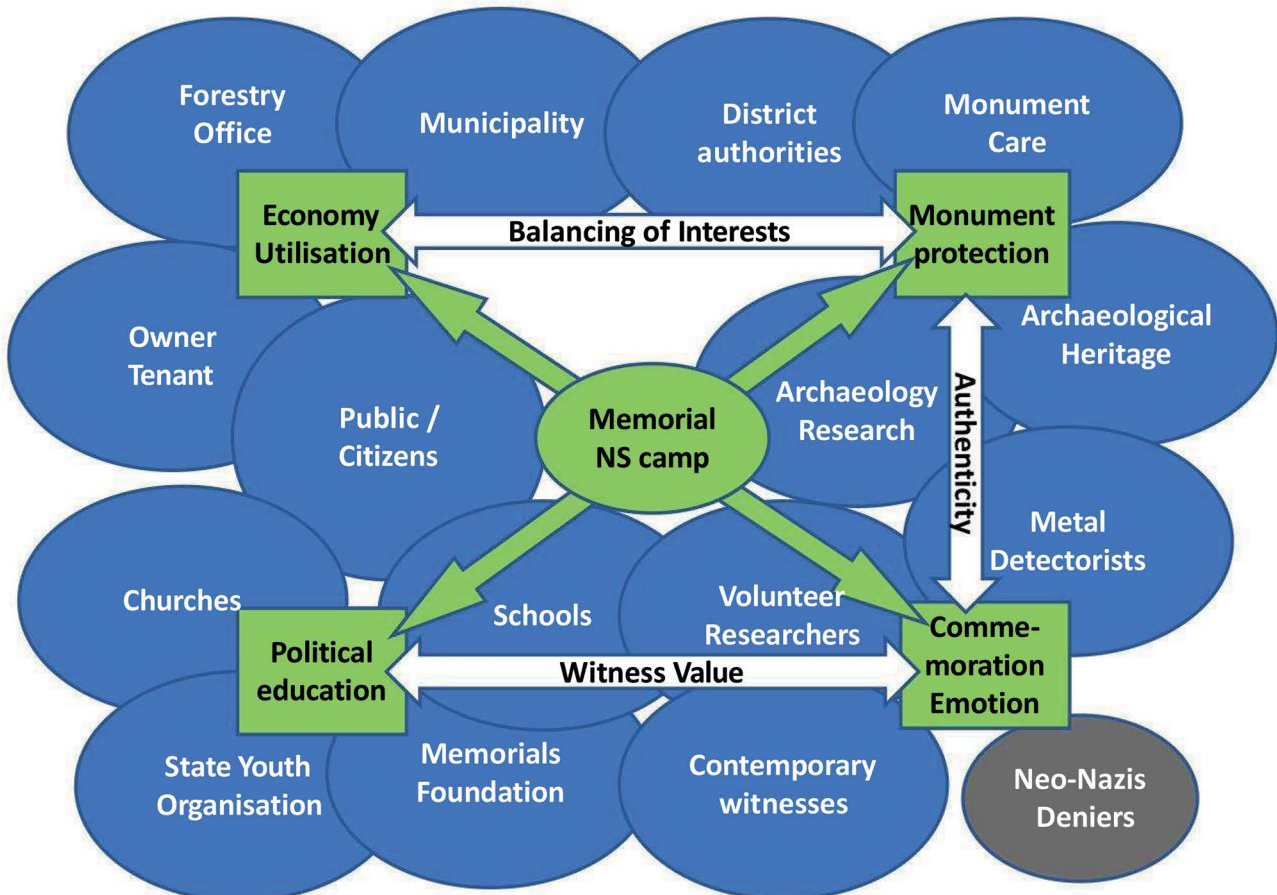


Fig. 1.5 Archaeological monument camp site: Interested parties and fields of interest, graphic by Th. Kersting

indispensable to the political and human education of future generations, precisely because of the violent crimes and the suffering associated with them. The desire for comprehensible visualisation of this heritage has led to the search for and rediscovery of many previously overlooked sites. Local civic initiatives have played a significant role in this rediscovery. However, in the transition from expert knowledge and public engagement, these groups often prefer to bypass scholarly processes and move straight on to memorialisation. (Fig. 1.6).

Archaeology’s function, both literally and socially, is to make visible what was hidden. Camp sites and their histories are returning to public awareness. After all, to see, one must first know (Allmeier et al. 2016, 21). The demonstrative power of original camp remains plays an important role in education, especially for young people. This is not a “boom” in war and terror archaeology—it reflects real social concerns to which archaeology can finally make a positive contribution.

1.5.5 Archaeology and Politics: A New Challenge?

Archaeology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is inherently more aware of political implications. It knows the political contexts and personal fates of its research subjects—real people—and it can draw parallels with current issues: war crimes, marginalisation, camps and mass graves have unfortunately existed and continue to exist worldwide (unless otherwise noted, this section is based on Kersting et al. 2018b). With this awareness,

archaeologists working on earlier periods have begun to move beyond an antiquarian fixation and to reflect on the lives of the people behind the artefacts. Flint daggers and bronze swords were not only symbols of power but also weapons of violence and murder.

When archaeology aligned with political regimes in the past (e.g. the Third Reich or the GDR), it often did so in anticipatory obedience—whether voluntarily or under coercion. Today, especially in the context of contemporary archaeology, heritage conservation has the opportunity to support civic initiatives (see above) and to engage openly in political discourse. This politicisation has a positive effect on the perception of archaeology. Otherwise, it often has the status of a cultural curiosity, barely noticed before the evening weather forecast. If we accept that peaceful conflict resolution, social inclusion and integration are desirable societal values, then archaeology can and should contribute to their preservation. It is often overlooked—even by well-informed commentators (cf. Welzer 2010)—that archaeology has something substantial to offer in this regard. This only proves that archaeology has not yet succeeded in fully communicating its societal potential.

1.6 Research versus Preservation? Approaches in Archaeological Heritage Conservation

The field of research often referred to in practice as camp archaeology has a distinctive feature: it lies at the interface between archaeology, heritage preservation and memorial

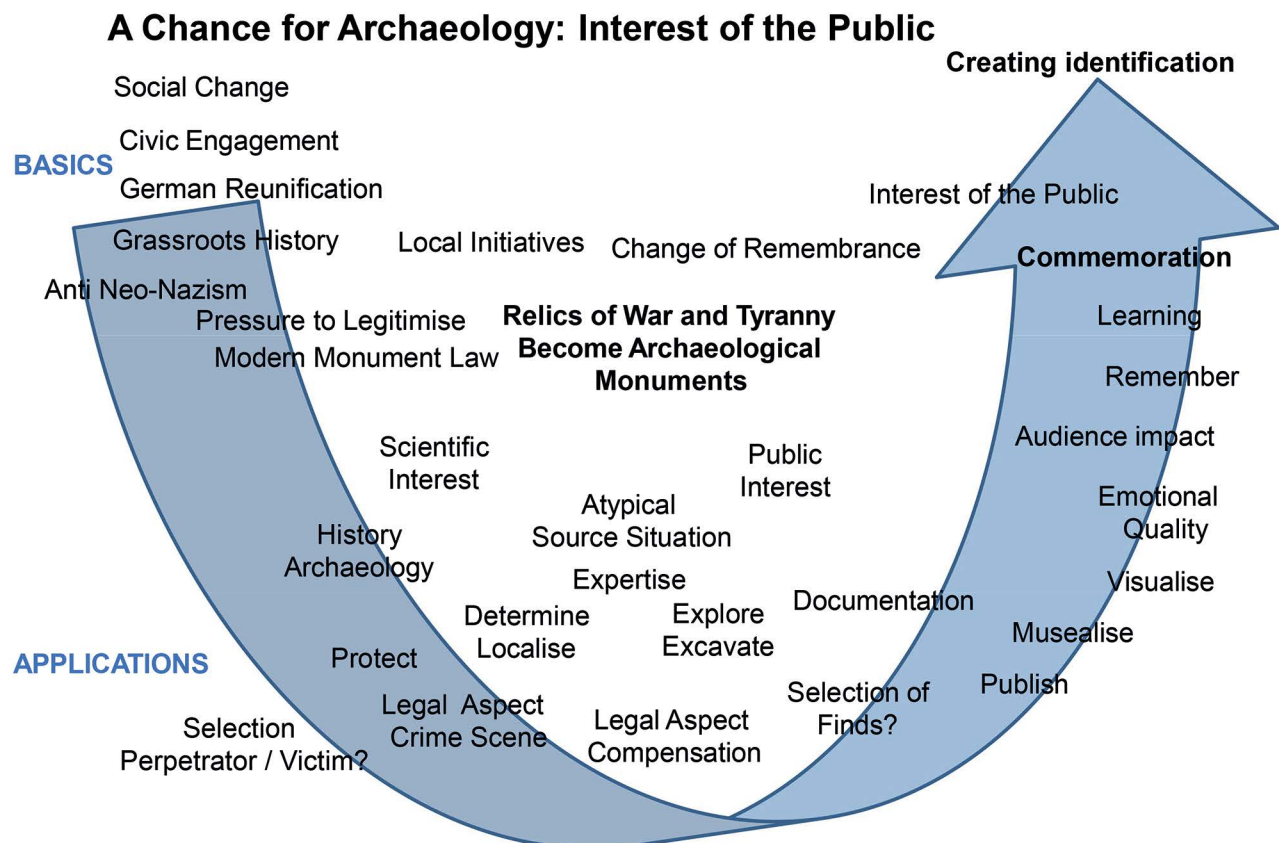


Fig. 1.6 Archaeological monument camp site: Interest of the public, graphic by Th. Kersting

sites, each with their own perspectives and approaches. Its main focus is the protection of archaeological remains in the ground, which is often neglected because archaeology is still too closely identified with excavation—seen as “research”—and not enough with *in situ* preservation (cf. Bernbeck 2017, 364f.). However, there need not be a conflict between conservation and research; the two can complement each other effectively.

Today, archaeology must focus on absolutely essential tasks (and expenditures) in the interests of heritage protection, particularly given current staffing and financial constraints. The task of archaeological heritage preservation is to conduct a comprehensive inventory of Nazi-era camp sites—this is the only way to ensure effective protection of this category of sites. Initially, it is sufficient to record all known camp sites in low resolution, enabling appropriate responses to existing heritage structures in land-use planning. In Brandenburg and other federal states in Germany, considerable progress has already been made in this direction.

Provocative proposals—such as lowering excavation standards at memorial sites, retaining finds for educational purposes, or releasing sites after excavation—challenge

archaeology’s perceived claim to sole authority. These proposals stimulate debate between memorial sites and heritage authorities, as they clearly articulate differing approaches (Morsch 2016). However, the purpose of archaeology is not to obtain exhibits for planned memorials (Poggel 2020, 13 and 18). Nevertheless, cooperation between memorial sites and the heritage office has, for many years, represented a successful and innovative approach in Brandenburg (see Kersting/Schopper/Theune 2016).

Conclusions

Memorial institutions and state archaeology services share a common interest in preservation and communication, and interdisciplinary cooperation is essential. However, there must not—and cannot—be a hierarchy of interests. On the one hand, memorial sites must not exhaust their original resources through the demands of daily educational work. On the other, the state archaeology services must—and do—acknowledge the special status of these atypical archaeological sites. They, too, benefit from the emotional resonance of this work—such a direct connection between archaeology and social reality in the context of political education is new, and valuable, for all those involved.