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Finding the Wrong People. Challenges of contemporary archaeology in Poland

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The immediate past has been of interest within Polish archaeology only very recently. Research was first undertaken in 1967 and was incidental, tending not to change the general view of archaeologists focused on periods spanning prehistory to the Middle Ages, and then gradually adding the 17th and 18th centuries. A permanent change came in the 1990s with the emergence of development-led archaeology in Poland. Excavations preceding construction of motorways and other infrastructure projects revealed relics dating back to 1800-1945 on an unprecedented scale. Initially, insufficient historical knowledge made archaeological research particularly difficult. Now, after a few decades, this pioneer era is coming to an end, and there are archaeologists focusing mainly on the contemporary period e.g. archaeology of armed conflicts in the broadest sense of the term or narrowly specialised forensic archaeology.

Nevertheless, the challenges of contemporary archaeology still exist. They are related to the key heritage management issues and significant consequences (including financial consequences) of resulting administrative decisions with regard to archaeological heritage of the 18th-20th centuries. In this article, individual challenges are discussed with regard to archaeology and memory, systems of heritage protection as well as preservation and research. Selected case studies are used to illustrate them all.

The omission of time boundaries in binding legal definitions of both monuments and archaeological monuments is perfectly fine, because this ensures that all the relatively new relics are, in theory, as protected as older ones regardless of their state of preservation. However, in practice, archaeological research of a 19th-20th century site can cause confusion, from the first application for a research permit up to choosing a storage facility for the finds and their proper permanent curation. In order to go beyond the state-of-the-art in Poland, this article presents several solutions consistent with the existing legal framework. However, a uniform approach is still to be developed, even within the archaeological community.



1. Introduction

Contemporary archaeology has introduced the discipline to a new and wide range of written, iconographic and cartographic sources, and to finds from mass industrial production (which tend to be uniform and standardised). More importantly, contemporary archaeology has entered the world of living memory. This means that the relevance of archaeology to the present is no longer always in question, because, in many cases, this relevance is the very reason for undertaking the research.

In Poland, where the legal definitions of heritage and archaeological heritage objects or properties do not include any time limits, archaeological interest in the recent past has, for the first time, forced the sector to reconsider or consider explicitly the significance of the discovered relics. Consequently, the validity of any automatic and habitual decision-making in heritage management has been questioned. This article discusses this type of decision-making and other challenges of contemporary archaeology that are developing against the common perception of this science within a legal framework more suited to older periods.

2. Archaeological research of 18th-20th-century sites in Poland

In 1961, Jerzy Kruppé, one of the pioneers of historical archaeology in Poland, wrote about the lack of studies on late medieval pottery (Kruppé [1961](#), 8), which, in the 1950s, was regarded as too recent and therefore beyond the scope of archaeological interests. It was the same researcher who, in 1967, led the first fieldwork in the Nazi extermination camp of Auschwitz. The small-scale research was filmed (Zalewska [2017](#), 57). A short documentary entitled 'Archaeology' is devoid of commentary, and the unearthed objects, like shoes, glasses and postcards, speak louder than words.

This first research was incidental and did not change the general view of archaeologists focused on periods spanning prehistory to the Middle Ages, and gradually the 17th and 18th centuries. Not until 20 years later did archaeologists turn to the recent past to give justice to victims of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianisms. In 1986-1987, relics of the Nazi extermination camp in Kulmhof/Chełmno on the Ner were excavated (the fieldwork continued from 1997-2008), and in the 1990s, archaeologists took part in locating and exhuming Polish POWs killed by the NKVD (Soviet security service) who were buried in secret mass graves in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk, Mednoye, near Tver and Kharkov (Zalewska [2017](#), 58).

From the second half of the 1990s, when large-scale archaeological research related to the construction of national roads and highways began in Poland, archaeologists encountered the remains of contemporary human activity from the 19th-20th century on an unprecedented scale. Initially, it was discussed whether such relics are heritage, and if so, whether they are archaeological monuments. Should



contemporary sites be documented in the same way as prehistoric and medieval sites? Should everything be catalogued or only selected artefacts? In motorway archaeology, these deliberations were brought to an end by the attitude of the main investor i.e. the General Directorate for National Roads and Motorways. The road agency demanded and, most importantly, financed the 'removal' of all traces of human activity from the route of future roads by funding archaeological research. Their decision, based on careful analysis of the existing legal framework, changed the entire discipline. Although discussions about the heritage nature of such sites continue to this day, contemporary relics are consistently subjected to regular research and their results are increasingly being used in scientific circulation (for example Świątkiewicz [2011](#), 200-203; Rzepecki and Ryba -Kaczorowski [2013](#); Bohr [2015](#), 210-14; Mazurek *et al.* [2017](#)).

In the case of relics from armed conflicts of the 20th century, such works are part of the dynamically developing sub-discipline known as the archaeology of conflict (for more on this topic, see Wrzosek [2019](#)). More and more archaeologists, including those in Poland, find therein interesting research topics and may focus exclusively on them. It should be noted, however, that except for development-led archaeology, contemporary archaeological sites are very rarely studied as part of purely scientific projects (for example, see Kiarszys [2019](#); Zalewska [2019](#); [2022](#); Zalewska *et al.* [2019](#)).

3. Legal framework and its consequences

Formal heritage protection and preservation in Poland began with the restoration of its independence in 1918. Since then, the country has had four heritage acts ([1918](#); [1928](#); [1962](#); [2003](#)). To be declared as heritage, archaeological relics had to be significant 'for heritage and cultural development' ([1962](#), article 2), 'be the result of human activity or related thereto', and be 'the testimony of the past, whose preservation is in the public interest' ([2003](#), article 3). Since the 1960s the significance of heritage sites and objects has been defined through their historical, scientific or artistic values ([1962](#), article 2; [2003](#), article 3).

The binding legal definition of an archaeological monument takes into account the two- or even three-fold nature of archaeological heritage. It encompasses cultural layers with buried features, structures, and their traces, as well as individual artefacts. The heritage status of archaeological sites and objects is conditional on their value for future generations, and the possibility of selection is implied, because first they have to be declared as heritage in general.

It should also be noted that, according to the law, heritage is subject to protection regardless of its state of preservation. A 50 year time limit was imposed initially only on monuments of art and culture from 1918. Even then, however, younger artefacts and property could be legally protected as heritage by the decision of the relevant Minister ([1918](#), article 11). Thus, the law has never denied archaeological relics from the 18th-20th centuries their heritage status.



However, while sites with prehistoric, medieval or early modern chronology do not raise any major doubts as to their historical value, later relics such as field fortifications, battlefields, historic villages, towns and cities, as well as industrial infrastructure are treated differently. Legal protection covers individual structures or features, like fortifications or graves, rather than entire battlefields or their larger remains (Wrzosek [2010](#)). To illustrate this, it is enough to mention that only seven battlefields (one 15th century, three 18th century, one 19th century and two 20th century) have been inscribed in the register which includes over 87,000 monuments (see [National Institute of Cultural Heritage](#)).

4. Into the world of the living

The reason for this approach may be linked to a specific range of key heritage management issues and significant consequences (including financial consequences) of related administrative decisions with regard to archaeological heritage of the 18th-20th centuries. The decision about the heritage status of archaeological relics is just the first of numerous choices. The next choices include the spatial extent of the protected area and the manner of preservation, or - conversely - allowing destructive research. In the case of the latter, researchers and state heritage service are faced with homogeneous bulk finds coming from mass production, impossible to deal with without proper selection strategies. Practical consequences of these choices will be [discussed below](#), but first, more attention should be given to the most specific and sensitive issue, where archaeology enters the world of the living by touching memories of people and events from not so long ago. In Poland, which has a history marked by wars and conflicts, archaeology sometimes results in opening old wounds and disputes. The recent past, more than any other, belongs to society, so it is more prone to be biased and shaped according to current needs, as in two examples presented below.

In 1910 in Kałuszyn, a town located less than 60km east of Warsaw, the local community erected a cross-monument to commemorate Polish insurgents who fell during the so-called January Uprising of 1863-1864, which was one of many iconic events in Poland's long fight for independence. Some 104 years later, the mayor decided to move the cross from the centre of the market square to a more suitable location, because of planned modernisation. According to historical records, the bodies of the fallen insurgents were supposed to rest under the cross and the initial survey confirmed this location (Jankowski *et al.* [2018](#), 113-14). In the course of the archaeological research that followed, the remains of 35 people were unearthed. However, analysis of the discovered artefacts revealed that they were French, Polish and Russian soldiers who fell in 1813 during the Napoleonic wars. The local community could not reconcile itself with the fact that the Polish insurgents were being 'taken away from them'. During numerous meetings at various levels, they unsuccessfully tried to contradict the findings e.g. by presenting statements of older residents of the town, in which they shared their family stories on the topic (Jankowski *et al.* [2018](#), 133-34; Orłowska [2017](#). *Note that the latter source describes the case and its social context, although the publication gives the incorrect dates for the January Uprising which should be 1863-1864*). There were even attempts to deem the entire research illegal in court.



A few years earlier another archaeological project carried out in the battlefield of Ossów, also near Warsaw, stirred the public, but this time on a national level. It involved a mass grave of soldiers who fell during the Battle of Warsaw of 1920. This victory against Bolshevik Russia was a formative battle for the young Polish state. This time, before the two-season fieldwork started in 2008, it had already been clear that its aim was to locate a burial place of enemy soldiers in an attempt to commemorate as many episodes of the renowned battle as possible. The exact location was chosen based on information from the local community, and archaeologists from the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (led by one of the authors) discovered the remains of at least 22 Bolshevik soldiers (Wrzosek [2016](#), 176-77). Their reburial in Ossów, first planned for 15 August 2010, had to be postponed for a few months owing to protests against commemorating the enemy. The reburial coincided with the deterioration of Polish-Russian relations after the plane crash at Smolensk of 10 April 2010, which took the lives of 96 people including the President of Poland and his wife as well as other public figures. In the heated atmosphere, the calls for dismissal of the chairman of the responsible Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites reached the Minister of Culture and National Heritage and the Prime Minister. Because the case of Ossów got entangled in the highest level of national politics, it became difficult to get the authorities' support for the commemoration of the entire battle and the proper presentation of its location. As a result, the museum that was supposed to open in 2020 is still under construction.

5. Institute of National Remembrance

The closer to the present day, the more sensitive the research. The role of archaeology is also different. To reconstruct the events from World War II (WWII) onwards, archaeology is used rather as a method of gathering data and complementing prosecutorial proceedings or other investigations. Since 1999, the majority of this work in Poland has been carried out by the [Institute of National Remembrance](#).

The tasks of this state agency include the collection and management of archives of the secret services of the People's Republic of Poland, research and popularisation of Poland's modern history, the commemoration of historical events, places and figures in the history of the struggle and martyrdom of the Polish nation in Poland and abroad, and the commemoration of the places of struggle and martyrdom of other nations within the territory of the Republic of Poland. The Institute's Office of Search and Identification looks for unidentified burial sites of soldiers struggling for independence and victims of totalitarian oppression from 8 November 1917 to 31 July 1990 (the end date marks the dissolution of the secret services). The Office's main aim is to restore the memory about those people who were condemned to oblivion by the communist authorities. A team of historians, archaeologists, forensic experts and geneticists conducts research and exhumations in many places in Poland and abroad. In the best-case scenario, the fieldwork and subsequent analyses meet the criteria of both scientific research and the preparation of forensic reports (Szwagrzyk [2017](#), 102).



Even for the Institute, however, this is not always the case. The procedures of the Office for Search and Identification are not consistently used throughout the organisation, and archaeological research is at times replaced with exhumation, resulting in significant loss of knowledge about the peri- and post-mortem fates of the deceased. Similar reservations relate to search projects taken up by various grassroots initiatives, developing in parallel with the official, state-sanctioned programme of the Institute. '(...) despite the noble cause which they are intended to serve, [they] face various risks related to the unreliability of the methods used, the absence of competent staff and - due to the ignorance or the free interpretation of legal provisions - the possible conflict with the law' (Szwagrzyk [2017](#), 105).

6. Fitting into the existing system of heritage preservation and management

In Poland, the approach to recent relics is thus far from uniform, and the choice of legal regime (heritage law or other acts) has numerous consequences, some of which are presented in Table 1.



Figure 1 & Figure 2: Examples of finds from the excavations at the former Gęsia Street in Warsaw dating to WWII part of the Jewish ghetto. © J. Wrzosek, 2023

When declared heritage, finds from the 19th-20th centuries become, literally, one of the biggest challenges faced by investors, researchers and the state heritage



service. A significant portion thereof are more-or-less characteristic fragments of building ceramics (e.g. bricks, roof tiles), window glass, fragments of glass containers and metal objects (e.g. wire, nails, construction elements; Figures 1-2) In the case of military remains, there will be huge amounts of shooting and artillery ammunition as well as elements of uniforms and military equipment. Acquiring, recording, preserving and transferring all finds to museums or other storage facilities may therefore prove difficult or even unfeasible. This is influenced by various factors, the most important of which are funds allocated for research and the approach of a relevant Voivodeship Monuments Preservation Officer (VMPO) and museum curators who have to consent to admitting new collections into their storage.

To overcome these obstacles, the following procedure can be proposed. The contractor for archaeological research includes all finds in the records (e.g. photographs and descriptions), and then, with the help of other specialists - historians, military historians etc. presents the finds to the VMPO that, in their opinion, either are or are not heritage objects. The VMPO makes a final decision and transfers the heritage objects by way of an administrative decision to the appropriate museum or other organisational unit. The heritage service may also consult specialists including museologists, historians, archaeologists or experts at the Minister of Culture and National Heritage.



Figure 3: Wreck of a 19th-century steamboat located in the shallows of the Bug river, near the village of Bojany, c. 85km east of Warsaw. © SNAP Oddział w Warszawie, 2014



Table 1: Comparison of approaches to 19th-20th century relics depending on their recognition as heritage

	Archaeological heritage	Not heritage
Administrative procedures*	Permit and surveillance from state heritage service required	Permit from state sanitary inspection/order from a court or prosecutor required
	Report and scientific study of the results are required	No report or report consistent with prosecutorial proceedings
	Heritage service decides on the finds	Court or prosecutor decides on the finds
Fieldwork	Methodical archaeological research	Digging for human remains
	Detailed recording	No detailed recording, or recording according to criminology procedures and regulations on the examination of corpses
	Meticulous collection of artefacts and human remains (separation of individual skeletons)	Collection of human remains and objects in bulk
Finds	Fully catalogued and described	Recorded as evidence
	Conserved	No conservation
	Transferred to long-term storage	Stored as evidence
	Available for research	Not accessible
	Re-burial if allowed by the heritage service	Re-burial
	Owned by the State	Depending on the type of finds and the possibility of identifying the original owner, finds (unless they are weapons or ammunition) can be owned by the State, the Polish army, or can be claimed by heirs

* For more on legal and heritage management issues, see Borkowski and Trzciński [2017](#) 121-23.

The significance of the final decision lies in the fact that, according to the binding law, all the artefacts recognised as heritage must be consistently treated in terms of cataloguing, storage, and conservation. With regard to relics from the time of mass industrial production, these procedures may pose quite a challenge. One of the archaeological sites recorded in the Polish Archaeological Record (AZP) is a wreck



site from the River Bug (AZP 47-74/55) near the village of Bojany to the north-east of Warsaw (Figures 3-5).



Figure 4: Wreck of a 19th-century steamboat from the Bug river - site recording in 2014. © SNAP Oddział w Warszawie 2014



Figure 5: Wreck of a 19th-century steamboat from the Bug river - site recording and the resulting drawing. © SNAP Oddział w Warszawie, 2014



The 40m-long wreck of a steamboat sunk during World War I (1915) is now set in the shallows. It disturbs the river traffic and is under threat from both natural factors and dredging. As far back as 2006, before the wreck was even recorded as archaeological heritage, attempts had been made to remove it from the riverbed (Miechowicz [2014-2015](#)). The attempt failed and should not be repeated before funds for conservation and storage are secured. For large contemporary relics, open-air exhibitions may be a good option requiring, of course, sustainable funding for proper preservation. Such objects may serve more than just heritage purposes (Figures 6-7).



Figure 6: Fragment of the Kierbedź Bridge - the first steel bridge over the Vistula River in Warsaw built in 1859-1864 - presented near the Road and Bridge Research Institute in Warsaw. © Adrian Grycuk, 2017, CC BY-SA 3.0 PL

In terms of site recording and preservation, the current legal and administrative system, albeit favourable for contemporary sites, has been designed for excavation of older relics. Various human activities from the 18th-20th centuries, such as armed conflicts, mining operations or charcoal production, were characterised by vast land occupation and transformation. A specific research approach must be developed to fit large numbers of uniform terrain forms and the vast spatial extents of sites. The stage of preparation for fieldwork is especially significant, in particular archival, historical and cartographic queries, as well as analysis of the remote sensing data e.g. airborne laser scanning (ALS) and the derived digital terrain model (see Schriek [2016](#); Zalewska [2018](#), 43-45; Zalewska [2019](#), 9-24).

Such research requires a landscape approach using a wide spectrum of remote sensing data. A best-practice example has recently been published in relation to the battlefield of 1914-1915 on the Rawka and Bzura Rivers (Zalewska *et al.* [2019](#)). Their results, as well as invasive fieldwork (Zalewska [2019](#)) indicate, as never before, the problem of defining an archaeological site and its boundaries (for more on this subject see Zalewska [2018](#), 45-48).



Figure 7: Fragment of the so-called 'II bridge' from the 1870s, originally located near the Warsaw citadel, presented near the Road and Bridge Research Institute in Warsaw. © Adrian Grycuk, 2017, CC BY-SA 3.0 PL

Heritage-related activities with regard to investments require precise delimitation of protected areas where material remains of human activity are worthy of *in situ* preservation or preventive archaeological research. In Poland, the latter option is chosen when archaeological sites are in the inventory of monuments (AZP). According to the 'polluter pays' principle, the spatial extent of a protected site translates directly into the total cost of land development.

Particularly in the case of the 20th-century battles, one should be aware of a certain artificiality and conventionality in determining the extent of a protected area. This can prove very difficult, especially when the relics of warfare are scattered over large areas at a certain distance from each other, which may result in huge areas measured in hundreds of hectares or even in tens of square kilometres. Heritage-related restrictions give rise to resistance from landowner and developers, but also from the heritage service that has to accept responsibility for sites of unprecedented size. Unaware of the actual methodology of battlefield archaeology, they fear that the entire area to be developed has to undergo excavations. On battlefields, however, owing to the large areas, the aim is not to excavate the entire site but selected areas only (Carman [2013](#), 45-54; Wrzosek [2017](#), 84-87).

For efficient heritage management, the boundaries of archaeological sites should be recorded in as much detail as possible so that they can be accurately identified in the field. The easiest way is to base recording on the boundaries of land plots, watercourses and roads. Oval areas marked on the basis of loose interpretations on paper maps in the existing records from the 1970-1990s do not meet the needs of heritage management in times of GIS and more and more transparent decision making.



The General Monuments Preservation Officer (GMPO; Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage) has taken measures to resolve some of the described issues and include contemporary sites within the archaeological workflow. The guidelines from 2018 on cooperation with the General Directorate for National Roads and Motorways recommend conducting archaeological research on relics and sites of the recent past that are threatened by roads under construction. In particular, these include old, out-of-use cemeteries, graves, field fortifications, prisoner-of-war camps or abandoned towns (Wytyczne [2020a](#) 35-36). This idea is also continued in the GMPO's 2019 guidelines regarding the activities in Poland of the American Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) searching for missing American soldiers. They endorse treating the crash sites of WWII aircraft as archaeological sites, conducting all fieldwork in research mode and classifying elements of military technology, such as fragments of aircraft, as archaeological heritage objects (Wytyczne [2020b](#) 80).

The methods of designating and recording large-scale sites were sanctioned in the GMPO's 2019 guidelines (and prepared by the National Institute of Cultural Heritage). They give instructions on filling in the inventory site sheet, numbering sites, delimiting site boundaries on land features easily identifiable in the field, as well as recording villages and towns with a historical record as archaeological sites (Narodowy Instytut Dziedzictwa [2020a](#), 22-24). They include a recommendation to record relics from the modern and contemporary period (Narodowy Instytut Dziedzictwa [2020a](#), 23). The standards for destructive archaeological research issued by the GMPO also recognise the inclusion of the examination of late modern and contemporary sites (Narodowy Instytut Dziedzictwa [2020b](#), 14).

7. Archaeology of the recent past in the field

Archaeological research of sites and finds dated between 1800 and 1945 challenges archaeologists as well. Be it during development-led or purely scientific fieldwork, archaeologists have to resort to different sources than they are familiar with and different disciplines than those in which they have been trained. Academic archaeological education equips them with sufficient flexibility in the search for new knowledge, which is common to all good archaeologists. But the truth is that gaining qualifications suitable for the subdiscipline of contemporary archaeology is left solely up to the individual. More and more archaeologists make this effort with good results, as in the two case studies presented below.

In 2016, during the survey preceding construction of the S8 expressway near Warsaw, in the village of Nadma, commercial archaeologists K. Karasiewicz and M. Kielbasińska identified the crash site of a German Messerschmitt 110 fighter that, as further study revealed, was shot down on 3 September 1939 (Karasiewicz *et al.* [2021](#)). During survey and excavations, over 5000 aircraft fragments were acquired. Despite the fact that larger elements of the aircraft were collected during the war, through the meticulous study of the dispersal of the smaller remains and the available documentary sources, the researchers were not only able to identify by name all airmen participating in this fight (Polish and German), but also to



reconstruct the entire course of events down to the tiniest detail (Karasiewicz *et al.* [2021](#), 226-31). Many pieces of the crashed plane were identified, based on technical drawings, museum queries and consultations (Karasiewicz *et al.* [2021](#), 174-208).

Between 2018-2019, Grzegorz Kiarszys from the University of Szczecin carried out a project entitled 'Nuclear Soldiers of Freedom' (Kiarszys [2019](#)), during the course of which he investigated the relics of three nuclear warhead storage sites from the Cold War located in north-western Poland (see map: Kiarszys [2019](#), 126). These military bases were constructed in 1966-1969 and handed over to the Soviet Army, which was stationed on Polish land until 1991-1992. The military character of these facilities and foreign possession meant there was an information gap of more than 20 years that the relevant Polish military archives, declassified in 2006, could not fill. During the research, according to the methodology of archaeological prospection, the present state of preservation was recorded with the use of ALS (Airborne Laser Scanning) and TLS (Terrestrial Laser Scanning) methods, complemented by photographic documentation from the field verification of the relics. Project site and chronology sources included US intelligence spy satellite declassified images, CIA reports, military strategic documents, private photos documenting the everyday life of Soviet soldiers and their families and many others (Kiarszys [2019](#), 18-19, 220-21, 331-34).

8. Conclusions

Let us consider the projects presented here as a lens that focuses on numerous issues of archaeology of the recent past. First of all, the study subject is archaeological, consistent with the binding legal definition, yet is not considered as such by many archaeologists and non-professionals alike. Secondly, the research has dealt with an unwanted or difficult past - the material remains that, from a Polish perspective, are not 'ours' may always give rise to arguments that public resources should be used for other purposes, yet, if relics of the Polish armed forces are being researched, just as in the Kałuszyn example [discussed above](#), the findings 'must not' deviate from the common beliefs on the topic in order not to disturb the public. Memories of eyewitnesses passed on through three or four generations become part of local intangible heritage and local or even personal identity. The emotional load they carry causes their bearers to react to any changes with less flexibility. Moreover, fairly recent chronology results in many misconceptions. These include the idea that the relics of the recent past are numerous, well preserved and easily understood by everyone, and the belief that our knowledge is accurate because the events in question happened only a few decades ago, so we can easily fill any gaps therein without archaeology. The cited projects emphasise the contrary, discussing in detail the methodology of archaeological fieldwork applied and emphasising the great cognitive potential of such research. Such an approach attests that in Poland, archaeology of the 19th-20th centuries is a subdiscipline that is still in the making, and that systemic solutions are yet to come.



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