# **“AN EXAMPLE OF NAZI KULTUR”: PARADIGMATIC AND CONTESTED MATERIALITY AT BERGEN-BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP**

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**ABSTRACT**

Since it was liberated on the 15th April 1945 and images broadcast around the world, Bergen-Belsen has been synonymous with the cruelty of the Nazi concentration camp system. Although the history of the camp is well documented, less attention has been paid to what happened to the bodies of almost half of the 53,000 victims who died there and to the materiality of the camp landscape. This paper outlines the results of historical and non-invasive archaeological investigations aimed at locating unmarked graves and camp structures, as well as how they aligned and conflicted with established narratives. The ethical challenges involved in these investigations – as well as the contestation that surrounds the issue of unmarked burials – are also discussed.

# **INTRODUCTION**

**“This is the site of the infamous Belsen concentration camp *liberated by the British on 15 April 1945.* 10,000 unburied dead were found here. Another 13,000 have since died. All of them victims of the German new order in Europe. And an example of Nazi kultur.”**

A sign posted by the British army at the entrance to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Madalae Fraser).

Since it was liberated by the British military forces on the 15th April 1945, Bergen-Belsen (Germany) has been perceived by many as an archetypal example of a concentration camp and one synonymous with the cruelty of the Nazi regime (Schultze 2006 and 2015). Shocking images and film footage of bodies piled high and being bulldozed into mass graves imbedded the “horror camp” (Berney 2015:4) into British consciousness providing “a constant reminder to the British people of the menace they have beaten” (Daily Mail cited in Reilly et al 1997:4; Haggith 2006; figure 1). This evidence of so-called “Nazi kultur” revealed that tens of thousands of people died as a result of starvation, ill-treatment and disease during the concentration camp period alone (Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen (GBB) 2019).

As recent scholarship has shown, in reality, Bergen-Belsen was far from a “typical” concentration camp and the iconography that has developed around it portrays only the events of the final few months of its existence (Stone 2020; Cesarani 2006). Many scholars have argued that these representations meant that the camp “became separated from what the people held in this camp had had to endure, and why they had been incarcerated in the first place” (Schulze 2015). At different times since the war, it has been used as what Kushner (1996: 181) has termed a “crude metaphor” for “the universal horrors of war and man’s capacity for evil”, Jewish suffering, Nazi/German atrocities, and / or the “decency” and thoroughness of those who “exposed [these crimes] to the outside world”; a contested site where different victim groups and certain narratives have been emphasised at the expense of others.

Therefore, because of Bergen-Belsen’s place in “British imagination” and international consciousness (Kushner 2017:364), there has been little discussion concerning the extent and nature of the mass graves on the site, the various methods of body disposal used and what might have happened to the thousands of individuals whose bodies have never been found. Images of the clean-up operations which were broadcast around the world contributed to the notion that the burials and numbers of those who died in the camp were fully documented. This belief was affirmed further after the creation of the well-tended memorial and museum that now exist in the former camp area where the locations of known mass graves are marked. Historians researching the site have, by their own admission, not dedicated a great deal of time to the issue of body disposal practices, as it was assumed that all remains that could be found, had been found (Seybold 2017; GBB 2019). Since the materiality of destruction was so evident at liberation, first within the camp and then within the images taken, the misconception persists that the form and function of Bergen-Belsen are fully understood. Only a handful of scholars and practitioners have challenged this view, drawing upon archaeological, historical and augmented reality (AR) methods to highlight the importance of analysing physical evidence and space, not least of all because few traces of the camp survive above the ground (Pacheco et al 2014; Sturdy Colls 2015a; Schute et al 2014; Hummel 2008).

This paper outlines the results of the most recent of these archaeological investigations which used historical research, non-invasive technologies and the novel fusion of 3D data to map the terrain of Bergen-Belsen and generate new digital educational tools.[[1]](#endnote-1) The main focus of the discussion centres on how this work complemented and challenged established narratives surrounding the site, something which was an unexpected consequence for historians working at the associated memorial museum. The ethical challenges involved in these investigations – as well as the contestation that surrounds the issue of unmarked burials – are also discussed, thus highlighting both the value and some of the dangers of utilising archaeological methods at sites of conflict and genocide.

*Figure 1. Images of Bergen-Belsen at liberation. (left) A camp inmate, reduced by starvation to a living skeleton, delouses his clothes, 17-18 April 1945 (Copyright: IWM BU 3766) and (right) German SS guards and a bulldozer fill in a mass grave (Copyright: IWM BU 4273).*

**BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CAMP**

Numerous publications and testimonies exist concerning Bergen-Belsen which document its various functions and prisoner groupings (e.g. Rahe 2012; Wenck 2000), landscape and architecture (Cole 2015), liberation (e.g. Stone 2015; Berney 2015; Eeles and Konig 2015), place within cultural memory and British society (e.g. Stone 2020; Kushner 2006; Reilly et al 1997) and contested aspects of its history (e.g. Schultze 2006; Kushner 1996; Rosensaft 1979). Therefore, only a brief overview of the camp’s history is provided here as context for the remainder of the article.

The first camp to be established at Bergen-Belsen was a military camp constructed by the German army in 1935. This complex was expanded leading up to and after the start of World War II, resulting in the creation of several military bases and Prisoner of War (POW) camps in the area (GBB 2019). In June 1941, Stalag 311 was created south of the main military base at Hohne to house 20,000 Soviet POWs. Starvation, ill-treatment and disease were common from the beginning, resulting in 19,500 deaths by January 1945 (Ibid; Cesarani 2006).

From Spring 1943, the southern section of this camp was taken over by the SS Business-Administration Main Office (WVHA) and “detention camp (*Aufenthaltslager*) Bergen-Belsen” was created. This camp was unusual as it housed Jews due to be exchanged for Germans captured by the Allies, although in reality just over 200 people were actually exchanged (Rahe 2012:278).[[2]](#endnote-2) Following the acquisition of the southern area by the WVHA, although Jewish inmates were the majority, other inmates included Romani, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, criminals, “asocials” and political prisoners (USHMM 2019). In this early phase, inmates generally experienced better conditions than in other concentration camps (depending upon which sub-section of the camp they were housed in and their perceived status) and survivors “recalled a place of order rather than a place of disorder”, dominated by roll calls, barbed wire and work (Cole 2015:207).

In March 1944, Bergen-Belsen was designated as a recovery camp (*Ehrholungslager*). From this point onwards, sick and dying prisoners from other camps were transferred there, as were women en route to other German satellite camps (Wachsmann 2015:565). However, it was not until after December 1944 – when an increased number of transports arrived from evacuated camps such as Auschwitz – that the completely overcrowded, disease infested, corpse-ridden Bergen-Belsen that was documented by the liberators, came into existence (Lavsky 1993:37). The increase in prisoner numbers was dramatic; rising from 15,000 in December 1944 to 22,000 in February 1945 and 41,250 in March (Rahe 2012:280). By the time of liberation in April 1945, around 55,000 people were imprisoned in a space designed to hold just 10,000 prisoners. The number of deaths at Bergen-Belsen also peaked at this time. Testimonies paint a picture of the appalling conditions as accommodation was limited, sanitation was absent, and illness was rife. The prisoners of the camp were left to fend for themselves. They no longer worked and all basic human survival needs - food, water and room to sleep - were withdrawn: “Those too weak to move [to the cookhouse] died of starvation” (The Illustrated London News 1945). Instances of cannibalism were documented by witnesses(Lees-Milne 1977:192), and lice, typhus and typhoid were commonplace (Blitz undated).

Unlike other concentration camps, the infrastructure of Belsen was not equipped to deal with the overwhelming numbers of sick and dying people: ‘it did not have the ‘Facilities’ of Auschwitz, where bodies were ‘processed’ with comparative ease. Auschwitz was a place where people were MURDERED. In Belsen they PERISHED” (Lasker-Wallfisch in Lattek, 1997:70).

As Dan Stone (2020) has argued “in its last days, and whatever the Nazis intended it to be for, Belsen was in fact a death camp”. According to research undertaken by Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen (2019), the anticipated death toll during the concentration camp period stands at 53,000 people, around 14,000 of which perished after liberation when they failed to recover from medical conditions acquired whilst incarcerated.

When the British forces liberated Bergen-Belsen, their priority was understandably to care for the living and to repair, and then ultimately destroy, the "infrastructure" of the camp to prevent the spread of disease (Eeles and Blitz Konig 2015). Bodies were quickly buried in mass graves and, once all surviving inmates had been evacuated, the camp was burnt down and levelled. Unlike in other camps where the Nazis had time to hide their crimes, irrefutable proof of atrocities was evident; hence, the British government felt that there was no need to conduct lengthy investigations or collect material remains for use in legal trials. Capturing the evidence on film and in photographs before the site was destroyed was deemed sufficient. Since the permanent memorial was constructed in the early 1960s, a peaceful, green landscape, almost entirely devoid of any obvious traces of the camp, has defined the site.

**BERGEN-BELSEN ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT**

In 2015, the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation initiated a project which sought to map the terrain of Bergen-Belsen in three-dimensions, identify surviving buried remains and generate new digital educational tools. As a result, the Centre of Archaeology at Staffordshire University and ScanLAB Projects were commissioned to undertake a survey in the Spring of 2015.

An interdisciplinary non-invasive methodology was employed which accounted for the ethical issues involved in examining Holocaust sites. One important consideration was the fact that Jewish Law (Halacha) strongly discourages the disturbance of human remains of Jewish victims buried within graves, since it states that to disturb a grave is to disturb the soul of an individual (Sturdy Colls 2015b; Schudrich 2015). As Bergen-Belsen has been designated a cemetery and there was the possibility that unmarked mass graves may exist, traditional methods of archaeological investigation were rendered inappropriate. Data was therefore generated via desk-based assessment (DBA), the application of terrestrial LiDAR (to generate a topographic model of the modern landscape and identify surface indicators which may indicate the presence of buried remains), photogrammetry (to further document above-ground remains and the current memorial from the air and ground level), surveying tools (such as GPS and Total Station survey to record surface materials) and Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) (to identify and characterise buried remains) (e.g. Carrick Utsi 2017, Opitz and Cowley 2013, Egels and Kasser 2002). This methodology has been successfully applied by the authors at several other Holocaust sites where excavation was not permitted, or desirable, on religious grounds (e.g. Sturdy Colls 2012, 2014 and 2015b).

Whilst the whole of the former camp terrain was surveyed using the airborne methods, targeted survey areas were selected for terrestrial laser scanning and GPR survey based on the size of the site and specific research questions (figure 2). Even though the aim of the project was not to search for burial sites per se, it became apparent during the DBA that seventy years after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, questions still remained about the extent and nature of some areas of the camp, and what happened to the bodies of almost half of the known victims. Therefore, the western end of the camp, near the crematorium, was targeted since historical research suggested this was where many of the deceased bodies were disposed of. Part of the Mens’ Camp was also examined to determine the configuration of barracks in this area, alongside a potential sewage line and barrack in the south-west of the concentration camp area (Sturdy Colls 2015a). The collected data was synthesised with documentary, cartographic and photographic resources to generate a novel 3D representation of the site, allowing both researchers and the public the opportunity to analyse both above- and below-ground remains within a digital space (figure 3).

*Figure 2. Map of Bergen-Belsen showing key features of the concentration camp in early 1945 in relation to the survey areas (Copyright: Centre of Archaeology, based on analysis of aerial photographs and research by Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen 2012)*

*Figure 3. An example of a scene from the 3D model of Bergen-Belsen showing a memorial obelisk (background) and two of the marked mass graves (foreground) (Copyright: ScanLAB Projects)*

As a result of carrying out the survey work, several new discoveries were made that offered the opportunity to record, identify and characterise buried evidence connected to the former Nazi camp at Bergen-Belsen within selected pilot study areas (Sturdy Colls 2015a). The remainder of the paper will focus on three of these discoveries relating to (1) the crematorium, (2) potential unmarked burials relating to the post-liberation period and (3) potential unmarked burials dating to the concentration camp period.

## **THE CREMATORIUM**

It is well documented that, during the early stages of Bergen-Belsen’s operations as a concentration camp, the bodies of those who died were cremated. A purpose-built crematorium was located within its own building, surrounded by a fenced compound. This area was physically distinct from the prisoner barracks and was separated from the rest of the camp by additional fences to the north, south and east. Surviving photographs taken by the British liberators demonstrate that it consisted of a metal oven(s) housed within a wooden structure (figure 4).

*Figure 4. The remains of the Bergen-Belsen crematorium after liberation 1945 (Copyright: IWM BU 4004)*

Analysis of documentary sources confirms that the crematorium building was dismantled by the liberators along with the rest of the camp structures; hence, popular narratives suggest it was totally destroyed. However, archaeological survey demonstrated that elements of the structure and its surrounding compound survive. Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) revealed both a square feature, measuring approximately 6.15m x 6.15m, and a semi-circular feature nearby. When the GPR data and historic aerial photographs of the camp were georectified in GIS onto modern satellite imagery, it became apparent that the square feature likely represented the foundations of the main crematorium building (figure 5). The structure likely continued to the east underneath a memorial constructed in 1964/65 to protect an area where burnt human remains and ashes were recovered (Archiv Lüneburg, 11320/3.2; Seybold 2017:5-6). This suggests that the crematorium’s precise location was forgotten after it was demolished in the absence of detailed maps of the camp. Although this discovery presented new information, it was not viewed as contentious by historians and educators working at the site (Stephanie Billib, pers. comm.). Rather, it was seen as useful information that could aid educational and conservation efforts in the future.



## **UNMARKED BURIALS?**

The memorial landscape at Bergen-Belsen centres on the presence of mass graves,; thirteen stone memorials (eleven of which are inscribed with the number of dead) cover the burial sites dug by the liberators giving the impression that all of those who died in the camp are buried there (GBB 2012). However, more detailed analysis of the landscape and the processes of burial reveals not only that there is disparity between the predicted death toll and the number of bodies that are believed to have been found (54,000 dead vs only 23,200 in marked burials), but also that seemingly the British did not mark all of the graves that they found or created. In the first instance, this is evidenced by the fact that two of the body deposition sites were marked in the 1950s and 1964/65 respectively, long after the British had burnt down the camp (GBB 2012; Seybold 2017). Although the unknown number of bodies residing in these two locations does reduce the margin between the death toll and body count, as does the fact that other people were cremated or buried in mass graves in Camp II (Hohne barracks), recent research by Seybold (2017) (initiated after the archaeological research described in this paper) suggests that around 15,000 people remain unaccounted for. Historical and archaeological research by the authors revealed that these victims are likely buried in mass graves – some of which relate to the period when the camp was operating and others to after liberation.

**Burials After Liberation**

When the liberators arrived at Bergen-Belsen, the number of dead was so staggering it left them unable to comprehend the unfolding scenes (IWM 8996). As journalist Patrick Gordon Walker (1945) described “corpses in every state of decay were lying round, piled up on top of each other in heaps. There were corpses in the compounds in the blocks. People were falling dead all around – people were walking skeletons”. The scale of the disaster – which saw a further 14,000 people die after liberation (5000 in the first five days)– and the risk of disease meant that the British needed to excavate many pits to dispose of the corpses (Walker 1945). Speed was imperative. Trailers were soon used to gather up the bodies and SS guards were then made to put them into the graves (IWM 32374). Bulldozers – immortalised in the iconography of Bergen-Belsen via photographs shown in the media – were occasionally used to push in the corpses (see for example Levy 1995, Riches 1997).

In almost all cases, identification of individuals was impossible in the absence of possessions on the bodies or relatives to identify them (TNA WO235/13). As François-Poncet recalled, “as most of the survivors could not even give their own names…it was useless trying to obtain information as to the identity of the dead” and few had personal belongings in their possession (Stone 2015, 170-171; Walker 1945).

Lime was placed on top of the bodies and then soil, forming 2ft 6” high mounds, was used to cover the graves. A service was then held by the various chaplains and a “notice board was erected stating the approximate or actual numbers buried, and the date the pit was closed” (British Zone Review 1945). The lack of precision and record keeping is described in various sources, including one by a British NCO: “a lot of the pits we just put on number unknown. But some pits we put 5000, 8000 and that’s how it went on. But we weren’t really sure how many cause nobody counted them. They was just buried, that was the only way we could do it” (IWM 32374). The lack of precision in counting the dead likely explains some of the disparity between the anticipated number of people who died in Bergen-Belsen and the numbers marked on the graves.

Contemporary records show that there was concern at the time that the initial exercise to cover and mark these pits was not enough to ensure their commemoration:

*“At present, the sites of the mass graves at the former BELSEN concentration camp are marked by the presence of several large mounds. There is, however, a danger that with the passage of time the significance of these mounds may come to be overlooked, since there is little to show that they conceal the unrecorded graves of thousands of former camp inmates”* (TNA FO 1032/2308).

As already mentioned, these concerns appear to have been valid as historical records show that two body disposal locations were not located until the 1950s and early 1960s respectively, suggesting that either they were never marked by the liberators or that their markers had been lost (GBB 2012).

Testimonies suggest at least one other location that the British possibly recognised and reused as a mass grave. This area, located west of the crematorium, has been referred to as a bomb crater by Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen (2012). However, aerial photographs and a camp survivor suggest that it may have been a quarry or gravel pit in which the British buried 2000 bodies after liberation (Cheim 1945) (figures 2, 5 and 6). GPR survey over this area confirmed the presence of a large feature measuring a minimum of 63m x 58m, originating at 0.47m below ground (the likely ground surface at the time the concentration camp was operating) and extending beyond the 5m depth of the survey (figure 6: marked A). It appeared consistent with a backfilled pit, most likely containing redeposited sand and silt, and its overall form matched that of an area of disturbance visible in aerial photographs taken in 1944. Several associated features were also located. The first was a likely ramp into this feature, thus supporting the theory that it was a pit that required access (figure 6: marked B). The second was a rectilinear feature – seemingly structural - which enclosed an irregular feature – an apparent backfilled pit measuring approximately 17m x 14.8m (figure 6: marked C and D). The former was visible in aerial photographs taken whilst the camp was in operation. The latter was not but this is likely because it was present at a greater depth. Interpreting the exact nature of this and associated features remains difficult because witness testimony is limited and excavation is not possible out of respect for Jewish law. However, the archaeological and historical information does present a plausible theory that additional burials and a quarry could exist in this locality.

*Figure 5. GPR data showing the locations of the crematorium, possible mass graves and a quarry pit overlaid onto terrestrial LiDAR data (Copyright: Centre of Archaeology and ScanLAB Projects). (Inset) Aerial photograph from September 1944 showing the corresponding features (Copyright: NCAP)*

*Figure 6. GPR time-slice results (birds eye data view) at 0.58m depth and 2.14m depth showing the possible quarry pit and associated features; A- possible quarry pit, B- ramp, C- rectilinear feature, D- possible backfilled pit (Copyright: Centre of Archaeology).*

**Concentration Camp Era Burials**

When the camp was under SS control, archive research shows that the crematorium at Bergen-Belsen was insufficient in size and the quantity of ovens were too few, to have managed the number of dead, particularly in its final months (Leo 1945; examples in Cole 2016). The escalating death toll and the advance of the British brought about the need to build cremation pyres and then to excavate mass graves; something that inmates were forced to do under the supervision of the SS (Le Druillenec 1945, Winwood 1945).Identification and documentation of the deceased had to be dispensed with to prevent further chaos (Reilly 1998:17).

As already noted, the graves marked by the British in 1945 contained only the bodies of the 10,000 unburied dead they found around the camp and those who died after liberation. Therefore, it appears that the graves dug by the SS were not located, or at the very least they were not marked, by the time the British left the camp. Whilst some of these “large pits”*,* “excavations”, “open mass graves” and “burial pits” may not have been evident to the liberators, others were certainly observed by them (TNA:WO171/4604, Burger 1945, Winwood 1945b). For example, Brigadier Glyn Hughes noted that: “near the crematorium were signs of filled-in mass graves, and outside to the left of the bottom compound was an open pit half-full of corpses” (Lattek 1997:38), yet only a memorial covering scattered burnt bone fragments exists near to the crematorium and this was erected in 1964/5 (Seybold 2017:6). Jean-Pierre Renouard showed the liberators another grave which was not “yet filled to the brim, far from it. But there are already thousands of bodies” (Renouard 2012:86). Therefore, it is necessary to pose the question: where are the concentration camp-era mass graves located?

The possibility that the British reused open graves, burying the recently deceased on top of those interred by the SS cannot be ruled out, meaning that some of the graves could be those already marked. If this is the case, it remains unclear whether these bodies were included in the death tolls written on the grave markers.

Two other possible options exist in the form of open pits, east of the crematorium, that are visible in aerial photographs taken in September 1944 (figure 7). When GPR was carried out in this area, two anomalies were discovered 0.5m below the surface, originating at what was believed to have been ground level when the concentration camp was in operation. The first anomaly – measuring approximately 30.5m x 8.5m, and exceeding 4.5m in depth – matched the size and location of one of the pits shown in the aerial photographs (figure 7: marked A). The second – which was approximately 30m x 12.5m, and also exceeded 4.5m in depth – was considerably larger than the pit visible in the aerial images and only partially matched its orientation, suggesting it was either partially filled in when the September 1944 photograph was taken or, more likely, that it was enlarged for the purpose of continued use after liberation (figure 7: marked B). The latter may be supported by the testimony and map of survivor E. van Lambaart which refer to a mass grave to the east of the crematorium into which he reportedly buried a friend shortly after liberation (Schute et al 2014).[[3]](#endnote-3) Considerable ground disturbance was visible in this area in aerial photographs taken after liberation; seemingly, confirming the long-term use of these pits. Once again, excavation is not possible to confirm the exact nature of these features. To rule out the possibility of other burial sites, further archaeological research is also required to the south and west of the crematorium.

*Figure 7. GPR data showing two possible mass graves; marked A and B (Copyright: Centre of Archaeology)*

**Contentious Findings**

The discovery of evidence relating to unmarked mass graves at Bergen-Belsen was an unexpected consequence of the archaeological investigations for the museum at Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen and it was contentious (Stephanie Billib, pers. comm.). By their own admission, the specifics of body disposal practices before and after liberation had not been a topic that the museum’s historians had extensively researched. After controversial proposals for exhumations were put forward by a French Mission in the 1950s, the decision was taken that the dead should remain undisturbed in perpetuity and no further searches were carried out (Rosensaft 1979; Anstett and Dreyfus 2017). Archaeological works in 2014 (by Schute et al 2014) and 2015 (by the authors), reopened the debate about what happened to the dead during and after the camp was operating. Several ethical questions arose for both the memorial and the archaeologists involved in the research: What further investigations (if any) should take place? Could the existence of graves ever be confirmed and memorialised solely based on non-invasive data? At what point should survivors/descendants be informed of the findings and how might they react to such news? Does a site which is already seen as a cemetery need additional markers? What might the implications be of disrupting the established narrative of the site?

Ultimately, the archaeological research inspired a new research project at the Bergen-Belsen memorial relating to body disposal practices (Seybold 2017) which the historians at the museum felt was the only way to confirm the plausibility of additional graves. As this process is ongoing, no further action has yet been taken with regards to officially recognising the existence of the sites identified by the archaeological works.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Given its status as a “deathscape”, Bergen-Belsen forms part of a group of places that are both “intensely private and personal…while often simultaneously being shared, collective, sites of experience and remembrance; each place mediated through the intersections of emotion, body, belief, culture, society and the state” (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010). The former camp is quite rightly viewed as a cemetery by survivors, whilst judicial and museum authorities have stressed its importance as a “landscape of memory” which embodies lived and recalled experiences (Anstett and Dreyfus 2017). As a *lieux de memoire* (Nora 1989), Bergen-Belsen’s contemporary landscape and paradigmatic aspects of its history were formed as a result of “the selective preservation, construction, and obliteration of ideas about the way things were in the past” (van Dyke 2006:277). Via these selection processes, the dead are both everywhere and nowhere, ingrained in international consciousness via media portrayals and survivor recollections, and simultaneously fore-fronted and anonymised within the landscape by prominent mass grave memorials referring to numbers and not names. Bergen-Belsen is a landscape defined by absence of people, but also of materiality, as its buildings were demolished by the British liberators. As Wolschke-Bulmahn (2001: 300) argued of the current heath-like landscape developed in 1961, “on the one hand, it reflects an attempt to recall the Nazi past but, on the other, it may be interpreted as an attempt to conceal historic events behind a façade of a comforting landscape”.

To date, this “façade”, has served to detract attention from the fact that questions remain about the camp’s operations and, in particular, the issue of what happened to the dead. The research outlined in this paper has clearly shown that, faced with thousands of corpses to dispose of and a rising death toll, the British liberators focused on the rapid burial of bodies, as opposed to detailed investigations regarding the identities of the victims or the specifics of the Nazis’ crimes. It is evident from archaeological readings of historical sources that many bodies were never found and non-invasive methods have indicated possible locations where they may have been buried, whilst also accounting for Jewish law (Sturdy Colls 2015b). This project has revealed important new evidence regarding the nature of buried remains and generated novel three-dimensional tools, which have the potential to enhance visitor experiences, provide new foci for commemoration practices and generate new information and tools for use in education and research. The archaeological work has also complemented and challenged narratives in a way that historical research alone cannot (Gonzáles-Ruibal 2008).

However, it is precisely for this reason that some of the work at Bergen-Belsen was considered contentious. Whilst the identification of the crematorium building, as well as barrack foundations and a sewage line (not described in this paper but outlined fully in Sturdy Colls 2015a) were welcomed because they complemented historical narratives, the suggestion of further mass graves was contested because it challenged them.[[4]](#endnote-4) Even though there has been a recent “forensic turn” and a growing recognition of the value of archaeological methods at sites of mass violence, non-invasive archaeological research within Holocaust studies remains in its infancy (Dziuban 2017; Sturdy Colls 2015b). Although the combination of historical research and non-invasive archaeological data has been a central part of efforts to memorialise previously unidentified killing sites away from the camps e.g. in the fields and forests of Poland and Ukraine as part of projects led by the authors and others, what the example of Bergen-Belsen shows is that, at well-established memorials, there remains a reluctance to accept that historical research might not be the only way to understand sites and events. This undoubtedly also stems from the fact that archaeological evidence– and the marking of graves that it might inspire – has the potential to (physically and metaphorically) disrupt “comforting landscape[s]” and well-established narratives, evoking a wide range of difficult ethical questions about approaches to Europe’s conflicted past.

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2. Around 1400 Hungarian prisoners were also exchanged in late 1944 as a result of separate negotiations between the SS and a Zionist aid committee. See Rahe 2012: 278. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In 2014, based on the information provided by E. van Lambaart, his grandson (a respected neuroscientist) and archaeologists from RAAP in The Netherlands conducted resistance and metal detecting surveys over part of the terrain to the east of the crematorium (Schute et al 2014). Although they were successful in identifying shallow disturbances within their targeted area, their survey was neither large nor deep enough to target the pits shown in the aerial photographs. This work was another motivating factor in proceeding with the GPR survey over this area. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Since 2010 Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen have utilised an Augmented Reality (AR) app that “allows visitors to physically visit the former campsite and perceive and experience the historical spatial structures and details of fences, buildings and camp sections as part of the landscape”, demonstrating a clear commitment to the inclusion of materiality within their educational offerings (Future Memory Foundation 2019; Pacheco et al 2014). Hence, this reaffirms the view that it is the mass graves that remain the most contentious. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)