

Chapter 8

The Contribution of Archaeology to WWI Commemoration in Flanders

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ABSTRACT

When the First World War ended, the landscape had been transformed into a wasteland. Later, the population faced the challenge of rebuilding the region. Many traces of the war were then wiped out. Everywhere, the archaeological remains are slumbering in the soil, barely 30 cm deep and invisible to the visitors. It took a while before the remains of the war have been considered as archaeological heritage. It was not until 2002-2004 that professional archaeologists in Belgium began to show an interest in this special heritage. Since then, the importance of this archaeology has only increased and today it is part of mainstream archaeological research. Several initiatives built on the successful first commemorative

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year 2014 in Belgium, with record numbers of visitors in the Westhoek. During the commemorations, various archaeological projects were put in the spotlight and were picked up with great interest from the public. This chapter highlights a series of high-profile initiatives that shaped specific parts of the remembrance of the First World War in Belgium.

INTRODUCTION

In August 1914 war broke out in Belgium. After the fall of the fortress belts near Namur and Liège, and later also of the National Reduit in Antwerp, the war of movement turned into a stalemate in the trenches. The Belgian Army dug itself in behind the IJzer River (Battle of the Yser, 16-31 October 1914). Allied troops held out near Ypres (First Battle of Ypres, 19 October – 22 November 1914) and dug in for a first winter in the trenches. In the Ypres Salient along the front line on the hills around the city, several large-scale offensives and smaller skirmishes and front changes took place. North of Ypres, chlorine gas was used for the first time on a large scale by German troops during the Second Battle of Ypres (22 April - 25 May 1915). The surprise and panic were complete, but nevertheless, large breaches pushed the front only a few kilometers closer to the city. Between May 1915 and the summer of 1917, the front was relatively calm, with the exception of smaller local attacks, mine explosions, and the daily trench warfare. In the spring and summer of 1917, British troops planned an ambitious offensive that would take them to the ports on the Belgian coast and German logistical centres. On 31 July 1917, the Third Battle of Ypres began (31 July - 10 November 1917). However, it would take until 7 November before Canadian troops reached Passchendaele. A goal that should have been reached after 72 hours. The bloodiest battle ever fought in Belgium was finally stopped a few days later. Both sides dug in again and prepared for a new winter in the trenches. With the Russian Revolution and the fall of the Russian army, Germany had to deal with only one more front at the end of 1917. As a result, large numbers of troops in the East were released and the Germans planned an offensive in Belgium (German Spring Offensive/Battle of the Lys, 7-29 April 1918). The front line shifted to near the city of Ypres and would remain there until the final liberation offensive in September 1918.

At the end of the First World War, the landscape along the front line in Belgium and France had been transformed into a large wasteland as a result of the successive battles and offensives. After the war, the population came back and faced the enormous challenge of rebuilding the region and making it habitable. At that moment, many of the surface traces of the war were wiped out and they became part of the archaeological soil archive. Everywhere, the archaeological remains of the war are slumbering in the soil, barely thirty centimetres deep and invisible to the visitors of the region.

It took a while before the remains of this conflict have been considered as archaeological heritage. The first investigations were carried out entirely on the initiative of various groups of amateur archaeologists. It was not until around 2002-2004 that professional archaeologists in Belgium began to show an interest in this special heritage (Dewilde, 2006; Dewilde, de Meyer, & Saunders, 2007; Saunders, 2002,

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