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Reshaping Waterloo: History, Archaeology, and the European Heritage Industry

Neil A. Silberman

University of Massachusetts - Amherst, nasilber@anthro.umass.edu

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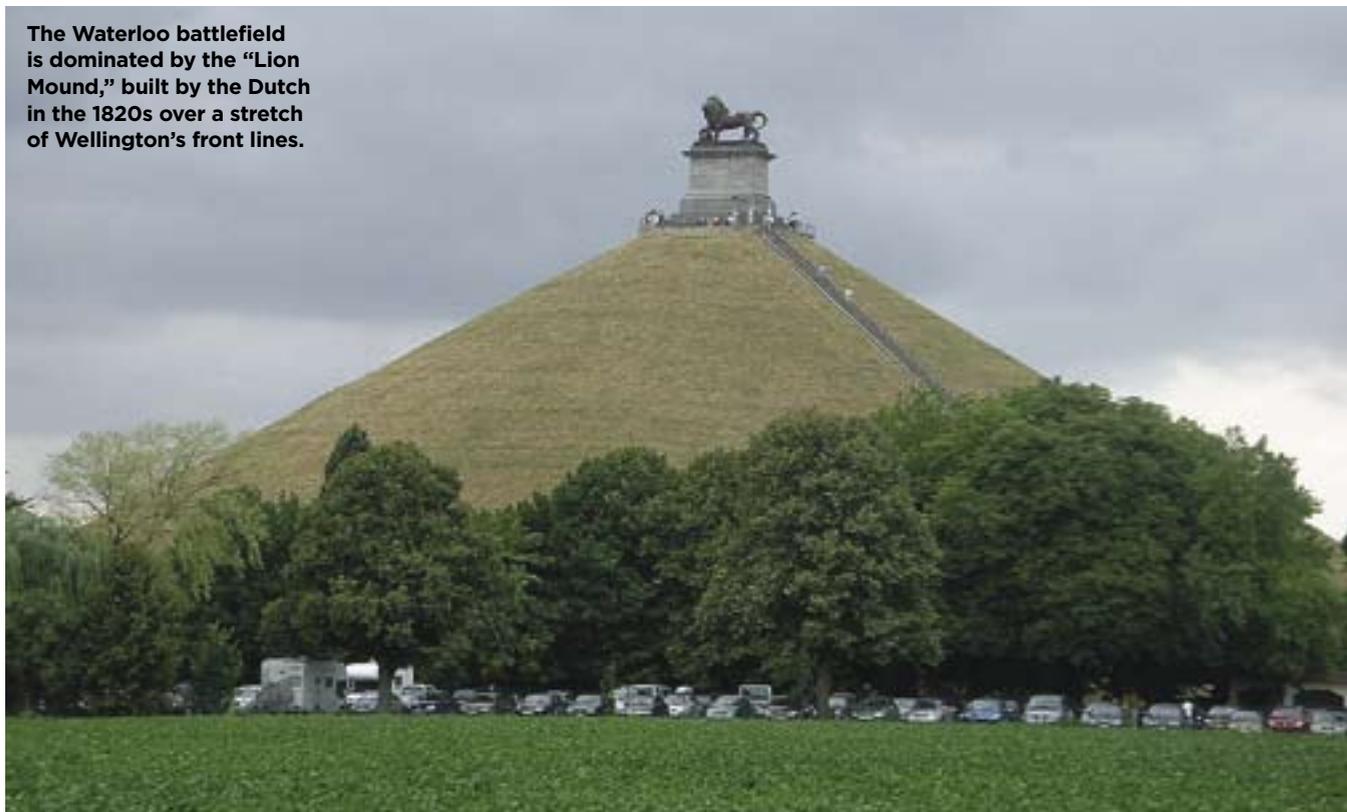
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The Waterloo battlefield is dominated by the “Lion Mound,” built by the Dutch in the 1820s over a stretch of Wellington’s front lines.



Reshaping Waterloo

History, Archaeology, and the European Heritage Industry

by NEIL ASHER SILBERMAN

THE WATERLOO BATTLEFIELD’S ROLLING landscape—dotted with antique farmhouses and planted with rye—is one of Belgium’s most famous historical attractions. Every year some 300,000 visitors flock to the place where the Duke of Wellington’s allied British, Dutch, and Prussian forces decisively defeated Napoleon Bonaparte’s advancing armies on June 18, 1815. Located about 15 miles south of Brussels, the site of the battle that determined the fate of Europe is also the perfect vantage point from which to observe a worrisome transformation now sweeping over the European heritage scene. For beginning this spring, Waterloo is

slated to undergo an extensive tourist development project in which the quest to enhance the site’s entertainment value and economic potential will directly endanger the site’s still-buried archaeological remains.

Few battles in history have been so decisive. On a single day, almost 20,000 soldiers were killed at Waterloo and 40,000 wounded. Shattered bodies and abandoned equipment were left scattered across the vast battlefield. Napoleon’s army was utterly destroyed. The great French emperor and military genius who had campaigned across Europe for more than two decades fled in panic south toward Paris, forever abandoning his

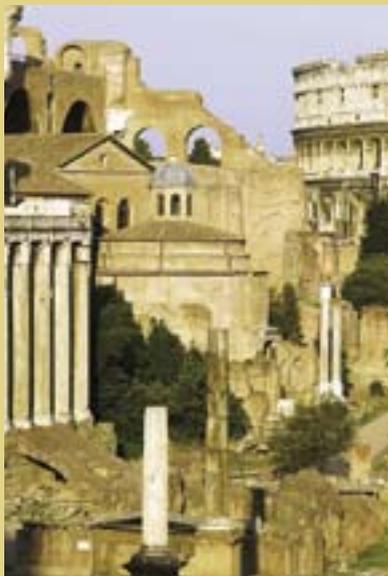
imperial ambitions, and making the name “Waterloo” synonymous with a stunning personal defeat.

Many questions remain about the movements and performance of the opposing forces at Waterloo that are central to understanding Napoleon’s defeat. Was Wellington’s static, unyielding defense the main factor—or did the last-minute arrival of Prussian reinforcements turn the tide? Did the quality of the respective armies’ weaponry, rather than the tactics of their famous generals, play any part in the dramatic outcome? The battle may have been won, as Wellington famously put it, “on the playing fields of Eton,” but the answers to some of

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The Waterloo visitors' center, slated for demolition, stands next to a 1912 neoclassical building housing a 360-degree panoramic painting of the battle that will remain at the site.

its most intriguing questions may yet lie buried in and around the still-standing farmsteads of Hougemont and La Haie Sainte, and along the broad ridge where Wellington established his front line.

From an archaeological standpoint, Waterloo's potential is enormous. For nearly 200 years, many relics from the battlefield have been dispersed across the world in museums and private collections. Every year farmers and treasure hunters with metal detectors still turn up musket balls, cannon balls, badges, belts, and bone fragments. But these finds likely comprise just a tiny portion of the battlefield's full range of archaeological remains. On the day of the battle, in the span of 11 hours of continuous artillery barrages, cavalry charges, and increasingly desperate hand-to-hand fighting, enormous quantities of cannonballs of various sizes, grapeshot, musket balls, and military equipment of all kinds were expended. During two massive French infantry attacks and 12 cavalry charges by thousands of horsemen, countless helmets, belts, rifles, pistols, bayonets, sabers, backpacks, saddles, and personal effects—not to mention the mangled remains of both humans and horses—were trampled into the muddy earth.

These objects are far less valuable as keepsakes and collectors' items than they are as pieces of the historical puzzle of that fateful day. Over the past 25 years the excavation techniques and analytical methods of battlefield archaeology—in places as diverse as the Little Bighorn site in Montana or the nearby World War I trenches at Ypres ("In Flanders Field" May/June 2004)—have revealed new information about military tactics, technology, and soldiers' behavior in the thick of combat. At Little Bighorn, much of the mystery of "Custer's Last Stand" has been dispelled through painstaking archaeological reconstruction of the progress of the battle, based on the distinctive patterns of U.S. Army and Native American projectiles. And at Ypres, excavation of the World War I trench system has provided new insights into the horror of trench warfare and the complexity and ingenuity of even the most static defense.

Yet remarkably, no systematic survey of Waterloo's archaeological resources has ever been conducted—and none is planned.

TODAY, THE PART OF THE BATTLEFIELD that most visitors come to see is little more than a tacky roadside attraction—the towering conical “Lion Mound,” built by the Dutch in the 1820s and surmounted by a huge cast-iron lion that glowers southward toward France. Nearby are a cluster of pubs, souvenir shops, and a musty wax museum featuring a melodramatic tableaux of Napoleon and his generals. An early-twentieth-century neoclassical building contains a huge 360-degree panoramic painting of the battle, marred in some places by extensive water stains. A modest visitors’ center features an illuminated map of the battle, an introductory film, and the inevitable gift shop stocked with plastic muskets, toy soldiers, and a wide selection of Napoleonic tea towels, refrigerator magnets, ashtrays, and figurines.

In the summer months, a costumed Napoleon struts among the crowds of arriving tourists with his right hand

thrust between his coat buttons. And each June, groups of historic reenactors from all over Europe descend on the site to set up encampments and stage a mock battle, complete with cavalry charges and booming cannons.

Yet local authorities are not convinced that the Waterloo battlefield is living up to its potential as a tourist destination. So as the bicentennial of the battle approaches, the government of Belgium’s French-speaking Wallonia region and a consortium of surrounding towns and villages have announced a plan to reshape the battlefield’s topography, offer new attractions, and dramatically expand the visitors’ facilities. However, that plan poses a direct threat to the site’s archaeological record and even its historical authenticity.

Though the area of the fighting has been protected by law since 1914 as a public monument, archaeology has never been considered essential to understanding the battle. To make matters worse, the renovation of the

site will include the construction of large, partially subterranean structures that will destroy a crucial section of the battlefield’s archaeological remains. According to the new development plan, the existing visitors’ center will be razed and replaced by a 59,000-square-foot underground multimedia exhibition complex with a virtual-reality re-creation of the battle, interactive exhibits on European history, conference rooms, a cafeteria, and plenty of retail space. A large new parking lot with underground levels will be built nearby. Both structures will be placed at one of the most archaeologically sensitive areas of the battlefield—cutting right through the central sector of Wellington’s front lines.

The planned construction will require the removal of almost three million cubic feet of earth from the present surface. This has been approved by the local zoning board with a requirement that the regional archaeological service be informed

before the earthmoving operations begin. But battlefield archaeology is still in its infancy here, and in Belgium, as elsewhere, government archaeologists are trained primarily to recognize familiar types of ancient tombs and settlements, make surface surveys, and conduct rescue excavations in urban settings. The protection and analysis of battlefield projectile patterns is not yet recognized as a normal part of their work. So even with an official from Wallonia's archaeological service present at the time of construction, it is likely that the bulldozers will rip away a huge amount of data—and with that destruction, the possibility of obtaining new insights into the battle through archaeology will be lost.

Though it is impossible to know precisely what kinds of finds and artifact patterns lie in the area of the planned underground structures, a controlled excavation at the place where Wellington's forces repelled repeated French attacks could well provide new information about the allies' defensive alignment and about the intensity and extent of the French advance. Whatever the state of Waterloo's archaeological remains, and however much they have been disturbed

The Waterloo battlefield was once the site of Wellington's victory, but it is now the world capital of Napoleonic kitsch.



Each June, the battle is reenacted with participants from all the countries that fought in the epic engagement.

over the last two centuries, they still make up a unique and irreplaceable record that should be protected or at least systematically studied before the topography is so dramatically changed. But the underground visitors' center and parking lot are not only expected to threaten Waterloo's archaeological record; the new master plan will also endanger significant evidence of the site's post-battle history.

BESIDES THE STILL-BURIED BONES, bayonets, musket balls, and personal possessions, Waterloo has another kind of artifact in abundance: the material remains of the public commemorations that gradually transformed the killing fields of 1815 into a complex landscape of memory. Over the nearly two centuries since the battle, dozens of memorials, obelisks, and plaques have been placed on the battlefield, changing the landscape to conform with evolving European visions of Waterloo's historical significance.

The first tourists to come in large numbers were the British, memorializing their fallen with plaques and neoclassical monuments. In 1818, a British veteran of the battle, Sergeant Major Edward Cotton, established a

small inn and museum for the visitors who arrived in carriages from Brussels, eager to see the site of Wellington's celebrated victory. It didn't take long for other nations to claim the victor's laurels. In 1819, the Prussians commissioned imposing memorials to highlight their role in the battle. Then the Dutch took center stage. Since the area had been stripped from France and given to the Netherlands after Napoleon's defeat, the Dutch were eager to emphasize their sovereignty over the battlefield. Between 1824 and 1826, hundreds of local workers were brought to the site to dig a stretch of Wellington's front line and erect the imposing "Lion Mound," a massive conical mound over the spot where William of Orange—the 22-year-old crown prince attached to Wellington's forces as commander of the Dutch troops—was struck in the shoulder with a musket ball. The original significance of the earthen monument, today Waterloo's most recognizable symbol, was mocked and gradually forgotten after a bitter anti-Dutch uprising led to the establishment of

an independent Belgium in 1830. But throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, as tourists from all over Europe continued to arrive, the cluster of inns and souvenir shops gradually expanded and new commemorations were placed on the battlefield.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the French were back in the picture, cultivating a nostalgically idealized image of Napoleon. After World War II, as Napoleonic nostalgia further intensified, Major Cotton's old inn was turned into the present museum filled with wax figures of Napoleon and his generals. In the last few decades, the government of Wallonia constructed the visitors' center and increased the Francophile tilt.

The new design of the battlefield stresses coherence and order. The key element of the plan, according to the architects, Brussels firm BEAI, is to carry out a thorough "cleaning" of the site to bring some order to its chaotic commemorative history.

Interpretive messages will be made more attractive, homogenizing the older, conflicting national perspectives that seem inappropriate today. It is, after all, the Age of the European Union, when old rivalries need to be forgotten. An advisory committee of historians from all former combatant nations has been appointed to ensure that the new presentation will be impeccably balanced and fair. No gloating by winners and no recriminations by the losers will be permitted. To further emphasize the site's pan-European significance, a long "Wall of Memory" will extend from the parking lot to the new visitors' center, bearing the names of all the units from all the nations that participated in the battle, and providing a collective tribute to the 60,000 casualties.

No doubt evenhandedness is often a virtue in public discourse, but meaningful history is not necessarily about balance and fairness. Waterloo was a brutal confrontation in which one side undoubtedly won and the other quite certainly lost. The new Waterloo presentation will take the focus off the national tensions and rivalries that

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motivated the 1815 battle. Instead, the facilities will stress entertainment value. The centerpiece will be a virtual-reality simulation of the battle produced through the unlikely collaboration of the advisory committee, a Brussels design-and-exhibit firm, and Italian-Belgian film director Franco Dragone, best known for his extravagant production designs for Cirque du Soleil.

The “new” Waterloo is hardly an isolated vision. All across Europe, dozens if not hundreds of historical sites from every period are undergoing reconstruction, with at least as much attention to generating income from tourists as to conservation and serious historical research. Sites like the Xanten Archaeological Park in Germany and Altamira in Spain have already become popular holiday destinations, paving the way for the similar development of a steadily increasing number of historical and archaeological sites throughout Europe.

Borrowing design concepts from theme parks, site planners now utilize living-history demonstrations, 3-D computer reconstructions, and virtual-reality experiences. Great efforts are made to create enjoyable historical environments with a wide enough range of vivid images and impressions to satisfy almost every visitor’s taste.

Culturespaces, the Paris-based heritage management firm which took over operation of the Waterloo battlefield in 2004, is typical of this new vision—it identifies itself in its promotional material as “one of the prime European players in the cultural leisure sector.” The goal of Waterloo’s new management team is “to ensure that a Culturespaces visit is always a pleasurable experience.”

It is only natural that Waterloo’s public presentation be updated, but something is being lost in the process—along with irreplaceable archaeological remains. How will future generations view the irreversible changes

to the site and its archaeological record that are being made today in the name of tourist development?

In the coming years, visitors may have the opportunity to learn facts and figures about the battle and enjoy new multimedia presentations. But with the large-scale reshaping of the battlefield’s terrain, the construction of new facilities, and the updating of its message, the “new” Waterloo will imply as much about the present as the historical and archaeological past. Another indelible layer of commemoration will be left on the battlefield, embodying the economic needs and political sensibilities of the New Europe. It will be emphatically upbeat, politically neutral, and generically “European”—far closer to the feel-good strains of ABBA’s famous Eurovision pop tune *Waterloo*, than to the reality of that bloody day in 1815. ■

Neil Asher Silberman is a contributing editor to ARCHAEOLOGY.

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