

One World Archaeology

Adrian Myers
Gabriel Moshenska
Editors

Archaeologies of Internment

 Springer

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One World Archaeology

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AM: for Stephanie
GM: for Chana and Raf

It was quite dark in the centre of the compound . . . In each hut, cold and dead from the outside, a hundred prisoners, each with his own private problem, crowded into family intimacy. Each darkened hut seething inside with living cells, loving, hating, chaffing, wrangling.

The Wooden Horse, Eric Williams, 1949:35

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Contents

1	An Introduction to Archaeologies of Internment	1
	Gabriel Moshenska and Adrian Myers	
2	Exceptional Space: Concentration Camps and Labor Compounds in Late Nineteenth-Century South Africa	21
	Lindsay Weiss	
3	A Tale of Two Treatments: The Materiality of Internment on the Isle of Man in World Wars I and II	33
	Harold Mytum	
4	The Archaeology of Internment in Francoist Spain (1936–1952) . .	53
	Alfredo González-Ruibal	
5	The Things of Auschwitz	75
	Adrian Myers	
6	Gordon Hirabayashi, the Tucsonians, and the U.S. Constitution: Negotiating Reconciliation in a Landscape of Exile .	89
	Mary Farrell and Jeff Burton	
7	Control or Repression: Contrasting a Prisoner of War Camp and a Work Camp from World War Two	111
	Iain Banks	
8	Engraving and Embroidering Emotions Upon the Material Culture of Internment	129
	Gillian Carr	
9	Archaeological Investigations of Second World War Prisoner of War Camps at Fort Hood, Texas	147
	Judith Thomas	
10	Forgotten in the Wilderness: WWII German PoW Camps in Finnish Lapland	171
	Oula Seitsonen and Vesa-Pekka Herva	

11	Materialities and Traumatic Memories of a Twentieth-Century Greek Exile Island	191
	Nota Pantzou	
12	The Engineering of Genocide: An Archaeology of Dictatorship in Argentina	207
	Andrés Zarankin and Melisa Salerno	
13	A Political Archaeology of Latin America's Recent Past: A Bridge Towards our History	229
	Gonzalo Compañy, Gabriela González, Leonardo Ovando, and David Rossetto	
14	Hohenschönhausen: Visual and Material Representations of a Cold War Prison Landscape	245
	John Schofield and Wayne Cocroft	
15	The Last Murals of Long Kesh: Fragments of Political Imprisonment at the Maze Prison, Northern Ireland	263
	Louise Purbrick	
16	Lockdown: On the Materiality of Confinement	285
	Eleanor Conlin Casella	
	Subject Index	297

Chapter 1

An Introduction to Archaeologies of Internment

Gabriel Moshenska and Adrian Myers

Abstract In this opening chapter, we introduce the developing field of archaeologies of internment. We first illustrate the prevalence of modern forms of institutional internment around the world since the final decades of the nineteenth century. Second, we offer a tentative definition of “internment” and describe what is meant by an “archaeology of internment,” including a review of previous research in the field. Third, we situate the archaeology of internment within an interdisciplinary context, and discuss some of its potential strengths and unique contributions. Fourth, and finally, we introduce and contextualize the chapters in this volume, and suggest some possible directions for future research.

The Experience of Internment

Internment, past and present, is in the news. During the writing of this introduction, US President Barack Obama is under fire for not closing the infamous Guantánamo Bay prison camp as promised, and the British government is defending the internment of children of asylum seekers in immigration detention centers. At The Hague, Radovan Karadžić is on trial for alleged war crimes, including running concentration camps in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. In Buenos Aires, former Argentinean president General Reynaldo Bignone has just been imprisoned for crimes including running a secret detention and torture center in the 1970s. The leader of the neo-fascist British National Party, Nick Griffin, was questioned on television about his belief or disbelief in the existence of the

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Nazi extermination camps. The phenomenon of internment clearly has widespread resonance in society today.

The experience of internment is a common thread that links Winston Churchill, John McCain, Günter Grass, Nelson Mandela, Kurt Vonnegut, and Pope Benedict XVI. Internment has inspired powerful and influential books, including *The Gulag Archipelago* and *If This is a Man*, as well as popular films, such as *The Great Escape*, *Empire of the Sun*, and *Bridge on the River Kwai*. Despite their inherent restrictions, sites of internment have become spaces of intellectual and philosophical expansiveness: prisoners on Robben Island, South Africa, drafted the constitution for a new nation; Antonio Gramsci revolutionized Marxist philosophy in his *Prison Notebooks*; a group of rabbis in Auschwitz put God on trial; and Gerhard Bersu pioneered the archaeology of the Isle of Man (Chapter 3 by Mytum, this volume).

The long, varied, and often dark history of internment has played a significant role in shaping societies and cultures worldwide. It touches all the inhabited continents, the sea (e.g. Casella 2005) and, in the age of extraordinary rendition, the sky (e.g. Fastabend et al. 2004; Grey 2007). Internment stretches through time from the distant past to the present day and into the foreseeable future. The practice and experience of internment has been a powerful force in the forging of nation-states, in waging war and, some would argue, in maintaining peace (e.g. Cucullu 2009).

This book draws together studies from around the world with a shared interest in the material and historical traces of internment. It is based in part on a conference session held at the Sixth World Archaeological Congress, and we hope to invoke the ethos of that organization through the recognition that the past, with all its oppressions and injustices, is physically and socially materialized in the present. In this introduction, we examine some of the issues and concepts that make the archaeology of internment a coherent, if novel, field. Following this opening, we begin with a consideration of the word “internment” and argue for an inclusive and flexible conception of the term. The following section examines whether there is a need for an archaeology of internment, the precedents for work in this area, and the range of disciplinary contexts and influences on what is a highly interdisciplinary field of study. The next section of the introduction briefly discusses the contributions to this volume, highlighting connections and contrasts as well as some emergent themes for the discipline as a whole. The final section considers potential future directions for archaeologies of internment, which we anticipate will remain a vibrant field for years to come.

What is Internment?

In the most general archaeological sense, incarceration or internment might be described as the practice of organizing material culture and space to control and restrict the movement of a person or a group of people. Sites of internment can range in scale from a single room or building to entire landmasses. In the chapters of this book we see internment sites defined as physically bounded spaces, with

either human-made boundaries such as fences and walls, or natural boundaries such as rivers or deserts. Landscapes of slavery and other coercive spaces bounded by fear or threats of violence are a separate but closely connected area of study.

There is currently some debate as to whether internment should be distinguished from imprisonment, and the contributors to this volume have taken a range of perspectives on this question. One useful if highly subjective definition of internment drawn from the chapters of this book might be all forms of unjust imprisonment: those that are not the result of a fair and equitable legal process. These forced movements serve social, political, economic and military ends and are often organized around conceptions of racial, ethnic, political and social otherness. The distinction between just and unjust laws and imprisonment is of course usually ambiguous. It is commonplace in criminology to state that prisons have little to do with justice and everything to do with brutal social control by elites. On similar grounds, some anarchists and prison abolitionists argue that all prisoners are political prisoners (e.g. Kropotkin 1927; Davis 2005; Davis and Rodriguez 2000).

A key theme in the history of internment is the notion of the camp, which is typically a newly built collection of more-or-less ephemeral structures designed for communal living, often bounded by a fence or other barrier, with that perimeter patrolled by armed guards. The internment camp is often modeled closely after the army camp, with the barrack as the archetypal structure in both contexts (Fig. 5.3). The architectural relationship between the army barrack and the internment barrack was perhaps formalized through the Hague Convention of 1899 (and later the Hague Convention of 1907 and the Geneva Conventions of 1906, 1929, and 1949) which stated that Prisoners of War (PoWs) must be held under conditions similar to the soldiers of the jailing nation (Geneva Convention 1988; Roland 1991; Vance 1992, 2000).

Everdell (1997) traces the first internment camp for civilians to the late nineteenth century. These “reconcentration camps” were established by the Spanish in Cuba, tested in 1869 and fully implemented in 1896. This system was set up to separate the Cuban rebels from the civilians: after rounding up the civilians and confining them in barbed-wire enclaves, anybody not locked up could be assumed to be a rebel (see also Netz 2004). The Spanish invention was first criticized, then rapidly copied, by the Americans in the Philippines in 1899 and by the British in South Africa in 1900 (Agamben 1997; Everdell 1997; Kessler 1999). Following the establishment of these earliest camps at the end of the nineteenth century, the First and Second World Wars were critical moments in the expansion of these technologies. Though an archaeology of internment should not be temporally bounded, the evidence does seem to suggest a particular association between the internment camp and the twentieth century, and perhaps even more specifically with what Hobsbawm called the “short twentieth century”: that period of “accelerated modernity” which began with the start of the First World War (González-Ruibal 2007, 2008; Hobsbawm 1994).

Prominent and widely known historical examples of internment abound. Internment of PoWs has been a common practice for centuries and formed the basis for some of the earliest international laws. Today the most notorious examples of internment, such as Camp Delta at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, are in violation

of both national and international law (Rose 2004; Margulies 2006; Myers 2010). Where conflicts polarize ethnic communities, members of particular groups are often interned both to prevent their acting as spies or saboteurs, such as Germans in Britain in both World Wars (Bloch and Schuster 2005), or to prevent their joining insurgencies in colonial contexts, such as the Kikuyu in Kenya during the Mau Mau Uprising (Firoze and O’Coill 2002). Other examples of ethnic selection of internees, such as the Serb-run camps in the Bosnian War, were part of a wider scheme of genocide and ethnic cleansing (Campbell 2002). Labor camps, where prisoners are forced to work, existed most infamously in Nazi Europe (Chapter 5 by Myers, this volume) and the Soviet Union (Applebaum 2003), and these harsh penal methods remain in use in China and elsewhere today (Shaw 2010). In these cases the perceived need to isolate a population can conflict with the need to locate them close to their workplaces, whether rural and agricultural as in the case of Chinese forced laborers, or largely urban and industrial as in the Nazi case.

Internment and labor camps aim to control bodies, but some are expressly aimed at controlling minds, as shown in several chapters of this book (e.g. Chapter 4 by González-Ruibal, this volume). In post-war Europe “de-Nazification camps” tried to instill ideas of democracy in the German population (Herz 1948). Since 1957, Chinese dissidents and political prisoners have been sentenced to periods in “re-education through labor” camps. Internment camps are often used to control groups and populations on the move. Refugees, asylum seekers and “illegals” are interned in large numbers for defying national borders, those most arbitrary and often dehumanizing divisions of space (Dow 2004).

In the aftermaths of wars, violent conflicts and natural disasters, large populations of displaced persons are often housed in refugee camps—which have been shown to be a direct descendant of the internment camps of the Second World War (Malkki 1995). In 1945, as the war in Europe was ending, millions of displaced persons (DPs), including demobilized soldiers, Holocaust survivors and bombed-out civilians, were put into camps so that their movements could be regulated (e.g. Malkki 1995; Burström 2009). Internments of this kind are often defended as a means of providing food and shelter, as well as helping to prevent epidemics. In post-war Europe, many of the camps used to house displaced persons had previously held PoWs, political prisoners, forced laborers and soldiers. The institutional and material similarities that enabled these divergent yet connected uses are of significance to archaeologists attempting to understand the past uses of space through traces surviving in the present.

What is the Current State of the Archaeology of Internment?

In photographs, films, art and literature, the internment of civilians and soldiers in temporary or hastily constructed camps is often represented by a recurring set of material symbols, including barbed wire, watch towers and cell blocks. Barbed wire, a nineteenth-century American invention, is perhaps especially notable as both

material reality and metaphor: it has inspired a surprisingly wide body of academic and popular writing (e.g. Liu 2009; Netz 2004; Razac 2000; Krell 2002; Vischer 1919). On a smaller scale we think of the uniforms, restraints and the prisoners' bodies themselves: shaved, shackled, starved or simply confined. But despite their iconic material manifestations, many of these camps have disappeared entirely or are only visible as traces. The brief but awesome power and significance of these structures belie their physical fragility and transience: today even some of the largest and most notorious camps have virtually disappeared from view (e.g. Gilead et al. 2009). As the people who experienced these spaces grow older and die, most of what we can learn about these spaces will come from archaeology.

If internment is a controversial practice, then the history and archaeology of internment is no less problematic. The conflict and controversy begins with the creation of a prison or camp and extends into the future, even to a time when nothing remains but a "site." Former internment camps are now museums, education centers and World Heritage Sites—as well as fields, forests, and urban residential neighborhoods.

Where interpretations and presentations of buildings or artifacts are present, these are continually and sometimes violently contested (Dwork and Van Pelt 1996:354–378). Thus the study of internment inevitably includes the study of its contested history and contested commemorations (Ashplant et al. 2000; Purbrick et al. 2007; Logan and Reeves 2009). With these conflicts come ethical and methodological quandaries: archaeologies of violence and violently contested pasts present complex problems that must be addressed from the outset (Meskell and Pels 2005; Moshenska 2008, 2010). The comparative novelty of archaeological approaches to internment is reflected in the scope of the published literature, which largely consists of site reports, with relatively few comparative studies or syntheses. Nevertheless there is growing interest in this field and it is reasonable to predict that in the coming years a greater number and range of articles and monographs will begin to appear.

There is an apparent dearth of archaeological research into the first generations of concentration camps: some investigation into the early South African Boer War concentration Camps is apparently ongoing but there are no publications to date (Willem Boshoff personal communication 2008). There is no known archaeological research, and apparently very little historical research of any kind, on the early civilian concentration camps in Cuba and the Philippines, and there is a single known report on the archaeology of internment from the First World War (Francis 2008).

A handful of archaeologists have begun to direct their research at the vast complex of camps that were built in Europe during the Second World War, such as Ronald Hirte's work at Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar, Germany. Hirte excavated a number of war-era dumps "resulting in a collection of several thousand found objects, primarily simple articles of everyday life in the camps" (Hirte n.d.). Many of these artifacts were made by hand or personalized by camp inmates, serving as a reminder of the rich potential for a biographical approach to internment camp artifacts. An international team is currently working at the Sobibor extermination camp in Poland, conducting survey, geophysics and excavations toward an "archaeology of extermination" (Gilead et al. 2009). This project