

# L'Archéologie Nazie em Europe de l'Ouest

*Jean-Pierre Legendre, Laurent Olivier, and Bernadette Schnitzler*

Reviewed by Pedro Paulo A. Funari

This edited volume publishes a series of papers originally read at a round table at the Tenth Conference of the European Association of Archaeologists (2004), held in Lyon, France. The chapters are written in three languages (French, German, and English), and extended abstracts are also published at the end of the volume, in different languages. It is a very comprehensive study of archaeology under the Nazis and a groundbreaking survey of fieldwork, museum management, and archaeological publication under Nazi rule. The volume deals only with countries occupied by the Nazis, not with the Reich itself, although the first section covers German archaeology during the Third Reich.

The volume begins by introducing the epistemological and political issues involved. Archaeology and geopolitics are intertwined, and there is no way archaeology and power relations can be disentangled. This is even more the case in dictatorial and/or colonial situations, when arbitrary rule is imposed by force. As Daniel Lindenberg states, public use of the past (*sensu* Habermas) is inevitable, but the consequences under dictatorial regimes can be much more dangerous and violent, even lethal, as the editors stress. In the 1930s, the Nazi conquest of Europe promoted German archaeology, particularly prehistory, as an important tool for legitimating racial policies and strategic interests linked to the construction of a Greater Germany.

Bettina Arnold and Henning Hassmann noted several years ago that after the end of the war many archaeologists who had served the Nazi regime and actively engaged in Nazi activities continued their careers unharassed, even controlling institutions and promotions. The code of silence, as in other similar circumstances, prevailed. In the Nazi period, the romantic nineteenth-century concept of *Volk* (people) was extended to include nation and race and was used to create mythic rural German roots, as opposed to a supposed Jewish inability to cultivate the soil. Two rival branches of archaeological institutions were established: the so-called Amt Rosenberg (*Reichsbund für Deutsche Vorgeschichte*), the direct heir to Gustav Kossinna's ideas, and the *Deutsches Ahnenerbe*, linked to the SS and Himmler and to traditional archaeological institutions such as the German Archaeological Institute and the Römisch-Germanische Kommission at Frankfurt. As is usual in dictatorial times, rival gangs competed with each other. The Mediterranean excavations by the German Archaeological Institute in Italy and Greece were praised and supported by the Führer himself. In 1931, there was only one rescue archaeological unit in Germany,

upgraded to nine in 1939 and then to a staggering fourteen in 1943, at the height of the war. The archaeological profession was particularly prone to political engagement, and no less than 86% of all registered archaeologists adhered to the Nazi party. This figure is impressive when we consider that fewer than 10% of the population held a Nazi membership card. Archaeologists were members of the party prior to Hitler's accession to power in 1933 (20%), but most got their card after the Nazi takeover.

Several chapters detail the careers of leading archaeologists, such as Hans Reinert, who was active until his death in 1990, when director of an open-air museum. A Bronze Age house in the museum was described as a 'mansion' in 1931, as the house of the Führer in 1937, and after the war was renamed as the house of the village headman. Gunter Schöbel produces a comprehensive study of the photographic archives relating to a 1937 archaeological excavation directed by Gustav Riek, witnessing the omnipresence of the SS on the site. Achim Leube describes the SS archaeological missions in Luxembourg, Holland, and Denmark, and studies also Wolfram Sievers, defined as 'the most important person in the archaeological SS' (*der gewichtigste Mann im SS Ahnenerbe*), condemned to death and hanged in 1948. Hans-Peter Kuhnen examines archaeology at Trier, in western Germany, where all archaeologists at the local museum except one supported Nazi rule and engaged in the struggle to legitimate Nazi ideology as historical truth. Roman remains were no longer excavated, in favour of Germanic vestiges.

The second section of the volume deals with France, Luxemburg, and Austria, starting with 'a German archaeology embassy in France: the department of prehistory and archaeology of the *Kunstschutz* (1940–1944)' analysed by Laurent Olivier. The department was part of the High Military Command in France. Jonannès Thomasset (1895–1973) is characterised as a prehistorian serving Nazi Germany. Olivier and Legendre stress that Thomasset admired Hitler and the racial state, and quote some of his racist statements. Jailed after the war, he was freed in 1948 for health reasons and returned to archaeological activities, digging, and publishing. In areas under occupation, archaeologists looked for 'the German character of the people and land' (*dem deutschen Character von Volk und Land*). Searching for Merovingian remains, diggings at Ennery were carried out in Gau Westmark, as the Rhine and Moselle areas were renamed. Excavations at Mont Sainte-Odile during the war (1942–1944) used very accurate field methods, but the interpretation was biased to prove that the region was from time immemorial purely Germanic (*die ersten Germanen im Elsass*). Excavations of the Aleburg site in Befort, Luxemburg, in 1941 looked for supposedly 'Nordic' traits. In spite of his activities within the SS, Gustav Riek regained his position at the University of Tübingen in 1955. From the invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941 onwards, there was a political intention to justify territorial conquests with finely targeted historical and archaeological research.

The third section turns to Belgium and the Netherlands. Archaeologists showed great self-initiative in suggesting administrative measures for the occupiers. Early medieval archaeology played an important role in occupied France and Belgium. Franz Petri, working in the early 1930s, considered that the modern populations of northern France and Belgium remained more Germanic than Gallo-Roman. The *Deutsche Grösse* exhibition, organised to glorify the German empire in 1942

at Brussels, relied heavily on archaeology to justify Nazi rule. During the German occupation of the Netherlands, archaeologists were confronted with many new opportunities for research. As a result of the destruction caused by the war, it became possible to excavate city centres—always stressing Germanic remains. After the war, however, Dutch archaeologists involved with archaeology under Nazi rule were not accused of collaboration.

The fourth section is devoted to Scandinavia, starting with a study of Herman Wirth and the history of primeval thought. It was part of the *völkisch* movement and its race theory, searching for archaeological evidence of *Germanentum* (Germanicness). German archaeology in occupied Denmark (1940–1945) is the subject of two chapters. The Nazi Dane Party made extensive use of prehistoric symbols, to the extent that lurs, burial mounds, and rune stones were permanent components of its store of nationalistic symbols.

The editors conclude the volume with a comprehensive evaluation of Nazi archaeology in Western Europe. The ‘national revolution’ was not only political and economic; it was first and foremost a cultural move (*‘la révolution nationale est pardessus tout culturelle’*, as a document from the Nazi era put it). It is clear that the use of archaeology by Nazi ideology was no marginal move of the regime, as its roots are much deeper and can be found prior to Nazi rule, stemming directly from the *völkisch* movement after the Great War and the German defeat in 1918. After 1933, it was not possible to remain neutral and try to keep an objective approach to fieldwork. Those German archaeologists who freely joined the Nazi party and sponsored Nazi cultural ideology were thus inevitably part of the Nazi criminal project. After the war, several Nazi archaeological ideas and practices continued, such as the open-air museums. Nazi archaeologists usually continued to work, now as neutral, objective scholars, sometimes even posing as democrats or hidden opponents of the regime they served, until at least the 1980s. Archaeology was part of the Nazi political ideology, providing evidence for ‘German racial superiority’.

Even though the volume deals with Nazi archaeology, it leads us to consider a wider issue, relating to the role of archaeology in dictatorial times and the responsibilities of archaeologists serving autocratic regimes (Galaty and Watkinson, 2004). Latin American archaeology suffered particularly with nationalist, fascist, military, and/or other dictatorships during the Cold War (1960s–1980s). As in Western Europe, there were direct and indirect interventions by a foreign power, in this case the United States, whose democratic credentials did not hinder the support and sponsoring of murderous dictatorships. Several local archaeologists were murdered, went into exile, or suffered inside the country. Others, as in Europe during Nazi times, chose to cooperate with the dictatorships. Neutrality and objectivity were abused in the archaeological discourse, in order to support racial theories and sponsor dichotomies between simple and complex or between Indian and Western, which contributed to the continued under-evaluation of natives, females, and ordinary people. As in Europe, the end of arbitrary rule did not automatically lead to the waning of fascist ideas and scholars. New generations of archaeologists faced a plethora of old-guard archaeologists. In the new democratic context, archaeologists who had worked in collaboration with dictatorships usually stayed in power and tried their best to whitewash the past, presenting themselves as objective scholars and even hidden members of the resistance (Funari and Zarankin, 2006).

The publication of this volume on the Nazi era is not alone in its quest for a critical history of the discipline. Others are studying the same issues in relation to archaeology during arbitrary rule in Spain during the Franco era, and in other dictatorships in Europe and in other continents. This is a most important trend in archaeology, at the heart of a public approach. Archaeology has contributed to oppression, but it can also foster liberation and freedom, as a result of a critical examination of its own history.

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## References

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## Notes on contributor

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