

Archaeology of Conflicts

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Austrian military camp on the battlefield at Wagram in the light of archaeological sources

Sławomir Konik

In 2017–2018, the Novetus GmbH company, seated in Vienna, carried out a pre-development archaeological rescue excavation to the order of the ASFiNAG company on the planned route of the expressway S8. Since the road is intended to lead through the battlefield at Wagram (Fig. 1), it was decided that the research shall also involve a metal detector survey of the topsoil layer, inclusive of an accurate localisation of metal finds of historical significance. The survey was conducted between the municipalities of Deutsch-Wagram and Parbasdorf. It has yielded a collection of about 9000 finds detected in the topsoil layer. The majority of them – such as ammunition and components of uniforms – are associated with Napoleonic Wars, more precisely with the Battle of Wagram in 1809. In the next phase, the topsoil layer was removed, thanks to which more than 500 pits as well as 25 individual and group graves, evidently dating back to 1809, were found. A thorough study of historical maps and written sources has proved that this area encompassed not only the battlefield but also a temporary camp of the Austrian troops. Archaeological excavations detected here more than 500 sunken features, which were arranged in two parallel lines running about 280 metres from one another (Figs. 2–5). The width of these lines varied around 30 metres. The majority of detected features were square or rectangular in plan; round or oval features were much less frequent. The dimensions of individual features varied between 1,4 and 2 metres in width and 1,7 and 3,5 metres in length. From historical maps and written sources we can infer that the southern line was formed by the positions of the IR 47 *Vogelsang* troops and the northern line consisted of positions of the IR 35 *Argenteau* troops (Fig. 6).

The appearance of the 47th Infantry Regiment camp was described by an eyewitness and immediate participant in the events, a 24-year-old Prussian volunteer in the Austrian army, later Romantic writer, Karl August Varnhagen von Ense: *“Soldiers camped together in the open air; in the middle of each regiment, a tent was erected to serve as a field chapel where services were held and where at the same time also senior officers were accommodated. All the other men, both soldiers and junior and non-commissioned officers, had to put up with dugouts covered with turf, leaves and branches. They looked like little cabins and provided shelter from the weather”*.¹

The dwelling itself is described in the novel *“War and Peace”* by Leo Tolstoy. In the early spring of 1807, during a pause in the military campaign, two protagonists in the book are encamped nearby the town of Bartoszyce (Bartenstein): *“They were on bivouac. Denisov and Rostov lived in a dugout covered with branches and turf that the soldiers had made for them. The dugout was made in the following way, which had then come into fashion: a trench was dug four feet wide, five feet deep, and nine feet long. At one*

¹ Karl August Varnhagen von Ense *Die Schlacht von Deutsch-Wagram am 5. und 6. Juli 1809*. Wien 1909, p. 10.

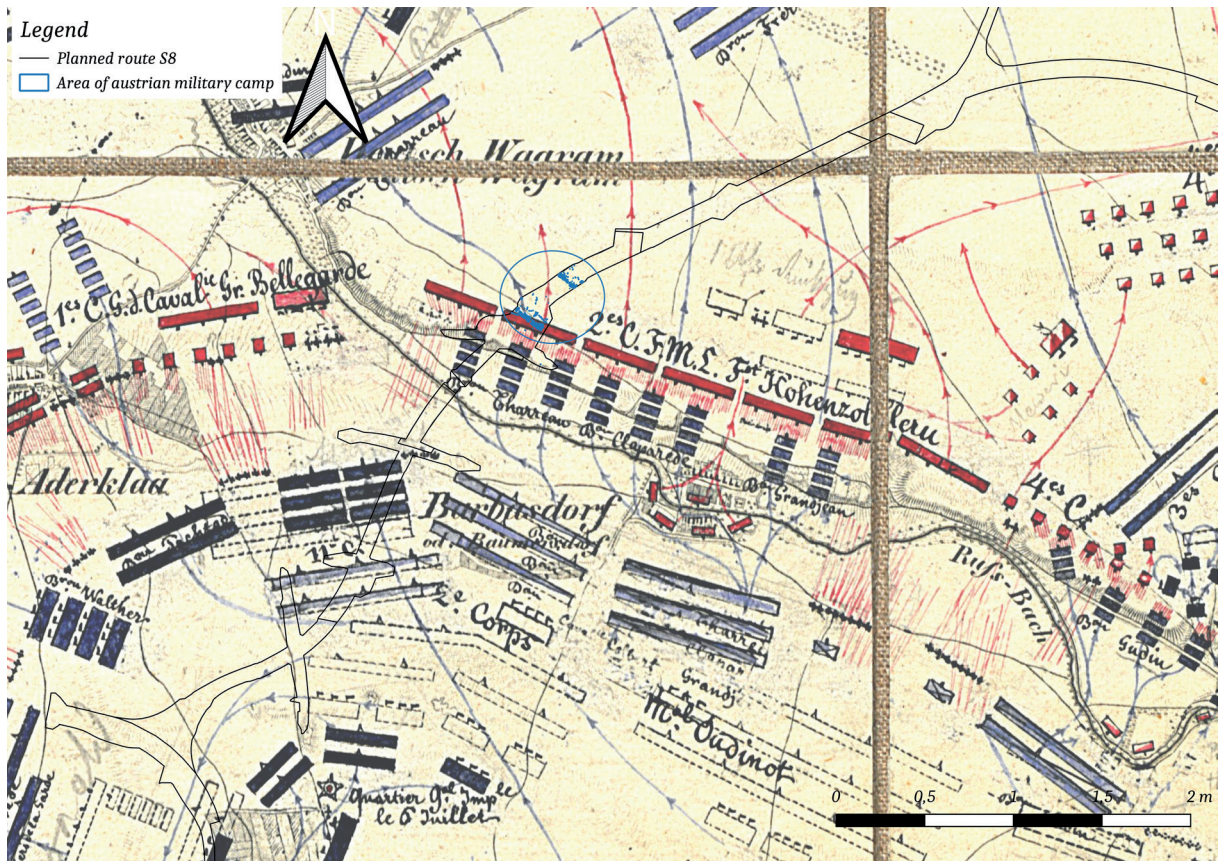


Fig. 1. Attack of French army on the main battle positions of Austrian army on 5 July, with marked route of the expressway S8. Staatsarchiv Wien.

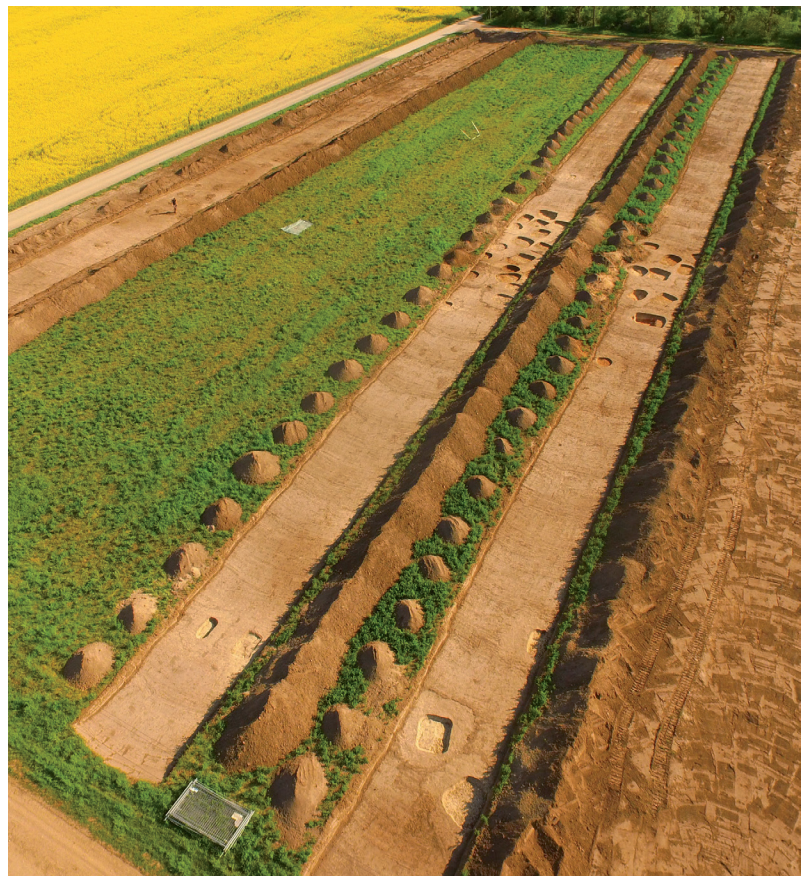


Fig. 2. Aerial view of the excavation area. Photo: INGWAR, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 3. Detailed view of excavations with negatives of camp pits. Photo: INGWAR, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 4. Archaeological features in the excavation trench. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 5. Aerial view of the excavation trench with archaeological features. Photo: INGWAR, Novetus GmbH.

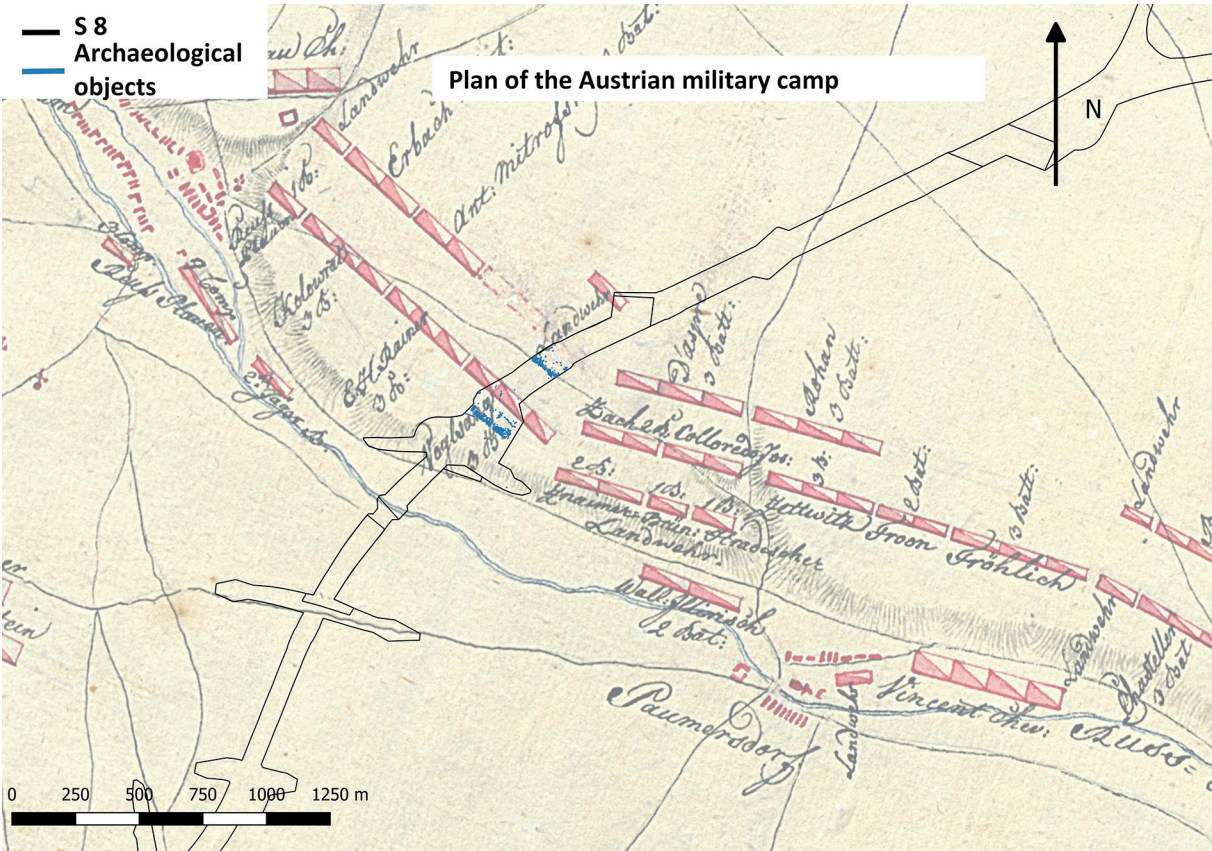


Fig. 6. Plan of the Austrian military camp from May to July 1809 with marked route of the expressway S8. Staatsarchiv Wien.

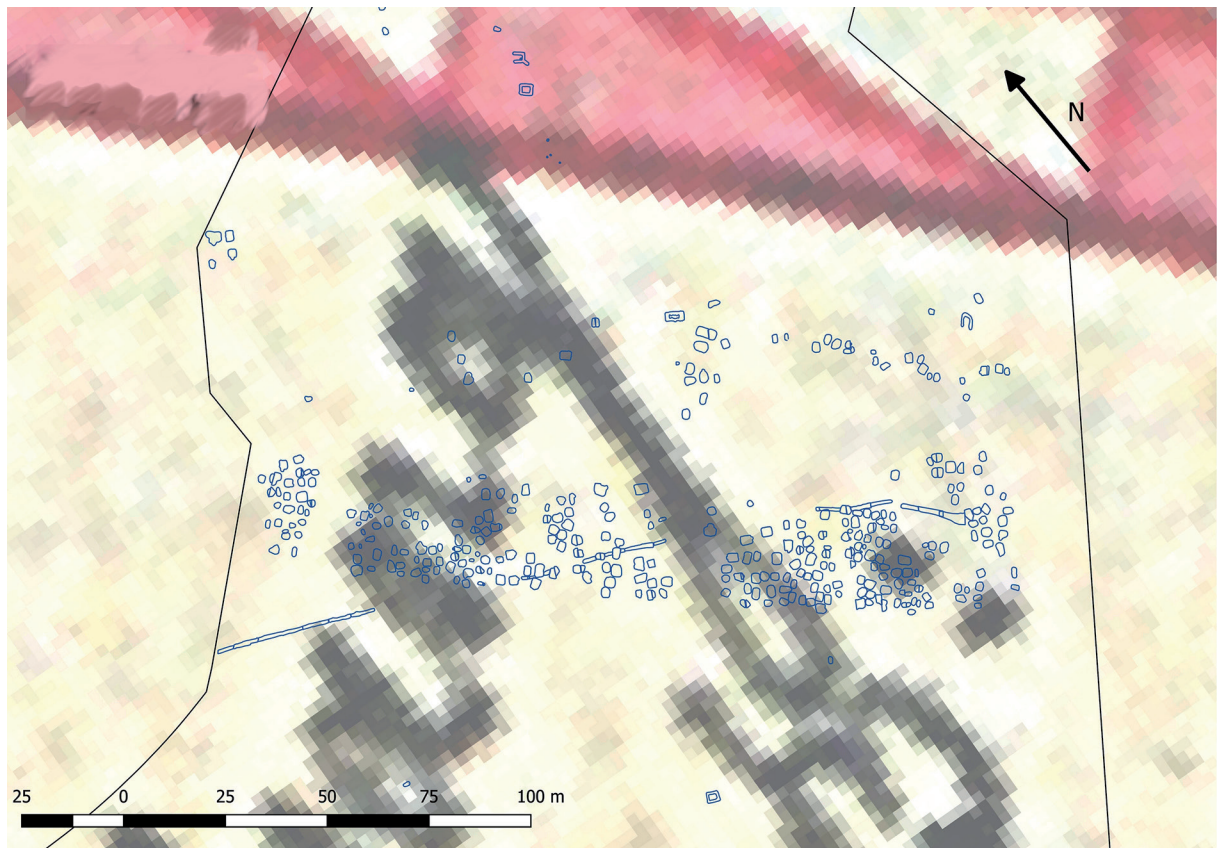


Fig. 7. Distribution of pits in the camp of the 47th Infantry Regiment, Staatsarchiv Wien, Slawomir Konik, Novetus GmbH.

end of the dugout, steps were made, and this was the way down, the entrance; the trench itself was the room, in which the lucky ones, such as the squadron commander, had a board lying on four posts at the far end – this was a table. Along both sides of the trench, earth was removed to a width of two and a half feet, and this made two beds or couches. The roof was constructed in such a way that one could stand up in the middle, and one could even sit up on the beds if one moved closer to the table. Denisov, who lived in luxury, because the soldiers of his squadron loved him, also had a board in the pediment of the roof with a piece of broken but mended glass set into it. When it was very cold, hot coals from the soldiers' bonfires were brought to the steps (the anteroom, as Denisov called this part of the shed) on a bent piece of sheet iron, and it became so warm that the officers, of whom there were always many with Rostov and Denisov, sat in nothing but their shirts.”²

Tolstoy of course did not witness the 1807 events, but his father participated in the 1812 war and he himself attended the Crimean War. He thus knew various details of military service from stories told by his father and even from his own experience. Dugout represented a good shelter against unfavourable weather conditions of various kind. Soldiers in the novel by Tolstoy suffered from the Masurian coldness in the early spring. Varnhagen's soldiers, on the other hand, were troubled by the hot June weather and by the wind blowing through the Marchfeld.

The borders of individual features were difficult to recognise and they were often identified only by archaeological finds after removal of the topsoil layer (e.g. bones or metal objects detected with the help of a metal detector). Identification of features was also eased by recognising their original distribution in two lines with a relatively constant width. Regarding the modest depth of features and small

² Leo Tolstoy *War and Peace*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Vintage Classics, Random House Inc., New York, 2008. Vol. II, XVI, p. 398.

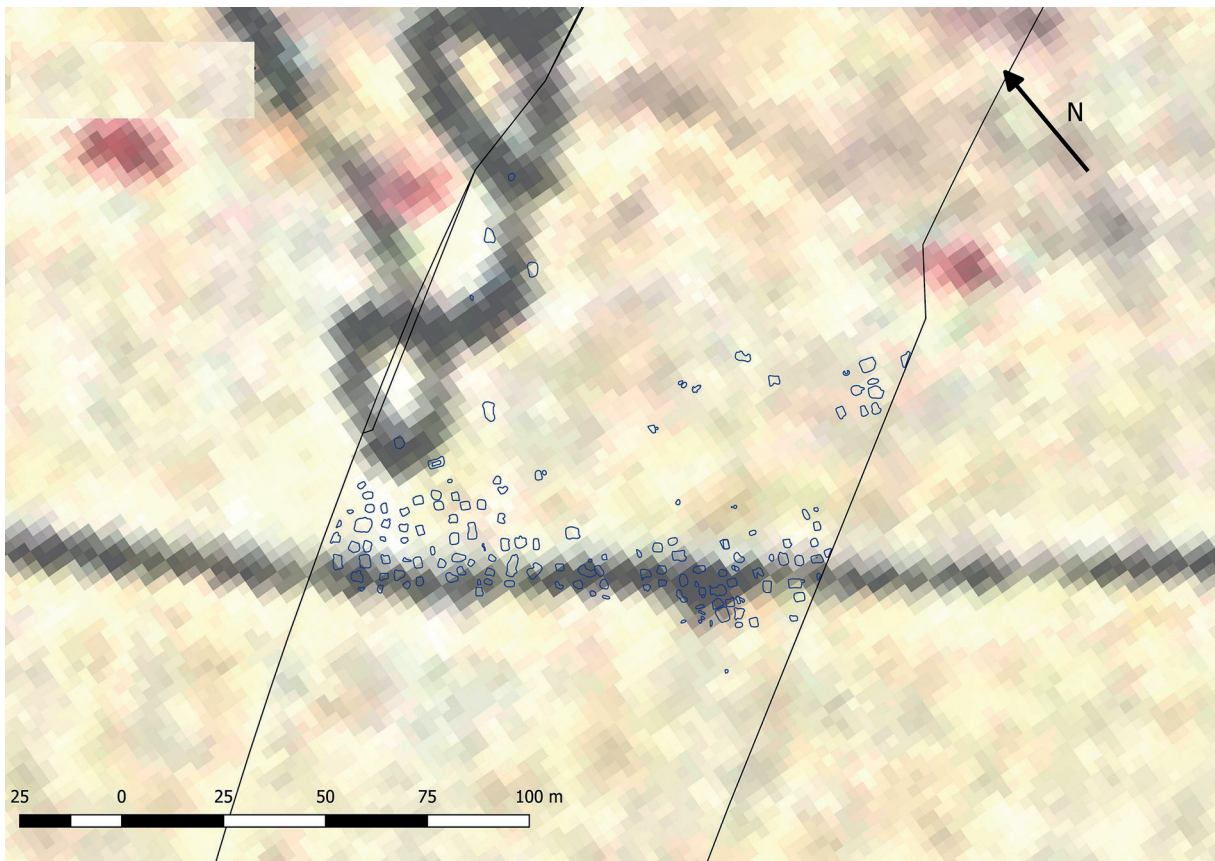


Fig. 8. Distribution of pits in the camp of the 35th Infantry Regiment, Staatsarchiv Wien, Sławomir Konik, Novetus GmbH.

thickness of the topsoil layer (ca. 30–40 cm), the topsoil removal with a machine weighing twenty tons required high accuracy and patience but it has yielded great results. The shapes of individual features were mostly identified in more detail only after the exploration of their fill. Figure 3 shows two parallel trenches with explored features. In several features we can clearly see a step-like adjustment.

The 47th Infantry Regiment already arrived in the Wagram plateau in May, shortly after the Battle of Aspern. The detected structures probably represented the positions of the 1st (central) battalion of this regiment (Fig. 7). The gaps between groups of features correspond to border zones between individual battalions, whereas the wide area in the central part of the examined camp represented the main road. The majority of detected features are pits of square layout, but in three cases we can recognise quadratic features delimited by perimeter trenches. The first one was found ca. 50 metres to the southeast of the main line of pits, the other two features were localised ca. 40 and 100 metres northeast of this line.

The 35th Regiment took the positions behind IR 47 on 1 July (on the map it is therefore marked with a dashed line) and the length of stay on site is much shorter (Fig. 8). The number and concentration of pits associated with activities of IR 35 are smaller than in the area occupied by IR 47. Other difference consists in the absence of free spaces used for the communication between battalions. The camp of this regiment might have been in the preparation phase. Regarding the plan of the camp, we can suppose that the archaeologically explored features represented the positions of the left wing of the battalion. A feature delimited by trenches was found in this area. It was localised on the northern border of the line of pits associated with the operation period of the camp.

The example of feature No. 481 demonstrates how difficult was it to identify the pits in the subsoil layer (Fig. 9). Their presence was relatively often signalled by a metal detector (concentration of metal

finds) and by the occurrence of human (in the case of graves) or animal bones (in the case of refuse pits) that were already recognised in the topsoil layer. The topsoil was removed very carefully due to threat of damage – or even a total destruction – of shallow features (Fig. 10) by the mechanical digger bucket. The real dimensions and shape of many features were not recognised until their exploration was completed (Fig. 11). The detected dimensions of feature No. 481 were 1.89 x 1.31 m, the depth was 12 cm. The fill of the feature contained two unspent 16 mm calibre rifle projectiles, whetstones, buckles from a French rifle sling (Fig. 12) and animal bones. Feature No. 481 is an illustrative example that even a relatively small and shallow feature can provide interesting material.



Fig. 9. Cleaned surface of one of the features. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 10. Cross-section of an archaeological feature. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 11. Top view of an excavated camp pit. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.

The above-mentioned four features delimited by trenches are rectangular or nearly square in plan, the width of the perimeter trench is 0.6–0.8 m (Fig. 13, 14). The inner areas enclosed by the trenches were empty, without any traces of disturbance. The fills of these features contained uniform buttons (including a French IR 4 button), rifle projectiles, buckles, gunflints, nails, a knife, weapon components, numerous fragments of ceramic and glass vessels, as well as animal bones. Their function was a mystery, which was maybe solved by studying historical iconography and photographs from the time of Boer Wars. They probably represent the remains of a field table (Fig. 15).



Fig. 12. Buckle from a French rifle sling. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.

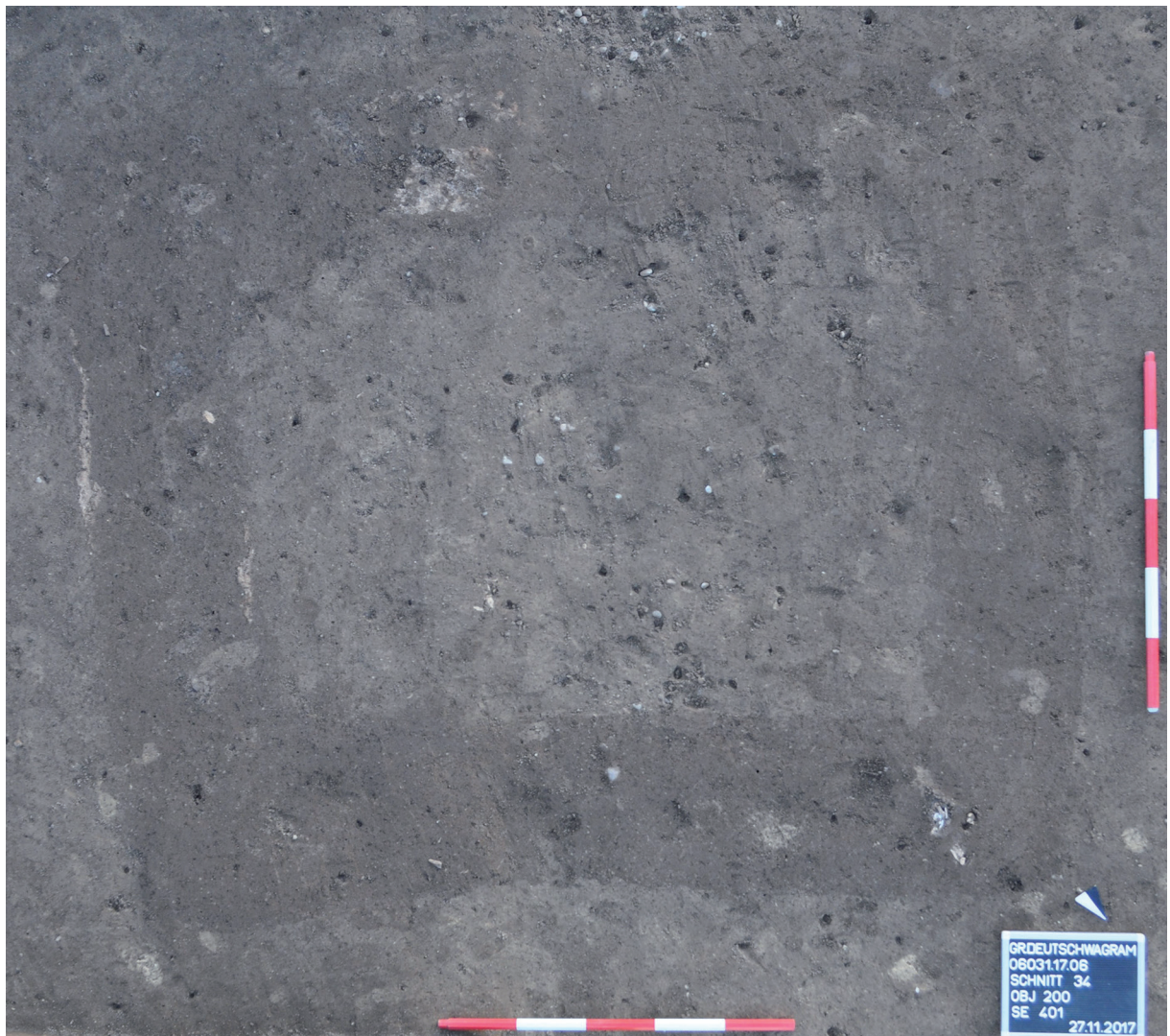


Fig. 13. Surface of a quadratric feature delimited by perimeter trenches. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 14. Negative of a quadratic feature delimited by perimeter trenches. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 15. Officers dining in the field, 1900, <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1999-06-95-4>.

The features associated with the operation period of the camp contained more than 3000 objects (inventory numbers). Buttons count among the most interesting artefacts. All pits have yielded a total of 456 buttons, among which 25 specimens can be assigned to various French troops. French buttons are interpreted as spoils of the Battle of Aspern or of the first day of the Battle of Wagram, i.e. 5 July (Fig. 16). Another group is represented by brass buttons (191 pieces), which often have a faceted or rounded rim. The vast majority of these buttons bear no inscriptions but one part of them is marked with the manufacturer's signature (e.g. BIRMINGHAM, A O LONDON, W, W S) or a quality mark (PLATED, GILT, FEIN). One part of these buttons were made in England (Fig. 17). The occurrence of brass buttons was mainly recorded in features of the northern line of the camp, which is in accordance with the usage of "yellow" buttons by the members of IR 35³.

Another group encompasses bone buttons with five holes and two engraved circles (Fig. 18). These buttons were also found in graves and their localisation nearby the calves identifies them as shoe components. Soldiers also used mostly richly decorated (Fig. 19) civil buttons made from arsenical bronze (10 pieces). Another group is represented by cast, undecorated tin-lead buttons (172 pieces). They mainly come from features associated with activities of IR 47 but their occurrence was also recorded in graves. They typically have slightly faceted rim. Their appearance enables to associate them with IR 47, about which we know that it used "white" buttons (Fig. 20)⁴. One of the buttons was silvered and decorated with a depiction referring to the Order of the Black Eagle. It was found in a feature associated with IR 47 and it probably belonged to one of the Prussian volunteers, maybe even to the above-mentioned Varnhagen von Ense (Fig. 21).

The fills of individual features contained 73 coins, which can be divided into three categories. The first one comprises Austrian copper coins (54 pieces) minted in 1800 and 1807 (Fig. 22). The second group encompasses Bavarian silver coins (13 pieces), most of them minted in the 1750s and 1760s (Fig. 23). These coins probably were spoiled, or acquired in some other way, by Austrian soldiers during an early phase of the conflict in the spring of 1809. The last category comprises 9 individual coins, such as a half kreutzer from the time of Joseph II, a kreutzer of Maria Theresa, two 1758 Prague pfennigs (Fig. 24), a French coin from the time of Louis XV and even a Roman coin, which was unfortunately illegible.

The voluminous assemblage of finds from individual features comprises components of weapons, military uniforms and ammunition. An extraordinarily numerous group is represented by lead rifle balls (946 pieces, Fig. 26), most of them found in pits associated with activities of IR 47. It is an indirect evidence that these pits were used as shelters for French soldiers and their allies during the evening fights on 5 July⁵. The balls were divided into two groups based on detected deformations: spent (246 pieces – 26 %) and unspent (703 pieces – 74 %). At this place it is necessary to remark that the proportion of spent to unspent balls in the collection of all balls found during the exploration of the battlefield at Wagram was nearly 1:1. The distinct numerical superiority of unspent projectiles found in the fill of pits might indicate a high protective effect of these shelters against the enemy fire. The balls found in pits thus might have been either lost or thrown away by soldiers during the battle, or they may have got into the fill of features during the battlefield cleanup. The fill of features also contained gunflints – 40 pieces in a lead sheath and 25 pieces without any sheath (Fig. 25). Also found were 8 flint flakes, whose presence might indicate the production or repair of gunflints directly in the military camp. The group of stray finds comprises various types of metal fittings, such as the front plate of an Austrian leather helmet equipped with letter F and the Roman numeral II (referring to the name of the Austrian Emperor Francis II, Fig. 28), a fitting in the form of an exploding grenade,

³ http://www.napoleon-series.org/military/organization/Austria/ArmyStudy/c_AustrianArmyInfantry.html

⁴ http://www.napoleon-series.org/military/organization/Austria/ArmyStudy/c_AustrianArmyInfantry.html

⁵ John H. Gill *1809 Grom nad Dunajem. Zwycięstwo Napoleona nad Habsburgami*. Tom III, Wagram i Znojmo. Wydawnictwo Napoleon V, Oświęcim 2016, p. 271.

originally probably mounted on a bullet pouch (Fig. 27), or the muzzle socket of an Austrian M 1798 rifle (Fig. 30). Some screwdrivers were found, which were used to disassemble the rifles (Fig. 29). Many finds which were recovered from the pits used by soldiers represent articles of daily use. Among them are iron field flasks, knives, forks and spoons, bone brushes, shoe nails, glass and ceramic vessels, religious items, fragments of beer glasses, tobacco pipes, door and clock keys. Rarities are represented by remnants of objects from organic materials, such as leather (Fig. 31) and textile, which may be used for comparison with finds from other battlefields and military camps from the time of Napoleonic Wars.



Fig. 16. Button of the French 5th Artillery Regiment. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.

Fig. 17. English "Birmingham Gilt" button. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 18. Bone button. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.

Fig. 19. Civil button from arsenical bronze. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 20. Two lead-tin buttons. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 21. Prussian button with a depiction referring to the Order of the Black Eagle. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 22. Austrian copper coin. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 23. Bavarian silver coin. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 24. Prague copper coin. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 25. Gunflint in a lead sheath. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 26. Lead rifle ball. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 27. Bullet pouch fitting in the form of an exploding grenade. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 28. Front plate of an Austrian leather helmet. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 29. Screwdriver for disassembling rifles. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.

After the end of the battle, one part of the pits associated with the operation period of the camp were secondarily used for burials of fallen soldiers. The research in the area of the camp has revealed 25 collective and individual graves, which contained skeletal remains of 60 humans and one horse. At least 20 out of the total number of 25 graves represented secondarily used older pits. It is proved by their localisation in the pit zone of the camp and by archaeological finds which are typically found in dugouts, such as ceramics, glass, and animal bones. In some cases, fallen soldiers were buried directly



Fig. 30. Muzzle socket of an Austrian M 1798 rifle. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.



Fig. 31. Leather strap. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.

in the place of death (Fig. 32). The analysis of finds showed that the skeletal remains of 26 individuals belonged to 14 French regiments, 4 individuals belonged to Saxon regiments and another 14 individuals can be associated with Austrian troops. Skeletal remains of 16 individuals cannot be identified with any of the sides in the conflict due to absence of archaeological material. Current efforts are made to find out the identity of individual fallen soldiers.



Fig. 32. One of the uncovered graves. Photo: Bogusława Miska, Novetus GmbH.

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