



# Life on a Napoleonic battlefield: A bioarchaeological analysis of soldiers from the Battle of Aspern, Austria<sup>☆</sup>



Leslie Quade<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Michaela Binder<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Austrian Archaeological Institute/Austrian Academy of Sciences, Franz Klein-Gasse 1, A-1190 Vienna, Austria

<sup>b</sup> Durham University, Department of Archaeology, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

On the 21st–22nd of May 1809, French and Austrian soldiers engaged in battle near the village of Aspern on the outskirts of Vienna. This battle, the first defeat of Napoleon's army on land, was one of the largest and deadliest encounters during the Napoleonic Wars (1798–1815). Salvage excavations between 2009 and 2016 have revealed several battlefield burial sites in Aspern. The remains of 30 individuals were evaluated for a series of pathological conditions which develop during childhood and adulthood to elucidate the impact of Napoleonic military conditions on health. Statistical comparisons were conducted of stature estimates and frequencies of pathological conditions between the Aspern soldiers, several contemporaneous military, and two civilian samples of differing socioeconomic status. These data were compared to test the hypothesis that military conscripts had 'healthy' childhoods, but then experienced deteriorating health as a result of military conditions. The analysis revealed comparatively high mean stature, but also a high prevalence of enamel hypoplastic defects, indicating that the childhood health of the military recruits was more varied than was initially expected. High frequencies of carious lesions, dental calculus, active maxillary sinusitis and pleuritis and osteoarthritis were recorded, demonstrating the deleterious effects of military life on health.

## 1. Introduction

The effects of specialized or specific living environments on health and well-being is a focus of wide-ranging interest, as societies attempt to minimize disease and promote optimal health. The detailed accounts and records of 18th- and 19th-century European armies are of particular value in helping to understand how lifestyle and living conditions impact health, as observed in the skeletal material of soldiers from this time. The relative homogeneity of the recruits or conscripts, which were reportedly restricted to healthy male individuals of young or middling age, provides an interesting baseline from which to work. Previous research has identified the 19th-century military environment as notably deleterious to the health of new recruits who arrived 'fighting-fit', but were quickly reduced to poor states of health, in addition to the inherent risks of death or injury on the battlefield (Horácková and Vargová, 1999; Sledzik and Sandberg, 2002; Meyer, 2003; Signoli et al., 2004; Cooper, 2006; Palubeckaitė et al., 2006; Raoul et al., 2006; Binder, 2008; Binder et al., 2014; Dutour and Buzhilova, 2014). Comparisons of pathological conditions between 19th-century military and civilian samples have been relatively underexplored (with the

exception of Sledzik and Sandberg, 2002), limiting current understandings of how military conditions impacted health within the larger setting of the 19th-century living environment. To the authors' knowledge, such an analysis has yet to be performed on European populations in a systematic manner.

The present study offers a palaeopathological analysis of a new dataset from 30 soldiers buried directly on the field of combat from the Napoleonic Battle of Aspern, Austria in 1809. Skeletal remains were analyzed for a series of pathological conditions that develop during childhood and adulthood, as well as patterns of antemortem trauma, to reveal conditions affecting life during Napoleonic warfare. Statistical comparisons were conducted of stature estimates and frequencies of pathological conditions between the Aspern soldiers, several contemporaneous military, and two civilian samples of differing socioeconomic status. These data were compared to test the hypothesis that military conscripts had 'healthy' childhoods, but then experienced deteriorating health as a result of military conditions during this period. A bioarchaeological approach is adopted to contextualize the interpretation of the recorded pathological conditions, which are the focus of this research.

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\* Corresponding author. Present address: Durham University, Department of Archaeology, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, United Kingdom.  
E-mail address: [Leslie.quade@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Leslie.quade@durham.ac.uk) (L. Quade).



Fig. 1. Map of the Aspern battlefield indicating the location of human (blue squares) and horse burials (red squares) (M. Penz, S. Uhlirz/Stadtarchäologie Wien) (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article).

### 1.1. The Battle of Aspern 1809

The War of the Fifth Coalition between the Austrian Empire, backed by the United Kingdom, and the French Empire and Bavaria erupted in April 1809 as a result of strong nationalistic feelings arising across Europe in response to Napoleon’s increasing control over the continent (Muir, 2000; Pigeard, 2000). Emperor Francis I of Austria, embittered by the previous invasions of the Austrian Empire and the loss of territories in Germany and Italy as a result of the Battle of Austerlitz (1805) during previous coalition wars, sought to break Napoleon’s dominion over Europe. After a series of military skirmishes between the Austrian

and French armies, the war saw its first major battle near the villages of Aspern and Essling, Austria, from the 21st to 22nd of May 1809. Approximately 77,000 French soldiers led by Napoleon Bonaparte were pitted against 90,000 soldiers defending the Austrian Empire under Archduke Charles of Austria, Duke of Teschen (Fig. 1) (Rauchensteiner, 1969; Novak, 1981). The Battle of Aspern has been extensively studied, resulting in detailed knowledge about particular events that occurred and tactics that were employed (see Bouchal and Sachslehner, 2008). During battle, the villages of Aspern and Essling were captured and forfeited multiple times by both sides, creating a confused, vicious and intimate style of combat (Ridgway, 1809). After two days of fighting,

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