



Death on a Napoleonic battlefield – Peri-mortem trauma in soldiers from the Battle of Aspern 1809

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ABSTRACT

On the 21st–22nd of May 1809 Napoleon Bonaparte saw his first major defeat on land at the Battle of Aspern, just north-east of Vienna. Of the 167,000 soldiers who fought for the French and Austrian armies, a total of 55,000 died on the battlefield. Salvage excavations prior to the construction of large urban development project (2008–2016) have revealed several burial sites related to the Battle of Aspern. The skeletal remains of 30 soldiers were excavated and underwent a detailed bioarchaeological study to elucidate both the impact of 19th-century military conditions on soldiers in life, as well as how they died on the battlefield.

This paper presents the analysis of peri-mortem trauma observed in 21 of the 30 skeletons (70.0%) excavated from the battlefield of Aspern. Following standard criteria in forensic and palaeopathological trauma studies, this study revealed a predominance of ballistic trauma (20 cases in 17 individuals), while only nine individuals (eleven cases) displayed evidence of blunt force trauma. By contrast, no evidence of sharp force trauma was identified in the skeletal remains. These results are discussed within the historic context of the Napoleonic Wars to reconstruct causes of injury and circumstances of death.

1. Introduction

Human behaviour on the battlefield captures the values of the combatant societies under significant stress and pushed to extremes; thus, the study of conflict ‘has a powerful ability to illuminate human behaviour’ (Scott and McFeaters, 2011, 107). However, systematic assessment of the physical evidence of warfare in the past, manifested as trauma and injury in the skeletons of those involved, is still relatively underexplored and standardized archaeological and bioarchaeological research has only recently started to develop (e.g. Homann, 2013; Knüsel et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2013; Martin and Tegtmeyer, 2017). Assessment of the physical remains of war is critically important because it not only enables researchers to elucidate the strategies, weaponry and tactics of war, but also provides the means to study warfare within its biological, social, cultural, and gender-related context (Knüsel and Smith, 2014). Although written sources provide invaluable evidence of warfare from historic periods, the bioarchaeological analysis of human remains reveals the physicality and biological reality of war, important and undocumented evidence of experience, suffering and survival which would be lost forever.

This paper presents the bioarchaeological evidence of warfare in a sample of 30 soldiers who died in 1809 on the battlefield of Aspern

(Austria), one of the major battles of the Napoleonic Wars between 1803 and 1815. Fuelled by the onset of industrialisation, this period saw one of the most decisive transitions of warfare in human history: the introduction of ‘total war’, or the complete mobilisation of civilian and military resources with the aim to destroy the enemy (Bell, 2007; Chickering and Förster, 2010). Tens of thousands of soldiers died on the battlefields of Europe, however bioarchaeological evidence addressing warfare during this time period remains scarce. In conjunction with the systematic palaeopathological study of the evidence of disease suffered during life (Quade and Binder, 2018), this study aims to comprehensively reconstruct life and death of soldiers during the Napoleonic wars.

1.1. The Battle of Aspern 1809 and its weaponry

Taking place on the 21st and 22nd of May 1809, the Battle of Aspern was one of the main encounters in the ‘War of the 5th Coalition’, one in the series of wars between Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and his European counterparts. Throughout the coalition wars, commencing with the French Revolutionary War in 1798, and ending with the War of the 7th Coalition in 1815, each leader sought domination over the continent and occupied overseas territories. In April 1809, the Austrian Emperor Francis I had once again declared war to regain the areas of

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Fig. 1. Iron balls from cannister shots (upper row) and lead musket balls (lower row) recovered from the battlefield of Aspern (Photo: C. Ranseder/ Stadtarchäologie Wien, scale: 1 bar = 1 cm).

Germany and Italy lost to France after the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805. After a series of initial victories in smaller battles in southern Germany, Napoleon marched into the Austrian heartland, taking Vienna on the 13th of May 1809. Meanwhile, the Austrian army, led by Archduke Charles of Austria-Teschen, held the northern bank of the Danube River. In the days leading up to the battle, Napoleon forced a crossing over the Danube near the villages of Aspern and Essling, but met with significant difficulties due to flooding of the river (Rauchensteiner, 1978). The ensuing delay allowed the Austrian army to gather on the opposite side of the river. The battle finally commenced on 21st of May on the vast open flood plain of the Marchfeld where 90,000 Austrian soldiers were positioned against initially only 24,000 French soldiers who had made the crossing and gathered around the villages of Aspern and Essling. Conforming to contemporary military practice, the majority of both armies consisted of infantry, supported by a cavalry of 14,000 Austrian and 10,000 French cuirassiers (armored cavalry) as well as 290 guns on the Austrian and 150 guns on the French side, respectively (Ranseder et al., 2017, 23, 26).

Over the course of the first day of the battle, the villages of Aspern and Essling were both taken and re-taken several times (Bouchal and Sachslehner, 2008). By the early morning of the 22nd of May, Napoleon's army had doubled its size, but nevertheless remained vastly outnumbered. Forced to rely on make-shift pontoon bridges crossing the Danube River for the transport of soldiers to the battlefield, the French forces never achieved their full strength. The flooding of the Danube, in conjunction with an active Austrian strategy, continually broke these bridges, cutting off the French from vital supplies and support (Larrey, 1812). In the afternoon of the 22nd of May, Napoleon finally ordered a retreat when the French position had become untenable, sealing his first personal defeat in a major battle on land (Rauchensteiner, 1978). Estimates of the number of casualties are contradictory, ranging between 6000 and 30,000 French soldiers and between 4000 and 24,000 Austrian soldiers (Novak, 1981). Accounts of the aftermath of the battle, describe thousands of dead soldiers lying on the battlefield between Aspern and Essling (Bouchal and Sachslehner, 2008, 136). Burial of the corpses had to commence immediately to avoid the outbreak of epidemics, leading to hasty burials on the battlefield, directly where the soldiers had fallen. Although Napoleon was defeated at Aspern, the Austrian victory was short-lived. Six weeks later, Archduke Charles again led the Austrian army against Napoleon at Wagram, 10 km to the northeast of Vienna, where the Austrian army was defeated in one of the bloodiest battles of contemporary warfare.

On the 1st of October 1809, the Treaty of Schönbrunn was signed, in which the Austrian Empire was forced to concede parts of its territory, including Tirol and Salzburg, as well as most of Croatia, Dalmatia and Slovenia.

The weaponry used during the Battle of Aspern was typical of armament from the early 19th century, largely consisting of muskets, bayonets and cannons (Haythornthwaite, 1979). During the Napoleonic Wars, infantrymen were primarily armed with smoothbore heavy flintlock muskets, usually equipped with a bayonet. Muskets were loaded with lead musket balls of either 17.6 mm (Austrian infantry) or 17.5 mm (French infantry) calibre (Ranseder et al., 2017, 82). Officers were additionally supplied with swords, sabres, or rapiers, which often acted as a symbol of rank within the infantry (Haythornthwaite, 1979). Cuirassiers, the heavy cavalry carried hand guns or short barrelled muskets (carbines), as well as sabres and rapiers (Ranseder et al., 2017, 82). In specialized regiments, such as the Austrian Uhlans, lances were also utilized. The artillery, or heavy long-range guns and cannons, were considered the most effective weapons in terms of their ability to kill large numbers of men. These guns were loaded most often (70–80% of cases) with simple iron cannonballs, known as 'roundshot' (loaded with gunpowder and exploded based on a fuse system), but could also be armed with cannonballs made from rock, canister shots (a tin case fitting containing a number of loose iron bullets which ruptured when it left the muzzle of the howitzer or mortar) or 'common shell' consisting of a hollow iron sphere filled with gunpowder which exploded at a predetermined moment by means of an adjustable fuse (Haythornthwaite, 1979, 60; Malhan et al., 2009). Historical sources report on the heavy presence of cannon and shells during the Battle of Aspern, giving it a reputation as one of the bloodiest battles of the time, with a casualty rate of 26% (Germani, 2016; Goujon, 1821). Archaeologically, 'roundshot' and shells were found throughout the battlefield as well as in the graves (Fig. 1).

Body armour was exclusively worn by the cuirassiers who were equipped with a "cuirass" consisting of a metal front and back plate in the French army, but only had a single front piece in the Austrian army (Haythornthwaite, 2013, 18). However, the ineffectiveness of this armour against artillery was noted by contemporary commentators because they were only able to deflect musket balls shot from distances of more than 70 m.

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