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Where are the dead of medieval battles? A preliminary survey

Anne Curry^a and Glenn Foard^b

^aFaculty of Humanities, Department of History, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK; ^bUniversity of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

ABSTRACT

Only a handful of mass graves from late medieval battles in Western Europe have been subject to large scale excavation to modern standards. The principal reason is that these, and indeed even early modern battlefield graves, have proven extremely elusive, most being identified by chance. Despite a few successes, no combination of prospecting techniques yet provides a consistently effective method of locating such small archaeological features set almost anywhere within a site covering many square kilometres. But this important resource should be explored and conserved for, as Towton has shown, much can be learnt through modern excavation and analysis of the remains. While this paper does consider the existing archaeological record, its primary focus and the starting point for almost any search for mass graves on a battlefield, has to be the documentary record. Using this evidence one must debate the number who actually died, how they were interred and commemorated and whether this varied according to status or allegiance, and where on the battlefield the graves might lie. One must also consider how often we will need to look further afield for the dead, for it is unclear how often the desire for appropriate Christian burial meant some or even most were interred in, or later moved to, consecrated ground.

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Medieval battles have always fascinated historians as well as the general public. We have to admit, however, that battles of this period are difficult to study. Many of the chronicle accounts, whether written by eyewitnesses or second hand, were politicised. The description and explanation of events was caught up with the desire to ascribe blame or to allocate

CONTACT Glenn Foard  G.Foard@hud.ac.uk

A shorter version of this paper in French, as delivered at a conference in Flaran in October 2013 was published as 'La bataille au Moyen Âge: où sont les morts?', in *Le cimetière au village dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne*, ed. Cécile Treffort (Presses Universitaires du Midi, Toulouse, 2015), pp. 221–32. Since 2013 several papers have been presented, especially that by Holst and Sutherland in 2014 which carries the subject further forward, particularly with regard to Towton battlefield, and other work such as that by Masters which has pinpointed the previously reported mass grave at East Stoke. In addition PhD research by Sarah Taylor at the University of Huddersfield is currently comparing the practice of burial and commemoration of late medieval and early modern battlefields in England. Also, the present authors are currently completing a British Academy funded assessment of the documentary, landscape and archaeological evidence for all the battlefields of the Wars of the Roses. Thus the subject is moving on significantly. It was therefore decided to publish the present paper largely unchanged from that first delivered in 2013 rather than provide a partial update.

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praise for valiant deeds. Intriguingly, there is one element in a medieval battle which is rarely mentioned in contemporary accounts – what happened to the dead of both sides. Historians have assumed that bodies were gathered up, stripped of their armour (as illustrated in the Bayeux Tapestry),¹ and buried in mass graves on or close to the battle site (as illustrated in a Swiss chronicle of the 1480s describing the battle of Morat in 1476).² This assumption has been bolstered by the relatively few texts which mention the topic, such as Monstrelet's account of the battle of Agincourt (1415). In his account, bodies were buried in an area specially dug for the purpose:

Lesquelx (l'abbé de Ruisseauville et le bailli d'Aire) firent mesure en quarreure vingt-cinq piez de terre, en laquelle furent faictes trois fosses de la largeur de deux homes, dedans lesquelles furent mis de compte fait cinq mille et huit cens homes...[the abbot of Ruisseauville and the bailli of Aire had a twenty-five foot square measured out in which they had three ditches, as deep as two men, dug, into which were put, according to the count made, 5800 men]³

This is an alluring description for the archaeologist eager to find the bodies of battle dead, but it is completely lacking in topographical and geographical precision, a common problem with medieval chronicle accounts. To date, it has proved impossible to find at Azincourt the burial pit described by Monstrelet, or indeed any bodies at all. In 1818, when British troops controlled the area in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, Lieutenant Colonel John Woodford claimed to have found human remains at the battlefield. We even have a map which he drew up where he marked 'the place of interment of 5800 French knights'.⁴ This appears to be in the vicinity of the current enclosure of a Calvaire erected before the Franco-Prussian War. Yet archaeological survey in and around this area by Tim Sutherland in 2002 failed to reveal anything.⁵ The explanation may be that Woodford had the human remains buried in the churchyard of the parish church of Azincourt. A letter written by him on 20 February 1818 indicates that this was his plan. The wording of the letter also suggests, however, that he found very little: his description certainly does not suggest a mass grave.

This is an example of how the interests and methodologies of previous centuries can damage the work of archaeologists today. The burial of battle dead was of considerable interest to antiquarians but their views have created myths in their own right. For instance, Francis Wise (1695–1767) concluded that Waylands Smithy in West Berkshire was the burial place of the dead from King Alfred's victory over the Vikings in 871 AD, and that the White Horse of Uffington was a contemporary memorial to the battle. In fact, both are now known to be important prehistoric sites. Similarly, in 1889 Leadman recorded the location of supposed graves of the battle of Towton (1461) but claimed that they had disappeared through ploughing. Recent unpublished work by Sutherland has shown that this site was Romano-British.⁶ It is not uncommon for antiquarians to mention finding bones on battlefield sites, but with no detail of location being given. This inaccuracy, combined with the tendency to invent, mis-identify or even destroy the archaeological record, means that they have created false leads. This is demonstrated by the records for England on the UK Fields of Conflict database. Although there are 106 records of burial sites from 80 different locations, 'most of the records on these and other sites are known only from antiquarian reports and many may prove to be spurious'.⁷ At Crécy there were excavations in the early nineteenth century of supposed battle pits but nothing was found, nor do any reports survive.⁸

Modern archaeologists have so far drawn a blank in finding human remains at virtually all English and French battlefields of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the period on which we will focus in this communication. Despite recent archaeological investigation, none have been found at Bosworth (1485), the battle on which we have worked recently, at

Shrewsbury (1403), where work was carried out by Pollard or, despite an intensive search, in the recent investigation at Bannockburn.⁹ One of the main problems for an archaeologist is knowing where to look. It is not easy to know the exact location at which fighting occurred. Furthermore, armed clashes might take place over an extended and diffuse area and include a rout which might extend for several miles away from the main seat of the battle. Should we expect the dead to be gathered together and buried in one place? If so, what factors dictated the choice of this place? Or should we expect individual as well as group burials over a wider area?

To these problems can be added technical difficulties. While it might be argued that metal artefacts are sometimes found in graves, if present they will normally be small – the armour noted below from Wisby is exceptional. Given that these small metal objects lie below the topsoil they will usually be well beyond the range of all but the most specialist, mainly pulse induction, detectors (that themselves impose yet more detecting problems). This will be particularly true of arrowheads if Towton is any guide because, despite exceptional conditions for preservation of ferrous metal, all had lost most of their metal content through oxidation. Even their concentration in the topsoil over the mass graves at Towton is not a secure guide to burial location, for the concentration has yet to be proven to derive from the bodies. What the archaeologist needs are firm leads based on documentary sources in order to know where to concentrate the search. Only then is it feasible to carry out closely targeted survey using specialist detectors and fieldwalking techniques, which might yield metal artefact concentrations or human remains, and most importantly the geophysics and trial trenching needed to locate and confirm the presence of burial pits.¹⁰

Given the lack of success in locating battlefield dead, three major finds have become rightly famous. The first is Wisby on the island of Gotland, where an army of the Danish king defeated local peasantry and townsmen in July 1361. In 1905 a mass grave was found. By 1928 another three pits had been discovered outside the gates of the town. At least 1185 bodies have been found.¹¹ This is relatively close in number to the 1,800 peasant dead mentioned in the chronicle of the Franciscans of Wisby, although it is likely that there are more burials which are now inaccessible because of modern building development. The corpses were still in their armour. Was this simply because hot weather and the numbers involved made it impossible to strip the bodies before decomposition began? Or was it simply that the armour was of such poor quality the royal army did not want it?

The second is in Portugal at Aljubarrota (1385).¹² Excavations in 1958 revealed a great accumulation of bones in an ossuary pit, but these were not examined until over thirty years later when it was concluded that they represented about 400 individuals. The third major discovery was the UK in July 1996 during building work for a garage at Towton Hall. Towton lies 18 km south-west of York, and is the location of a battle fought on 29 March 1461. It was concluded that the bone finds represented 37 or 38 individuals.¹³ It is clear that as many bodies as possible were packed into a relatively shallow grave.¹⁴ As at Wisby, it was possible to carry out research into the personal characteristics of the dead men as well as into the wounds which they had suffered in the battle. Towton is reputed to be the largest battle ever fought on English soil, with some chroniclers claiming 28,000 dead. As a result, the discoveries were greeted with much excitement even though they represented only a tiny proportion of the assumed battle casualties. Not surprisingly, the search has continued. Sutherland has found a further single and triple burial at Towton Hall, and also disarticulated remains in pits on the battlefield, the significance of which will be discussed later.¹⁵

It is obviously necessary for historians and archaeologists to work together but to understand the topic we also need to factor in religious beliefs and standard burial practices in the later medieval period. Religious belief and concern about the impact on the soul of killing explains why soldiers needed to make confession and to receive absolution before going into battle. It was common for this to be done within the performance of mass on the morning of the battle. Narrative accounts of battles frequently mention both liturgical practices. Indeed, failings in these areas were sometimes put forward as a partial explanation for defeat, as in the case of Richard III at Bosworth.¹⁶ The place of burial was also significant. As Daniel writes, 'it was expected that a Christian would be buried in consecrated ground'.¹⁷ The Church defined what ground was consecrated and what was not. Cemeteries had very well defined boundaries. Furthermore, the Church controlled burial. It was a zealously guarded right, not least as it generated income for a particular church which had burial rights. There are many disputes recorded where the rules were not followed.

Furthermore, people wanted to be buried in the right place for the sake of their salvation. The richer members of society made arrangements in advance for burial in a particular location, usually linked to their place of residence or else to a special personal religious devotion. This might be accompanied by the establishment of a chantry or at least arrangements for prayers and masses to be said for their soul. This also prompted the tendency for wills to be made before military campaigns. But even poorer people wanted to be buried in their home community where family and friends could assist their passage through purgatory. This explained the appeal of joining a confraternity or parish guild. As a royal survey of 1389 demonstrated, membership of such a group, to which a weekly subscription was paid, meant that if you died away from home your fellow members would bring your body home. For instance, the ordinances of the guild of St Peter at Wiggenhall (Norfolk) included the following:

If he perish by water or on land then his guild brethren will seek him within a three miles radius. They will bring him to burial as befits a Christian man if he cannot afford such a burial himself.

Other local guilds promised to find and bring the body back even if it was up to six miles away.¹⁸ There were also common practices involved in burial. It was customary for burial to take place within three days of death and to be accompanied by specific rituals. This included the washing of the naked body and its placing within a shroud. To be buried fully clothed and without a shroud was the fate of executed criminals. Excavations at St Margaret Combusto at Norwich revealed such bodies, some with wrists tied, some lying face down, and with all the signs of being thrown unceremoniously into the ground, although in ground which was already demarcated as consecrated.¹⁹ Bodies buried according to standard practice were usually laid on their backs with the head to the west. In the case of plague deaths we know that new cemeteries were created, as in East Smithfield just outside the city of London in 1348. Whilst bodies here were tightly packed in trenches rather than individual graves they were none the less arranged in an orderly fashion on their backs in a common west-east alignment.²⁰

Very rarely did large numbers of people die in a short space of time in one location away from home. The battlefield was the exception, and that it is why it is so interesting to look at what happened to bodies after a battle. A battle was likely to lead to unusual forms of burial, since the circumstances of death made it more difficult to follow customary practices. That said, there is evidence of efforts to conform to the usual standards. Froissart claims that Edward allowed a truce of three days for the battlefield of Crécy to be searched and for

burials to be made: 'Et fist a savoir sus chiaus dou pays que il donnoit triewes trois jours pour cerchier le camp de creci et enseverlir les morts [And he made known to those of the area that he would give three days truce to search the field of Crecy and to bury the dead].'²¹

Monstrelet's account of Agincourt claims that on the day of the battle and for four days following, the dead lords and princes were gathered up and washed, and taken for burial in their own lands.²²

The most obvious example of the attempt to follow standard practice is this recovery of bodies and their removal for burial in appropriate locations. This was notably the case for the dead of higher social status where they were taken to their expected burial place even if this was at a distance. So, for instance, Anthony, duke of Brabant, the brother of John the Fearless, duke of Burgundy, who was killed at Agincourt was found by his servants quite a distance from where the battle was fought. His servants initially took him to Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise, c. 18 km away. There it was put into a lead coffin with spices and herbs. The placing of a body in a coffin delayed decomposition, and the aromatic additions helped to diminish the smell. Between four and six days after the battle it was taken to Tournai where it was escorted by the bishop and chapter. On the next day it was taken to Hal where it rested overnight in the church of St Mary before being transported to the church of St Gaule in Brussels and then to Fure where it was buried after a requiem mass on 3 November alongside the duke's first wife.²³ Overall the body had travelled 173 km.

The two English peers (Edward, duke of York and Michael de la Pole, earl of Suffolk) killed at the battle were moved even further, being buried in their family churches of Fotheringhay (Northants) and Wingfield (Suffolk) respectively. This was too far simply to rely on the slowing effect of a lead coffin. Both men were 'excarinated'. That means that their bodies were boiled to remove the flesh, and their bones placed in suitable containers to be transported back to England. This boiling is recounted by the chroniclers, Jean le Fèvre and Jean de Waurin, the first of whom was with the English at the battle.²⁴ It implies that the English had with them a container large enough for the boiling of bodies even if it was possible to cut the body into pieces before boiling. There was a second method of preparing a body for long transportation: this was 'evisceration' where the entrails were removed. We find this practice where there was ample time and expertise for it to be used: this is the treatment given to the body of Henry V after his death at the chateau of Vincennes on 31 August 1422, in preparation for transportation to Westminster Abbey for burial (indeed, it even led to questions being asked in the English Parliament a few years ago on whether the French should be asked to return the entrails, buried in the chapel at Vincennes, to England!)²⁵ However, when a commander wished to move quickly away from a battlefield, as Henry did in 1415, excarnation was the only possible form of preservation if long distance transportation of a body was necessary.

There are ample examples in 1415 of bodies being moved to the anticipated burial place. The duke of Alençon, for instance, was taken to the cathedral of Sées within his duchy. But we also find examples of men of lesser status being taken home. Guillaume de Longueil, captain of Dieppe, and his son were buried at the church of St Jacques in the town, and there are several other examples for men from northern France. More research is needed on this, but it would seem that where there were the necessary resources (as in the case of the high nobility) or where home was close enough for friends and companions to take the body with them, a body would be taken to its 'proper' resting place.

However, we also know that bodies of nobility and gentry were also taken to churches closer to the battlefield. An eighteenth-century document notes the names of thirteen men, including the Constable d'Albret, buried in the church of the Franciscan house at Vieil-Hesdin, fifteen in the church of the Dominican house at Auchy-lès-Hesdin, and another twelve in the cemetery of the same house.²⁶ After the battle of Poitiers (19 July 1356), around 50 French dead were taken to the Couvent des Jacobins de Poitiers for burial.²⁷ These included peers such as the duke of Bourbon for whom we might have expected efforts to take back to his ancestral burial place. Perhaps the summer season was a factor in the decision to bury locally, or perhaps the friars of Poitiers simply did all of the organising of collecting and dealing with the dead. We know precisely where most of the dead were buried in the Couvent des Jacobins. Bourbon, as the highest ranking victim, was buried to the right of the high altar close to the piscina. In three graves, seven or eight bodies were placed without their names being known. This might suggest that the choice of bodies had not been socially exclusive save that the list adds that at least one of them was a knight with a particular coat of arms. A further 100 of the dead of Poitiers were buried in the church of the Cordeliers at Poitiers. Of these 59 were knights and the other 41 esquires. The document goes on to tell us that several other bodies of men killed in the battle were taken on carts by the Cordeliers 'pour estre enterrez en de grandes fosses en leur cymetiere qui est hors l'église ... et furent faites obsequies honnourables par toutes les eglises, convents, monasteres et par quantité de bons bourgeois d'icelle ville [to be buried in the great ditches in their cemetery which is outside the church ... and there were performed honourable obsequies by all churches, convents, monasteries and by a good number of the bourgeois of the town]'.²⁸

Whether this represents all of the French battle dead from Poitiers is impossible to know, but to date no burials have been found on the battlefield itself. What we see here, therefore, is an effort to move the bodies to consecrated ground and to bury them according to conventional practice. Hence the more socially elevated were buried individually inside churches. The rank and file were buried in trenches in a cemetery attached to a church. This pattern is also in evidence for the first battle of St Albans in 1455.²⁹ The Poitiers document also tells us that the mass burial was made by licence of the *official* of Poitiers (part of the church hierarchy of the diocese) and the mayor of Poitiers'. This reminds us that bodies could not be buried without permission of the church. We need to factor this in to our discussion of burials of other battles, linked to the expectation that bodies would be buried in properly consecrated ground wherever possible.

There is one further element of this final Poitiers burial which gives an extremely valuable insight. This is the date on which the mass burial took place – 'le jour de St Valentine audit an mil trois cent cinquante et six', which is 14 February 1357. In other words, the bodies appear to have remained on the field for five months since the battle. Eight days after the battle of Pinkie (1547), an Englishman remarked that he saw many rotting corpses still unburied, although he reported that many more had already been interred in Inveresk churchyard. Another report commented that there were not enough carts for transport, and that even after a month some bodies had not been buried.³⁰

Unless bodies were taken quickly from the field, they would begin to decompose. Even one night's exposure allowed the victor, as well as local scavengers, opportunity to strip anything they wished: we hear of this in the aftermath of Agincourt. Naked bodies decompose quicker than clothed bodies. Is it really credible that bodies were left exposed for months if not years, and allowed to decay on the surface? Even in times of political conflict,

this would seem so contrary to standard practices and beliefs as it left the bodies vulnerable to being eaten by animals. A common sense solution would be to bury bodies as quickly and conveniently as possible close to where they fell, but with a view to moving them later. In this scenario we would expect the use of existing hollows and ditches to avoid the need to dig deeply. This may have been what happened at Poitiers although there is as yet no documentary or archaeological evidence of temporary burial on the site itself.

At Towton, Sutherland's recent research suggests that bodies were initially buried on the battlefield and moved to consecrated ground around twenty years later.³¹ This research was based on the idea that burials were most likely to occur at the centre of the battle. This was inspired by the view of the military historian, Alfred Burne, who suggested most deaths would occur where the armies first engaged.³² In order to minimise the need to drag corpses over long distances, burial would surely be as close as possible to where men had fallen, either by digging shallow graves or else using existing hollows. At Towton, by means of metal detection, Sutherland mapped the distribution of arrowheads. It was during this metal detecting that the remains of a lower arm bone (distal ulna) were found on the soil thrown up by ploughing. Where detecting had revealed concentrations of arrowheads, Sutherland carried out a series of earth resistance and magnetic geophysical surveys, which identified several anomalies. Human teeth were discovered during the earth resistance survey and found to lie, as did the ulna, directly over one of the areas of anomaly. Sutherland then dug test trenches. The trench at the location of the finding of the teeth revealed further human remains, fragments of skull, vertebra, patella, fingers, toes and additional teeth – small bones all jumbled together. However, 'the anatomical position of some bones suggested that the skeletal elements had been partly articulated when they were interred.'³³ Sutherland also suggested that the finds lay within a pre-existing ditch that had been re-cut and re-used for burial. These features led to his conclusion that full bodies had initially been buried in this location but then disinterred later and moved, but leaving behind small bones and the evidence of the burial ditch.

As Sutherland realised, this fitted with what was known in the historical record. In an order of 19 February 1484 King Richard III gave funds to the parish church of Saxton and another chapel so that the bodies from the battlefield could be reburied there. The wording is extremely interesting, not least because it fits with the archaeological evidence that existing pits or hollows were used for the initial burial:

and their bodies were left on the field and in other places nearby, completely outside an ecclesiastical burial place (*extra ecclesiasticam processum sepulturam*), in three hollows. We ... caused the bodies to be exhumed and left for an ecclesiastical burial in these coming months, partly in the parish church of Saxton in the county of York and in the cemetery of the same place, and partly in the chapel of Towton...³⁴

The same procedure is evidenced in the historical sources for Bosworth. Only one source mentions burials in the immediate aftermath of the battle: Polydore Vergil claims that after the battle Henry Tudor climbed a nearby hill, and in addition to thanking his men, 'ordered the wounded to be tended, and the dead to be buried'.³⁵ As noted earlier, no graves have been found, even though the location of the battle has been ascertained through finds of cannon shot and other artefacts. It seems that at some point bodies were moved to the church of Dadlington. That this had occurred by August 1511 is suggested by royal and ecclesiastical documents concerning the collection of funds for the church at Dadlington 'standing upon a parcel of the ground where Bosworth feld, otherwise called Dadlyngton

feld in our countie of Leicester was done'. The text of an indulgence to be given to those who contributed money contains additional and interesting wording, referring to the chapel as the place 'to which bodies or bones of the men slain in Bosworth field have been brought'.³⁶ The mention of bones suggests that there had been exhumation from the battlefield for reburial although we cannot be sure at what point between 1485 and 1511 this had occurred. Between the mid nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries, there have been various undocumented finds of skulls and disarticulated bones close to the entrance to Dadlington churchyard.³⁷

At both Towton and Bosworth, therefore, we have evidence of official approval and organisation for the exhumation and reburial. The conclusions reached at Aljubarrota suggest a similar situation, where only later, when a chapel was constructed seven years after the battle, were the bodies put into a common burial pit.³⁸ Exhumation and reburial was reasonably common within standard medieval burial practice. In towns where there were large numbers of burials it was common for skeletons to be dug up in order to create space for new burials. The bones were then cleaned, sorted and stored in charnel houses or specially dug pits. At St Margaret's Westminster, cheek by jowl with Westminster Abbey, several men were employed for four days in 1616 to dig a large pit 12 feet deep, 30 feet long and 10 feet wide to bury the bones which had been gathered up. Charnel houses were a common feature of medieval Brittany, and rites marking the transfer of clean bones were a very important part of Breton popular religion.³⁹

Exhumation and reburial may therefore have been common after battles. Sutherland's finds at Towton confirm that we would none the less expect to find imprints of the initial grave pits and smaller bones and teeth left behind when the disarticulated skeletons were moved. In this context it is interesting that Woodford commented on the teeth he found at Azincourt in 1818.

In the case of Agincourt, therefore, it is possible that bodies were initially buried in a specially consecrated area on the field and later moved to the churchyard. Monstrelet's account of the creation of the burial pit fits with the practice of creating consecrated ground. As we saw, the pit was authorised by the local abbot as well as a local royal official (a similar combination of ecclesiastical and civil as in the Poitiers example). He goes on to tell us that the land and ditches were blessed and consecrated as a cemetery by the bishop of Guînes at the command of Louis of Luxembourg, bishop of Thérouanne. Azincourt certainly lay within the diocese of Thérouanne, of which Louis was bishop in 1415, although the reference to a bishop of Guînes is problematic since there was no such person. Fenin gives a slightly different account but with the same overall notion: Louis of Luxembourg had several grave pits made in the place where the battle had been. Then he gathered up all the dead from both sides and had them buried there. He blessed the place and had it enclosed with strong hedges all around (a typical cemetery boundary) in order to protect it from animals.⁴⁰ The *Chronique de Ruisseauville* follows a similar line but claims that Louis blessed the ground and the places where the battle had been, adding that he was accompanied by the abbot of Blangy and that five graves were made 'and on each grave was placed a great cross of wood'. This is similar to an account of the creation of a cemetery in Italy in 1520: crosses were planted at each corner of the designated plot with another in the centre. The bishop sprinkled holy water on each cross as well as censing them. Candles were then placed on each cross.⁴¹

A chapel might also be built. For Agincourt, we have no evidence of the building of such a structure at the battlefield during the medieval period although it seems that a chapel

was constructed at La Gacogne in later centuries, and was destroyed at the French Revolution. However, for the battle of Shrewsbury (1403), a church soon followed the creation of a consecrated burial area. Here too we have the supposed dimensions of a pit into which it is alleged that 2,291 bodies were placed: 160 feet long, 68 feet wide and 60 feet deep, although the last dimension cannot be accurate!⁴² As at Azincourt, we do not know precisely when the pit was dug, but in October 1406 two acres of land were assigned for the building of a chapel where services might be celebrated for the souls of those slain at the battle and who were buried there, as well as for the victorious king (Henry IV) and for all the departed.⁴³ Other documents, as well as the fabric, suggest that the church was completed by 1409. The texts speak of the church being erected in the field where the battle took place, which suggests that it might have been built over the grave pit. It has also been suggested that site chosen was close to the main area of action, or at least downhill from it, since it would have been easier to carry the corpses downhill rather up. The majority of the dead may therefore have been buried where the church and its churchyard lie. However, it is possible that there are some scattered graves still to be found: a charter of December 1445 concerning the church speaks of prayers for the souls of those slain in the battle 'whose bodies lie buried about three miles and more in and around the same field'.⁴⁴

One topic which remains problematic is whether the dead of the victorious army were treated in the same way as the dead of the defeated. There is very little in the sources on this. A twelfth-century account of the burials following the battle of Clontarf (1014) implies that the victors concerned themselves only with their own dead: 'on the next day they went into the field of the battle and buried every one of their people that they were able to recognise'.⁴⁵ In 1415, although Henry V had two peers excarnated, no source suggests he took other bodies back to England. Therefore, the assumption must be that they were buried at Azincourt. That is what some English chronicles suggest, but the Brabantine Edouard Dwynter claims that Henry had his own dead put into a barn and burned along with armour and equipment.⁴⁶ Cremation was not an acceptable practice in the Christian tradition but might it be used in a post-battle situation? Surely Henry would have had to have buried the burned remains? Henry left Azincourt on 26 October, the day after the battle. Therefore, whatever he did, he did quickly. We also need to ask how easy it was to discriminate between the dead of each side. English military ordinances from 1385 laid down the wearing of national insignia, which would have made matters easier in 1415. But in civil war situations it was surely more complicated.

Sutherland has suggested that the individual burials he discovered at Towton Hall were of the winning side since they were placed in the correct burial position. In one case a rosary bead has been found with the skeleton.⁴⁷ However, it is possible that the 37 bodies found at Towton in 1996 were also from the winning side as it is no longer certain that the bodies had been mutilated,⁴⁸ they might have been buried there in a group in anticipation of a chapel being built as it had been at Battlefield for the battle of Shrewsbury. In 1467 Edward IV petitioned the pope for indulgences to be granted for those supporting the repair of a chapel of St Mary within the parish of Saxton; this mentions that casualties of the battle had been buried 'partly in the cemetery of the said chapel, and partly hard by it'.⁴⁹ We have noted earlier Richard III's interest in the matter which mentions a parish church as well as a separate chapel, presumably close to the field. When in July 1486 the archbishop of York offered indulgences to those who supported the chapel, it was described as being 'upon the battleground where the bodies of the first and greatest in the land as well as great

multitudes of other men were first slain and then buried and interred in the fields around'. In December 1502 the archbishop granted a further indulgence to those who gave alms for a chapel at Towton 'on which chapel and ground about it where many bodies of men slain in the time of war lie buried'.⁵⁰ Such a chapel at Towton Hall has recently been discovered by Sutherland.⁵¹

Although there is no definitive proof, it is possible that this chapel was at or close to the current site of Towton Hall. None of the bodies found in 1996 was disarticulated, suggesting they were buried soon after the battle on a site which had already been earmarked for consecration and commemoration. The majority of the bodies were buried on an west-east axis although some were face down, and, as the excavators noted, 'the dead were certainly laid in the grave as opposed to being simply thrown in ...'. The moot point, as they also noted, was whether this simply reflected efforts to put as many bodies as possible into the grave rather than being a sign of respect for the dead.⁵²

However, this raises a bigger issue. Would the winning side necessarily have behaved badly towards the bodies of the defeated? In English victories in France it was the defeated who had to deal with the burials of their own dead. Even during civil war in England, there is little evidence of ill-treatment of bodies save for those of the leaders who were deemed to have acted as traitors, and even in those cases proper burial would follow. Richard III's body shows signs of post-death wounding but was buried in a church. The body of Henry Percy (Hotspur), who had been defeated and killed at Shrewsbury, was decapitated and cut into four quarters, which were then parboiled. The head and quarters, along with the heads of two other dead rebels, were put with cloves, cumin, aniseed and other spices and salt into sacks dipped in wax and resin. This was aimed at countering the putrefaction and decay until the heads and quarters could be distributed to four towns for display.⁵³ But it was common for even dismembered parts to have a proper burial later. The body of Thomas Percy, earl of Worcester, another rebel killed at Shrewsbury, was decapitated and his head displayed on London Bridge, but in December 1403 the sheriff of the city was ordered to send it back to be buried in St Mary's church in Shrewsbury where the rest of his body had been taken after the battle.⁵⁴

Thomas Walsingham's account of the immediate aftermath of the battle of Bryn Glas (June 1402) is also instructive.⁵⁵ He comments that 'after the battle the Welsh women cut off the genitalia of the dead, put the member of each dead man in his mouth and hung his testicles from his chin. They also cut off noses and stuck them up their arses'. But he adds two important comments: the first that this was an unprecedented crime and the second that 'they did not allow the bodies of the dead to be commended to God with the last rites of burial until a huge sum of money had been paid'. In other words, even when bodies were abused, they were still buried properly. We must beware of modern-day assumptions of hostilities in war. Similarly, the lack of physical commemoration for the bulk of battle dead seems ungrateful to the modern eye but is typical of the middle ages. Only those who could afford tombs in churches were commemorated tangibly. Churchyard monuments in England are extremely rare before 1600 and only common from 1650.⁵⁶

From these examples we can draw two main conclusions. The first is that there was always an effort to ensure proper Christian burial by whatever means. The second is that there was no set pattern for how the dead of battles were treated.⁵⁷ More research is needed on the variations. For instance, it has been speculated that weather was a factor. In very hot weather, as at Wisby, there was a desire to bury as quickly as possible. At Towton, it has

been suggested that the shallowness of the grave containing the 37 skeletons was because the ground was frozen and difficult to dig.⁵⁸ We could also factor in the location of the battle and the geographical origins of the troops. Where there was a neighbouring church or monastery, we would expect it to play a role in burials. Where soldiers came from the neighbourhood then there was a good chance of their being taken to their home church. Perhaps also where men were following a lord with large numbers of servants, or where they had friends willing to act, it was possible for even men of lower status to be taken home.

Whether bodies were exhumed and reburied or not might depend on subsequent political developments, as we can see in the case of Richard III's interest in Towton and Henry VII's in Bosworth. Indeed, even the immediate post-battle decisions on burials might be influenced by the nature of the victory and its political impact. For instance, was it always possible to recover bodies immediately? Froissart portrays Edward III's three day moratorium at Crécy as an act of clemency. Does this imply that he was giving greater opportunity than was common for individual bodies to be retrieved and repatriated? Froissart also adds that it was the English king who had the bodies of the great French lords taken to a nearby monastery and buried there in 'sainte terre' (hallowed ground).⁵⁹ Was it common for the victor to deal with the bodies of the defeated, or is this situation linked to Edward's possession of the territory in which the battle of Crécy had been fought, the comté of Ponthieu? Is it true that Edward took responsibility or is Froissart simply wishing to portray him in a more favourable light? In this context, it is interesting that some English chronicles credit Henry V not only with ordering the burials of both English and French but also agreeing that the bishop of Théroutanne 'should bless the unhallowed place so that it might serve as a cemetery'.⁶⁰ It is also significant that Monstrelet should mention the concern of Philip, count of Charolais, later Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, for the finding of the bodies of his dead uncles at Azincourt and with ordering the abbot of Ruisseauville and the *bailli* of Aire to create the burial ground.⁶¹

We also need to factor in the number and proportion of dead. Where fatalities in a battle were high we might expect the hasty construction of mass graves. But this takes us to the central problem in analysing medieval battles. We rarely know for certain the number of soldiers involved in the battles. We cannot accept at face value the numbers provided in the chronicles. They are always exaggerated, and where we can compare with financial records this is immediately apparent. To cite only one example, the *Journal d'un Bourgeois de Paris* claims that Philip, duke of Burgundy had an army of 6000 men active in September 1429. Other chroniclers give a figure of 3000 to 4000 men. However, the financial records of the duke's receiver-general show there were only 2300 men.⁶² The other difficulty is knowing how many men were killed. This is also because of the problems with the chronicles but is also linked to our understanding of how battles were fought. It is easy to prove the deaths of the leading nobles and gentry who would have engaged in hand to hand fighting. But we cannot be certain how many archers and crossbowmen were killed. In the later middle ages, these troops may not always have been involved in close fighting since they did not have full plate armour. If relatively few of the lower ranks were killed this would have an impact on the number of bodies left on the field, since it was men of lower status who would not necessarily have the benefit of repatriation as enjoyed by the higher status troops. Sutherland's conclusion is that the numbers of dead have been much exaggerated by chroniclers, perhaps by as much as tenfold.⁶³

The difficulty in locating mass graves largely arises out of the practicalities of archaeological investigation: we are looking for small features on big sites. This remains a problem even when, as in the case of the battles of the British Civil Wars in the seventeenth century, we are more certain of the number of casualties and even the general location where the main mass graves were dug. If more effective methods of geophysical survey are developed which allows rapid large scale survey at high resolution, then the mass graves may well appear. But, as the documentary record suggests, the location and scale of burial is likely to vary dramatically on different battlefields. But even then, whether the archaeological record proves sufficient on some battlefields to enable calculation of the true numbers killed we must wait to see.

Notes

1. For useful discussion see J. Hooper, 'The 'Rows of Battle-Swan': The Aftermath of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Art, in *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France*, ed. M. Strickland, Harlaxton Medieval Studies VII (Paul Watkins: Stamford, 1998), pp. 82–99.
2. The Berner Chronik of Diebold Schilling, c. 1483 (Burgerbibliothek, Berne). The image is printed in M. Strickland and R. Hardy, *The Great Warbow* (Sutton Publishing: Gloucester, 2005), p. 281. We are grateful to Matthew Strickland for bringing this image to our attention.
3. *Chronique d'Enguerran de Monstrelet*, ed. L. Douët-d'Arcq, 6 vols (Société de l'Histoire de France, Paris, 1857–62), t. 3 (1859), p. 122. In another version of the text 'vingt-cinq piez de terre' is replaced by 'vingt-cinq vergues de terre'. The Tudor author, Edward Hall, used Monstrelet's work but translated this as 'a square plot of 500 yards, in which he caused to be made three pits'. Holinshed, using Hall, spoke instead of a square plot of ground of fifteenth hundred yards': A. Curry, *The Battle of Agincourt. Sources and Interpretations* (Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 242, 258.
4. Warwickshire County Record Office CR 764/240: two letters from Woodford in February 1818 on his activities. We are grateful to Dr. Sutherland for these references. For the map see London, British Library Additional MS 16368 map C, printed in Curry, *Battle of Agincourt*, Figure 2, p. 382.
5. T. Sutherland, 'The Battle of Agincourt. An Alternative Location', *Journal of Conflict Archaeology*, 1 (2006), 261.
6. A. D. H. Leadman, 'The Battle of Towton', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 10 (1889), 287–302. We are grateful to Tim Sutherland for this information and to Professor Barbara Yorke for the comment on Wise.
7. G. Foard and R. Morris, *The Archaeology of English Battlefields. Conflict in the Pre-industrial Landscape*, Council for British Archaeology Research Report 168 (Council for British Archaeology: York, 2012), p. 30. Modern excavations of burials of the English Civil War are from siege sites including Abingdon and the castles of Beeston, Pontefract and Sandal, not from battlefield. For fuller discussion see G. Foard, *Battlefield Archaeology of the English Civil War* (Archaeopress: Oxford, 2012), and a useful list of human remains bearing indications of blunt-force, sharp-force, and penetrative-force wounds can be found in R.C. Woosnam-Savage and K. DeVries 'Battle Trauma in Medieval Warfare: Wounds, Weapons and Armor', *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries, Brill (Leiden and Boston, 2015), pp. 27–56.
8. A. Ayton and P. Preston, *The Battle of Crécy* (Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2005), p. 119.
9. G. Foard and A. Curry, *Bosworth 1485. A Battlefield Rediscovered* (Oxbow: Oxford, 2013); T. Pollard and N. Oliver, *Two Men in a Trench. Battlefield Archaeology – The Key to Unlocking the Past* (Michael Joseph: London, 2002). In some cases work is not yet complete. This is the case at East Stoke where a small amount of rescue work was undertaken on a mass grave which was probably related to the battle of 1487 but the work has not yet been fully written up: Foard and Morris, *Archaeology of English Battlefields*, p. 30. M. Penman, *Bannockburn, 1314–2014: Battle and Legacy: Proceedings of the 2014 Stirling Conference* (Paul Watkins, Lincoln, 2016).

10. T. Sutherland and S. Richardson, 'Arrow Point to Mass Graves: Finding the Dead from the Battle of Towton', *Fields of Conflict. Battlefield Archaeology from the Roman Empire to the Korean War*, ed. D. Scott, L. Babits and M. Haecker Charles (Westport, CT, 2007), pp. 160–73.
11. B. Thordeman et al., *Armour from the Battle of Wisby, 1361*, 2 vols (Kungl. vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien: Stockholm, 1939, reprinted Chivalry Bookshelf: Union City, California, 2001).
12. E. Cunha and A. M. Silva, 'War Lesions from the Famous Portuguese Medieval Battle of Aljubarrota', *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 7 (1997), 595–9. This article also mentions ongoing excavations at Grunewald (1410).
13. A. Boylston, M. Holst and J. Coughlan, 'Physical Anthropology', in *Blood Red Roses: The History, Archaeology and Anthropology of a Mass Grave from the Battle of Towton, AD 1461*, ed. V. Fiorato, A. Boylston, C. Knüsel (Oxbow: Oxford, 2000), p. 45.
14. T. Sutherland, 'Recording the Grave', in *Blood Red Roses*, p. 41.
15. T. Sutherland, 'Unknown Soldiers: the Discovery of War Graves from the Battle of Towton AD 1461', *From Artefacts to Anomalies: Papers inspired by the contribution of Arnold Aspinall*, unpublished paper, University of Bradford 1–2 December 2006, p. 4. T. Sutherland and S. Richardson, 'Arrow Point to Mass Graves: Finding the Dead from the Battle of Towton', *Fields of Conflict. Battlefield Archaeology from the Roman Empire to the Korean War*, ed. D. Scott, L. Babits and M. Haecker Charles (Westport, CT, 2007), pp. 160–73.
16. Foard and Curry, *Bosworth 1485*, p. 51.
17. C. Daniel, *Death and Burial in Medieval England* (Routledge: London and NY, 1997), p. 103.
18. *English Gilds*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith, Early English Text Society, original series, xl (1870), pp. 117, 113, 115.
19. B. Ayres, 'Norwich', *Current Archaeology*, 122 (1990), 56–9.
20. D. Hawkins, 'The Black Death and the New London Cemeteries of 1348', *Antiquity* 64 (1990), 637–42.
21. Jean Froissart, *Chroniques, Livres I et II*, ed. P. Ainsworth and G.T. Diller (Le Livre de Poche: Paris, 2001), pp. 589–90.
22. *Chronique d'Enguerran de Monstrelet*, iii, p. 121.
23. *Chronique des ducs de Brabant par Edmond de Dyncer*, ed. P.F.X. De Ram, 6 vols (Brussels, 1854–60), iii, p. 304.
24. *Chronique de Jean le Fèvre, Seigneur de Saint Remy*, ed. F. Morand, 2 vols (Société de l'Histoire de France, 1876–81), i (1876), p. 260; *Recueil des Croniques et Anchiennes Istories de la Grant Bretagne a present nomme Engleterre par Jehan de Waurin*, ed. W. L. Hardy et E. L. C. P. Hardy, 5 vols (Rolls Series: London, 1864–91), ii, p. 218.
25. Hansard House of Commons Debates 12 July 1978, vol. 953, cc 577–8W.
26. Bibliothèque Municipale de Besançon, Collection Chifflet MS 64, printed in G. Baquet, *Azincourt* (privately printed: Bellegarde, 1977), pp. 85–6.
27. For what follows see *Recueil des documents concernant la commune et la ville de Poitiers*, ed. E. Audoin, Archives Historiques de Poitou, xlv (1928), pp. 164–75.
28. Ibid.
29. Three men were interred with memorials in the nave of St Peter's church, and at least ten in the churchyard without memorials. Thanks to Peter Burley for this information. For burials after Tewkesbury (1471) see G. McN. Rushforth, 'The Burials of Lancastrian Notables in Tewkesbury Abbey after the Battle, A.D. 1471', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucester Archaeological Society* 47 (1925), 131–48.
30. Foard and Morris, *Archaeology of English Battlefields*, p. 32. W. Patten, *The Expeditioun*, Richard Grafton: London, 1548). *Treasurer's Accounts*, ix, 121 and 129 quoted in S.J. Fergusson, *The White Hind and other discoveries* (Faber and Faber, London, 1963).
31. T. Sutherland and S. Richardson, 'Arrow Point to Mass Graves'.
32. A. H. Burne, *The Battlefields of England* (Methuen: London, 1950). At Edgehill (1642) an eyewitness 'saw the bodies pulled together in a series of huge piles in the area where the two armies had first clashed': Foard and Morris, *Archaeology of English Battlefields*, p. 32.
33. Sutherland and Richardson, 'Arrow Point to Mass Graves', p. 165.

34. Sutherland, T. and S. Richardson, 'Arrow Point to Mass Graves: Finding the Dead from the Battle of Towton', p 168, comment 14: Curry, *Battle of Agincourt. Sources and Interpretations*, p. 175.
35. Foard and Curry, *Bosworth 1485*, p. 60.
36. W. A. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, *Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland 1475–1640*, revised by Jackson, Ferguson and Pantzer, vol. 2 (London, 1976), No. 14077, c. 37, and W. A. Jackson, 'Three Printed English Indulgences at Harvard', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 7 (1953), 229–31. See also TNA C 82/367/15, transcribed in O. D. Harris, 'The Bosworth Commemoration at Dadlington', *The Ricardian*, vol. 7, No. 90 (1985), 124, and Foard and Curry, *Bosworth 1485*, pp. 60–61.
37. P. Foss, *The Field of Redemore. The Battle of Bosworth, 1485* (Kairos Press: Newton Linford, 1998), pp. 74–5.
38. Cunha and Silva, 'War Lesions', p. 596.
39. C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (Croom Helm: London and Sydney 1994), p. 139; R. A. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480–1750* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1998), pp. 335, 369.
40. *Mémoires de Pierre de Fenin*, ed. E. Dupont (Société de l'Histoire de France: Paris, 1837), pp. 66–67.
41. Daniel, *Death and Burial in Medieval England*, p. 89.
42. This derives from a manuscript associated with Durham Cathedral Priory, dating to the late 1410s or early 1420s: Oxford, Bodleian Library Laud Misc. 748. The extract is printed in A. H. Burne, 'The Battlefield of Shrewsbury. A Military Reconstruction', *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society*, lii part 2 (1948), 147. We are grateful to Dr. Philip Morgan for advice on this and on other matters concerning the battle of Shrewsbury. Morgan suggests that the exaggerated depth of the pit might be an allusion to the pit of the damned. Archaeological investigations failed to locate the grave in 2002, and if such a pit exists, it presumably lies beneath the church and college buildings. No other, smaller, graves were located in the fieldwork that involved extensive trial trenching across the battlefield (T. Pollard and N. Oliver, *Two Men in a Trench. Battlefield Archaeology – The Key to Unlocking the Past* (Michael Joseph: London, 2002), 56–62.
43. Translated into English in W. G. D. Fletcher, 'Battlefield College', *The Battle of Shrewsbury* (Adnitt and Naunton: Shrewsbury, 1903), pp. 41–2.
44. Fletcher, 'Battlefield College', p. 73.
45. S. L. Fry, *Burial in Medieval Ireland* (Four Courts Press: Dublin, 1999), p. 114.
46. Curry, *Battle of Agincourt. Sources and Interpretations*, p. 175.
47. Sutherland, 'Unknown Soldiers', p. 5.
48. Sutherland, pers. comm.
49. The National Archives C270/26/30 cited in T. Sutherland, 'Killing Time: Challenging the Common Perceptions of Three Medieval Conflicts – Ferrybridge, Dintingdale and Towton – the Largest Battle on British Soil', *Journal of Conflict Archaeology*, 4 (2009), 23. See also *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 19 vols. (London, 1896–1998), vol. XII, *Papal Letters 1458–71*, p. 623.
50. T. Sutherland and A. Schmidt, 'Towton, 1461: An Integrated Approach to Battlefield Archaeology', *Landscapes* 4 (2003), p. 17. M. Habberjam, 'Some Thoughts on Richard III's Memorial Chapel at Towton', *Blanc Sanglier* 29/2 (1995), 3–5. We are grateful to Philip Morgan for this reference. For 1502 see W. Wheeler, *The History of the Parishes of Sherburn and Cawood with notices of Wiston, Saxton, Towton etc*, 2 vols (Longmans. Green and Co: London, 1882), cited in Sutherland, 'Recording the Grave', pp. 12–13. For general discussion see P. Morgan, 'The Medieval Battlefield War Memorial' in *Ritual and Space in the Middle Ages*, ed. F. Andrews, Harlaxton Medieval Studies XXI (New Series) (Shaun Tyas: Donington, 2011).
51. 'The Medieval Dead', Yesterday Television, November 2013.
52. Sutherland, 'Recording the Grave', p. 40.
53. W. G. D. Fletcher, 'Some documents relative to the battle of Shrewsbury', *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 2nd series, x (1898), pp. 243–5, from Foreign Account Roll, 1–6 Henry IV No. 5, m. 23. It is even possible that Hotspur had been

buried in the church at Whitchurch on the evening of the battle but that Henry IV ordered his body to be dug up to be beheaded and quartered.

54. When his tomb was opened in 1816 both the body and head were found there: H. Owen and J. B. Blakeway, *History of Shrewsbury*, 2 vols (London, 1825), vol. 1, pp. 196–7.
55. *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham (1376–1422)*, ed. J. Clark (Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2005), p. 322.
56. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family*, p. 362.
57. This persisted into later centuries. For instance, after the first battle of Newbury (September 1643) we hear that 60 cartloads of dead were taken into the town for burial in addition to those buried on the field but we are not told how a choice was made of who to carry away and who to bury *in situ*.
58. Sutherland, 'Recording the Grave', p. 41.
59. Froissart, *Chroniques*, p. 589.
60. Curry, *Battle of Agincourt*, p. 96.
61. *Chroniques d'Enguerran de Monstrelet*, iii, p. 122.
62. We are grateful to Aleksandr Lobanov for this example.
63. Sutherland, 'Killing Time', 22.

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Notes on contributors

Anne Curry is a professor of Medieval History and Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Southampton. She has published extensively on late medieval warfare, especially the battle of Agincourt and Lancastrian Normandy, and is co-director of *The Soldier in Later Medieval England* project (www.medievalsoldier.org).

Glenn Foard is a Reader in Battlefield Archaeology at the University of Huddersfield, and author of *Battlefield Archaeology of the English Civil Wars*, *The Archaeology of English Battlefields* (with Richard Morris) and *Bosworth 1485. A Battlefield Rediscovered* (with Anne Curry), as well as various landscape studies of Northamptonshire.

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