“And describe the shapes of the dead”: Making Sense of the Archaeology of Armed Violence

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... I would like to describe that here
And to describe the shapes of the dead;
Some trampled by horses,
Others with open breast and head
Others that it was pitiful to see,
With bare entrails and brains.

Few artifacts from Europe’s long Middle Ages evoke the kind of visceral response that comes from viewing the skeletal remains of the victims of violence. As Joanna Sofaer puts it, “Bodies intrigue us because they promise windows into the past that other archaeological finds cannot.” These are powerful and evocative objects. Upon seeing the mass graves, excavated between 1905 and 1930 before the city walls of Visby on the Island of Gotland, filled with the dead from the 1361 battle between townsfolk and forces of the Danish King, E.G. Folcker did far more than just describe their shapes. He found them “[i]n poses which in the living would denote hatred or tenderness, pain or hilarity,

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1 The central argument of this paper was developed in the author’s conference presentation, “It’s Not Over Until it’s Overkill: Mixed Messages from the Archaeology of Violence,” 47th International Congress of Medieval Studies (University of Western Michigan, Kalamazoo MI., May 2012), for a session hosted by De Re Militari: The Society for the Study of Medieval Warfare and Technology. The present paper has benefited from the insight of conference participants and the careful reading of early drafts by Zena Charowsky and Dr. Steven Gunn.


despair or ecstasy,” but they were now “hallowed by the passive majesty of
death,” transformed into something else. Folcker, an art historian deeply
moved by Gunnar Hallström’s 1905 charcoal drawing of one of the open graves,
could not restrain his imagination:

Straining all their muscles, and expending all the strength of their bodies,
these men attacked each other, the blood spurting, limbs being crushed,
and the flesh being cut from the bones in ribbons. When one has looked
at the fallen men who have been flung into the huge grave, one almost
believes the words of the saying that on this day, the third after St. James,
in the year 1361, the blood flowed in streams through the gates of Wisby
and ran down the hillocks right to the sea.

The mass graves that so affected Folcker have supplied the stock images, in
skeletal form, of medieval warfare for almost a century. Those same bones
regularly appear in popular works of medieval history or in television docu-
mentaries and online journalism, often without much commentary or detailed
analysis. Explanations seem redundant. Sofaer explains public reaction in
emotional terms: “We instinctively recognise their bodies as we recognise our
own; they are essentially **us**.” The bones are left to speak for themselves.

The 1996 excavation of a mass grave associated with the 1461 battle of
Towton in Yorkshire, often considered the bloodiest battle of the Wars of the
Roses (c. 1450–1485), has introduced new images of medieval violence and
wounding through the reconstructed face of one of its victims. The face of the
skeleton, catalogued as Towton 16, was reconstructed in sculptor’s clay. The sci-
ence of forensics and the artist’s skill has made the face of Towton 16 as familiar
to students and scholars of medieval warfare as any celebrity of pop culture.

Viewers are drawn to the face of the middle-aged soldier, not because it is par-
ticularly handsome or aesthetically curious, but for the deep scar that runs

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4 E.G. Folcker, *Hic sepulti*, quoted in Bengt Thordeman, Poul Nörlund, Brian R. Price, and Bo. E.
Ingelmark, *Armour from the Battle of Wisby, 1361* (Stockholm: Vitterherts Historie och
Antikvitets Akademien, 1939), 1:52–53.
7 Caroline Wilkinson and Richard Neave, “The Reconstruction of a Face Showing a Healed
male, who exhibited skeletal traits commonly associated with experienced archers: S.A.
Novak, “Case Studies,” in *Blood Red Roses: The Archaeology of a Mass Grave from the Battle of