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Violence and Conflict in the Material Record



Edited by Skylar Neil and Belinda Crerar

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Volume 25.1 Violence and Conflict in the Material Record

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Introduction

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At the horrifying extreme of human capability, the act of violence can be both mystifying and intensely familiar. History is traditionally told in terms of war: battles won or lost, cities destroyed, peoples conquered. Images of violence are pervasive in both fictional and non-fictional contexts. Despite our supposed modern enlightenment in the age of technology and globalisation, violent patterns of conflict and war persist. Whether or not one believes violence to be 'natural' or a product of social conditions, the long history of conflict is mirrored by extensive academic study, not only into the acts and consequences of violence but also the causes and underlying events that culminate in its execution. Archaeology as a discipline is uniquely situated to contribute to this debate, especially when all that remains of a violent act may be its physical consequences in the material record.

What remains in the archaeological record is the by-product of, and response to, violence and conflict: weapons designed to maim and kill, skeletal trauma on the victims of violence and defensive fortifications intended to resist such attacks. Although this physical evidence can convey the fact that violence existed, it is less useful for the interpretation of larger questions about the extent of violence or its causes. As Carman and Harding state in the introduction to *Ancient Warfare: Archaeological Perspectives*, “the interpretations offered of [the archaeological] evidence...are predicated upon beliefs about past violence, and do not of themselves constitute evidence for it” (Carman and Harding 1999: 7).

More elusive are the meanings, practices and power dynamics that lead to physical violence and do not leave a material trace. Ultimately, the act of violence is a relationship with an unequal power distribution: whilst it has physical consequences, the relationship itself is immaterial. Consequently, there is a temptation in the archaeological study of violence and conflict to focus on these physical consequences and neglect the underlying contexts for the reasons for violence: this is where an interdisciplinary approach is most valuable. It is up to the archaeologist or historian, through a more total understanding of the social, cultural, economic, political and ethnic contexts in which violence occurs, to interpret the physical consequences of violence accordingly and to avoid a singular focus on ‘objectified war’ and its material accoutrements at the expense of the underlying causes for violence and conflict. The papers in this volume strike this important balance between the archaeological evidence and contextual background, whilst utilising methodologies and approaches from a variety of disciplines including anthropology, history, ethnography, epigraphy and literary analysis.

Interpretations of Violence and the ‘Disturbing Past’

Often the terms ‘conflict’, ‘violence’ and ‘war’ are taken to be synonymous. The omission of the words ‘war’, ‘warfare’ or ‘battle’ from the title of this volume is intentional. It is designed as a means of opening up the debate on violence and conflict beyond their association with large-scale combat. In his 1996 publication, *War Before Civilization*, Keeley

advanced the argument that warfare is not solely the auxiliary of complex cultures but has influenced and affected human societies since their very inception. Although not universally accepted (Ferguson 1997; Otterbein 1997), Keeley's deconstruction of the myth of the 'peaceful savage' has irreparably altered the way in which students of ancient warfare approach their discipline. Accepting that human society has always tended towards war should also raise our awareness to the broader implications of the capability of humankind to inflict violence upon its own. Rape, murder, sabotage, destruction of property and, more generally, the fuelling and incitement of fear and oppression are not exclusively the corollaries or tactics of war but occur within cultures and communities independently of collective, systematised combat. Like war, such acts may be politically or economically driven but are also symptomatic of other personal or societal frictions that shape and characterise communities.

Strife within a single society, where it does not escalate to the degree of civil war or genocide, has taken second place in scholarship to conflict between opposing cultures or states. When clear evidence of violence is uncovered archaeologically there is a tendency to look for external pressures and invading foreign forces for an explanation. Occasionally, clear evidence for this paradigm presents itself. Fifty-one decapitated males recently excavated in Dorset have been interpreted as the victims of a systematic slaughter of captive Vikings by local Anglo-Saxons around the turn of the first millennium AD (BBC News 2010). Their foreigner status is confirmed by isotopes extracted from the teeth of the dead men, which suggest that they spent their youth in a colder climate than Britain. In this case, there is justification in seeing this event as one in a series of hostile, potentially violent encounters between two opposing cultures at this time. However, in other cases there may be no need to look beyond internal frictions: Birch's reassessment of the evidence for violence among the precontact Northern Iroquois of Ontario, Canada (Paper 2), is particularly eloquent on this subject as she examines how internal conflict was fundamental in shaping tribal networks and maintaining social hierarchies. Recognising—and being open to recognising—more subtle traces of violence within communities

through the analysis of material remains is a key step towards a better understanding of that community's social infrastructure.

Such an attempt was made by Sonia Hawkes and Christopher Wells in the 1970s regarding the prone burial of a young Anglo-Saxon woman at Kingsworthy, Hampshire, in what has now become a well-known academic controversy. In brief, they interpreted the woman's posture and signs of osteological trauma on her legs as resulting from rape, followed by ritualised execution to cleanse the community of the crime (Hawkes and Wells 1975). This was later challenged by Reynolds (1988), who offered a less dramatised interpretation of the burial, removing any reference to violence. In his reappraisal, Reynolds accepts that rape and blood-vengeance existed in Anglo-Saxon society but adopts a contemptuous attitude to Hawkes and Wells' attempts to identify it archaeologically. He interprets the girl's injuries as resulting from a horse-riding accident by claiming that this "seems to provide a much more sensible interpretation of the evidence" and concludes that prone burials were "merely a reflection of soil movements at some time after the decomposition of the body". The differences in academic approach are striking: while Hawkes and Wells' theory is one-sided, it is inferred directly from the archaeological and osteological data and incorporates contemporary literary sources for interpersonal violence in Anglo-Saxon society. In contrast, Reynolds's approach is more instinctive and reveals an acute dissociation from the need to factor in individual human agency in the interpretation of the archaeological remains. If Hawkes and Wells were too keen to fit the evidence into their theory of rape and execution, Reynolds is equally as guilty of distorting the evidence in order to deny the possibility that hostile human actions had any role to play in the death and burial of this individual.

Reynolds's article is a rather extreme manifestation of a more general aversion in scholarship towards interpreting violence as an emotional response rather than a practical means to an end. Fitting evidence for violence into a framework of functional war, where motives are limited to expanding or defending territory and securing control of resources, allows the archaeologist to strip the evidence of its potentially unsettling emotional substance. In contrast, by

acknowledging the presence of isolated and internalised disputes one must also acknowledge the plethora of incomprehensible rivalries and emotional interactions that fuel human behaviour. The fundamental challenge to reconstructing these is, how can it be done without relying on anachronistic judgements derived from our own cultural values? Does attempting to acknowledge emotional agency in past human actions preclude academic objectivity?

If this problem sounds familiar it is because this volume of the ARC complements issue 22.2, *The Disturbing Past*, which addressed the difficulty archaeologists experience in engaging emotionally with their research material and how the desire for objectivity among archaeologists has resulted in a professional inertia towards the remains of the past. In that volume, Holloway and Klevnäs (2007: 4) use Reynolds's article to highlight the disparaging attitude of archaeologists towards the use of sensationalism and emotive language (such as that used by Hawkes and Wells) when discussing archaeological material. This volume of the ARC continues that theme by addressing how a reluctance to express the past in emotional terms influences how we recognise and interpret the disturbing extremes of human behaviour in the material record itself.

As an attempt to look for more nuanced archaeological interpretations of violent acts, Elder (Paper 7) explores the possibility of distinguishing trauma sustained through warfare and interpersonal conflicts in hunter-gatherer societies by dividing certain defining markers of skeletal damage into four categories: injuries from accidents, localised conflict, raids or ambushes, and warfare. Such studies provide the necessary first step in recognising the body of working evidence for the study of interpersonal violence. From here we may consider precisely who was involved in violent acts in past cultures: an important factor in understanding how social frameworks were potentially regulated or manipulated. Some studies have already been conducted towards this end. As an example, Robb (1997) has looked at skeletal remains with signs of trauma in Iron Age populations of Pontecagnano, Italy. He perceives an increase in trauma sustained by males compared to females at this time—whereas in earlier periods the ratio had been more

equal—and links this to the establishment of trade and communication networks, which led to a heightened sense of male dominance within communities and a re-negotiation of gender roles. Often violent conflict is automatically discussed as existing within a male sphere; however, a greater awareness of the characteristics and frequency of violence within societies and the involvement of different social groups in these acts—both as victims and active perpetrators—can offer insights into social dynamics and deserves careful attention.

Hawkes and Wells' (1975) interpretation of the Kingsworthy burial may be open to question, but their willingness to acknowledge the carnal and terrifying side of human behaviour and its presence in the material record is commendable. When treated with moderation, such an approach has potential for permitting greater insight into how societies expressed and enforced their values and how this determined the actions of different social groups. An anesthetised approach towards archaeological evidence for violence stagnates our understanding of the role it had in maintaining or undermining internal structures of past societies. Furthermore, it undermines our original claims of objectivity since it creates an interpretive bias towards a more sanitised reconstruction of the past. Thus, the aim of this volume is to address how violence and conflict shaped archaeological remains and how a contextual interpretation of the evidence can produce more complex understandings of the motives for, and social constructions of, violence both within and between societies.

Archaeology and the Study of War

The degree to which humans are innately predisposed towards violence continues to be a topic of much debate. Whether one believes that violence is an innate and inescapable facet of human existence or the product of a specific socio-cultural attitude (a cross-disciplinary debate that warrants its own ARC issue), human *capability* for violence against other humans is indisputable, and war is one of its most destructive and extreme manifestations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, studies of warfare have come to dominate discussion of conflict in the past and, indeed, most

of the articles in this volume deal with war either directly through its physical debris or indirectly through its consequences.

The value of archaeology for the study of war as a phenomenon in pre-industrial and non-western societies has long been recognised and has gained greater momentum in recent years (Arkush and Allen 2006). In historically documented periods the value of archaeological investigation to further warfare studies has been slower, although valuable steps have been taken to remedy this. The establishment of the Centre of Battlefield Archaeology in Glasgow in 2006 and its associated publication, *The Journal of Conflict Archaeology*, has made substantial inroads to redress the imbalance between archaeology and textual history, particularly in regards to Mediaeval and Post-mediaeval warfare. Moreover, archaeology plays an increasingly important role in the aftermath of modern violent events, such as the massacre at Srebrenica, by identifying victims and forensically reconstructing violent acts. However, broad conceptualisations of warfare in the Classical World that use archaeological material are still rare compared to those which rely on literary sources, invariably written by the winning side or retrospectively by later authors. Bedigan's article (Paper 5) investigates disparities between the literary evidence for the worship of hero cults in Classical Greece and the material evidence for activity at these sites. By doing so, she demonstrates the benefits of integrating archaeological evidence into traditional studies of the textual record to construct a more nuanced conception of past events.

The terminology used by archaeologists in the study of conflict and warfare stems predominantly from the disciplines of anthropology and military history. Categorisations of 'types' of warfare based on well-known dichotomies have emerged within these disciplines: 'ritual' or 'primitive' warfare is common, if problematic, anthropological shorthand. In military history, societies with different social organisations and technological capacities are juxtaposed—'Oriental' compared to 'Western', 'primitive' compared to 'modern'—and combined with a variety of classifications based on historical period and style (Carman and Harding 1999: 3–4). Whilst these terms provide a seemingly neat categorisation for discussing various types of warfare

throughout history, the divisions can be restrictive and discouraging of holistic approaches to warfare in general. Moreover, the unproblematic usage of loaded terms such as 'primitive' is ultimately detrimental to a study of warfare and conflict without a proper deconstruction of the term's nuances and its implications within specific disciplines. For example, 'primitive war' to an anthropologist may be categorised according to the perceived development level of those participating, whereas to a military historian it may refer to specific tactics and the frequency or extent of casualties.

Violence and Conflict in the Material Record

When advertising for contributions to this volume no restrictions were set on the periods contributors could discuss and papers were chosen specifically so as to include a broad range of cultures and eras. The benefit of combining these in a single collection of articles is that it allows considerations of the approaches towards the study of warfare from within several typological categories, facilitating and encouraging cross-comparison. For example, how the fear of imminent attack influenced architectural design is discussed in regards to both nineteenth-century Australian settler communities responding to sporadic raids by Aborigines (Paper 3) and the military infrastructure of Cold War America (Paper 9).

The material evidence for warfare traditionally falls into three main categories: the machinery, the architecture and the human impact (Carman and Harding 1999: 6–7). Johannesson and Machicek lead the volume with a theoretical assessment of each of these categories and how archaeologists should approach them. In doing so, they re-evaluate not only the evidence and methodologies for studying warfare through the material record, but also how we identify and characterise peace. The following eight articles investigate the three categories of data directly, either focusing in detail on one or combining the evidence of several to achieve more integrated conclusions. For example, weaponry and the physical tools of war are discussed in forensic detail by Boatright (Paper 6) and in terms of their wider cultural impact by Hanson (Paper 9).

Settlements provide the archaeologist with evidence for social organisation as a means of countering or fuelling conflict, as well as changes in community structure following periods of aggression. Grguric (Paper 3) investigates the former through the domestic structures of European settlers on the Australian frontier during the nineteenth century, using these structures to inform on a defined 'White Australian' identity for the occupiers in opposition to the Aborigine 'other'. By contrast, Hayman (Paper 4) investigates the latter through the results of an archaeological survey in Strathnaver, Scotland, through which he determines the impact on the landscape of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Highland Clearances which saw the forced expulsion of Highlanders from their land and the confiscation of their territory.

The third category—that of the physical trauma of war evidenced through human remains—has already received mention and is examined by Elder (Paper 7) and Birch (Paper 2). From the remaining two papers in the volume, a fourth category of material evidence should be noted. Linked to the study of architecture, memorials and commemorative structures for the dead should be treated with special attention since they reveal how war was perceived by different communities during times of relative peace. These physical memorials also provide a link between the practicalities and direct human impact of war—discussed in terms of settlements and skeletal trauma—and its emotional ramifications. Monuments to the deceased and the politics of rebuilding damaged social networks are discussed by Bedigan (Paper 5) and Trigg (Paper 8) in regards to Classical Greece and post-World War I Britain respectively. These papers provide an opportunity to discuss the premium that different social groups or cultures placed on legacy and processes involved in remembering or forgetting their violent histories.

Taken together, the articles that make up this edition of the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* incorporate a diverse spectrum of evidence for conflict and violence in the past and span a wide geographical and temporal range. The volume itself does not aim to be an assessment of the function of warfare and armed conflict for

different societies throughout history and prehistory, why it occurs and its socio-political impact. Instead it is concerned with the methods by which we can reanimate silent traces of violence in the archaeological record. It is through this that we gain greater ability to confront the disturbing realities of human behaviour and to use our awareness of this constructively and holistically to gain a better understanding of the cultures which we study.

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