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Violence and Conflict in the Material Record



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War and Peace: A Reassessment of the Archaeological Traces of Warfare, Inter-Personal Violence and Peace in the Material Record

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Violence and warfare are such persistent features of human behaviour that some have argued that they are not only deeply rooted in our prehistoric past, but that humans have evolved with a propensity for aggression towards members of our own species (Keeley 1996; LeBlanc with Register 2003). Conversely, others have argued that humans have developed behaviours that reduce or mitigate conflict and the use of violence (Fry 2007). In the last two decades, there has been a productive debate amongst archaeologists about how to identify violence and warfare in both historical and prehistorical periods; however, in identifying and reconstructing warfare, researchers have often understandably focused on the direct material traces of violence and war such as weapons, skeletal trauma, fortifications, monuments and iconography. In this paper we argue that a narrow focus on the material aspects of

war in archaeological study overlooks the important observation that episodes of warfare and violence also encompass a transition from a previous state of non-violence or peace. At present, the evidence used to identify violence archaeologically renders warfare and peace as mutually exclusive conditions. The presence of war negates a state of peace and *vice versa*. Consequently, archaeologists tend to view prehistory either from a Hobbesian perspective of *bellum omnium contra omnes* or as inhabited by the peaceful 'noble savage' of Rousseau (Ferguson 2006; Keeley 1996; Warburton 2006). Both of these perspectives are valid because they rest on two equally accurate observations:

- 1) that humans have a demonstrated capacity to inflict tremendous harm on other humans;
- 2) that humans display an equal capacity for altruistic behaviour, compassion and care.

However, a conceptual dichotomy between war and peace fundamentally inhibits our interpretation of warfare in prehistory and furthermore detracts from a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the human past. This is due to the fact that humans invariably display both capacities at the same time.

Here we propose to reassess several aspects of the evidence used to infer past conflict in order to insert the notion of peace back into the debate. We contend that archaeological traces of warfare cannot be engaged without an equally critical assessment of peace. We also argue that the dichotomy between war and peace and its implications for how we identify warfare archaeologically is structured by our living in a nation-state in which individuals have become separated from the means of their own protection. The modern state's regulations on ownership and possession of weapons may influence our interpretation of their presence archaeologically. Consequently, graves have often been argued to belong to warriors based solely on the presence of weapons (Davis-Kimball 2002; Härke 1990; Osgood et al. 2000; Werner 1968). We challenge this interpretation on the basis that mortuary contexts are inherently symbolic and there is no certainty that these weapons were ever used in warfare or inter-personal

violence. In this paper we propose a critical re-evaluation of the material evidence used to infer warfare in the past while also engaging how we might identify peace archaeologically. This short assessment does not intend to produce a model of the archaeological correlates of peace but rather aims to raise a number of worthwhile questions and provide a few tentative solutions to this argument.

Identifying warfare archaeologically is by no accounts a straightforward exercise and, due to the demand to produce tangible and incontrovertible evidence of conflict, archaeologists are compelled to rely on direct and often extreme types of evidence, such as skeletal material with evidence of violent peri-mortem injuries, which arguably suggests the presence of war or violence. However, since a case can often be made that this type of trauma may represent accidental injury, any trauma exhibited typically needs be of such severity and character that it can only have been inflicted in armed conflict (Tayles 2003). This leaves very little room for the more subtle expressions of violent trauma such that may be caused by unarmed combat or violence that is not fatal. Moreover, not all violence and fatal injuries cause damage to bone, which further complicates matters (Osgood et al. 2000; Parker Pearson 2005).

This does not imply that it is impossible to recognise acts of violence from skeletal material but rather that there are difficulties involved with interpretation, of which scholars outside of the discipline should be aware. For instance, it may at times be difficult to determine if a cranial fracture was sustained as a peri-mortem injury or if it is resultant of post-mortem fractures from the burial environment (Boylston 2000). Another example of the complications involved with diagnosing lesions on skeletal material can be found in the case of cut marks exhibited on crania. These may be cited as evidence for mutilation or scalping, but they may also be resultant of post-mortem body processing such as that found in the well-known Iron Age burials from Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains (Rudenko 1970).

As a result of the difficulties involved with identifying incontestable evidence of violent trauma it is likely that some evidence of warfare in the archaeological record may often go unnoticed or unrecorded (Knüsel 2005). Similar instances in which archaeologists are required to rely on very pronounced evidence of conflict can be seen in the quantity of individuals

in graves that exhibit violent trauma and the ambiguity of such evidence. Here again, armed conflict can often be dismissed as isolated incidents or murders due to problems with reconstructing population sizes, sample bias and/or problems with chronology in which graves may be temporally divergent (Chapman 1999; Ferguson 2006). The result, particularly applicable in prehistoric periods, is that archaeologists often need to produce evidence of massacres or mass graves in order to convincingly argue for violent episodes and the existence of armed conflict and still the evidence does not always hold up under detailed scrutiny (Chapman 1999). It is worth mentioning, however, that in spite of requiring such explicit evidence of violence to infer warfare, archaeologists have uncovered these types of evidence throughout the world from many different time periods (Eddy 1974; Ferguson 2006; Guilaine and Zammit 2005; Martin 1997).

By contrast, archaeologists rarely reflect on how peace or the absence of violence might manifest archaeologically but rather infer peace in the absence of material traces of war. This is a particularly problematic issue considering that well-known violent events are not always visible archaeologically. To use a known historical case, the Roman invasion of Gaul (58–51 BC), for example, left virtually no archaeological evidence until long after the conquest and ‘pacification’ had been achieved (Hamilton 1995). Similarly Timur’s conquest of the former Seljuk Empire (AD 1383–1405), though known historically, is largely invisible archaeologically (Manz 1989). Moreover, periods that have been called peaceful such as *Pax Romana* or *Pax Americana* have only been periods of relative peace in which there were still ample instances of war. Trajan’s Wars against Parthia (AD 114–117) or the Vietnam War are two examples of this, but there are multiple others. Hence, it is problematic to infer peace or non-violence simply by the absence of the material traces of warfare, and archaeologists would be hard-pressed to provide tangible evidence to identify or reconstruct peace archaeologically.

However, peace cannot be left out of a discussion of prehistoric warfare because peace and war are not mutually exclusive. Conflict and war, although they are recurring events, are not unending or ubiquitous conditions and are invariably followed by periods in which there are no

wars. The ephemeral and cyclical nature of war and peace cannot be overstated. Individuals occupying social roles involving combat rarely spend much of their lives engaged in actual fighting even if much time is spent preparing for it. The role of the warrior is often a transitional one in which much time is spent engaging in other activities (Vankilde 2006). To emphasise this point, let us consider the ancient writer Aeschylus. Today he is celebrated as an innovative and accomplished playwright, yet during his life he also occupied the role of warrior. He participated and fought against the Persians at the battle of Marathon in 490 BC and, although he had a distinguished career as a playwright, his epitaph makes no mention of this and honours only his military achievements. Sophocles and Xenophon are two additional ancient authors who are celebrated for their literary achievements but who also spent portions of their lives as warriors. Therefore it is essential to recognise that people may experience both war and peace at various stages in their lives. Furthermore, not all members of societies at war are active participants even if they are affected by the ensuing conflicts. The aforementioned writers composed a number of their works at times when Athens was at war and engaged in conflicts in which they did not themselves participate. Hence a dichotomised approach to identifying and reconstructing war and peace archaeologically is incompatible with observations about how people experience these conditions. A focus on evidence of violence or the threat thereof to discuss war in the past also detracts from a more nuanced perspective that can address the broader aspects of war such as displacement of peoples, conscription, troop movements, deportation and ethnocide. Finally, a focus purely on material evidence of actual warfare makes a debate in archaeology concerning peace impossible. This obfuscates the observation that episodes of warfare and violence generally come to an end because of a desire for peace.

In order to more accurately address conflict in prehistory and its material vestiges it is necessary to assert what we conceive as indicative of peace. Peace, defined simply as the absence of war, holds little interpretive value since it cannot be demonstrated convincingly using archaeological evidence. However, if peace is used in a more inclusive sense to mean not only the absence of conflict but also the avoidance of violence, the desire

for security in economic and political affairs, and equality or stability of social relationships, there is at least a rudimentary framework within which material evidence can be discussed (Fry 2006, 2007). This is not meant to suggest that peace may be identifiable in archaeological contexts that, for example, display diachronic growth and/or stability. This would only swing the pendulum in the opposite direction, placing archaeologists in the precarious position of having to find incontestable evidence of peace. Using a broader interpretation of peace is instead meant to allow for a multi-dimensional and synthetic approach by which to discuss both war and peace using archaeological evidence. Such an approach treats war and peace as inseparable features that can coexist simultaneously and recognises the human capacity for both inhumanity and compassion. Let us now turn to some of the material evidence traditionally used to infer warfare in order to demonstrate how this might be accomplished.

Fortifications

Fortifications and defensive settlement patterns are virtually omnipresent in most cultural regions and are considered indicative of warfare or the threat thereof (Arkush and Allen 2006). However, fortifications also represent the desire to avoid conflict by positioning the defenders out of harm's way. Defensive structures are, of course, not peaceful structures by any means, but they represent appropriate examples of how peace and war may coexist in the same archaeological context. Walls, trenches and barriers defend and protect. They represent a desire for security and stability while they also attempt to regulate and control access, movement and interaction. Inasmuch, they may be viewed as representative of qualities associated with avoiding violence, maintaining stability, and regulating social and economic relationships. Yet walls are also divisive features that separate those they protect from outsiders. They embody fear, exclusion of outsiders, xenophobia and, of course, violence. The Great Wall of China, for example, was originally erected in response to the formation in Mongolia of a powerful confederacy of nomadic steppe tribes the Chinese referred to as the *Xiongnu* (c. third century BC to second century AD; Di Cosmo 2002; Watson 1993). The Wall sought

to limit persistent and destructive incursions by nomadic raiders that threatened both the economic and political stability of the empire (Barfield 1989). The tremendous amount of resources invested in the Great Wall over time is testament to the desire by the Chinese to maintain order, regulate access and minimise destruction by persistent border raids. The Great Wall embodies order; however, it is also a symbolic barrier that makes a clear distinction between the 'civilised' agrarian Chinese on the one hand, and the 'uncivilised' destructive nomadic pastoralist on the other. The Great Wall is thus a valid example of the insecurity, xenophobia and fear that may be exhibited in times of war. Other examples include the extensive Danevirke in southern Denmark and Götavirke in central Sweden, which were both constructed in the eighth and ninth centuries AD and built as regional defensive barriers rather than as settlement walls (Griffith 1995; Thurston 2001). Hence fortifications *are* indicative of the presence of armed conflict, but not exclusively so.

Approaching defensive structures solely as evidence of violence obscures another very real dimension in the act of building fortifications: to prevent or discourage violence. Further complicating matters is the interpretation of fortified structures themselves. Often it is difficult to determine to what extent a site actually represents a 'fortified' site as such. A number of examples may be found in Mongolia and southern Siberia where several large Iron Age or *Xiongnu* sites exhibit walled enclosures and ramparts (Perlee 1961; Pousaz et al. 2007). It would be tempting to refer to these simply as fortified structures. However, upon closer examination it is clear that a number of activities took place at these sites. They exhibit evidence of ritual practices, trade, craft production and domestic activity. Though they may have had a defensive or protective element these walled sites may also have been constructed as areas of ceremonial activity and as stopping points along trade routes. The Danevirke's primary purpose, for example, was to control movement and to collect taxes in peacetime (Griffith 1995). Therefore it is important that we attempt to identify the multiple functions which were carried out at such sites and to recognise that walled sites need not purely represent defensive structures.

Skeletal Trauma

In spite of attendant problems with osteological evidence, signs of violent trauma on archaeologically recovered human remains provide direct evidence of violent episodes in the past and may represent the most efficient means by which to address warfare in the archaeological record (Knüsel 2005; Larsen 1997; Walker 2001). Skeletal trauma that suggests intentional mutilation and torture underscores the inhumanity and cruelty that people are capable of inflicting upon one another (Craig et al. 2005). The archaeological record is studded with evidence of violent deaths, massacres and mass graves (Freyer 1997; Tayles 2003; Thorpe 2003; Vencl 1999). It is not our intention here to contest this evidence or downplay its significance. Candid discussions of warfare must acknowledge the brutality of war and accompanying behaviours such as racism, xenophobia and genocide that sometimes occur in times of conflict. New forms of social practice enacted through violence and warfare such as mass killings, mutilation and desecration have further importance in interpreting the evolution of warfare and conflict. Death in war and especially mass killings are traumatic events not only for the victims, but also for surviving group members. Therefore, archaeological interpretation of evidence for massacres should be approached against a backdrop of behavioural responses to such events and consider the impact on social memory, commemoration, group identity and funerary practice that may be identifiable in contemporaneous archaeological materials (Hanks 2008).

The identification of the battlefield at Kalkriese in Germany where Arminius defeated and massacred three Roman legions in AD 9 represents a rare and probably unique example where evidence of warfare, massacre, desecration and re-consecration coexist. Historical accounts impart that after a two-day battle victorious German forces massacred and mutilated three Roman legions (Tacitus *Ann.* 1.55–71). This event had immediate and profound consequences that continued to reverberate centuries after it transpired. The immediate result was a Roman military retaliation five years later during which the exposed remains of Roman soldiers still littering the battlefield were buried and re-consecrated. Human remains recovered at Kalkriese corroborate

the historical accounts (Harnecker 2004). The skeletal remains exhibit massive trauma and considerable evidence of mutilation, dismemberment and exposure. Evidence also indicates that a great number of individuals and in some cases individual osteological elements had been carefully re-interred after a period of exposure to the elements seemingly substantiating the historical accounts of later re-burial episodes (Harnecker 2004). The battlefield at Kalkriese represents an invaluable archaeological resource for reconstructing warfare at the inception of the Roman Empire but also serves as a reminder of the multifaceted circumstances that may be in play at battlefield sites and mass graves.

Examples of skeletal trauma and especially battlefield sites are thus of critical importance and can facilitate archaeological reconstruction of violent episodes in the past. It is essential to note however that skeletal trauma, mass graves and battlefield sites represent only a limited set of components for reconstructing warfare and its impact in prehistory. Focusing on skeletal trauma to the exclusion of contemporaneous osteological material that may exhibit evidence of nurture and co-operative behaviour will again create a unilateral perspective that juxtaposes war and peace. Warfare involves a very complex set of behaviours not all of which are violent. *Camaraderie*, altruistic behaviour and *unitas* are also characteristic of human conduct in times of conflict. War has an impact on group cohesion and identity formation as people respond to threats in the interests of communal safety (Jansen 2006). Investigating osteological trauma alone emphasises combatants, more specifically the victims, of violent behaviour and overlooks the broader impact war has on affected populations. Therefore, a multi-dimensional approach that relies on many lines of evidence from numerous contemporaneous archaeological contexts is arguably the most effective means of elucidating the extensive effects of war on society and human behaviour. When available, osteological data should be employed to form one of many lines of inquiry. The importance of skeletal analysis, carried out within an archaeological context, cannot be overstated. This would seem to be an obvious statement; however it is still often the case that osteological analyses are considered as

peripheral to overall archaeological investigation. If we are to obtain valid indications of prevalence rates of trauma and violent incidents, through palaeodemographic reconstruction and mortality profiles in archaeological contexts, then it is imperative that osteological considerations be taken into account at the outset of project design when applicable.

Weapons

Fatal injuries can be inflicted with many types of objects or simply with muscle power. Weapons, on the other hand, are specific types of material culture that have been developed for the express purpose of enacting and inflicting violence. Weapons are the instruments of war and allow for the study of specific aspects of warfare and combat. What types of weapons were available and how they might have been used both offensively and defensively can give important insights into military practice at the time. However, with the exception of weapons retrieved from battlefield contexts, it is rarely possible to determine if these objects were ever used (Parker Pearson 2005). Hence, weapons, especially those retrieved from mortuary contexts, are rarely straightforward representations of warfare but rather metaphors of particular practices, agents and identities (Vankilde 2006; Whitley 2002). Objects such as bows and arrows, knives and axes also serve utilitarian functions and need not represent weapons at all. Härke (1990, 1992) has convincingly demonstrated the symbolic role of weapons deposited in Anglo-Saxon burials, where younger individuals, unable to actively participate in warfare, were afforded various items of weaponry. This clearly illustrates an example of the symbolic role of weapons in burial contexts that may be reflective of kin groups, age, social strata, inheritance or a myriad of other complexities, which contribute to the final mortuary context and need not denote the 'warrior' status of the individual.

Moreover, buried caches of weapons and those found in graves need not represent the complete arsenal of weapons available but rather those weapons that had specific symbolic value (Vankilde 2006). The well-known Anglo-Saxon burial of Sutton Hoo at the site of Woodbridge in Suffolk, England, contains a number of weapons, armour and ceremonial items that were clearly symbolic rather than functional in nature given their

elaborate design, decoration and overall impracticality (Campbell 1991). Weapons have become metaphors of violence but they may, in some cases, represent less aggressive behaviour. Fontijn (2005) has suggested that weapons deposited in graves and hordes are not necessarily indicative of the importance of warfare but rather of the role played by weapons in sacrificial and votive practices. Thus, buried weapons may represent attempts at removing weapons from society. Weapon hordes can thus be metonymic devices that signal an end to hostilities or a desire for/gesture of peace (Vankilde 2006). Hence, weapons recovered archaeologically should be approached as metaphors of military practice and possible warrior identities, as well as symbolic representations of social ideologies rather than merely as tools used for violence.

Archaeologists and War

As a result of socio-economic developments in the last 50 to 60 years and the demands of academic curricula the vast majority of archaeologists have not actively participated in war. Although this places archaeologists in the role of objective observers it also asks them to identify the materiality of behaviours and emotions they have never themselves experienced. Archaeologists must look reflexively at how current events, our relationship to weapons and our attitudes towards war may affect our interpretation of warfare in the past. Vankilde (2003) has demonstrated how resurgence in interest in prehistoric warfare in the last two decades has coincided with a return of war to European soil. Kristiansen (1999) has argued that there has been a reluctance to accept the extent of warfare and violence in the past because it is not a viewpoint that has been compatible with academic traditions that have developed in the West since World War II. One should also note that current social structures and practices are far removed from those just a few centuries ago.

Unlike our prehistoric subjects, archaeologists' worldviews are structured by living in modern nation-states. In the nation-state, individuals have largely become separated from the means of their own protection. Security is enacted by specific civic agents such as the police service and fire brigade. The state has authority over the legitimate application of violence and in most Western countries it is typically illegal for

adult citizens to use violence against other members of society. Moreover, the state regulates ownership and possession of weapons. In fact, in a number of Western countries there are ongoing political debates as to whether citizens should be able to own or carry weapons at all. Weapons are not commonplace or mundane objects in today's Western societies and thus it is not surprising to find that archaeologists consider their presence archaeologically noteworthy. The presence of weapons in burials has been used to argue for the existence of warriors in prehistory; however, weapons may be privileged over other types of objects in these interpretations as a result of archaeologists' attitudes towards weapons that are structured by the society in which they live (Guilaine and Zammit 2005; Härke 1990). It is imperative that we continue to deconstruct the archetypal image of 'warrior' and instead adopt a more holistic approach to the study of mortuary contexts that include weapon deposition. Other types of objects such as ceramics or textiles are rarely assigned the same power to infer social roles of deceased individuals. One should also note that people in prehistory relied on very different institutions for personal security and, especially in small-scale societies, a great deal of responsibility likely fell on the individual. Hence weapons may have simply been very practical tools to survive in uncertain times in which individuals had to rely considerably on their own ability to defend themselves.

Conclusion

Contemporary attitudes towards war are an important factor that may affect interpretation of archaeological traces of warfare, especially with regards to motivation and causation. In modern society war is understood to be a moral activity that serves to achieve a higher purpose (Warburton 2006). War in the modern nation-state, particularly since the twentieth century, requires rationalisation, justification and even a legal basis. State warfare, its causes and results, is the type of war that archaeologists are most familiar with but the attitudes towards, and characteristics of, prehistoric warfare were likely to be very different. Prehistoric warfare need not be justifiable either morally or materially. In order to better understand the social conditions in which prehistoric warfare occurred, archaeologists need to move beyond

the debate of the existence or frequency of war in prehistory. It has been demonstrated quite convincingly that prehistoric warfare was widespread (Guilaine and Zammit 2005; Keeley 1996; LeBlanc with Register 2003). On the other hand, it has been shown not to have been a ubiquitous or uninterrupted occurrence (Chapman 1999; Ferguson 2006). Continued debate on the suitability and meaning of certain types of evidence used to discuss warfare will eventually reduce interpretation to archaeological nihilism. Archaeologists should therefore reject a polarised interpretive framework with war on one end and peace on the other, and adopt a more nuanced perspective that recognises that war and peace are not only compatible, but inseparable. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise the ways in which our perceptions of warfare are shaped by the modern world in which we live. It is only through the acknowledgment of these potential biases that we can endeavour to examine more objectively the material traces of warfare in the past. Therefore, in order to glean a better understanding of prehistoric warfare we must aim to adopt a multi-scalar and multi-dimensional approach that recognises the suite of behaviours human societies display during both times of conflict and peace.

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