

The Ancient World at War

Philip de Souza, ed. Thames and Hudson, 2008

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1 War Before History

KEY DATES

- 12,000–10,000 BC** Bodies with embedded projectiles at Jebel Sahaba, Sudan
- 8000 BC** Maces and enlarged projectile points at Qermez Dere, northern Iraq
- 6000 BC** Earliest rock art portrayals of group conflict in Australia
- 5500–5000 BC** Massacres at Ofnet, Talheim and Schletz in Germany
- 5400 BC** Skeletons show signs of violence in Florida, USA
- 5000 BC** Defensive ditches around Yangshao villages in the Yellow River valley, China
- 4300 BC** First true fort at Icel on the southern Turkish coast
- 2600 BC** Rammed-earth village walls throughout Longshan, China
- 2500 BC** Skeletons show signs of violence, Pacific Northwest Coast, USA
- 2000 BC** Severed heads, Peruvian coast, South America
- 1500 BC** Palisades and settlement destruction at San José Mogote, Oaxaca, Mexico

Opposite Neolithic cave painting of archers in battle from Tassili n'Ajjer, southeastern Algeria. The Sahara was much wetter then; other portrayals suggest that conflict was stimulated by cattle theft.

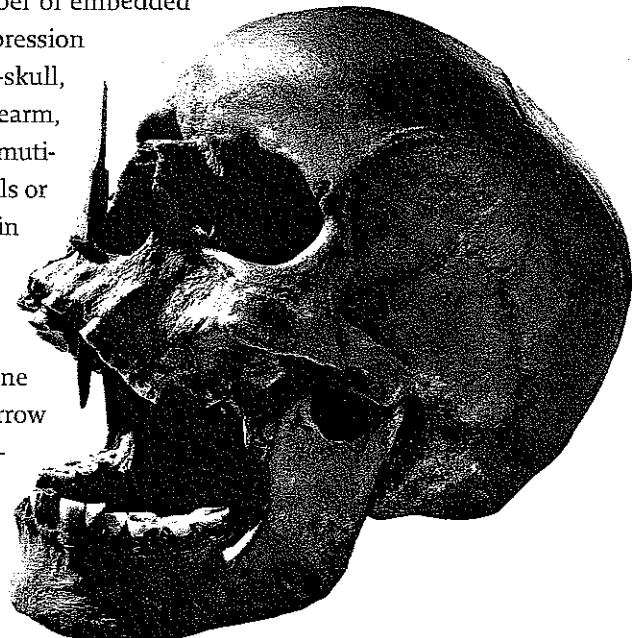
Right A skull from a Danish bog body with an embedded bone point, dated to 2500 BC, when war had become endemic across Europe. Death was probably caused by another point found in the breast.

When did war begin? Or has it always been with us? We do not know. Part of the problem is in the definition of 'war', but most anthropologists could settle on simply 'organized, lethal violence by members of one group against members of another'. This is just enough to make the essential point that war is different from murder. It is a group process, it is social. Many believe that socially sanctioned war is as old and commonplace as humanity itself, or maybe older. In this view, war is in our blood, or at least our genes. Many people, without claiming any expertise, simply assume, they know, that war has always been our way, from our most distant discernible past. But what are the facts? We will start with 'what?' – what sorts of evidence reveal the presence of war. Then we will move on to 'where and when?' – scanning the globe for the earliest signs of war. With that in hand, we can ask 'why?' – what factors seem responsible for the origin or early intensification of war?

EVIDENCE

The archaeological record varies tremendously around the world – what sort of material past inhabitants left behind, the degree of preservation, and how much archaeological investigation has been done. In addition, the point in time from which good evidence can be recovered varies by millennia across different world regions. But when an archaeological record does develop, war leaves recoverable traces of four types of evidence: bones, settlements, weapons and art.

Skeletal evidence can be definitive, but quite often is not. When a good number of embedded arrow points, unhealed depression fractures on the left fore-skull, 'parry fractures' of the forearm, missing or extra body parts, mutilations, unusual mass burials or unburied bodies are found in a collection of skeletal remains, the presence of war is beyond doubt. But often what is found is one individual. An embedded arrow point could be from a murder, an execution, or a hunting accident, and many forms of non-lethal violence cause skeletal





trauma, from domestic violence to culturally structured head-bashing duels. In the past, post-mortem bone damage was often misidentified as proof of violence, an error that gave rise to very bloody scenarios of human prehistory.

Settlement data can also be conclusive – or not. Nucleated settlements, walls with defensive features, defensible locations on hilltops or cliffs, redoubts and lookouts, and settlement destruction are found where war was common. But enclosing walls may also be used to keep cattle in, predators out, or to indicate the status of a settlement; clustered buildings can burn to the ground accidentally; and settlements deep within the lands of a people warring against external enemies may not need to be fortified.

A stone mace or a bronze sword might show the presence of war, but the line between tool and weapon is often not so clear cut. The spear or arrow used to kill a beast can kill a man. Stockpiles of larger arrow points or slingstones are suggestive of battle preparation, but, until a specialized weaponry has developed, such artifacts alone usually cannot confirm the presence of war.

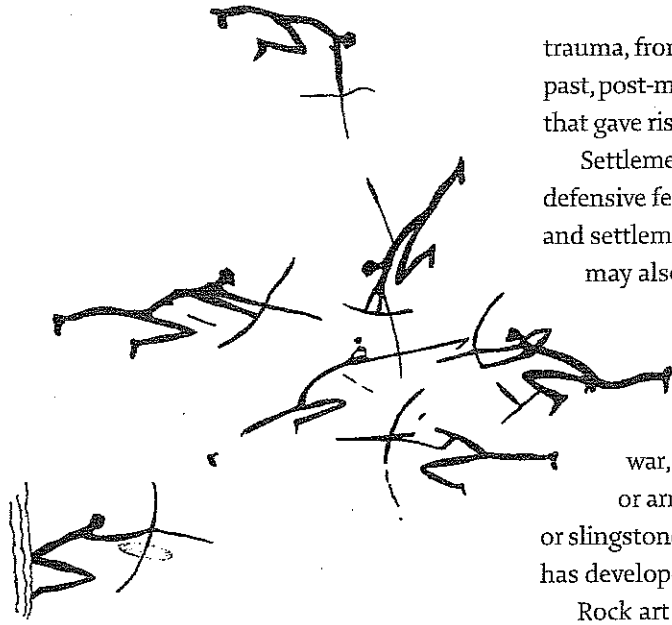
Rock art or carvings in rock depicting interpersonal violence can seem to be compelling evidence of war. But dating of such images is often maddeningly imprecise, within a range of a few thousand years. And what do they portray? One scene from eastern Spain – probably Neolithic – suggests a flanking manoeuvre, but some see the enactment of a ritual. Another suggests an execution, but of whom?

In the past decade, a major controversy has developed over how to interpret the archaeological record described above. Some conclude that war goes forever backwards in time. But others – including the present author – argue that evidence of war emerges out of a warless background. Most archaeologists are in between, clear that any evidence of war amongst many early prehistoric peoples is lacking, yet not going so far as to claim there was a time before war. The next section surveys the global archaeological record for signs of collective violence, so you the reader can form your own opinion. But be forewarned – each area is different.

AROUND THE WORLD WITH A TROWEL

What is the earliest war? That depends on what you count. Cannibalism of enemies, for example, sometimes occurs in war. There are indications of cannibalism among Spanish *Homo antecessor* as early as 780,000 BC, and possible (but debated) cannibalism among later *Homo erectus* in China, Neanderthals in Europe, and among the earliest modern *Homo sapiens* in southern Africa. But cannibalism can be a last resort of the starving, or part of mortuary rituals for one's own dead, so these cases do not establish feasting on killed enemies. In the American Southwest, strong evidence of cannibalism includes a period when there seems to have been little if any war (AD 900–1140), though cannibalism accompanied war later.

For decades, the earliest generally accepted evidence of war has been a burial site excavated during the Aswan Dam construction at Jebel Sahaba, possibly dating to before 10,000 BC. Some 5,000 years later, further south along the Nile, the Khartoum Mesolithic people had stone discs which appear to be maces. Despite these intriguing early finds, African archaeology has produced only a few scattered skeletal indicators of violence from these early periods. Thus, collections of several hundred skeletons from Nubia exhibit high levels of different sorts of trauma, variously and tentatively



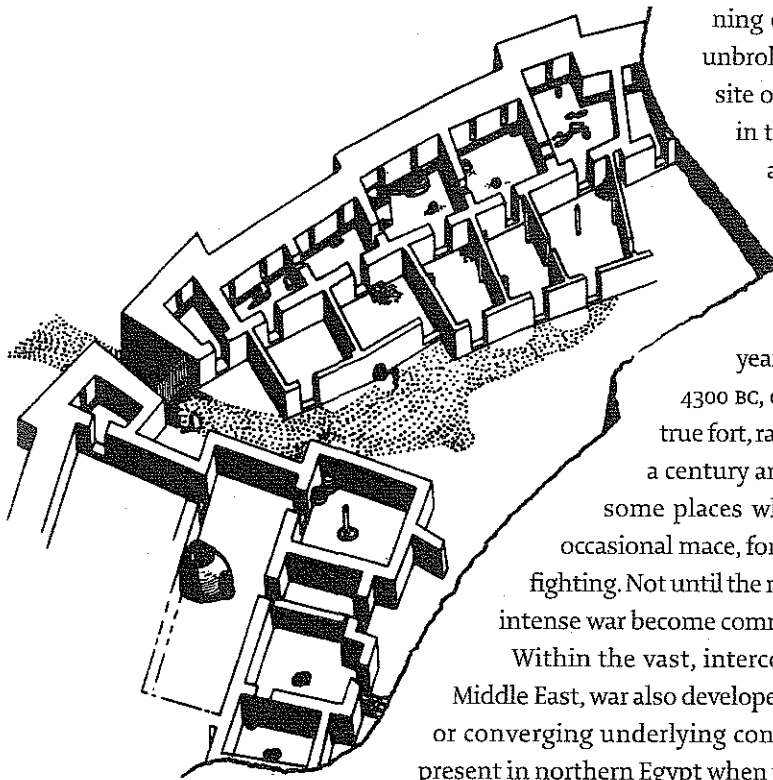
Above Rock art from Morella la Villa, Spain. Dating has been disputed, but most believe it is Neolithic. Interpretation of ancient art is always debatable, but this panel appears to show a basic tactical manoeuvre. Two lines of archers clash, while another comes from the side and shoots an enemy in the back.

Below Palaeolithic rock art from Cougnac, France. Such images could be taken as evidence of interpersonal violence, even war, but the wavy lines emanating from the human figure, and going around human figures in other images, contrast with the straight, v-tipped lines sticking into animals in roughly contemporary cave paintings.



identified with war, non-lethal club or wrestling fights, domestic violence, accident, and even political repression – but all of these come after long interaction with Egyptian civilization. The earlier record in Africa remains a major gap in our knowledge, and could be seen as the future of the archaeology of war.

A more recent entry in the ‘very earliest’ category comes from Arnhem Land in northern Australia (see box on p. 25). In Australia, or at least parts of it, it seems the fighting never went away. Parry fractures and cranial depressions are common in many skeletal collections. The vast majority of these are healed, suggesting the usually non-lethal club fights observed ethnographically. Females generally had more skull fractures, suggesting much of the trauma may be from domestic contexts, or even a known mourning ritual of bashing the head with rocks. But the earliest accounts of European contact leave little doubt that aboriginal Australians were prepared for deadly encounters with wooden spears.



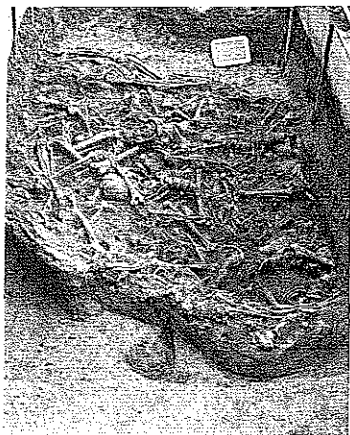
Reconstruction of the fort at Icel on the Anatolian coast, dating from around 4300 BC. War had been present for millennia, but this represents a new phase. Not a walled village, it appears to be a true fort, with projecting towers, reinforced entrance, and barrack-like rooms with slit windows.

The first widely accepted evidence of war, the beginning of a terrible stream of violence that comes down unbroken into the present, is found in northern Iraq. The site of Qermez Dere, dating to around 8000 BC (all dates in this section are simplified and should be taken as approximations), has maces and enlarged projectile points, and two other sites about a thousand years younger have between them a major defensive wall, maces and skeletons associated with arrow points. Slowly, irregularly, over the next 3,000 years, war spread throughout the Middle East. Around 4300 BC, on the southern coast of Turkey at Icel, there was a true fort, rather than a walled village, which was destroyed after a century and reoccupied by others of a different culture. But some places where there are signs that war was present – the occasional mace, for example – do not appear to have had much actual fighting. Not until the rise of city-states early in the 3rd millennium BC does intense war become commonplace.

Within the vast, interconnected cultural sphere all around the ancient Middle East, war also developed, due to some combination of military interaction or converging underlying conditions. Mesopotamian-style maces are already present in northern Egypt when the record picks up around 4300 BC. In Central Asia east of the Caspian Sea, and in the high country of Pakistan, settlement defences begin to appear during the 4th millennium BC. The great Harappan civilization of the Indus valley is a long-standing puzzle, with surprisingly few signs of war before and during its peak years, 2500–1800 BC. But after Harappa declined, intensive and spreading warfare is unmistakable.

In China the first defensive pattern appears in the 5th millennium BC among the Neolithic Yangshao in the central Yellow River valley. After 3000 BC, rammed earth fortifications show up across the extensive Longshan interaction sphere of local Neolithic traditions, and in other regions. One location has several bodies thrown down a well. Yet like the Middle East, war signs are clear in some areas, while absent or rare in others. In the Bronze Age, however, war became a way of life.

WAR BEFORE HISTORY



Above A 7,000-year-old bone deposit at Talheim, Germany. At least 34 individuals, 16 children and 18 adults, appear to have been slaughtered and thrown in a pit. More than half have blows to the skull, seemingly caused by farmers' tools.

Below The enigmatic skull nests from Ofnet in Bavaria, dating to around 5500 BC. Some 33 individuals, mostly women and children, are represented in these two roughly contemporaneous deposits. Separate interment of skulls is not rare in burial practices, but perimortem bludgeon wounds strongly suggest war killing.

The record for the Korean peninsula begins with specialized metal weapons already present, but in Japan there was a dramatic transition from hunter-gatherers exhibiting little skeletal trauma when war-making cultivators from Korea arrived around 300 BC; then war with high casualties quickly spread.

In Europe the story is more complicated, partly because we have so much information. The very early record is suggestive, but difficult to interpret. Signs of cannibalism have already been noted. In the Upper Palaeolithic after 40,000 years ago there are more skeletons, but only rare suggestions of violence, including a few embedded points. These could be accidental, individual quarrels, or executions. In the 9th millennium BC, warming climate led to the spread of forests and loss of big-game herds. Settled Mesolithic lifestyles developed, a shift from mobile hunting to reliance on smaller, more concentrated wild foods. More human remains have signs of violence, such as the depression fractures on several of the skulls from Ofnet in Bavaria.

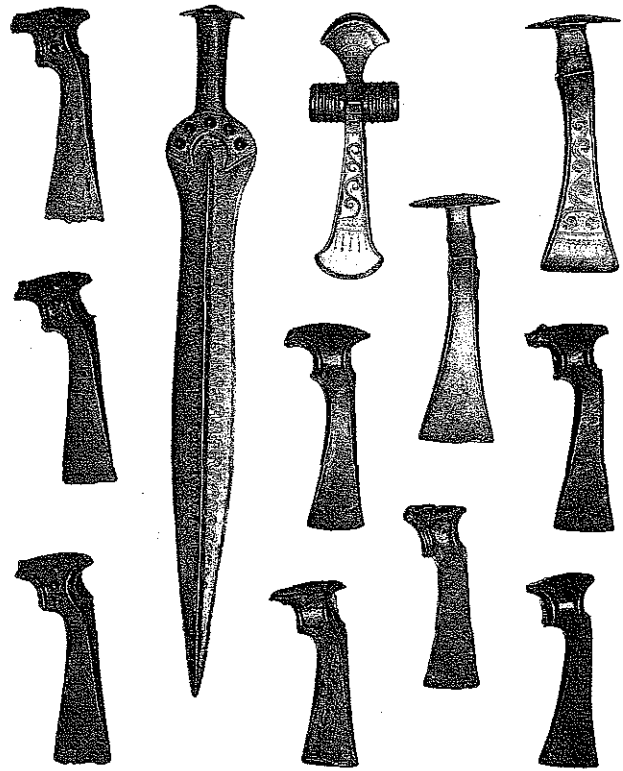
In the 6th millennium BC, agriculture began to spread slowly across Europe, reaching the far corners some 2,500 years later. Early agricultural sites generally lack any defensive features, and this status can last for centuries. The earliest pattern of fortification may begin before 5000 BC on Italy's Tavoliere plain, where substantial ditches ringed Neolithic villages. More conclusive evidence of war appears abruptly around 5000 BC at German Talheim and Austrian Schletz, in what appear to be slaughters of settled farmers, slain with woodworking adzes and axes. Signs of violence are scarce or non-existent in most other areas at this point, but by 3500 BC or so, war seems firmly in place across Europe. Forts dominated hilltops, and men were buried with battle-axes. The Bronze Age, beginning around 2300 BC in the Aegean (later elsewhere), is associated with an elaborate weaponry, often ceremonial, linking together warrior elites across the continent (see box opposite).



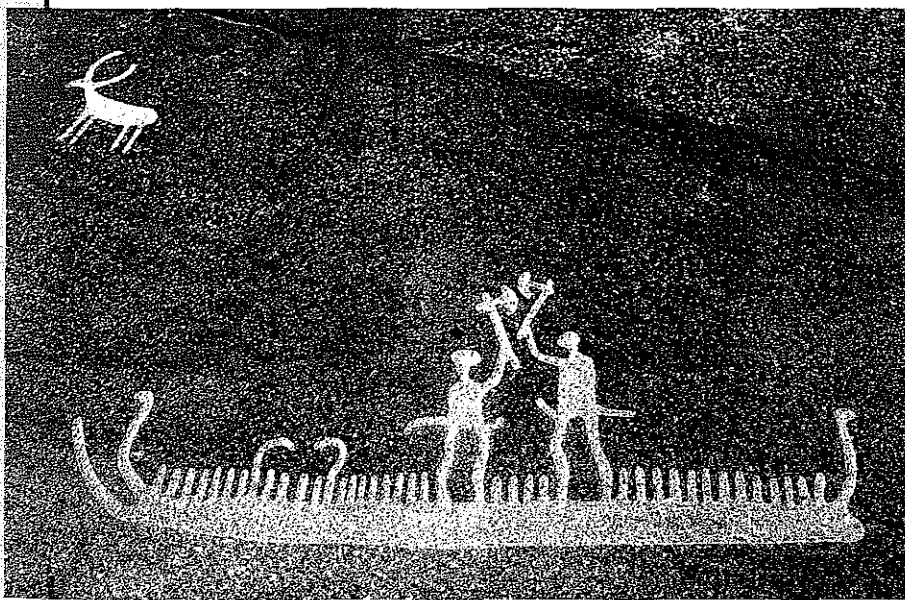
Bronze Age Weaponry

A warrior aristocracy flourished in the European Bronze Age. In the Late Neolithic, some warrior specialization was already apparent in grave goods, but bronze was a critical addition. Circulating in ingots and finished products, at first almost all of it went into weapons. Bronze spearheads, daggers, and battle axes testify to personal combat by small numbers of elite warriors, probably joined by larger numbers of subservient farmers with cruder killing tools. After 1500 BC, the sword became the paramount weapon. With more bronze in circulation, it appeared in drinking goblets, body ornaments and implements (combs, razors, tweezers and mirrors) for men and women.

The concentrated value of bronze gave more to monopolize, more to fight over, and trade routes were especially militarized. But if elites fought each other, they also traded and built alliances. These interlocking chains connected long distances, spanning peoples who were culturally very different. The whole system supported a network of chiefs, elaborately buried with artistically detailed ceremonial swords, supported by warriors whose swords show ample signs of use. Pictures carved in stone celebrate a martial existence, ideologically reinforcing warriors' political dominance. Even chariots appear, however impractical in northern Europe. At its peak, this shared elite military ethos and exchange joined together most of Europe, from Spain to

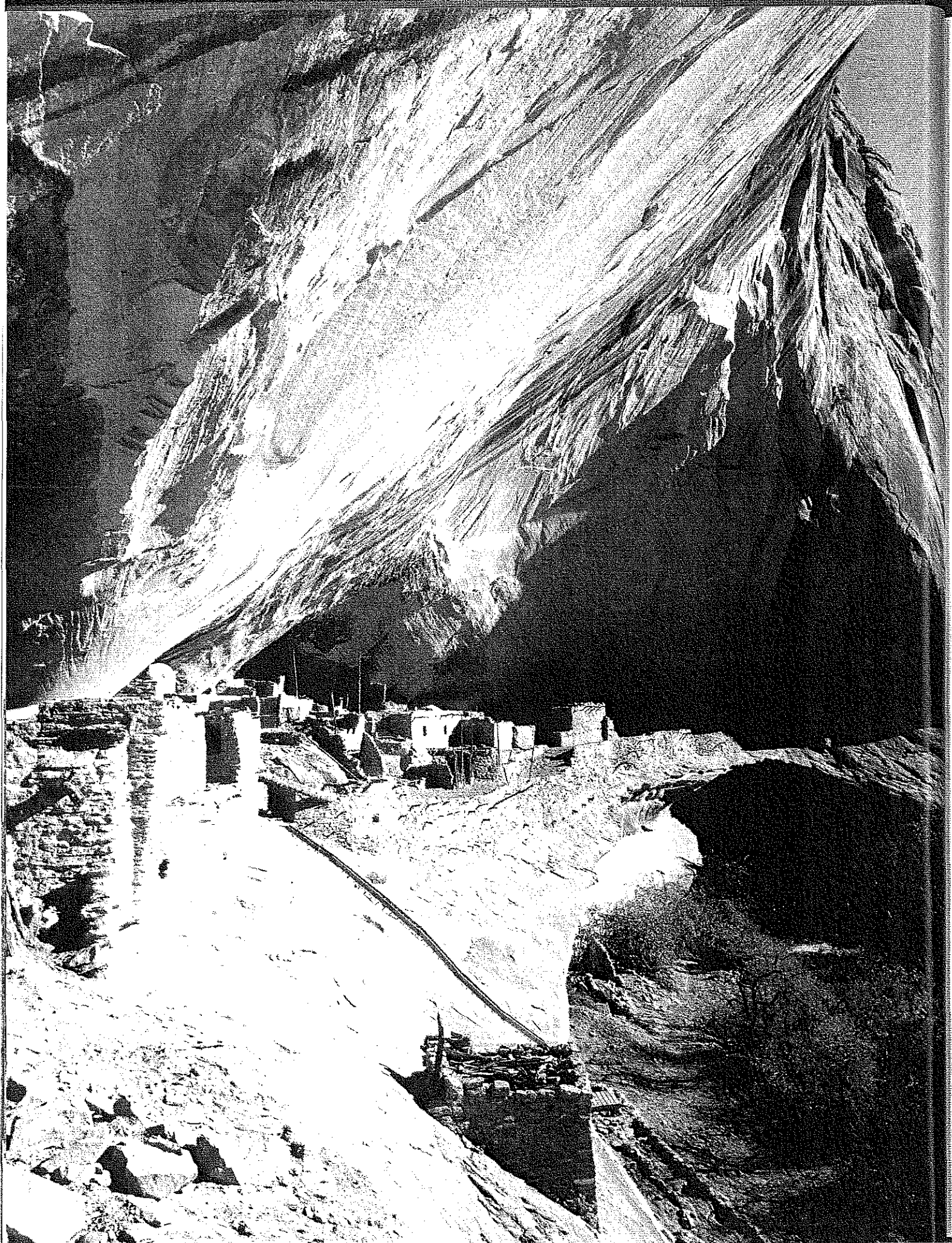


Scandinavia, from the Eastern Mediterranean to England. After 1200 BC, with new ways of fighting – in some areas based on iron weapons – this universe came apart, ending an epoch of a common pan-European culture of the heroic warrior.



Above A horde of Middle Bronze Age (16th–15th centuries BC) weapons from northeast Hungary, including a short sword and both decorated and undecorated battle axes. They were deposited in water, a common ritual practice. The Carpathian Basin was a crossroads of Bronze Age cultures, and these show stylistic affinities with the Aegean and northern regions as far away as Scandinavia.

Left A Bronze Age carving in granite bedrock at Fossom in northern Bohuslan, Sweden. It could represent an actual fight, but given the symbolic significance of both axes and boats in this culture, it might also represent a ritual performance, or even a clan insignia.



Keet Seel ruin, northeastern Arizona, USA. Local Anasazi moved from scattered exposed settlements to begin construction of this defensible location around AD 1250. At that moment, a century-long dry period turned even drier, and all the local people moved to inaccessible sites, with up to 150 people living at Keet Seel. Early in the 14th century, the entire area was abandoned.

Crossing the Atlantic, the early inhabitants of North America did not have it easy. Two of the 39 or so individuals known from 13,000 to 9,000 years ago – some just bone fragments – have signs of projectile wounds, others have cranial fractures. Later archaeology is a patchwork of very different stories for different regions. Since they give such a compelling picture of the variability of war records, and since North America is not otherwise considered in this volume, a region by region overview is in order.

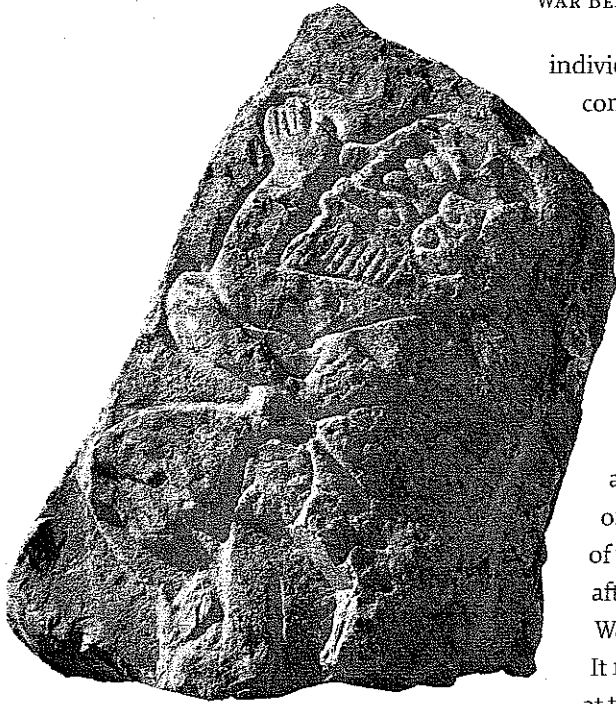
In the eastern forests, one of the earliest large skeletal collections, of hunter-gatherers from about 5400 BC in Titusville, Florida, has 9 of 168 individuals with signs of violence. Elsewhere signs of violence remain unusual, and from scattered, single individuals. By the Late Archaic, 4100–2500 BC, there are a few clear cases of collective killings, such as at Indian Knoll, Kentucky, and the Finger Lakes area of central New York. The subsequent Woodland period seems comparatively peaceful. The rise of the maize-based, urban Mississippian tradition beginning around AD 900 is accompanied by unmistakable signs of intensive warfare – fortifications, empty buffer zones, specialized war weapons and icons. In the Southeast, this intense violence appears to be associated with the rivalries between regional chiefs, which were observed, and utilized, by the explorer de Soto in his meandering, bloody quest for gold in the mid-16th century.

The southern Great Plains region begins with scarcely any signs of violence, just one woman with two blows to the head among some 173 individuals. Much of the area later fell into the militaristic Mississippian orbit. Out of southwestern Minnesota after AD 1250, the Oneota people warred against and ultimately replaced earlier residents. At Norris Farms #36, an Illinois Oneota cemetery, 43 of 264 fairly complete skeletons indicate violence. But it was in the Dakotas that the worst violence recorded for prehistoric North America occurred: one location, Crow Creek, had a mass burial of 486, often mutilated, skeletons, conventionally dated to 1325, but perhaps later.

In the Southwest, there is no clear evidence of war for centuries after the start of maize and squash agriculture (1500–1000 BC). In the Anasazi area (a modern name for an ancient cultural group), during the Basketmaker II period of 500 BC–AD 500, collective violence is clear, including an apparent slaughter of 90 individuals at Weatherill's Cave 7 in southwestern Utah. But the Mogollon and Hohokam cultural areas to the west and south remain without any war indicators that early. Over the next 750 years, the record is variable, but the big shift to war throughout the Southwest came in the 1200s, with defensive settlements – including the famous cliff dwellings – settlement destructions, area abandonments and other compelling signs of war. After 1400, with huge areas already abandoned and populations concentrated in larger pueblos, signs of actual fighting decrease, yet war was still waged when the Spanish arrived.

Native peoples of California had a reputation for non-violence in early historical accounts, but the archaeological record shows something different. A few individuals are found with projectile wounds from as early as the 5th millennium BC. On the Channel Islands near Santa Barbara, a 7,000-year series of skeletons indicates a pattern of club fights begun by 3000 BC, but with few if any fatalities. Around AD 500, the bow and arrow appears on the scene, and so do more skeletons with points. A big increase in war is seen from several California locations from about AD 1150–1350.

The Pacific Northwest Coast has by far the longest documented history of war in the Americas. In the earliest set of human remains, from 3500 to 1500 BC, 9 of 42



Above The central plaza of Monte Albán in the Oaxaca Valley of Mexico was home to more than 300 bas-relief carvings of mutilated war captives, once thought to represent dancers and hence called 'danzantes'.

Below Nasca spirit-being holding a club and trophy skull. Although a number of ancient South American peoples took enemy heads, among the Nasca of the southern Peruvian coast this became a cultural obsession. Heads were interred in other burials, painted on ceramics, and woven into textile designs.



individuals show signs of violence. Fortifications, embedded points and daggers continue in later times. Generally, war appears to be earlier and more intense to the north, in southern Alaska, and only gradually spreads to and intensifies in the south, around Vancouver and Washington state. Throughout the coast, a marked intensification of war is visible in the period from AD 900 to 1400.

Jumping south, Mexico and Guatemala are well known as an area of state formation. Persuasive evidence of war is lacking until some of these states began to develop. The Olmecs, perhaps the first Mesoamerican state dating to around 1150 BC, clearly made war (see Chapter 17). However, the best continuous Mesoamerican sequence comes from Oaxaca. Maize domestication appears in the area around 3400 BC, but the first village palisades and at least one settlement destruction, at San José Mogote, date to around 1500 BC. Signs of war fluctuate thereafter, but generally indicate that raiding is more frequent after 800 BC. The real surge came with the rise of chiefly polities around 500 BC. War increased in scale to the rise of the Monte Albán state two centuries later. It never went away. Incessant conquest struggles still characterized the region at the time of Spanish conquest.

The continent of South America contains enormous variation in ecologies, settlement, political development and archaeological recovery. The historically interconnected Pacific coast and Andean highlands, both divided into multiple distinct valley systems, illustrate how variable localized records can be. In the Norte Chico region of Peru's coastal desert, major settlements with monumental architecture date from 3000 to 1800 BC. But countering expectations, there is an astonishing lack of evidence of organized violence. Other early coastal sites such as San Pedro de Atacama include skulls which indicate a pattern of non-lethal bashing – perhaps individual duels, but not war. However, severed heads have been found from pre-ceramic peoples on the coast, as early as 2000 BC at the Asia site. In the Casma valley, a theocratic state with little if any war appears to have fallen to a militaristic state from the highlands around 1000 BC. Other coastal valley systems do not show a comparable level of disruption. In what would eventually be the Moche area of the northern Peruvian coast, agriculture was practised by 2700 BC, and localized political centralization developed around 1800–900 BC, but there are no hints of war in skeletal or settlement material until roughly 400 BC. Then war signs increase over 800 years, culminating in the Moche state, with internal peace and external war. In other locales regular war does not become apparent until some point from 200 BC to AD 700. The coastal Nasca culture, from AD 200 to 600, exhibits a seeming obsession with trophy heads, in contrast to the highland state of Tiwanaku, peaking around AD 800, which had war but seems relatively un-militaristic. Other highland systems offer their own pattern variations.

The archaeology of other South American areas, particularly the wet lowlands, is much less developed than for the Andes or Pacific coast. Some good information is available, however, for the Orinoco Basin of central Venezuela. One detailed reconstruction from the middle Orinoco finds manioc agriculture in the first small settlements identified in the region by 2100 BC. Maize cultivation begins, slowly, around 800 BC, and then population

growth rises for centuries before stabilizing. Signs of war, along with chiefdoms, show up on a tributary of the Apure, itself a tributary of the Orinoco, around AD 550. That was a contact zone between lowland and highland peoples. It took 500 years for this combination to appear throughout the middle Orinoco. But by the time the Spanish arrived in 1530, powerful chiefs in fortified villages could muster armies in the thousands. Once war gets going, it can really go.

The last stop for our global tour is the far-flung Pacific. In New Guinea, so many different groups waged war in front of anthropological eyes that it became a focus for scholarly theorizing. Yet it is one of the least understood areas archaeologically. Evidence of any violence, collective or otherwise, is extremely scarce. One synthetic overview, however, argues that the introduction of sweet potatoes in the Eastern Highland area was followed by a major development of warfare, only a couple of centuries before European observers arrived. The Melanesian islands of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa, colonized some time after 1200 BC, all see the creation of fortified settlements 2,000 years later. On Fiji and some other locations, this was associated with a social emphasis on cannibalism of war captives.

Polynesian colonization of other islands in the Pacific is also fraught with controversy and uncertainty. The expansion appears under way by AD 1, but accelerated later. In this far-flung diaspora, an initial date of war cannot be fixed. Yet over time it became an integral part of Polynesian culture. When New Zealand was reached – around AD 800–1200 – the word for warrior and its cultural elaboration had been brought along. Some of the earliest skeletal remains have signs of interpersonal violence. Hawaii saw separate, hierarchical polities arise after AD 1100, and turn to conquest warfare after 1400. The Marquesas also saw fortifications develop between 1100 and 1400. New Zealand hilltops were covered with fortifications after 1300, and all indications of war increase after 1500, setting the stage for genocidal campaigns once Europeans introduced guns.

Maori hillfort (or Pa) at One Tree Hill, a volcanic peak in Auckland, New Zealand. Located on an isthmus between two bays, it was strategically situated to extract tribute on trade. This may have been the largest Maori settlement in pre-European times, and is one of the largest known earth forts in the world.



WHY DID WAR START? WHY DID IT GET WORSE?

This tremendously varied global record, with all its uncertainties, warns against any simple theory on the origins of war. Contrary to some popular opinions, we know that war did exist before agriculture or civilization. In Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere, there is unmistakable evidence for war before agriculture, and it is early agricultural societies, often with abundant archaeological remains, which provide some of the most compelling evidence for the absence of war. Nevertheless, over time, war regularly appeared in agricultural societies, and many civilizations became chronic war machines.

It may be that both agriculture and civilization are accompanied by more basic circumstances that greatly increase the likelihood of war. Comparing situations around the world, several sets of circumstances appear again and again in the record before, or as, war developed. Rather than the cause of war, they may be thought of as preconditions that make its inception or intensification more likely. These preconditions are not independent, and many causal linkages connect one or another. But with several of them put together, the stage is set for whatever spark that finally starts the fire.

Sedentism is very important. Fully mobile groups have the option of moving away from conflict. Initial signs of war usually appear among a people who have recently become more anchored in space. Once people have invested in one location, there is something to be both lost and gained through combat. Moreover, the settled points often are unusual locations of relative plenty in broader regions of resource scarcity or unpredictability, coveted, and if necessary, defended.

A shift to more intensive and sedentary resource exploitation typically is associated with another precondition, increasing population density. This may be revealed by larger settlements, but more commonly by a substantially increased number of contemporaneous settlements within the same area. Although population density is not correlated with more intensive warfare among tribal peoples of recent centuries, that may be due to a host of historical circumstances. In the archaeological past, a rough connection is apparent in many cases. The obvious inference is that more people in one area can mean more competition over finite resources, as well as a more fertile medium for political struggle and efforts at domination.

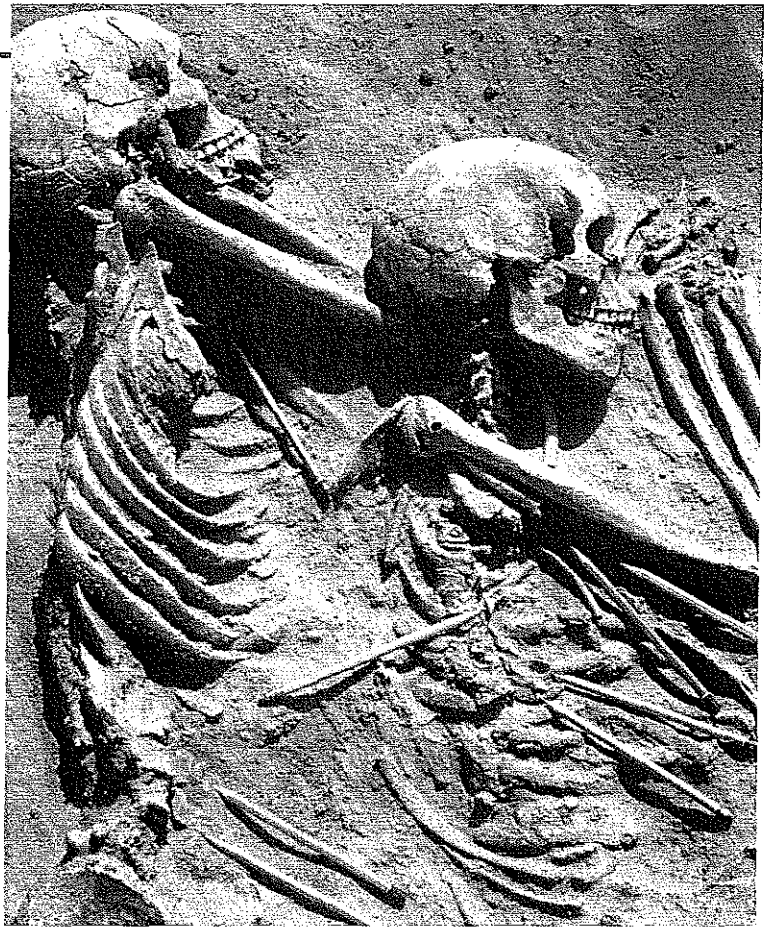
Some scholars have stressed the presence of stored food as a lure for raiders, whether that is foraged (e.g. preserved fish stores) or cultivated (e.g. cleaned wheat). Those are bounties, especially when others experience want, although the ability to haul away food without supplemental transport can limit its significance. Others note that livestock may be even more tempting. Not only is this capital in the original sense, they can transport themselves, and historical herding peoples are often notably warlike.

Other preconditions involve social organization, both horizontal and vertical. One line of thinking is that the development of segmental social structures, such as lineages or clans, is a necessary precondition for war. These preformed groups not only provide a basis of military mobilization, but by establishing collective identities, they encourage a shift from homicide targeted at specific individuals, to the more warlike 'any of them will do'. Although cultural divides can also provide such group identities, it should be stressed that most early cases of warfare appear - when we can tell - to be among people of the same or similar cultures.

The Earliest War?

Two widely separated locations credited as very early cases of war demonstrate the problems of establishing such claims. Jebel Sahaba, a burial site near the Nile in Sudan, contained 58 skeletons, 24 associated with stone artifacts interpreted as parts of projectiles. That convoluted phrasing is necessary because most of these items are simple chips indistinguishable from ordinary stone-working debris. They are interpreted as barbs or points on spears because a few are embedded in bones, and the position of others suggests they were in the bodies. Some multiple burials and cut marks on bones reinforce a military interpretation. However, post-mortem defleshing or repositioning seem worthy of greater consideration as explanations. Dating of the site is very problematic, and is based on comparisons of the stone tools to another regional stone working tradition that is very roughly dated to between 12,000 and 10,000 BC, but could be considerably younger.

In Northern Australia, rock art of human figures, flying boomerangs and embedded spears seems to reveal a very long-term progression from mostly individual confrontations, to group clashes, and to elaborate battles, beginning roughly around 8000, 4000 and 1000 BC respectively. Do they represent a transition from duels, to feuds or contests, to tribal

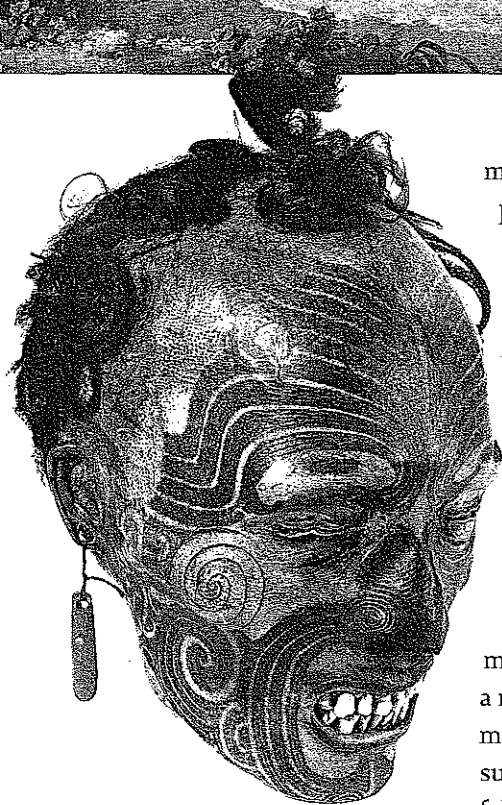
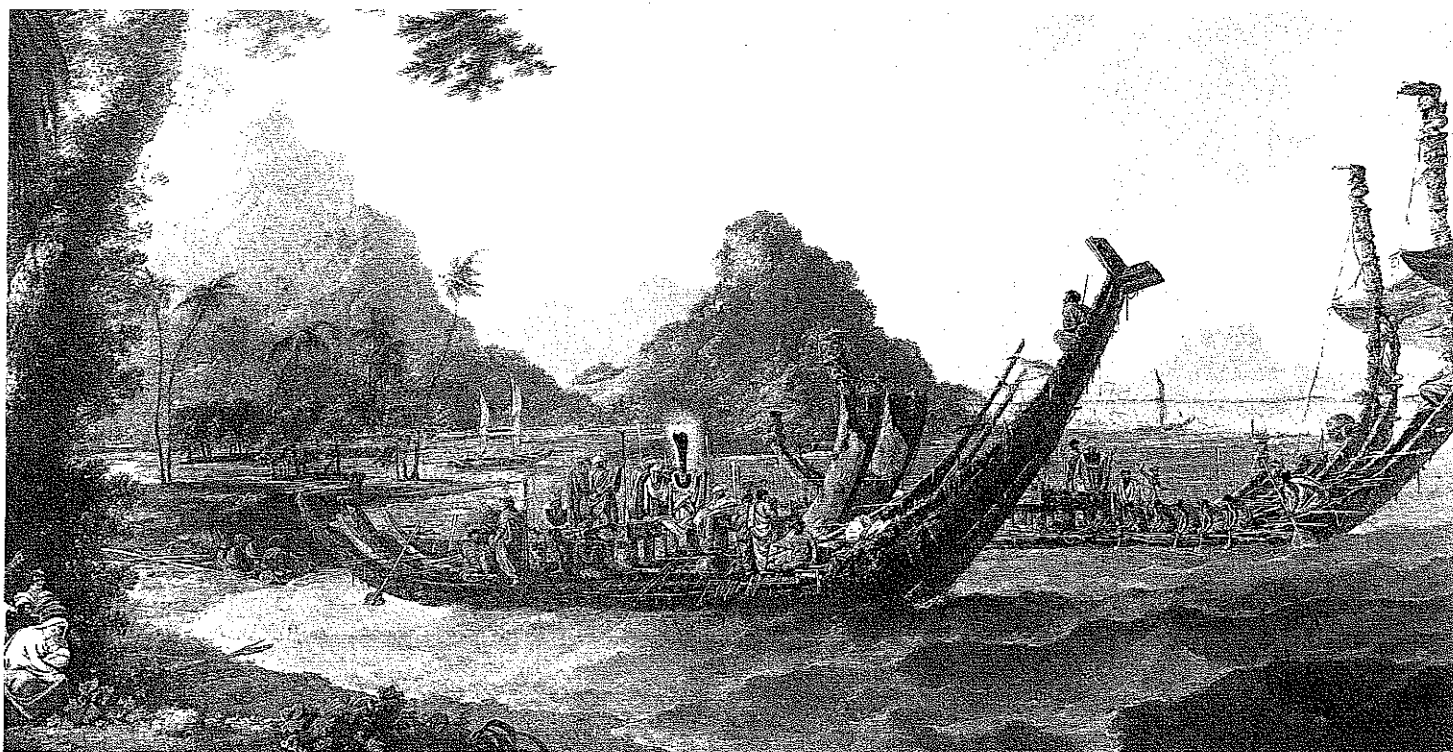


war? Do they represent physical humans at all, or happenings on a spirit plane? Here too dates are very rough, cobbled together from evaluations of material culture, indications of fauna and human adaptations, and the amount of silica crust formation over images. Future revisions of claims for the earliest evidence of war are to be expected.



Above Two adult males from Jebel Sahaba. The individual on the left had six stone flakes, the one on the left 19, two of them embedded in bone, two within the skull (pencil points show the location of some of them). Were these crude tools composite points of projectiles, or perhaps the remains of a defleshing process prior to burial?

Left This rock painting from Ngarradj-Warde-Djokeng rock shelter, Kakadu National Park, northern Australia, appears to represent one group of men throwing spears at another group. Earlier images portray individual duels. Assigning dates to such rock art is difficult and tentative.



Above Maori trophy head. Traditional Maori warfare involved a mix of conflict over resources, chiefly competition, and cosmological ideas of social power. With the introduction of guns, it shifted to attacks of extermination. The Musket Wars from 1818 to 1840 claimed 20,000–50,000 lives.

Vertical social development means political hierarchy. In ethnography, even the most minimal leaders, such as Amazonian headmen, are known to manipulate potential conflict issues in pursuit of their own private interests. In archaeology, it is not the case that all chiefly systems are warlike, but the vast majority of them are. Chiefly status-striving and competition is a regularly cited explanation of intensive warfare, although ‘status-striving’ should be read as a gloss for a lot of different interests, involving wealth, wives and power. Not always but often, leaders favour war because war favours leaders – if they win.

Beyond the organization of particular communities, long-distance trade, especially of prestige items, creates a concentration of value that can be plundered or monopolized. High-value trade offers perhaps the tightest linkage between the use of force and its potential benefits. Those who sit atop trade routes, or who can tax or plunder trade, may become wealthy.

One last pre-condition or cause of the inception or intensification of war is a major ecological reversal. This may be purely natural, such as a decrease in rainfall, a river that digs a gorge and thus loses a floodplain, or rising sea levels that push more people together in remaining lands. A particularly striking example is the surge of warfare in many areas of North America from around AD 1100 to 1400. This followed a climatic period which had been favourable for many subsistence activities – notably maize agriculture – followed by a time of cooling and more erratic precipitation which made getting enough food for expanded populations much more difficult. Other ecological reversals can be anthropogenic, such as degradation caused by over-farming or over-grazing. Intense warfare associated with negative ecological change seems to be widespread throughout broad regions, which should raise red flags concerning our current global environment.

Opposite On his second visit to Tahiti, Captain Cook was surprised by the sudden appearance of over 200 war vessels, manned by some 6,000 men, with raised platforms for fighting with slingstones, clubs and spears. They were preparing for a punitive attack on a neighbouring island, but the Tahitians did not want Cook to see the battle, and set it for five days after he left. With European contact, Tahitian warfare shifted from limited engagements to territorial conquest.

But if there was a time before war, how did it get to be so common – not just among civilizations, but among tribal peoples around the world? Here four different trends can be identified. First, war began in more places as all the preconditions identified above became more common. Always there are questions of independent invention vs diffusion, but certainly the Middle East, China, Central and South America, and the Pacific represent *sui generis* war traditions. In North America alone, the Northwest Coast, the Southwest, the Eastern Woodlands and perhaps other areas seem to have turned to war all by themselves.

Second, war spread. In Japan, war arrived with people from Korea. In North America, warlike Mississippian chiefdoms spread throughout the midwest and east. Polynesian seafarers carried a war complex to new domains.

Third, the rise of states pushed the development of war beyond their frontiers. Tribal peoples around states probably developed warlike cultures simultaneously with state centres, but expansionist states pushed the process. The rise and fall of states can set off chain reactions of violence, as happened throughout northwest Mexico after the fall of the great city of Teotihuacan in the 7th century AD, or in southeastern Africa with the rise of the Zulu. Long-distance trade routes between states were often highly militarized.

Fourth, contrary to the standard idea that European contact ‘brought peace to the savages’, the initial effect was usually the reverse. In contrast to the gradual, localized expansion of ancient states, Europeans crossed huge distances and entered entirely new areas of interaction. They brought new plants, animals and diseases that tumultuously transformed local societies. They brought trade goods of iron, glass and cloth, which often became scarce items of great demand, and thus booty or payment for war. Their military techniques and technology, over time, radically transformed indigenous war patterns. The scope of European demand for captive labour or land denuded of prior inhabitants was far greater than the most exploitative ancient empires. All these factors created a bow wave of warfare that spread far in front of actual colonization, and which too often has been mistaken for the ‘pre-contact’ pattern.

Taking these four trends together explains how the world turned to war in the 10,000 years since its documented origin in northern Iraq. Yes war is ancient, and war has been quite pervasive among the non-state peoples whom we know most about. But it was not always like that. If to claim that there was a time before war – as I do – may seem too extreme for many archaeologists, few with expertise in the subject would disagree that the ethnographic universe of the past 500 years is far, far more filled with war than the early archaeological records of nearly everywhere on earth. Times of written history can be misleading guides to humanity’s prehistoric past.



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