

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ORIGINS OF WAR



My colleague and friend Walter (Scheidel), ancient historian at Stanford, took me to task over a blog comment last week about democracy and warfare. [Link]

I argue that war emerged in the bronze age – for the Near East from 3000 BC, later in the second millennium for most of Europe.

Walter –

Is it time for the return of the Noble Savage, recast as peace-loving neolithic flower child? Were the Sumerians the first to wage war? Perhaps it depends on what the meaning of ‘war’ is, as the forty-second president might have put it. If ‘war’ requires sustained efforts over years and armies of thousands supported by a ‘megamachine’ of stylus-wielding bureaucrats, the Sumerians surely deserve the prize. Then again, state-level civilization = war is a mere

tautology. If we were to define war as organized collective aggression whose scale and duration is appropriate to the underlying socio-economic complexity of the warring parties, we might award it a more extensive pedigree. Keeley's book on War before Civilization may well be flawed, but it provides ample evidence for the war-like endeavors of pre-state societies.

My personal favorites are Manson and Wrangham on inter-group aggression in primates and humans (Curr. Anth. 1991), and White and Burton on primitive war and polygyny (Amer. Anth. 1988). It is certainly instructive to observe foraging bands fight for women well before the Corinthians pursued identity and wealth. Chimps already set the tone: in their book on Demonic Males, Wrangham and Peterson report on bands of male chimps who would repeatedly attack neighboring groups to kill their male members one by one so that they could finally take over the surviving females. If you are an ape, does a series of deliberate and interlocking raids on the same neighboring group qualify as a form of war?

[Link]

War? “Organized collective aggression whose scale and duration is appropriate to the underlying socio-economic complexity of the warring parties”. Walter is quite right to raise the matter of definitions.

My point is a genealogical one – that war has a history, [that war has changed in its very definition](#), and that such all-encompassing definitions are not so useful if we want to understand where we are now with war. Just like chimps? Maybe. But we aren't chimps.

The problem, for me, with books like Keeley's “Myth of the Peaceful Savage”, or Steven LeBlanc and Katherine Register's “Constant Battles: the Myth of the Peaceful Noble Savage”, or even Raymond Kelly's better book “Warless Societies and the Origin of War” is that they primarily rely on ethnographic examples. They just don't know how to deal with the archaeological evidence. And their anthropology is faulty – too reliant upon models of cultural evolution. (Now I know I have to substantiate this, but it will have to wait till my forthcoming book – Origins).

I mentioned Kristian Kristiansen and Thomas Larsson's new book on the bronze age (forthcoming). There is also John Carman and Anthony Harding's “Ancient Warfare”. These are much better archaeological treatments.

Something happened in the bronze age in the Near East and Europe (and I think the same features can be seen in central America and Asia).

It is actually very familiar.

Collective aggression got tied to logistics (how to feed your army away from home), diplomacy, conspiracy, alliance and plotting (war was always the counterpart to talking – we academics call it a particular kind of discourse), style and gender – it's about dressing up, travel, leisure, grooming, talking with your “friends” (allies, potential enemies), organizing grand projects, being “someone”. Playing heavy rock as you blow away a block of houses in Baghdad and feel alive at the edge, crossing the edge. [The techno-military-entertainment complex](#).

There was clearly organized collective aggression before this. Though I do doubt that the evidence is that extensive. Hunters yes, but there was not the same figure of the warrior before this – no significant evidence at all. Defensive works yes, but it is hard to argue for the *primacy* of defence in any architecture before the

bronze age.

The crucial implication, long recognized by the likes even of Clausewitz, is that *war is not primarily about aggression, about inflicting violence*. Just as life in the army today is mostly boredom and shifting stuff around. War becomes a particular way of applying force that does not necessarily involve much actual violence, cannot in principle involve too much bloodshed. Though when it is applied it is with some extreme ferocity.

War – a particular convergence of bronze age warrior and management technology.

This is all why early warfare (in my sense) is associated with charismatic leaders like Sargon of Akkad or Alexander the Great, with fragile imperial states, retinues of warriors, male bonding – the *mannerbund*.



This is what surprised me about Michael Moore's movie documentary Fahrenheit 9/11. I expected investigative journalism revealing the corruption of transnational elites. We got this, but also the story of ordinary family guys from Flint, Michigan, who join the army because they have no job prospects.

Moore's analysis was Orwell's. That *permanent war is state offence against its own citizenry*. The roots of the war we know so well are not to be found in collective aggression, but in the mundanities of everyday life in the bureaucratic and class-ridden state. And it makes people feel good. War back in the bronze age is an inextricable and necessary mix of the production and accumulation of wealth, conspicuous consumption and gross destruction. Wealth, in this form, goes with destruction of property – just as in the potlatch, and as Marcel Mauss and Georges

Bataiile were so smart to point out. It is about transgressive experience (I got so much out of Klaus Theweleit's encyclopaedic treatment of early 20th century German fascist military males in his books "Male Fantasies" when I was researching the early Greek state of Corinth).

This is what takes us from Sun Tzu to contemporary business practice (Belisarius.com) – the focus on information management, maneuvering, agility, generating chaos in the opponent through your own ordered decision making, the culture of your organization.

No – I am not disputing that chimps kill each other, that ants march against each other, that Neanderthals committed mass murder. What I want is to retain are the differences in the manifestations of war and violence that help us understand the historical roots of where we are today. I don't think that is at all tautological.