Commemorative tales: archaeological responses to modern myth, politics, and war

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Abstract

Academic archaeology of the twentieth century has strangely ignored warfare and violence as relevant aspects of past human activity despite sufficient evidence of war-related traumata, weaponry, warrior burials, and war-celebrative iconographies. Instead – and relatively independently of paradigmatic shifts – two commemorative tales about warriors and peasants in the European societies of the Stone and Bronze Ages have been created. The two archaeological tales are stereotypes positioned at opposite ends of the scale, and they confirm or react against contemporary politics, ideologies, gender hierarchies, and wars. The generally weak presence of war and the final breakthrough of war studies in the mid-1990s can indeed be linked to contemporary politics and war. They are simultaneously entrenched in two myths about the primitive other, which have persuasively influenced European thought at least since the seventeenth century. The emergence of warfare studies in archaeology can be understood as a social response to the many ethnic-based wars of the 1990s. Yet the theme of war is treated in a rational manner, which belies the disaster, suffering, and horror involved in all wars, past or present. This rationalization of prehistoric war begs further consideration: through a comparison with the newest anthropology of war it is discussed how the archaeology of war can avoid becoming celebration of war and thus reproduction of the war mythology of the nation state.

Keywords

War; warfare; prehistory; weaponry; warriors; myth.

Power, dominance, and coercion almost inevitably connect to warfare and its principal actors, soldiers and warriors. War is, in other words, a central ingredient in social reproduction and change, and brutally interferes with human existence almost everywhere in our late modern world. These reasons, embedded in a twenty-first-century setting, make it obvious that warfare should be an object of archaeological study. However, looking back at the Stone and Bronze Age archaeology of the twentieth century reveals that archaeologists have studied weaponry, and in some measure warriors, but rarely war. Possible
reasons for the general absence of violence in interpretations obviously need to be outlined and debated. Warfare and violence began to enter the archaeological discourse only after c. 1995. Compared to the general implementation of social theory, war studies thus arrive on the scene much delayed. Even after this date the theme is quite often embarked upon as something set aside from the rest of social practice.

War and archaeology: an introduction

This article examines the history of research on warfare in archaeology critically, with the presupposition that prehistoric warfare is a highly relevant issue to discuss. It will be argued that the under-representation of war in archaeological studies of the twentieth century and the appearance of war studies in the mid-1990s are rooted in the myths, politics, and wars of contemporary society. The article relates to the war-commemorative theme of the present volume in two ways: first, by highlighting the dominant position and celebration of certain stereotyped head figures of ‘war’ and peace in archaeological histories of the European Stone Age and Bronze Age; second, by viewing these histories as social responses to the surrounding world, specifically different ways of coping with contemporary war and genocide. Such a relationship is undoubtedly unintentional, but the question must be posed: can our archaeological writings become, in effect, celebrations of war, and thus reproductions of the war mythology of the nation state?

It is not sufficient merely to add war to the themes that archaeology can study. The seriousness of the topic demands that we discuss how war should be studied and portrayed. Is it really indispensable to incorporate the vicious face of war in archaeological studies of this phenomenon? This is a relevant question because the archaeology of the later 1990s has analysed war in a strictly rational fashion. In this respect the newest war anthropology can potentially inform the archaeological study of war. Furthermore, the present contribution wishes to promote an understanding of warfare as a social phenomenon, which cannot be studied isolated from its social context and which needs an adequate theoretical framework. The position taken is, in short: warfare is a flow of communally based social action aimed at violent confrontation with the other. Being a warrior is consequently a social identity founded in warfare.

Vencl (1984) has argued that the absence of warfare studies in prehistoric archaeology is linked to the inadequacy of archaeological sources. It is undoubtedly true that archaeological data underrate the importance of war in prehistory. Trauma is notably under-represented and so are weapons of organic materials (Capelle 1982). However, direct and indirect evidence of war-related violence is by no means non-existent (Figs 1–4 and Plates 1–4). The number of prehistoric weapons, including fortifications, is huge, and iconographic presentations of war and warriors in art and rituals supplement the picture. Skeletal traumata are, in fact, relatively frequent in European prehistory when it is taken into account that skeletons are often not well preserved, that skeletons are not routinely examined for marks of violence, and that much physical violence does not leave visible traces on the skeleton. The evidence is most certainly adequate as a basis for studies of violence and war.
I shall argue that the reason why war has played a small part in the archaeology of the twentieth century must be searched for elsewhere. Insufficient evidence is hardly the core of the matter. Rather, the existent evidence has been ignored, underestimated, rationalized, or idealized, for example, through the use of soft metaphors for war. The initially weak presence of war and the belated appearance of war studies are arguably linked to the politics and wars of contemporary society, but they are simultaneously entrenched in two myths about the primitive other, which have persuasively influenced European thought at least since the seventeenth century. These myths have circulated within the discipline of archaeology and have also been communicated to the public. The two myths commemorate certain stereotypes of identities and societies with contemporary political meanings.

The two tales of prehistoric society are interpretive traditions, or trends, rather than
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As schools of thought inasmuch as they contain different theoretical stances, which may not agree in the classification of them undertaken here. Nevertheless, each trend is glued together by a related understanding of society and of how and to what degree social change is generated. The first trend conjures up warriors – though not always explicitly – and advocates prehistoric society as an organism that changes through human agency, often suddenly and radically. The second and generally later trend, evokes peaceful hunters, peasants and traders – indeed the antitheses of the warrior – by proposing a view

Figure 2  Warrior burial from the final Middle Bronze Age, c. 1300 BC, at Hagenau in Germany (after Boos 1998). The man is lying in his coffin surrounded by full weaponry of sword, dagger, axe, shield, arrows, and an over-sized dress pin, which is potentially a stab weapon. It is an idealized presentation arranged by surviving relatives, and it should be remembered that the warrior role has a less glorious side to it.
of prehistoric society as a mainly reproductive organism, involving a step-wise or slow long-term social evolution.

The following account is intended to lay out the history of research in broad brush strokes and in doing so it draws on European, and particularly Scandinavian, Stone and Bronze Age archaeology. Comprehensiveness is not attempted. The key word of commemoration is here understood as ‘presentation’, ‘celebration’, and ‘remembrance’, with overlapping meanings. In the latter case, ‘forgetting’, is surely a related aspect.

**Disruption or harmony: tales of warriors and peasants**

A vigorous tradition in twentieth-century archaeology has envisioned Stone and Bronze Age society as a socially unstable and contradiction-filled entity, which was transformed through radical events. Sudden material changes were explained as a result of migration or revolution, often with fierce warriors as front figures. This warrior tradition took shape in the beginning of the century and initially included first and foremost V. G. Childe and contemporaries of the empiricist school. Despite his fondness for the warrior model, Childe was reluctant to incorporate war as a force in history, even if some of his later

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*Plates 1 & 2* Flint arrowhead shot into the breastbone of a male aged between 20 and 30 years (photo Preben Dehlholm). Around 2500 BC the man was interred among kin in a communal stone cist at Gjerrild in Denmark.
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writings made use of warfare in describing the economic greed of aristocrats (1941: 133, 1951 [1936]: 134, 1958). In Scandinavia very similar thinking recurred in P. V. Glob’s seminal study (1945) of the single grave culture, the Danish version of the battle-axe culture. Presumably influenced by Childe, Glob evoked a lively scenario of invading warrior nomads, axe-wielding and on horseback. In his great survey of Danish prehistory, published first in 1938–40, Johannes Brøndsted conjured up several intrusions of warrior groups during the Neolithic. He even employed a Marxist-Childean vocabulary, not least when categorizing the Bronze Age as a class society with an aristocratic upper class of warriors and an oppressed peasant class (Brøndsted I, 1957, II, 1958: 10).

The same trend was evident in structural-Marxist approaches of the later 1970s and 1980s, even if internal social dynamics and structural contradictions had substituted migration as the cause of rapid social change (e.g. Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978; Rowlands 1980). Kristian Kristiansen has similarly made use of warriors in seeking to explain the archaeological record of the Bronze Age (1982, 1984a, 1984b, 1991b, 1998, 1999; also Vandkilde 1996, 1998, 1999). The post-modern archaeology of the late 1980s and early 1990s showed the same inclination, albeit rarely referring directly to warriors. Power, dominance, and conflict were nevertheless inserted into prehistory, for instance in studies by Christopher Tilley (Tilley 1984; Miller and Tilley 1984: 5ff.; Shanks and Tilley 1987: 72f.) and Charlotte Damm (1993: 202).

In spite of the fact that the model of migration and revolution does not envision peaceful interaction, warfare and violence are seldom mentioned – regardless of precise theoretical persuasion. ‘Unrest’, ‘troubled times’, and similar metaphors for warfare are sometimes used, but the core of the matter, namely war, is remarkably absent. In the few, and therefore noteworthy, studies which mention or examine warfare – for example, by Childe (1941), Hedeager and Kristiansen (1985), and Jarl Nordbladh (1989) – the social functions of warfare are highlighted. Fighting is described as a route to social success. What is envisioned is a bloodless, theatre kind of war. The entire explanatory trend

Figure 3 Two warriors in close combat on a ship. Rock carving from the Older Bronze Age, c. 1400 BC, at Fossum in Sweden (by the courtesy of Joakim Goldhahn). This and similar pictures have glorifying features, but the sport-like duels were doubtless only one component of a warfare pattern that included pirate expeditions, raids, and other kinds of warfare.
underplays the violence it so clearly implies. Even when the armed individuals – implicitly males – are termed ‘warriors’, brutality and killing do not form part of their actions. The violent face of massive ethnic migration and social revolution is ignored, understated, or simply not realized. We are, in other words, presented with an idealized image of revolution, migration, and warriors in prehistory.

Various subjective influences may hide a key to the lack of realism. Several of the scholars behind the warrior tale have sympathized with left-wing politics and ideology up through the twentieth century – maybe the most violent and warlike century ever, hence reaching into most people’s lives. With the exception of extremist versions the left wing was from the onset tied up with anti-war movements. One possible reason for the understatement of violence could be that pacifist attitudes coloured the archaeology of revolution and migration. Another reason could be rooted in idealist attitudes to riots and radical social transformation. Quite possibly, these factors have interacted. A proportion of revolutionary romanticism does seem to inhabit the work of Childe and contemporaries like Glob and Brøndsted as well as later structural-Marxists and post-Processualists.

Marija Gimbutas, by contrast, included war as well as gender in her later works from the mid-1970s. In her vision, Old Europe was a peaceful place ruled by women and structured by female values. Paradise was destroyed by migrating bands of horse-mounted warriors from the Eurasian steppes, and Old Europe never recovered. Social order and cultural values were reversed, and New Europe became a thoroughly male-dominated and explicitly violent place (Gimbutas 1982 [1974]: 9).

Gimbutas’ explanation of the archaeological record has naturally not escaped criticism since it does not accord with the evidence (Häusler 1994; Chapman 1999). It is nevertheless interesting because of its unique position. She treads in the footsteps of Childe with her emphasis upon warriors and migration, but her explanation contrasts with contemporaries in two ways: first, it has an inherent binary opposition of warlike maleness and peaceful femaleness, female gender representing the dominated part. This certainly recalls ‘radical’ feminist ideology of the 1970s. Second, it contains an unusually direct reference to a state of violence and warfare, which is considered fatal for human life and values of equality. These attitudes correlate with her feminist stance. It is also related to her life outside the protected sphere of Western European academics. John Chapman has convincingly traced the origin of Gimbutas’ dichotomous perception of an Old and a New Europe in her idealized Lithuanian childhood as opposed to the horrors of the Russian invasion (Chapman 1998). There is certainly no romanticized attitude to revolutions here.
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The above portraits of Stone and Bronze Age society, and the warrior trend in general, undoubtedly respond to important war-related events in the contemporary world although mostly in an indirect, ideology-influenced manner. Warlike figures are presented and sometimes even celebrated in the mediated histories, hence exhibiting some elements of remembrance even if the real world of war has been suppressed.

The reverse trend – the peasant tradition – had its breakthrough between 1940 and 1950. Here we meet harmonious and egalitarian societies, mostly static and without latent conflict or underlying contradiction. Peaceful hunters, peasants, and traders now substituted for the armed warriors of the previous tradition. The agrarian, and otherwise economic, foundation of prehistoric society was continuously emphasized. This happened not least through the influential work of Grahame Clark (e.g. 1939, 1952, 1975), whose focus upon ecology and the function of culture, rather than upon explaining cultural change, was a distinct reaction against Childe’s Marxist approach (Trigger 1989: 264ff.). Clark and Piggott (1978 [1965]), for instance, characterized the earlier Neolithic as
peasant communities whereas the later Neolithic and the Bronze Age were classified as trading communities based upon an expanding metal industry.

A similar understanding of prehistoric society, with impact from the natural sciences, underlay much empiricist archaeology outside the circles of Cambridge University. Scandinavian archaeologists such as, notably, C. J. Becker (1954: 132ff.), H. C. Broholm (1943–4), Mats P. Malmer (1962, 1989: 8ff.), and Søren H. Andersen (e.g. 1971, 1975, 1981) mediated a peaceful picture of prehistoric society based on nature, subsistence, and cultural continuity. The Nordic Bronze Age was, for example, perceived as a primitive and peaceable peasant culture without marked social differentiation.

Although concerned with processes of social change, and with explaining it, New Archaeology performed the reorientation of the discipline without warriors and war. Even now focus was upon the economic basis. Social evolution became a core point through substantial influence from the Neo-Evolutionism that developed in social anthropology from the 1940s onwards. Prehistoric society progressed towards still greater complexity in evolutionary sequences from band to tribe to chiefdom and eventually the state. Change was imperceptibly slow or occurred at the transition between these societal categories brought about by population pressure and ecological crises. Thus, in a long-term perspective social reproduction was much more normal than social transformation. Jørgen Jensen’s analyses of Danish prehistory (1979, 1982) represented such a
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Processual/Neo-Evolutionist view. Even when war was recognized as a characteristic feature of ethnographic tribes, this insight was not really used to explain the frequency of weaponry in the Danish past. The weapons – undeniably there – were interpreted as symbols of superior social rank with key functions in gift exchange between high-ranking members of society (Jensen 1979: 147ff.; cf. Vandkilde 2000: 6ff.).

This essentially static view of society in New Archaeology accorded with the empiricist view of prehistoric society as largely unchanging. They agreed in describing prehistoric man as hunter, peasant, and trader rather than warrior – the female half of society still being without a place in history. Prehistoric society was a peaceful place characterized by evolution rather than revolution and migration, socially balanced and economically prosperous due to the efforts of skilled hunters, successful traders, and, most particularly, hard-working peasants.

This major chronicle of Stone and Bronze Age society also responded socially to important war-related events in the contemporary world, again in an indirect ideology-influenced way. The described perception of the past can be linked to a very similar ideal of modern, i.e. post-Second World War, Western society being concerned with technological development, human progress, harmony, welfare, and peace, hence confirming it (cf. Trigger 1989: 289). This optimistic attitude to life was ultimately a reaction to years of hardship, wars, and genocide, and it had a profound impact on how European prehistory was perceived. Peaceful figures are presented and sometimes even celebrated in the mediated histories, but possibilities of war and violence are denied, thus demonstrating a striking ability completely to repress, or forget, concluded, ongoing, and impending wars in the contemporary world.

The more recent relationship between the warrior and the peasant tradition in archaeology can be described as follows. After the Second World War the assessment of the prehistoric actor as innately non-violent and preoccupied with subsistence, production, and trade became quite dominant. But the opposite stance survived and had a revival especially in the years after c. 1980 with the Marxist recovery – now in Structuralist bedding – and with the power branch of post-Processual archaeology. The two archaeological tales, with their partial coexistence, peaks, and declines, can be summarized as differential responses to contemporary politics and wars. The initially weak presence of warfare in the archaeology of the twentieth century is thus intimately linked to these two tales and thus also to the politics and ideologies that contributed to their formation.

Adding war

During the last ten years the warrior tale has prevailed and social categories like warrior élite, warrior aristocracy, warrior or martial society increasingly inhabit archaeological interpretations. Warfare is usually allowed, but the language often retains celebrative undertones highlighting the heroes of war, the élite warriors. Such a view is, in fact, being widely communicated, not least among scholars studying the Bronze Age, and also transmitted to the public (Kristiansen 1999: 180–8; Demakopoulou et al. 1998). It mediates an élitist and heroic stereotype of the Bronze Age, stressing cultural similarities on a pan-European scale, and thus, by the way, hinting at
a tie to a modern European project, which also conceals cultural differences (Gröhn n.d.; Gramsch 2000).

The increasing popularity of warriors in archaeological interpretations at the transition to the twenty-first century is a follow-up to the celebrative tale of the warrior so distinct during the previous century. The typecasting is largely maintained by which warriors are viewed as the brave-hearted heads of society. There is, likewise, an inclination to focus one-sidedly upon the privileged upper classes as if these were the only agents of significance. Sameness is contended in warriorhood in Europe regardless of time and place. The paired institution of the war chieftain and his retinue – as described in sources to so-called Indo-European origins, in Tacitus’ *Germania* and also present in the *Gefolgschaft* of the feudal order – is in the process of finding its way back in time into the Neolithic and the Bronze Age (e.g. Treherne 1995). In recent writings the warrior thus tends to be an unchangeable identity, embedded in social constancy, despite the often underlying evolutionary idea of prehistoric society as tending towards increasing complexity. It remains a rigid construct, which is not really negotiated with archaeological data.

The current prevalence of the warrior tale is associated with the belated appearance, around 1995, of specific studies of violence and war in archaeology.¹ This is an important event, which is marked by Lawrence Keeley’s influential publication *War before Civilisation: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (1996), followed by a veritable explosion in studies of war.² Quite likely, the dramatic increase in ethnic wars and genocides during the 1990s among dissolving national states has contributed immensely to this sudden escalation. Especially, the massive media coverage may well have made it difficult to carry on ignoring archaeological data of war and violence and may explain why this late response to contemporary war is less ideological than previously. These archaeological war studies improve on the realist component, but a critical voice may insert that war is described in a matter-of-fact fashion, which belies the horror, disaster, and slaughter involved. It is likewise significant that this initial inclusion of realism in archaeological writings is mingled with a continued idealization of the principal actor of war, namely the warrior. This certainly suggests that, apart from a politicized impact from contemporary events, much deeper-lying myths and ideals have been influential in creating and sustaining the two tales of warriors and peasants.

Myths commemorating heroes

The archaeological traditions of warriors and peasants mostly pacify the past and populate it with idealized figures of male identity. The scholars involved in the debate, predominantly men, consciously produce their views of prehistory in disagreement or agreement with existent views and this may have contributed to the academic reproduction of two stereotyped perceptions of prehistoric society positioned at each end of the scale: a disruptive and discordant society or a peaceful and harmonious society. There is more to it than academic rivalry among male scholars, however.

Even if war and violence are not really central to the former of the stereotypes, I believe both of them have their origin in the history of European identity created and recreated in the face of growing colonialism. The warrior tale and the peasant tale can be claimed to
Commemorative tales incorporate two dominant myths about the primitive other, which have been reproduced probably on a continuous scale at least since the seventeenth century. The bellicose and brutal savage emerges in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1958 [1651]) and reappears in transformed form in Karl Marx’s contradiction-filled and latently violent society. This being is in contrast to the noble and peaceful savage, who originates in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s romantic writings and who, in a sense, recurs in Max Weber’s consensus society.

The two archaeological tales relate to this contradictory pattern of myth. They include modern commemorations of heroes in the same way as heroes were celebrated in past societies through epics and material culture: a presentation of ideal manliness with limited bearing on the real world of the past, or the present for that matter. The past – insofar as this can be treated as a unit – was no doubt characterized by rival myths about heroes and heroines, much in contrast to the realities of most people’s lives. Presentations of war heroes are indeed frequent in European societies of the Stone and Bronze Ages (cf. Figs 2–4). Similarly, a veneration of warriors and warlike behaviour has permeated contemporary society as well as its interpretation of history. Sanimir Resic (1999) has recently identified celebrations of warriorhood and combative actions before, during, and after the Vietnam War, 1965–73. This romanticization included not only the official propaganda, but also the stories the soldiers told family and friends in letters. Resic (1999) finds a similar ideal of violent masculinity also in different historical and contemporary settings such as the Sumerian poem of Gilgamesh, Homer’s epics, Rambo movies, and modern football culture. The myth of the courageous warrior thus appears to be completely static and forever dominant, but this is doubtful. First, the attitude to warriors and their deeds could well have varied internally in past societies, depending on the identity and perspective of the agents. Several competing myths may well have existed, the idolizing of a certain violent masculine identity being the one most successfully transmitted to the present. After all, men have authored most written sources in the past as well as histories about the past in the present. Second, even dominant myths have a beginning and thus presumably also an end. Ideals of female fierceness are, for example, currently entering the contemporary scene and European women join the army more frequently than before. Moreover, other male ideals exist today than the one based on violence and fierceness, even if the latter unfortunately appears to be dominant in several parts of the world.

The horrors of war are thus suppressed in many different contexts, whether historical, epic, or contemporary. It might be added here that nothing points in the direction that war in so-called primitive societies should be less bloody than in so-called civilized societies (Keeley 1996; Helbling 1996; Wiessner and Tumu 1998: 119ff., 152f.; Brandt 2002). Rather, the frequency of war and violence varies with the specific cultural and social setting. It is likewise a myth that women are inherently peaceful. Historically, women have played a much more active role in warfare than usually acknowledged, either as supporters or as combatants (e.g. Simons 1999: 90f.).

Keeley’s book from 1996 was pioneering in that it helped to encourage war studies in archaeology. His key message is that the past has been utterly pacified by archaeologists and anthropologists, who have nourished the Rousseauian notion of the noble savage.³ This portrayal of the historiography is not entirely wrong, but is inadequate. The recurrence of the warrior theme throughout the twentieth century supplements the picture, and so do early studies by Childe, Gimbutas, Rowlands, Hedeager and
Kristiansen, Nordbladh, and Vencl, who to variable extents incorporate or study war. If anything, there have been two coexistent myths – the peaceful savage and a fierce and potentially warlike savage. A similar critique adheres to the anthropological part of Keeley’s book (Otterbein 2000: 794, 800ff.).

The history of research can now be summarized. Two opposite tales of prehistoric society have coexisted, and probably still do. The warrior tale with its emphasis on revolution and migration grew strong during the first half of the century, while the peasant tale with its emphasis on harmonious, industrious, and imperceptibly changing societies gradually moved into focus after around 1945 and then receded again in the 1980s. It is characteristic that the brutal and deadly side of the warrior tale is usually left out or transformed into soft war, while the possibility of violence and war is completely ignored by those advocating the peasant tale. During the last decade or so the warrior tale has resumed a predominant position, coinciding in part with a veritable boom in war and violence studies from c. 1995. This whole trajectory reflects differential social responses to contemporary politics and wars, simultaneously, however, incorporating deep-rooted European myths, which celebrate opposite ideals of society and masculinity.

Archaeology, anthropology, and war

Social anthropology has likewise had ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ advocating opposite societal stereotypes based on the myths of the peaceful or warlike savage (Otterbein 2000). Anthropology has, however, been much more willing to make war an object of study. An explosion in anthropological warfare studies occurred during the so-called Golden Age, c.1960–c.1980, including classic ethnographies as well as theoretical analyses of the causes and effects of war (ibid.).

While the partial entanglement of archaeology and anthropology is generally apparent (Gosden 1999), the two disciplines have informed each other surprisingly little as regards the issue of warfare and warriors despite the possibility that new insight might have been achieved through a cross-dialogue. The tribal zone theory proposed by Ferguson and Whitehead (1992), for instance, would not have survived unmodified for long if archaeological sources to prehistory had been consulted. The anthropological database of peace and war might similarly have been used to assess critically the two tales of warriors and peasants in archaeology. The dramatic increase in warfare studies during anthropology’s Golden Age, moreover, failed to obtain any profound impact on archaeology. It is therefore unlikely that the breakthrough of archaeological war studies in the mid-1990s is directly linked to anthropology. Rather, it is connected to the growth in ethnic-based wars after c. 1990, as suggested above.

An archaeology of warfare

The prevalence of two societal stereotypes epitomizes a need for a theoretical understanding of war and warriors. This is accentuated by the fact that recent archaeology has tended to treat warfare as if divorced from the rest of social practice (cf. Thorpe 2001). The most recent anthropology and sociology can here be used as a source of inspiration in
that warfare is generally regarded as intentional action situated within the continuities of social practice (Jabri 1996). This perspective on warfare as a violent kind of social action is useful not least because archaeological remains are essentially fragments of past social action. War and violence are, moreover, never accidental since they always derive from a cultural logic. It follows that attention should be paid to the violent acts themselves, the cultural meanings they carry, and the cultural landscape that forms them. Furthermore, warriorhood must be understood as a specific social identity, which feeds on warfare and which overlaps variably with other social identities depending on the specific context.

Archaeology must question rather than repeat contemporary myths. At the threshold to the twenty-first century, war finally entered the archaeological agenda, hence making interpretations accord better with the archaeological sources. However, the terrible side of war has not yet become part of archaeological histories, which are usually kept in a strictly analytical language. The recent approach to war in archaeology recalls the rationalization of war that was accomplished in the sciences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From Carl von Clausewitz onwards, war has been systematically reduced to rules, procedures, functions, causes, and effects as part of a modern political project, which has thereby commemorated warfare and legitimized the slaughter on and outside the battlefield (Pick 1993: 165ff.). Recent developments in the anthropology of war suggest that the degree of realism can be improved.

During the last ten years the anthropological handling of war has changed. The impersonal political-science analysis is supplemented by a concern with understanding the actions, experiences, motives and feelings of combatants, civilians and victims under the chaotic conditions of war and after-war (e.g. Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Nordstrom 1998; Macek 2000; Kolind n.d.). This particular interest is thus one of expression. Physical pain is notably considered an irreducible bodily experience, which can never be wholly communicated and which therefore forms an instrument of power (Scarry 1988). Feelings of meaninglessness and pain under circumstances of war are, on the other hand, universal in character (cf. Tarlow 1999: 20ff., 138ff.). The human suffering involved can therefore be communicated regardless of whether the war took place in Jutland during the Middle Neolithic or in Bosnia merely a few years ago.

Violence, hardship, and death are situated at the core of warfare and warriors; if they are left out, the story becomes incomplete and too easily turns into a commemoration of heroes. Skeletal trauma and weaponry in various archaeological contexts can be taken as direct or indirect evidence of the presence of war and violence with everything that implies in terms of cultural meaning, agency, and human suffering. The question posed in the introduction has been tackled in the above critique: it is crucial in our archaeologies to include the vicious face of war and warriors. This is because idealizations of violent identities and one-sided rationalizations of prehistoric war inevitably run the risk of legitimizing the use of violence and waging of war in our own time.

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Notes

1 Research in the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age has been more willing to incorporate war in interpretations (cf. Brun 1988; Nørgård Jørgensen and Clausen 1997; Ringtved 1999). Evolutionary thinking, which has also influenced social anthropology, is here an important factor: if indigenous people without war, or with so-called ritual war, are placed at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder, then warfare has to grow more common as the complexity of society increases.


3 The Rousseauian notion of the noble savage is renamed ‘myth of the peaceful savage’ by Keeley.

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