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Contents

List of Figures page xi
List of Maps xiv
List of Contributors to Volume i xv

General Introduction: Violence in World History 1
PHILIP DWYER (UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE, NEW SOUTH WALES) AND JOY DAMOUSI (UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE)

Introduction to Volume 1 19
LINDA FIBIGER (UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH) MARK HUDSON (MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR THE SCIENCE OF HUMAN HISTORY, JENA) AND MATTHEW TRUNDLE (UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND)

PART I
THE ORIGINS OF CONFLICT 37

1 · The Origins of Warfare and Violence 39
STEVEN LEBLANC (HARVARD UNIVERSITY)

2 · Violence in Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Hunter-Gatherer Communities 58
JÖRG ORSCHIEDT (FREIE UNIVERSITÄT, BERLIN AND THE CURT-ENGELOHORN-ZENTRUM ARCHÄOMETRIE, MANNHEIM)

3 · Settled Lives, Unsettled Times: Neolithic Violence in Europe 79
MARTIN J. SMITH (BOURNEMOUTH UNIVERSITY), RICK J. SCHULTING (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD) AND LINDA FIBIGER (UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH)
Contents

4 · Violence during the Later Stone Age of Southern Africa 99
   ALAN G. MORRIS (UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN)

5 · Weapons, Warriors and Warfare in Bronze Age Europe 117
   BARRY MOLLOY (UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN) AND CHRISTIAN HORN (UNIVERSITÄT ZU KIEL)

6 · Weapons, Ritual and Warfare: Violence in Iron Age Europe 142
   PETER WELLS (UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA)

7 · The Origins of Violence and Warfare in the Japanese Islands 160
   MARK HUDSON (MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR THE SCIENCE OF HUMAN HISTORY, JENA), RICK J. SCHULTING (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD) AND LINDA GILAIZEAU (INDEPENDANT RESEARCHER, OKAYAMA)

PART II
PREHISTORIC AND ANCIENT WARFARE 179

8 · Hunting and Warfare: The Ritualisation of Military Violence in Ancient Egypt 181
   JOHN C. DARNELL (YALE UNIVERSITY)

9 · Recent Advances in the Archaeology of Maya Warfare 198
   STANLEY SERAFIN (UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES)

10 · Violence and State Power in Early Mesopotamia 219
    STEVEN GARFINKLE (WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY)

11 · Violence and the Roman Way of Warfare 238
    JONATHAN ROTH (SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY)

12 · Roman Warfare and Military Violence in Late Antiquity 257
    DOUG LEE (UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM)

13 · Violence and Warfare in Early Imperial China 277
    WICKY TSE (THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG)
PART III
INTIMATE AND COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE 297

14. Early Massacres: Mass Violence in Neolithic Europe 299
   CHRISTIAN MEYER (OSTEOARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH CENTRE, GOSLAR)

15. Gendered Violence in Iron Age and Roman Britain 320
   REBECCA REDFERN (MUSEUM OF LONDON)

16. Violence in Ancient Egyptian Society 342
   DONALD B. REDFORD (PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY)

17. Violence and the Mutilated Body in Achaemenid Iran 360
   LLOYD LLEWELLYN-JONES (CARDIFF UNIVERSITY)

18. ‘Knocking Her Teeth out with a Stone’: Violence against Women in Ancient Greece 380
   LLOYD LLEWELLYN-JONES (CARDIFF UNIVERSITY)

19. Gang Violence in the Late Roman Republic 400
   JEFFREY TATUM (VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON)

20. Violence in Early Chinese History 418
   CHARLES SANFT (UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE)

PART IV
RELIGION, RITUAL AND VIOLENCE 439

21. Ritual Violence and Headhunting in Iron Age Europe 441
   IAN ARMIT (UNIVERSITY OF YORK)

22. Ritual Killing and Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East 460
   LUIS SIDDALL (INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR)

23. Violent Sacrifice in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds 475
   F. S. NAIDEN (UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA)

24. Combat Sports in Ancient Greece and Rome 493
   MICHAEL J. CARTER (BROCK UNIVERSITY, ONTARIO)
Contents

25 · Religious Violence in Late Antiquity 512
PETER VAN NUFFELEN (GHENT UNIVERSITY)

PART V
VIOLENCE, CRIME AND THE STATE 531

26 · Violence, Law and Community in Classical Athens 533
MATTHEW TRUNDLE (UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND)

27 · Roman Violence: Attitudes and Practice 550
GARRETT G. FAGAN (PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY)

28 · Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews 572
CANDIDA R. MOSS (UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM)

PART VI
REPRESENTATIONS AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF VIOLENCE 587

29 · Kingship, Violence and Non-violence in Indian Thought, c. 500 BCE to 500 CE 589
UPINDER SINGH (ASHOKA UNIVERSITY, INDIA)

30 · Violence and the Bible 607
DEBRA SCOGGINS BALLENTINE (RUTGERS UNIVERSITY)

31 · Representations of Violence in Ancient Mesopotamia and Syria 629
DAVIDE NADALI (SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME)

32 · Representations of War and Violence in Ancient Rome 654
SUSANN S. LUSNIA (TULANE UNIVERSITY)

33 · Heroism, Military Violence and the State in Ancient India 684
JARROD WHITAKER (WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY)

Index 704
Figures

2.1 Krapina, Croatia, frontal-parietal fragment K20 with a small healed lesion on the upper part of the frontal bone. Source: author’s collection. page 62

2.2 Saint-Césaire, France, left parietal fragment with healed injury. Source: author’s collection. 63

2.3 Ofnet, Germany, occipital view of skull 21 of a young adult male with various lethal traumas. Source: author’s collection. 72

2.4 Ofnet, Germany, location of blunt force trauma on at least eight individuals from the large head deposition. Source: author’s collection. 72


4.2 Superior view of cranial vault of UCT 332 individual 3 (Langklip) showing perimortem injury on the right parietal caused by a bluntly pointed object. Source: the author; previously published in A. G. Morris, ‘Trauma and Violence in the Later Stone Age of Southern Africa’, South African Medical Journal, 100.6 (2012), 568–70. 105

4.3 Posterior view of cranial vault of UCT 386 (Faraoskop) showing impact point on left side and radiating fractures on both sides of the skull. Source: N. Dlamini. 107

4.4 Tracing of rock art from Hippo Shelter, Qacha’s Nek, Lesotho, showing (a) men fighting with bows and arrows, and (b) men fighting with knobbed sticks. Source: KwaZulu Natal Museum. 111

4.5 Tracing of rock art from Mpungwesi north Forestry Reserve, Pholela, Underberg District, Natal, showing San with bows and arrows defending against pursuing Nguni carrying spears and shields. Source: KwaZulu Natal Museum. 113

5.1 Bronze Age shields from Ireland from the environs of (1) Lough Gur, (2) Annadale, (3) Lough Gara, (4) Cloonlara, and (5) Clonbrin. Source: the author, © National Museum of Ireland. 122

5.2 Rock art image from Lövåsen, Sweden (RAÄ Tanum 319:1) with an axe bearer being stabbed in the back by a spear bearer who also has a sheathed
sword: the killed either has a phallus or this was the only way to show his sword sheath. Source: author’s collection.

5.3 Bronze Age battle-axe from Vatin, Serbia (top), and Bronze Age axe from Schkoder region, Albania (bottom). Source: author’s collection.

7.1 Reconstructed defensive structures at the Yoshinogari site. Source: M. Hudson.

7.2 Perimortem blunt force injury on the right parietal of an adult probable female from the Late Jōmon site of Sakaeso, Shimamaki (top), and adult female skull of the Epi-Jōmon found at Minami-Usu 6 (bottom). Source: Rick Schulting.

7.3 Blunt force cranial injuries from Kitakogane (left) and Takasago (right). Source: Rick Schulting.

15.1 Artist’s reconstruction of an Iron Age chariot burial at Wetwang Slack. Source: Aaron Watson, © Melanie Giles.

15.2 Relief depicting the conquest of Britannia by the Emperor Claudius from Sebasteion at Aphrodisias in Turkey. Source: © Steve Kersham, licensed under creative commons.

18.1 Attic red-figure chous c. 450 BCE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 37.11.19. Source: the author.

21.1 Reconstruction of one of the third-century BCE warrior statues from Entremont, Provence; the figure is a composite assembled from numerous fragments. Source: Libby Mulqueeny.


31.5 Seal impressions from Tell Beydar. Source: © Joachim Bretschneider and Greta Jans, Beydar Archaeological Expedition.

32.1 Riot in the Amphitheatre, fresco, first century CE, from Pompeii, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. Source: © De Agostini Picture Library/Getty Images.


32.4 Dying Niobid, marble, Horti Sallustiani, Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo. Source: author’s collection.

List of Figures

32.6 Mosaic with scenes of gladiators and referee from a Roman villa at Dar Buc Ammera à Zliten (near Leptis Magna), third century C.E., Archaeological Museum, Libya. Source: H. Koppermann courtesy of Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Rome.

32.7 Lusius Storax and magistrates (top) and gladiatorial combat (bottom); funerary reliefs of C. Lusius Storax, limestone, mid first century C.E., Teate, Chieti, Italy. Source: M. Hutzol courtesy of Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Rome.

32.8 Detail of the Medea Sarcophagus, marble, c. 140–50 C.E., Antikensammlung, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (inv. Sk 843b). Source: Shutterstock.

32.9 Portonaccio Sarcophagus, marble, c. 190–200 C.E., Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo, Rome. Source: author’s collection.

32.10 Claudius subduing Britannia, marble, first century C.E., Sebasteion, Aphrodisias, Turkey. Source: G. Petruccioli courtesy of NYU-Aphrodisias Excavations.

32.11 Soldier holding a severed head in his teeth, relief scene 24 from the Column of Trajan, 113 C.E., Rome, from a cast in the Museo della Civiltà Romana, Rome. Source: R. Ulrich.


32.14a–b The siege at Verona and the battle at the Milvian bridge, relief scene, marble, 315 C.E., Arch of Constantine, Rome. Source: R. Ulrich.
Maps

3.1 Distribution map showing locations throughout Europe of Neolithic human remains bearing injuries consistent with violence, with a second category of locations including settlements and enclosures with signs of being attacked and mass burials consistent with massacres. page 86

31.1 The ancient Near East. 630
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General Introduction: Violence in World History

PHILIP DWYER AND JOY DAMOUSI

This four-volume world history is the first collection of its kind to look at violence across different periods of human history and across many regions of the world. It capitalises on the growing scholarly interest in the history of violence, which is emerging as one of the key intellectual issues of our time. The volumes take into account the latest scholarship in the field and comprises nearly 140 scholars, who have contributed substantial chapters to provide an authoritative treatment of violence from a multiplicity of perspectives. It thus offers the reader a wide-ranging thematic treatment of different types of violence, as well as a compendium of an experience shared by peoples across time. The thematic sections vary from volume to volume, but they allow for a comparative history of violence from period to period and from region to region. In this way, the Cambridge World History of Violence will allow readers to assess the nature and the extent of violence across time and place, to examine its causes, and to consider the reasons for particular levels of violence at given moments of history. The project will, we hope, lead to a better understanding of the interaction between the forces that shape violence, and the ways in which institutions, beliefs and the structures of daily life reduce or amplify the potential for it, as well as the ways in which both the anticipation and the memory of violence can shape society.

These volumes encompass historiographical and conceptual ‘state of the art’ chapters which are at the same time forward-looking, exploring where current trends in research might, or should, lead over the coming years. They provide an accessible compendium to non-specialist readers, a readable account of the history of this crucial phenomenon. We are conscious that violence is such a vast topic that no body of work, even a project as ambitious as this one, can ever possibly comprehend the full range of the global experience of violence. As much as the editors have tried, the content is in part governed by both the availability of scholars to contribute to the collection as well as the type of research currently being conducted. Where
there are gaps, we hope that others will be encouraged to fill them. The range of topics covered is, therefore, necessarily selective, but we have nonetheless tried to draw out large themes over time so that the end product is both as wide-ranging and as cohesive as possible. For example, the volumes include essays on violence and animals, human sacrifice, state-directed violence, ritual violence, different forms of interpersonal violence, and literary and visual representations of violence. A decision was made, however, not to include topics on trauma and the aftereffects of violence (which is only obliquely touched upon), nor to explore themes around violence and the emotions.¹

The two problems facing any collection of this nature are how to make the whole as coherent as possible, and how to contain the parameters of such a vast subject. A decision was made to limit the scope of the work to the humanities, especially history, art history, archaeology and literature, although there are specialised contributions from other disciplines. While we appreciate the outstanding contribution social scientists have made to our understanding of violence – indeed, many of our authors draw on the insights and methodologies of social scientists – this collection takes a specifically historical stance and focuses squarely on the changing nature of violence from prehistoric times to the present.² In the process, it seeks to redefine how people understood violence and how people engaged with it at various times in human history. These volumes thus provide the first long-term study of violence that will allow us to place today’s world and its social problems in a much broader chronological context. Violence played a prominent role in the lives of all peoples across time and space from inter-state, organised warfare to everyday violence between individuals. What we can’t know is the extent to which the threat of violence played a role in the past, in part because it has never really been examined, and in part because the sources would largely remain silent on this point.

Recent arguments in favour of a decline in violence in the world over the past five hundred years, which rely heavily on an interpretation based on numbers, graphs and statistics, have been deliberately eschewed here. The statistical approach to understanding violence and in particular homicide has been seriously critiqued elsewhere, and so we will limit ourselves to simply pointing out, first, how little it says about contemporaries’ attitudes towards violence, and, second, how little linear approaches to history say about the function of violence in a given society, including things such as the role of the state, masculinity, the judicial system and the possible political values inherent in some forms of violence. Understanding and explaining violence in the world and its development through time has to do with context. That understanding can only come by working within larger frameworks that bring to light the relationships between and among violent events, processes and developments. By bringing a range of scholars and disciplines together, our objective has been to transform how we understand violence through a series of in-depth studies, and to explore both continuity and change in violence throughout human development.

What is Violence?

No collection of this nature can escape the inevitable question around the definition of violence. At the core of understanding violence is to understand cultural beliefs and attitudes, which can change over time, sometimes quite dramatically. That means understanding what is and what is not violence in any given society at any given time. One of the simplest definitions, offered by Dutch criminologist Pieter Spierenburg, limits violence to the ‘intentional encroachment upon a person’s physical integrity’. Intent is fundamental here; that is, there has to be a knowing intention to cause harm to another. That is why accidents, which may be very violent, are not considered. That is why we also discount, for the purposes of this collection at least, the violation

of a person by another, who for all intents and purposes may be thinking they are acting in that person’s best interests but who may unintentionally cause harm. Causing harm and violence, we would argue, are two different things. However, although most of the chapters in these volumes deal with the physical violation of the body, we cannot discount other forms of violence. Blasphemy was a form of violence in the early modern era. Bullying, cyber-hate, digital vigilantism, racial epithets and emotional abuse are also forms of violence, especially when persistent verbal attacks can lead to self-harm or even suicide. Sociologists have long included the structural and the symbolic in notions of violence. But defining violence is even more complicated than that, because deciding where physical violence begins and where it ends is no simple task. Does bruising constitute ‘violence’? Is the drawing of blood always violence? Is incarceration violence, even if it does not cause internees physical harm? What about the trauma that might result from the experience of violence, either as victim, witness or indeed as perpetrator?

The answer to many of these questions depends on who, where and when we are discussing. How people conceive of ‘violence’ will necessarily vary from period to period and from region to region, but sensitivity to the ways in which contemporaries used the language of violence or, to put it another way, what they understood to be ‘violence’ is fundamental to our interpretations of it. The difficulty is always balancing what any given society condones as violence, and what we as outsiders condemn. We have, nevertheless, defined it in its broadest possible sense to include not only the use of physical force by a person, a group of people or an institution against one or more other living beings, but also a psychological, social and emotional dimension, to encompass any coercive or exploitative relationship.

Another complication is the huge diversity of meanings of violence across time and across cultures. In the medieval Islamic world, where coercive force, moral law and power were intimately tied to notions of God, concepts such as shawka (brute force) preoccupied political theorists. Muslims, however, tended not to reify violence the way western Europeans did, nor to

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8 For the following see Patricia Crone, Medieval Islamic Political Thought (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 4–6, 246.
lump all violence together in one general category. In the past, Muslim communities had different categories for, say, violence towards animals and the violence exercised by Turkmen bands conquering a town. Coercive power was wielded against ‘evil-doers’ through institutionalised violence (as in the Western world), by imposing penalties, suppressing revolts and by organising campaigns against the infidel (jihad). Similarly, Aztec society, where ritualised violence was part of everyday life, conceptualised forms of violence, such as sexual assault, warfare and hitting, differently to other cultures; they even made a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence, but they did not have a term for ‘violence’ as such. In Japan in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, on the other hand, there was an extensive vocabulary of violence, depending on the nature of the act and the degree to which it flouted authority. The idea of violence was not, in other words, unique to Western cultures and it is certainly not modernist in conception. Violence is multifaceted, and it is highly ambivalent. It is multifaceted because there are so many different forms violence can take. It is ambivalent in the ways it can be experienced, socially sanctioned and culturally transmitted. The words used for violence must be understood in their cultural context.

Sexual violence is a case in point. Attitudes have evolved enormously over the centuries and across most societies. In Europe for most of the pre-modern era women were considered the property of their male peers (fathers, husbands), while definitions of rape had little to do with modern understandings of the word. Assault committed on a woman was an offence not so much against the woman herself, but against the male family member. When a complaint was made to the courts, compensation was asked for, since the dowry, in the case of a girl or a woman who was not yet married, was damaged. The mental and moral integrity of the woman assaulted was not taken into consideration until late in the nineteenth century and into twentieth. In the modern era the state and the judiciary categorise violence as a criminal form of behaviour that is punishable according to local laws, customs and social norms. This can vary radically from one country to another, and even within countries with differing jurisdictions.

9 Thanks to Caroline Dodds Pennock for this point.
Inevitably, any treatment of violence on a world-historical scale has to grapple with the issue of the innateness of violence in humans. A number of scholars, such as Jared Diamond, Azar Gat, Richard Wrangham, Edward O. Wilson and, more recently, Steven Pinker, have argued that violence and war are part of human nature, a part of our biological makeup. However, the last two decades have seen important changes in the ways in which archaeologists interpret violence in the past. The chapters on archaeology in volume I provide a unique long-term perspective on the development, institutionalisation and interpretation of violence. We can thus see how the use of a wide range of sources, from artefacts such as paintings and carvings to the examination of human skeletal remains, presents us with a different picture of the deep past, one that goes beyond current evaluations of non-state societies as inherently violent. As a result, the claim that prehistoric societies were more violent than other periods of human history is being questioned as archaeology offers alternative interpretations based on new evidence and data sets. Certainly, the osteoarchaeological record is clear; evidence of violent deaths has been uncovered in many parts of the world and includes evidence of massacres, torture, mutilation and execution. However, the quality and depth of the archaeological record varies chronologically and geographically; there is not enough evidence to suggest just how frequent the violence in all regions and periods was, or that it was pervasive, or that it existed across all regions of the world. A recent study of prehistoric Japan, for example, concludes that violence, including warfare, was not common. A review of ancient human remains over 10,000 years old, including more than 2,900 skeletons from over 400 different sites, found only four skeletons bearing signs of violence. It suggests that warfare was a cultural ‘invention’ that emerged towards the end of the Palaeolithic era. However, others argue that warfare among hunter-gatherers was much more common and proportionally deadlier than generally perceived (Steven LeBlanc, vol. 1).

12 Thanks to Linda Fibiger for this point.
We tend to characterise the relations between nomadic and agro-urban peoples as consisting of warfare, raiding and conquest, but there too the intensity of the violence cannot be demonstrated with any degree of accuracy. A turning point appears to have been the emergence of what has been dubbed a distinct ‘warrior ideology’, the timing of which could vary from one part of the world to another, but which marked a profound break with how warfare and inter-group violence was conducted, and which was intimately tied to the identity of the earliest states. In Europe, this took place from around 3,500 BCE to the early first millennium BCE. We see this ‘warrior ideology’ emerge around the same time as the earliest states – in China, in the ancient Near East, in Egypt – which began to take a large measure of control of violence by arguing that only violence sanctioned by the state, and by the gods (in other words, religion), was legitimate. We see then in the earliest civilisations an intimate connection between the political elites, state institutions and religion that in many parts of the world was going to persist right through to the beginnings of the modern era. That is, states often used religion to claim divine approval of violence. Ancient India (Upinder Singh, vol. 1) seems to be one of the exceptions to the rule in that there were tensions between the concept of non-violence and the state, but even then, most recognised that non-violence was incompatible with the wielding of state power.

The relationship between religion, the state and violence is explored in a number of chapters throughout the four volumes. Ritualised violence underpinned religious observances. We still do not understand why the practice of ritual sacrifice was so widespread in so many cultures throughout history. Sacrifice could take many forms, from animal sacrifice commonly practised among the ancients – as a result of which hundreds of millions if not billions of animals would have been put to death over the centuries – to the ritualised killing of the ‘bog people’ throughout northern Iron Age Europe, to the deaths of companions and retainers in Mesopotamia and in Tang China, sacrificed so that they could accompany deceased high-ranking personages into the afterlife, to areas of North America, Mesoamerica and the central Andes where humans, and in particular blood, became a ‘food for the gods’ to maintain the equilibrium of the cosmos (Stanley Serafin, Luis Siddall, Ian Armit, F. S. Naiden, vol. 1; Andrew Scherer, Wolfgang Gabbert and Ute Schüren, vol. 11; Wolfgang Gabbert, vol. 111). Throughout many parts of the Americas, bloodletting and other forms of self-inflicted injury, staged combat, both human and animal sacrifice, child sacrifice and the torture and execution of captives were common. The key to understanding what looks to
us to be cruel behaviour is to place this ritual violence in context – humans were repaying a debt to the gods for existing on earth, in flesh and blood, and if not one’s own blood then that of a suitable substitute. The Europeans who encountered these religious rituals could find no better justification for conquest (even if some of their own behaviours clearly resembled these practices).

On the whole, Europeans conquered non-Europeans on the pretext of combating barbarism and bringing civilisation to indigenous peoples. The colonial ‘other’ is generally depicted in dark colours, despite the vast diversity of indigenous societies, while Europeans were wrapped in the cloak of ‘civilisation’ – a word first coined in the European context in the 1750s and which was critical to legitimising the European colonial project (Matthew Restall, Stuart Carroll, vol. III). Over the course of the early modern and modern eras, wherever Europeans interacted with indigenous populations, ‘civilisation’ became synonymous with violence and was often used to justify genocide, ethnic cleansing and enslavement. Colonial settler societies in particular were predicated on violence, even if it took centuries for most of the globe to be incorporated into the European systems, and even if the nature of that violence changed over time (Patricia O’Brien, Amanda Nettelback and Lyndall Ryan, James P. Daughton, vol. IV). European settler societies were often vastly outnumbered by local indigenous or slave populations, which led to everyday violence becoming central to the settlers’ or slave owners’ sense of identity. The irony was that in practising that kind of everyday violence, European settlers were inadvertently undermining their own authority and in the long run laid the foundations for the decolonising movements of the twentieth century.

Religion and violence, that is, violence motivated by religious concerns and beliefs, can consist of anything from the destruction of places of worship and iconography to the persecution of those whose beliefs stray from the mainstream (Christine Caldwell Ames, vol. II; Robert Thurston, Anthony Roberts, vol. III). ‘Holy war’ can be waged against one’s own people too. This was the case in Byzantium in the twelfth century, when specific groups within the empire were subjected to trials for heresy and burned at the stake (Theresa Shawcross, vol. II). The same occurred in western Europe, where not only Jews and Muslims were persecuted but so too were other Christians who were deemed ‘heretics’. Eventually this too became institutionalised, for want of a better word, as early mob violence gave way to the Inquisition and even to the Crusades (Susanna Throop, vol. II).
Religion can also be intimately connected to the public uses of violence by the state. Spectacles of justice in medieval Europe, which could take the form of public executions and torture, were also imbued with religious symbolism. The state (or the church) was removing sin from society, but at the same time it offered the possibility of penance for the criminal, a chance to wash away one’s sins through pain, much like Christ on the cross, that if performed well enabled the condemned to better meet their maker (Sara Beam, vol. III). The case was different in late imperial China, where rock fights, cockfights, exorcisms, floggings and beheadings were common spectacles of public violence (Robert Antony, vol. III). Among the lower orders in China, violence gave meaning to men’s lives and was intimately tied to the folk traditions and bloody rituals that permeated everyday life and popular culture.

We can see, then, a sort of dialectic between the individual, the state and violence that can, depending on the circumstances, result in both a diminution and an increase in rates of violence. Three prominent examples are Europe, Japan and China. Interstate violence is inevitably most intense during periods of political division. In what we today know as China (Jonathan Skaff, vol. II), from the third to the tenth centuries, there were intermittent but intense periods of internal conflict not only between states but within states, at court and over changes of dynasties. In Japan from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries (David Spafford, vol. II), two shogunates ruled on behalf of the emperor during which time the violence of political adversaries was deemed by definition criminal and partisan. The flipside to that coin was that the violence used by the shogunates to put down rebellions was considered an act of ‘peacemaking’. But even that semblance of order collapsed in the sixteenth century as warlords vied for political ascendancy.

Moreover, as we see in a number of chapters throughout these volumes, the state can never completely control its subjects. Interpersonal violence will always exist; the only difference is the degree to which people have recourse to it. Up until the modern era, in most parts of the world everyday violence was taken for granted and used to either enforce and, indeed, reinforce social hierarchies, although sometimes also to challenge them. This kind of interpersonal violence varied according to the socio-cultural setting, but it was always present. It can be found in the gendered and legal relations of ancient Greece (Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, vol. I) and in the Early Islamic period (Nadia Maria El Cheikh, vol. II). In Rome, the tradition of physical authority exercised by the pater familias, normalised by custom and law and which could result in the death of spouses, children and slaves, was maintained with varying degrees of intensity right through to the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries when the right of the patriarch to ‘correct’ his dependants began to be questioned.

In general terms, violence against the weak and the poor – the socially marginalised – was commonplace. The lower social orders were always open to physical abuse and violence, the violence often part of systems and structures to keep them in their place. It was part of what Philippa Maddern referred to as the ‘moral hierarchy of violence’. By this she meant that those in charge, especially of the household, had the moral authority to employ violence in disciplining people occupying positions beneath them. Subordinates, in turn, were expected to accept this discipline with resignation and patience, even if they might on occasion consider it unwarranted or excessive. The meanings of violence were thus a function of the position a person occupied within the social hierarchy of the household. This may still be true for some parts of the world today.

Violence, then, is used as a method of control by both states and individuals, a means of imposing authority as well as of disrupting that authority. In the process, in many parts of the world, individual violence, and in particular the violence of the warrior, was idealised; it became the stuff of legend, through song and verse. Warrior elites who could legitimately practice violence as a way of life attached a particular set of values to it, such as honour and vengeance. This was as much the case for the Vikings as it was for the warrior knights of Europe among whom violence was believed to be spiritually beneficial (Richard Kaeuper, vol. II). Bravery and loyalty were prized values across many warrior cultures. Nonetheless, attitudes towards violence could vary enormously from one culture to another. In ancient China, up until the second century C.E., violence was mostly depicted in literature in a negative light (Charles Sanft, vol. i), but this was not at all the case at the same time in ancient Greece, ancient Rome, or in the Islamic lands between 500 and 1500, where warfare and fighting were generally regarded in a positive light. In India, too, fighting and dying in battle was the honourable thing to do. The classic Indian epic, the Mahābhārata (Jarrod Whitaker, vol. i), was in some respects an instruction manual for warriors on how to behave.

From ancient times right through to the present, questions of honour and shame were central to understanding male, and sometimes female, codes of conduct, and especially for understanding the violent consequences of having

those codes transgressed. ‘Honour cultures’, as they are called, existed in most parts of the world and in most periods of time. In imperial China (Bret Hinsch, vol. 11), elite men were expected to exact revenge on those who had shamed them. That changed over time. From the tenth century China’s literary and administrative elites associated public violence with the lower classes and with a lack of self-control. For Chinese men, on the other hand, it was still very much part of masculine identity. This change in attitudes occurred in China many centuries before Europe or indeed Japan. In Japan from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (Constantine Vaporis, vol. 111), at a time of relative peace, the samurai were extraordinarily quick to take offence when it came to their honour. The same could be said for much of the Western world (Pieter Spierenburg, vol. 111) during that same period, although notions of honour gradually began to shift in many countries in the north and north-west of Europe. By the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries these notions of masculine honour had largely faded from Western societies, or at least insults no longer resulted in the kinds of violence that were endemic in earlier centuries.

Why attitudes shifted, that is, why working-class men no longer resorted to the knife and why upper-class men no longer fought duels, is still being debated, although one theory attaches the decline in male-on-male fighting to Norbert Elias’s ‘the civilising process’, a process by which increased levels of state intervention and ‘affect control’ among the social elites somehow trickled down to the masses over the centuries, thereby bringing about a decline in interpersonal violence. This kind of overarching approach to changes in socio-cultural explanations for the decline in violence has been met with some scepticism. A more nuanced version of this theory combines the ‘civilising process’ with what has been called the ‘spiritualisation’ of the concept of honour. Intimately tied to male honour was the question of female honour – the female was, after all, considered the ‘property’ of the male for most of world history. To impugn the woman’s honour was to impugn the man’s honour. This is a problem that exists in many cultures


around the world today and which still finds expression in so-called ‘honour killings’.

Most questions of honour concerned men, but women too could have their honour impugned, although with different outcomes. Women are most often the victims of violence – the witch craze in Europe is an obvious example, and so too is domestic violence across cultures – but they can also be the agents of violence. Women were also warriors, fought duels, engaged in slavery and sent their sons and daughters off to Hitler or Communist Youth groups. Slavery is an example of the kind of violence usually associated with white men, but whole communities were complicit: white women and children, black and even mixed-race men and women were avid slaveholders as well. In other words, we should not look upon women (and children) as just the victims of violence. When they are the subject of violence, however, it is worth asking, as does Joanna Bourke in volume IV, who is entitled to label the violence against women. This is a question of figuring out not only what constitutes the different kinds of violence directed against women and children – all of which are deeply rooted in specific political, economic, social and cultural contexts – but who is determining what constitutes that form of violence. The answer is, more often than not, men, at least well into the modern era, when women began entering those fields of discourse.

Acceptable and Unacceptable Violence, Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence

Authorities exercise violence, or practise rites around public violence, in order to stabilise the social order. An early modern executioner could perform a quite involved ritual around public torture and death in order to assert the authority of the state, for example. This occurred in Europe but also in Islamic countries during the Middle period, that is, from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, during which we see an increase in violent punishment and torture (Christian Lange, vol. II). In Europe, too, we see an increase in public torture and execution between 1400 and 1600 – in fact, more executions took place during those two centuries than either before or after – although there is a tendency to exaggerate just how commonplace it was. Attitudes towards the spectacle of violence, a complex and difficult thing to

understand, necessarily evolved over the years. Eventually, the public torture that preceded executions was no longer performed, while the bodies of the condemned were no longer displayed in public. That change took time to occur and the reasons behind it were not always linked to an emerging humanitarianism or empathy for the condemned. In many parts of Europe, for example, the right of the state to use violence, and in some instances extreme forms of violence like breaking on the wheel and burning at the stake, was never really questioned, despite what French sociologist Michel Foucault may have written about the notorious Damien Affair in eighteenth-century France, the last person to be hanged, drawn and quartered for attempted regicide.¹⁹

This brings us to the traditional distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of violence. This is slightly different again from legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence, which is a distinction often made to designate the difference between sanctioned, lawful violence and unsanctioned, unlawful violence. Acceptable versus unacceptable violence is about what societies sanction or condemn. For example, throughout the early modern and into the modern period duelling was considered to be an ‘acceptable’ form of defending one’s honour, including in colonial societies, even if it had been outlawed by monarchical states. Norbert Elias uses duelling as an example of the relationship between state formation and the decline of violence in European culture.²⁰ It begs the question, what does ‘civilised’ violence look like? Does the duel represent a more civilised form of killing than warfare? Sixteenth-century Europe saw an increase in violence, as elites provoked rivals in order to demonstrate their social superiority (Stuart Carroll, vol. 111). The response to the problem of violence, Carroll argues, was the invention of ‘civil society’. The distinction, therefore, between acceptable and unacceptable violence is not very helpful when reflecting on violence from an historical perspective, just as the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate, while used in judicial circles, is not all that helpful. There will always be those who find


a particular form of violence acceptable or tolerable – the death penalty, for example – while others do not. Using ‘aversion therapy’ was a sanctioned form of violence against homosexuals in the 1950s and 1960s (and still is in some countries), but is it for all that ‘legitimate’, even when it has the endorsement of the authorities, or even when some of the individuals involved voluntarily subjected themselves to that form of ‘treatment’?

The lines between legitimate/acceptable and illegitimate/unacceptable forms of violence blur very easily. Moreover, ‘legitimate’ forms of violence are generally intimately intertwined with legal codes that define what is acceptable and what is not in any given society. Such codes date back to the first civilisations. Where they work best, they are dependent upon the cooperation and involvement of the communities they are meant to regulate. They often cease to work when communities no longer trust the authorities or when they have lost confidence in the judicial system. In those communities, vengeance is often at the core of interpersonal violence. This was the case for Japan (Morten Oxenbøll, vol. II; Constantine Vaporis, vol. III), and indeed in Italy and Spain, where the power of the central state was weak and law enforcement was unreliable. In those instances, and we see this in varying degrees throughout history, local communities developed their own conflict strategies, or they took the law into their own hands.

If we look to areas away from the state and government-sanctioned violence, to intimate and interpersonal violence such as domestic violence, violence towards children and gendered sexual abuse and assault, we see how pervasive violence has been in everyday life. These forms of violence have existed across centuries; a number of contributors discuss the manifestation of these practices in time and place, providing a rich and layered history to this vital aspect of the history of violence. Male violence operated in ancient Greece around concepts of honour and shame which entered into domestic life (Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, vol. I). In early modern Europe, men were expected to use violence to control those under their control (Elizabeth Malcolm and Dianne Hall, vol. III). In China, legal understandings of sexual and domestic violence (Matthew Sommer, vol. III), shifted over time away from status performance, in which sexual and domestic violence were understood in terms of the Confucian kinship system, to gender performance, in which males played a role as husbands, fathers and sons, and females played a role as dutiful, chaste wives, mothers and daughters. Despite the increasing legal recognition of sex crimes in the twentieth century, these have been significantly under-reported and the law has been slow to persecute
offenders. Despite the shift to a widespread recognition that sex with a child is heinous, child sexual assault continues, while the meaning of sexual assault remains contested (Lisa Featherstone, vol. IV).

Another aspect highlighted by these volumes is the relationship between animals and violence. Participation in extreme sports and the pleasure taken in the ritual baiting and slaughter of animals were features of many societies. Indeed, displays of violence between humans, between humans and animals, or between animals have existed for most of human history. If we take violence in sport as a window on to the social relationships, values and ideologies of any given society, then much can be gleaned from its study, especially where the violence was contained, that is, where it followed rules and regulations, and served a purpose or a function. Any number of examples could be given, from gladiatorial combat to boxing, wrestling and pankration (a combination of boxing and wrestling). In the early modern world, a distinction can be made between hunting, a venerated pastime in some sections of society, and spectator sports such as cockfighting, bear-baiting, bull-baiting and even bullfighting (Bruce Boehrer, vol. III). Violence in sporting arenas is also another dimension. In the early nineteenth century sport was played with a high level of physical violence with rules defined by local custom; the rules did not become standardised until the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, considerably reducing the risk of death or serious injury (Emma Griffin, vol. IV). Over the course of history the role of the state shifted from an absence in these practices to highly regulating them.

In other spheres, when the state intruded on the daily lives of its people in ways they were not used to, or when external factors such as population pressures and changing economic conditions placed strains on economies and societies, the result could be resistance and popular upheaval. This was the case for most parts of the world, although China and Europe come into particular focus during the period between 1500 and 1800. Revolts, food riots, rebellions and revolutions were frequent up until the time industrialisation was able to guarantee food supplies to urban centres. Again, we find this to be a common theme throughout history. China, despite periods of strong centralisation and bureaucratic government, was continually rocked by rebellions, from two of the most cataclysmic in early Chinese history – the revolt led by Huang Chao at the end of the ninth century and the revolt led by Fang La at the beginning of the twelfth century (Don J. Wyatt, vol. II) – through to one of the largest and possibly one of the strangest rebellions in history, the Taiping Rebellion (Thomas DuBois, vol. IV), led by a young man who claimed he was the brother of Jesus Christ, and which over a decade in
the 1850s cost the lives of millions of people. Domestic unrest is a consistent feature of European, Japanese, Indian and Chinese history right through to the modern era. Given that, we can better understand the mechanisms behind these revolts. Insurgent crowds have always used verbal and symbolic violence (Peter McPhee and Jeremy Teow, vol. 1v), which can consist of anything from threatening language to the destruction of property, but is the kind of violence that is usually expressed and contained within cultural limits. In Ireland, for example, arson rather than political assassination was often the preferred method of protest.21

If populations resisted the encroachments of the state, the state was also responsible for some of the worst mass killings in history, especially in the twentieth century. World Wars I and II were global phenomena, traumatic in the ways that the killing of civilian populations became strategic objectives of the wars (Hans-Lukas Kieser, Bruno Cabanes, Jochen Hellbeck, Takashi Yoshida, vol. 1v). Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s China and Pol Pot’s Cambodia are all examples of what can happen when the apparatus of the state is put to ideological use (Zhou Xun, James Tyner, vol. 1v). A characteristic of the modern state apparatus imposing its will and not tolerating political dissent is the concentration camp, in all its manifest forms (Dan Stone, vol. 1v), including among democratic imperial nations.22

Another is the desire to pursue nationalist agendas, and to ‘unmix’ races through deportation or mass annihilations. This was certainly the case for the imperial rimlands (bordering the Austrian, Russian and the Ottoman empires) in Europe during the interwar period (Mark Levene, vol. 1v).

The relationship between modernity and violence is one of those questions that historians will continue to debate, but there is little doubt that technology radically changed the ways in which humans fought and killed each other over the millennia, from the use of bronze and then iron in the fabrication of weapons, through to gunpowder, the musket and then the rifle, the Gatling gun and then the machine gun, to cannon and the atomic bomb. If we know how people fought, and often who they fought against, we do not always know why they fought, especially in earlier periods where written records were either not yet existent or scarce. What is certain, however, is that the ways in which people fight and kill each other will continue to evolve

with the technology as drones, robotics and artificial intelligence become more sophisticated.\textsuperscript{23}

It is impossible to assess or predict the forms violence will take this century, but already social media has profoundly defined the public nature of witnessing violence through digital platforms on such a vast global scale that there are no limits to its outreach or audience. Technology also played a role in the dissemination of violence, from the print media of Reformation Europe when images were circulated in new ways (Charles Zika, vol. \textit{III}) to the advent of the technologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This visualisation expanded the communication of violence through photography, film and television (Jolyon Mitchell, vol. \textit{IV}). Television beamed footage of conflicts across the world – most notably and controversially during the Vietnam War – while social media in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries can transmit violence around the world at any moment in time. Atrocities such as a beheading carried out by Islamic State in the Middle East or a mass shooting in New Zealand can now be watched as they happen.

**Conclusion**

Faced with the enormous diversity of violence across human cultures and throughout human history, it would be rash to make too many generalisations about the nature of violence, except to say that it is a common human experience, that it involves anger, ambition, fear, pain and death, and is an issue that is often lost in a focus on state systems, armies and the search for the ‘why’. The chapters in this collection are a timely reminder that, ultimately, violence – physical violence in particular – shaped, altered and at times ended the lives of countless individuals throughout history. The impact of these individual losses to families, clans and communities may ultimately be much harder to assess than the reasons for and the roles of violence in the state. These volumes should therefore be taken as the starting point of wider understandings of violence in the world, one in which violence as a behaviour reflects both social norms and the transgression of those norms. In putting together this collection, we never intended to include all of the variables across all of the cultures in deep time. But if violence is treated as the product of regulating societies, then it is no longer the end of the story, an object of study in and of itself, but the beginning of a much more

thoughtful reflection on social, political and cultural dynamics. Violence in that way, as the editors of volume III point out in their introduction, provides the material for a reflection on humanity, but also on the relationship of humanity to both the divine and the natural worlds.

Finally, a word about those who have helped us along the way. A project of this nature would not have been possible without the collaboration of all the contributors, but especially of all the editors, who gave generously of their time and expertise. During the course of this project a number of people fell seriously ill, including four of the editors. One of those was Deborah Tor from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. A specialist in the Middle East and central Asia, she helped shape the content of volume II before being obliged to withdraw from the project for health reasons. A special mention, however, goes to Garrett Fagan, Professor of Roman History at Penn State University, who passed away in March 2017 after a brief battle with cancer. Garrett was a generous human being, ever enthusiastic about life and his subject in particular. The last time we saw Garrett was in Rome in 2016, after a conference that brought together many of the contributors to these volumes. We had the privilege of having him give a small group of us a guided tour of the Colosseum. A friend and colleague of Garrett’s, Matthew Trundle, Professor in Classics at the University of Auckland, kindly agreed to take on the role left by him. To our great shock, Matthew was diagnosed with leukaemia in September 2018. Just as these pages were about to go to print, in July 2019, we learned with enormous sadness that Matthew had in turn succumbed to the illness. We dedicate these volumes to their memory.
Is violence an integral and inescapable part of human nature, embedded in our behaviour, even in our genes? Or are violence and warfare relatively recent developments in the human story, the result of particular historical circumstances such as agriculture or social inequality? These are important questions about human history, yet they also have profound implications for the future. If violence is part of human nature then, it could be argued, little can be done to escape its claws. If, on the other hand, it depends primarily upon social, environmental, economic and other historical contexts, then it might be possible to reduce or even eradicate many types of violence in the future. These two approaches to violence – sometimes termed, respectively, Hobbesian and Rousseauian – are of course exaggerated expressions of the same basic problem. Although humans have an undeniable capability for violence, they are not ‘genetically programmed’ to engage in warfare or conflict – even in modern armies the skill to kill does not equal the will to kill.\(^1\) Although violence was widespread in the past, there is no clear evidence that it was found to the same extent in all periods and places from the beginnings of human history. In fact, our understanding of the prehistory of violence and warfare is still extremely poor, a problem that this volume will attempt to address through a wide-ranging, global overview of violence in prehistory and antiquity.

As its title suggests, this book is a work of history and its primary focus is therefore on changing historical experiences of violence. This perspective provides the unique contribution of this volume and the series as a whole, yet it may also cause some misunderstandings, in particular for the early periods of the human story. In other words, our focus on violence should not necessarily be taken as proof that violence was omnipresent in the past. At

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the same time, of course, the question of the origins of violence is by no means tangential to the present undertaking. Any consideration of the origins of violence and its expression during human (pre)history requires examining evidence from several related fields beyond history and archaeology, including primatology, psychology, ethology and anthropology. Our understanding of prehistoric violence relies especially on its physical and material expressions as recorded through skeletal signs of injury and trauma. Other evidence from prehistory comprises weapons, armour, fortifications and other pictorial and monumental expressions of violence. It is important to remember that all of these lines of evidence are incomplete, fragmented and present a minimum fraction of the material record of their times, meaning that a state of non-violence or peace may be equally hard to prove or disprove as the occurrence of violence or even war. While a full overview of related fields such as primatology and psychology is beyond the scope of this introduction, we will begin by briefly looking at current understandings of the origins of violence in human evolution.2

The Evolution of Human Violence

The role of violence in human nature has been one of the most difficult and controversial of all topics considered by the natural and human sciences. Many scholars have brought with them strong preconceptions, assuming from the start of their research that humans are basically either peaceful or violent. Recent years have also seen a number of influential publications that have attempted to portray the human story as a single trajectory from the more to the less violent.3 All of these latter works make the assumption that prehistoric humans lived in very violent societies, but this conclusion is not necessarily supported by the archaeological record.4 The idea that violence


4 See e.g. R. Brian Ferguson, ‘Pinker’s List: Exaggerating Prehistoric War Mortality’, in D. P. Fry (ed.), War, Peace, and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and
has been an integral part of human nature has a long and influential history in Western humanistic and scientific traditions.\(^5\) Despite this, until some two decades ago many archaeologists tended to play down the role of violence in the ancient past. A turning point in this respect came with the 1996 publication of Lawrence Keeley’s *War before Civilization*, a work that stimulated a more widespread re-evaluation of the role of warfare and violence in prehistory. Steven LeBlanc, a contributor to this present volume, has become one of the most ardent supporters of the view that warfare was pervasive in prehistory. He adopts a broad definition of warfare, which includes small-scale raiding and ambushes but excludes homicide and feuding; and he concludes that because ‘essentially every social group on the globe has experienced conflict in practically every time period’, the underlying cause of this warfare must be a universal one.\(^6\) This universal cause was, he argues, ecological: the Malthusian problem of too many people for too few resources.

LeBlanc’s argument that archaeologists have tended to ignore or play down evidence for warfare and violence is well taken. As Jörg Orschiedt and Alan Morris discuss in their chapters here, there is a growing global archaeological record of violence beginning with the Palaeolithic. However, there is not yet sufficient evidence to argue that warfare, depending on its definition, has been prevalent in *all* times and places. There are clear ethnographic examples of hunter-gatherers who suppress violence both within and between groups.\(^7\) Archaeological evidence from Jōmon Japan and elsewhere suggests that high population densities did not *always* lead to high levels of violence, and there is a need to consider how demography may have had an impact on strategies of territorialism and resource defence.\(^8\) LeBlanc assumes that if only we look more carefully, the evidence for widespread prehistoric warfare will be forthcoming. Such an assumption is, however, premature given our present knowledge. For prehistoric warfare to be a universal trait, it would have to be found everywhere, but large parts of the world, such as East

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Asia, have so far been more or less ignored in this debate. LeBlanc and others are correct that further evidence for violence across the prehistoric world would probably be found through, for example, a closer examination of cranial trauma. We cannot assume, however, that such research would automatically confirm universally high levels of violence in prehistory. This presents a real problem for studies such as Pinker’s Better Angels of Our Nature, which attempt to identify universal trends from a patchy archaeological record.

Violence: Who Benefits?

In evolutionary terms, what are the benefits of violence for the individual or the group? The potential drawbacks of death or serious injury are clear, but when do individuals decide that the potential benefits outweigh those dangers? Does violence represent adaptive behaviour, which could increase access to resources such as food, mates, status or alliances? Or is it better understood as a non-adaptive reaction to outside pressures? Violence is not, of course, limited to humans. In fact, lethal violence is reported for nearly 40 per cent of studied mammal species, including hamsters. Some animals are territorial and engage in violence to defend their territories against other individuals or groups of the same species. Among chimpanzees and bonobos – our closest evolutionary relatives – chimpanzees have been observed to conduct patrols of their group territories and, at times, to attack, maim and kill chimpanzees from other groups who encroach on that territory. Chimpanzee mortality rates from such violence are high when compared to many human societies. Bonobos, by contrast, are much less violent and there is only one suspected case of conspecific killing by a bonobo.

The evidence for conflict and aggression among primates is important for an understanding of human violence, yet significant problems remain. With respect to chimpanzees, the role of human impacts such as provisioning, habitat loss and hunting has been debated in the literature. Humans, chimpanzees and bonobos are three closely related species with very different behavioural repertoires. Humans are the derived species, but it is presently

unclear if our last common ancestor was more like a chimpanzee or a bonobo – or was different again. Recently it has been argued that humans share with chimpanzees a high propensity for proactive aggression – planned, purposeful violence with a reward as a goal. Although it might be assumed that early human expansions out of Africa were more or less peaceful due to lack of competition over resources, researchers working in North America have found very high rates of violent trauma on the Palaeo-American skeletons who represent the first human settlers of the New World. Like many other early Homo sapiens skeletons in Eurasia and Australia, Palaeo-Americans display high sexual dimorphism, a trait which is usually associated with increased male competition over female mates. In a novel theory, James Chatters suggests that these biological traits may be associated with high levels of competition for resources and mates among populations of what he terms ‘wild type colonisers’.

Violence in Early Prehistory

This volume is divided into six parts. The first, titled ‘The Origins of Conflict’, begins with LeBlanc’s overview of the evolution of violence, which is then followed by six archaeological case studies of violence spanning the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age. Part II covers ‘Prehistoric and Ancient Warfare’ in early state societies. In Part III, ‘Intimate and Collective Violence’, the emphasis shifts to the social contexts of violence including gender. ‘Religion, Ritual and Violence’ forms the subject of Part IV, which contains discussions of ritual headhunting, human and animal sacrifice, and combat sports. Part V examines ‘Violence, Crime and the State’ and the final part, Part VI, explores ‘Representations and Constructions of Violence’ with chapters on artistic and literary representations of violence.

In addition to these six constituent parts, the chapters focus on a number of core themes. These themes interweave throughout the volume and form an important basis for its contiguity, straddling as they do both time and space in their analysis of different forms of violence. They can be summarised as relating to (1) organised violence, styled more clearly as warfare; (2) ritualised violence, which underpinned both mythical inter-relationships and religious

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observances; and (3) violence within communities that upheld social relationships, sometimes legally and sometimes through extra-legal and private means.

In exploring these three themes, therefore, a good number of chapters examine warfare in the ancient world alongside its role as both a driving force of civilisation and community integration. Warfare held an absolute significance to state organisation, politically, socially and economically. Side by side with organised violence in this formal setting, several chapters examine notions of what might be called ritualised violence and the religious significance of violence and its various manifestations. The importance of violence to a variety of rituals, whether that be sacrifice or even sport, should not be overlooked as a significant aspect of communal action. Finally, inside ancient communities the threat or use of low-level violence was commonplace and several chapters examine the use of this kind of physical force either to (re)enforce social relationships and civic order or simply to normalise such relationships. As noted, this kind of violence was sometimes exercised through legal processes and sometimes through illegal, extra-legal or simply private physical force. Violence against the weak and the poor was thus commonplace. Inside households, behind closed doors, violence against women, children and slaves upheld the dominant male hierarchies.

Chronologically, this volume covers a vast stretch of time from the emergence of the first human communities to the last years of the Roman Empire and fifth century CE India and China. Most of the chapters divide into a rough chronological progression from the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic to the Neolithic, through the Bronze and Iron Ages and finally to early states and empires. While the Cambridge World History of Violence emphasises the historical contingency of violence across the ages, there are nevertheless several common stages and trends which can be identified across broad areas of the world. One such stage is marked by the Neolithic. Despite the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record, the evidence for violence in the preceding Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods is not insignificant, and is discussed in detail by Jörg Orschiedt. The Neolithic, however, resulted in one of human history’s most monumental shifts with regards to the way people lived, to more settled (versus seasonally mobile) lifeways, the ownership of land, crops and livestock, and of course increasing competition for all of these things, underscored by a substantial increase in population numbers and the growth of community and settlement size. As population numbers increased, so the Neolithic also led to the expansion of individuals and groups into new territories. Recent research has emphasised that these varied elements only
coalesced into one ‘package’ at the end of the Neolithic; prior to that, societies across the world were characterised by different histories of accepting and resisting the Neolithic.\textsuperscript{14} While compared to preceding hunter-gatherers the prevalence of Neolithic violence does not necessarily increase per se, the primary material evidence for violence, particularly human remains with signs of violent trauma, becomes more marked across a wider geographical area. As lifeways in the Neolithic became more complex, so did the motivations and contexts for the occurrence of violence, which has now to be seen not as a fallback option but as a legitimate, socially sanctioned and widespread form of social interaction. Everybody – men, women, children – was affected, though to different degrees. This suggests a variety of contexts for violence (ritual, domestic, feuds, raids, and so on) and introduces a growing degree of martial inequality, with injury patterns and fatality rates connected to age and gender.\textsuperscript{15}

The Neolithic skeletal record shows that physical violence, as expressed in traumatic injuries to the skeleton, was endemic in large parts of, for example, central and western Europe, suggesting conflicts of varying scales and both in-group and out-group fighting. The latter is evidenced in the emergence of large enclosure sites and the occurrence of mass graves that probably represent whole groups or settlements. Though not covered in this volume, Neolithic China also saw increased evidence of walled and defensive sites and associated violence.\textsuperscript{16} The increasing mobilisation of large numbers of people in the Neolithic heralds a shift in scales of interaction, including cooperation and conflict, while at the same time greater specialisation and a more rigid division of labour signal a diversification leading to a less homogeneous and ultimately less equal society, another potential driver for conflict. With respect to the more martial aspects of society, this diversification and division of labour means that fighting and violent interaction – especially violent conflict between groups – gradually transformed from

\textsuperscript{14} For Japan, for example, see Mark Hudson, ‘Slouching Towards the Neolithic: Complexity, Simplification and Resilience in the Japanese Archipelago’, in Gwen R. Schug (ed.), \textit{The Routledge Handbook of the Bioarchaeology of Environmental Change} (London: Routledge, forthcoming).


\textsuperscript{16} See e.g. L. Liu, \textit{The Chinese Neolithic: Trajectories to Early States} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and Anne P. Underhill, ‘Variation in Settlements during the Longshan Period of Northern China’, \textit{Asian Perspectives} 33 (1994), 197–228.
something that would be the task of many to that of the specially trained few. In other words, we are looking at the origins of professionalised fighting and warfare, the basis for many of the developments seen in successive periods.

The Bronze and Iron Ages and the Specialisation of Violence

The Bronze Age, which began in the Near East in the second half of the fourth millennium BCE, transformed violence and warfare in myriad ways, which are discussed in several chapters in this volume. In most parts of the world the material cultural record of the Neolithic lacks specialised weapons, suggesting instead the use of tools as multi-purpose implements (or weapon-tools) for industry and crafts as well as more martial purposes.\textsuperscript{17} During the final stages of the Neolithic, however, we witness the emergence of single purpose weapons which, in the Bronze Age, evolved into an extensive, specialised materiality of violence, including a wide range of arms and armour, as well as horse-drawn chariots employed in combat and a growth and expansion in fortifications. The metals and other raw materials required for this new materiality of violence were associated with a widening of contacts, increased levels of mobility and an expansion of the motivations and mobilisation (via land and sea) for violence. Conflict, violence and warfare now relied on considerable structural support and ever-increasing specialisation. Often associated with the emergence of the warrior, the probably more significant development during the Bronze Age was the emergence of elites that controlled and sanctioned large-scale violence, like that represented at the much debated potential battlefield site in the Tollense Valley of north-east Germany.\textsuperscript{18} By the third century BCE elites at both ends of Eurasia controlled huge armies of up to half a million men who engaged in massive military campaigns such as those of Rome against Carthage and, in China, the Qin against the Zhao.\textsuperscript{19}

It is important to keep in mind, though, that Bronze Age societies and those of the later Iron Age – and their attitudes to and performance of


\textsuperscript{18} For an excellent summary of the latest research on Bronze Age warfare see C. Horn and K. Kristiansen (eds.), *Warfare in Bronze Age Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

\textsuperscript{19} On these campaigns and other east–west contacts in the Bronze and Iron Ages, see Morris, *War*, pp. 64–111.
violent interactions – were far from uniform and varied in size and complexity. And while written records emerged during these periods documenting the deeds and politics of cities, states, empires and notable individuals, these records bias the historical record towards the centralised administrative systems that controlled them and could afford to produce them. The development of specialisation and hierarchy is not uniform across space and time, and not everybody would have benefited from the support and protection of a political and military centre, thus creating vast differences in lived experience. Mycenae around 1500 BCE and, as an example, the west coast of Ireland would have provided very contrasting circumstances in terms of social, economic and religious systems. In terms of physical acts of violence in particular, this means that how people fought, the weapons they used, whom they fought and, most importantly, what they fought for are not equally well represented for the prehistoric period.

Coming back to the issue of a fragmented record, we may not always be able to construct as detailed a narrative for the way violence shaped society across all space and time, but what we certainly can hypothesise within this heterogeneous evidence for physical/martial violence is a common human experience of anger, ambition, fear, pain and death, something that is often lost in a focus on state systems, armies and tactics, and in the search for the ‘why’. The skeletal record that provides our most direct evidence for the actual occurrence (rather than the threat of) physical violence in these early periods is a good reminder that, ultimately, violence – physical violence in particular – shaped, altered and at times ended the lives of individuals. The impact of these individual losses to families, clans and communities may ultimately be much harder to assess than the reasons for and roles of violence in the state politics of antiquity.

From Early States to Empires

The Bronze (c. 3500–1200 BCE) and Iron Ages (c. 1200 BCE onwards) saw the establishment of the first major cities in Mesopotamia, the Fertile Crescent and then spontaneously elsewhere in India and China. The rise of early state societies transformed the way in which violence was used as a political tool. In order to maintain their agrarian economies, these states increasingly relied on warfare to obtain slaves and other workers to labour under their control. Wars were not so much about territorial control as commandeering loot and
manpower, with much of the latter being women and children. This early state violence was mirrored by attempts by ‘barbarians’ on the outside to grab the resources that states had conveniently concentrated in one place. States, in other words, became a type of ‘one-stop shopping’ centre for non-state peoples. As a result, those states were forced to invest heavily in defences against raiders or else to pay tribute in an attempt to stop such raiding.

The early Bronze Age saw the emergence of the first cities, and state-level polities arose in tandem with more sophisticated forms of political thought and, of course, warfare. Wars grew more complex as states commandeered more resources. The rise of specialist soldiers – in Marxist terms, part of the emergence of a new class – brought their military skills to the battlefield. In this environment, weapons improved in quality but with the advent of iron in particular they also multiplied in quantity. Ian Morris writes that ‘Iron swords were the ancient equivalent of AK-47s, giving every angry young man the same killing power as representatives of law and order.’ The inexpensive nature of iron as compared with bronze meant that new military systems developed which improved the ability of states to wage wars and inflict more damage on their opponents. As a result, early states overcame their enemies more effectively and extended the empires that had been first created in the Bronze Age. The ancient world, not only in Europe, western Asia and north Africa but also in north India and China, saw the ebb and flow of imperial powers, one following from another and all the product of violence and improved and developing techniques of war and control through violence. The first so-called imperialist, Sargon of Akkad, conquered the Sumerian cities of southern Mesopotamia in about 2400 BCE. The rise of the Old Babylonian Empire (c. 1800 BCE), the first Assyrian imperialists (c. 1800 BCE), the Hittites (1800–1200 BCE) and New Kingdom Egypt (1600–1200 BCE) were each products of the flourishing of military technology and centralised state structures of the Later Bronze Age. Further east, the rise of the Shang dynasty (c. 1550 BCE) and the extension of its power beyond the Yellow River Valley is often attributed to the introduction of bronze and bronze weapons.

21 James C. Scott, Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 34. As Scott notes, most states did both in practice.
22 Morris, War, p. 101.
The period after the collapse of the Bronze Age and the disappearance of New Kingdom Egypt, the Hittites and the Mycenaenans saw the slow but progressive emergence of the New Assyrian Empire in western Asia (c. 883–612 BCE), which from the ninth century BCE grew to dominate almost the entire region and even Egypt. Its fall opened the way for the rise of Persia and the establishment of what many describe as the first durable ‘world empire’ from 559–330 BCE. The same process can be seen in China, where the Zhou emperors reigned for 500 years from the eighth to the third century BCE. In the last historical phase that concerns this volume, we see in the west the fall of the Persian Empire to Alexander’s conquests and then the rise of Rome, which itself conquered much of Europe, north Africa and the far west of Asia. In China, the emergence of the Han dynasty (c. 202 BCE–220 CE) saw political unity restored and a Chinese empire re-established. The idea that both the Roman Empire and the Chinese empire brought peace and stability to their respective imperial subjects has long been a matter of academic debate. Certainly, the imperial governments controlled the abilities of all those living within their empires to wage war. At the same time, these empires theoretically protected their regions from foreign invasion. The emperors who controlled the army became the means of control of power and resources. Thus, for a long period of history both east and west enjoyed relative stability and our evidence suggests that populations rose alongside increased economic prosperity.\(^{23}\) The so-called Pax Romana and Pax Sinica, therefore, have come to symbolise past golden ages. That stated, plenty of evidence suggests that both the threat of violence and violence itself abounded, not just from state authorities but also violence inflicted by those outside of the state system such as runaway slaves, pirates and criminals. Violence remained common currency within the empires of antiquity. Garrett Fagan, in his chapter on violence in the Roman world, even goes so far as to state that violence was ‘the language of rank and status’. The peace brought by Roman and Chinese imperial power was in the end only relative to other less settled periods of time.

**Violence and the Ancient World**

Once we move from prehistory into the early historic era, documentary records provide new perspectives on violence which, as a result, shapes the way we view antiquity. Much of the evidence presented to us from the

\(^{23}\) See ibid. for an extended discussion of this argument.
ancient past deals with physical force, especially in its organised form of state warfare. As the Greek historian Thucydides pointed out in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, ‘War was the most violent teacher’ and as such he considered that war reveals the fundamental nature of the human condition *in extremis*. Violence or perhaps the threat of violence played a prominent role in the lives of all ancient peoples from inter-state, organised warfare to low-level everyday violence between ordinary people in their daily encounters. In the former case, violence played a crucial role in state formation and it justified the political, social and economic power of a community’s elites and even its leaders and kings. Indeed, violence appears to be intrinsically connected to early state formation. The first sedentary communities in the region of Mesopotamia between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers needed to defend themselves against outsiders and to coordinate themselves to attack others. Thus cities emerged, and their occupants built walls and other infrastructure to protect themselves and their property. Symbiotically, those who sought to attack them developed strategies, towers and rams to overcome defensive structures. Each required specialist infrastructure and its coordination. Organised violence and, dare one suggest, civilisation itself go hand in hand with controlling and defending land, specialist workers, soldiers, priests and rulers. This infrastructure emerged alongside sedentary communities across the globe first in western Asia and Egypt, then in northern India and China. It is important, of course – and even more so in a volume that hopes to cover so much ground in both space and time as this one – that we recognise potential differences between cultures and environments. As Wicky Tse makes clear in discussing early imperial China, different concepts and ways of warfare developed in a different environment to those of Europe and Western Asia. The ebb and flow of power between local rulers, like the seven kingdoms that emerged in the third century BCE, and a single ruler of the region saw Chinese history develop slightly differently from that of the

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24 Thuc. 3.82. Throughout the volume ancient works are abbreviated according to Liddell and Scott’s *A Greek–English Lexicon* (LSJ), *The Oxford Latin Dictionary* (OLD) and the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 4th edn (OCD), while some journal titles have been abbreviated in keeping with *L’Année philologique*. Secondary sources for some ancient works are specifically noted.


empires of the west. The lack of an inner sea naturally made warfare more territorially complex and power centres were based around two great rivers, the Yellow and the Yangzi. To the north and west, China lay open to migrants from the great steppe but also remained naturally contained by the Gobi Desert and the Mongolian and Tibetan Plateaus.

Due to the nature of our ancient documentary sources, and to the extreme features of war in society, violence plays an overly prominent part in the written as well as the archaeological records, the latter including new visual representations of violence and military operations. This emphasis on warfare places limits on what we can say about the overall role of violence in society. In addition, low-level violence (small-scale violent interactions outside military contexts) was omnipresent and effected the lower echelons of communities such as slaves and those others deemed lesser beings within ancient states, as well of course as those physically weaker in defending themselves, such as children and women. Unlike coordinated military actions, which were seen as glorious and ‘manly’, interpersonal violence receives far less attention in the literary traditions and is almost absent from visual representations. This stated, we are still aware of its commonplace nature in our sources through circumstantial references, legal codes on punishment and control, and other written commentaries. Several chapters in this volume explore the everyday nature of violence within societies, from domestic violence against wives and relatives to random acts of force that mediated so many relationships.27

Early literature reflects the significant role of violence for ancient peoples. The earliest written stories, such as The Epic of Gilgamesh, present the hero as a warrior and a war leader, a man who can both defend his community and destroy its enemies. This poem states that Gilgamesh is ‘Supreme over other kings, lordly in appearance, he is the hero, born of Uruk, the goring wild bull. He walks out in front, the leader, and walks at the rear, trusted by his companions. Mighty net, protector of his people, raging flood-wave who destroys even walls of stone!’ The Old Testament records the first murder among the children of Adam and Eve: Cain killed Abel over the reception of a gift he had grown for God (Gen. 1:4–8). His grain offering fell short of the

animal sacrifice presented by his brother, which in itself symbolises the violent struggle between farmers and pastoralists. The first Egyptian pharaohs were also closely connected to war. The Narmer palette shows the first pharaoh smiting with a mace his opponent to bring together the two lands as one kingdom. The first emperor of Chinese history, that of the Qin dynasty, became emperor in 221 BCE not just through military conquest but by ‘killing so many people that resistance became impossible’. His famous 8,000 strong terracotta army symbolised his military power even in death. On the walls of their palaces, Assyrian kings boasted in text and images their violence and power over enemies across the Near East. The first great poems of the Western tradition, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, both glorify violence. One concerns a great war over a large and doomed city, focusing on the violence of one man, Achilles, and ends with the death of the principal Trojan chieftain Hector at his hands; the other sees the return of Odysseus to his home and culminates in a violent denouement in which the eponymous hero kills all those who would have usurped his place in Ithaca as lord of his community and husband to his wife. Looking further east, Jarrod Whitaker in this volume identifies a similar use of violence to assert personal identity and enforce power relationships in the Vedic Epics of India such as the *Mahābhārata*. The first written texts in Japan, the early eighth-century CE histories known as the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* describe how rulers in the west of the archipelago violently subdued the barbarians of the east.

The fact that violence mediated social relationships in antiquity was no more clearly demonstrated than in gender relations. Such relationships were deeply ingrained in ancient ideology, and once more warfare set the tone. Men fought, and women stayed behind in the home. Power relationships were reinforced stereotypically and through self-fulfilment. Women were considered weak because they did not fight, but women were not allowed to fight because they were weak. Women only appear in military actions during sieges in which their homes and families were threatened directly. They threw stones and tiles from rooftops and walls. Violence reinforced power

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relationships more generally in antiquity as well. Like women, slaves were prohibited from fighting in battle, though they rowed galleys and could be freed to fight in times of national crisis, as happened during Hannibal’s invasion of Italy. As with women, slaves were considered weaker than free men because they did not fight, their slavery often justifying the fact that they did not fight. Many slaves, of course, had been captured in warfare. The laws of war allowed and justified such enslavement of the defeated, of men (though men were regularly executed after defeat), but especially of women and of children (Andoc. II; Xen. Cyr. 7.1.44).

By the same token, the weak in all ancient societies constantly suffered the threat of violence or violence itself. The bodies of those who were socially and politically disenfranchised might experience physical abuse and violation by their social and political superiors at any time. Slaves at Athens could only give evidence in legal trials under torture. Punishments for the same crimes varied depending on the status of the perpetrators. Social elites might escape physical violation for the same crimes as their social inferiors. In the Roman world, crucifixion or death in the arena was reserved for lowly criminals. Elites might be allowed to commit suicide or more ‘leniently’ to go into exile. Violence enforced and reinforced all forms of hierarchy. Ultimately, violence and more significantly warfare delineated political, social and economic status. Politically, as we have noted, it justified leadership or determined citizenship, and therefore determined status. Socially it delineated the free person from the slave or even man from woman, and the adult from the child. Economically, violence protected property but also enabled acquisition. The ancient world demonstrates clearly the principle that might makes right and that violence enabled and justified property ownership.

The political, social and economic connections between violence and prosperity must never be overlooked. Physical force was closely connected to economic privilege (as it was to other privileges of status). Philosophers like Plato (Phd. 66c) and Aristotle (Plt. 1.8, 1255b37, 1256b1, 1256b23–7, 1333) saw warfare as a natural form of wealth acquisition. Plato (Resp. 372e–374a) even thought that states required military forces to increase their own resources. Here, of course, the great thinkers of the Greek world diverged from those of the east, like Confucius or Gautama (Buddha), who saw physical force as

31 Alongside several chapters in this volume, see recent chapters on violence against women and slaves in both Greek and Roman contexts in Fagan and Riess, Topography of Violence. For a good discussion of the ideology concerning slaves and warfare see Peter Hunt, Slaves, Warfare and Ideology in the Greek Historians (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
anathema to achieving the ultimate good. This was, of course, despite the fact that both Confucius and Gautama served in the courts of those emperors whose military power supported their rule. Jesus Christ also never advocated revolution against the Roman imperial system and his statement on Roman taxation, ‘Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s’, aptly demonstrates the role of taxation as symbolic of Roman power (Matt. 22:21).

Warfare in all circumstances yielded plunder in the form of both land or movable goods like crops, metals from arms and armour, animals and people as slaves or serfs to work the land. Small-scale raiding by families or clans might capture movable booty from neighbouring villages, while more co-ordinated military actions by whole communities and political states led to greater acquisition of goods and chattels. Battles ended with the taking of plunder, with the stripping of the dead of their property or after sieges the wholesale capture of a city and its people. As states grew and empires developed, so raids and plundering gave way to annual tributes whereby communities paid a portion of their property to avoid attack. Such tributes led to empire and formal systems of annual taxation within complex systems of governance. Tribute or tax became symbolic of subservience as much as practical economic exchange. Of course, in such systems, the threat of violence replaced the use of violence to extract resources from neighbouring peoples.32

There is no doubt that in each ancient world context, levels of military violence grew as states became more centralised, better coordinated, wealthier and more sophisticated in fighting wars and mounting longer and more elaborate campaigns. Strategy and tactics developed in tandem with technological developments. This phenomenon alone may explain why ancient peoples looked back to a golden and distant past in which human beings lived more peacefully with each other and with the environment. The Hebrews recalled the birth of humankind in the Garden of Eden before the Fall and first murder (Gen. 3:6–24), Greeks a golden, silver and bronze age when heroes walked with gods (Hesiod, Works and Days 109–84), and Romans recalled Saturn’s Italy, wild indeed, but as yet undevastated by war and political strife (see for example, Ovid, Metamorphoses; Vergil, Aeneid 7).

Further east, in India the myth of the perfect age or Krita Yuga reflected similar notions of a peaceful past, and China had a similar belief of an early age of perfect or highest virtue. These myths in and of themselves suggest that early civilisations could envisage a world without war and without violence.

Finally, we should note the important role of ritual and symbolic violence within ancient communities. The act of sacrifice, so central to the worship of ancient gods, was in itself fundamentally an act of both ritual and real violence. Evidence suggests that some societies practised human sacrifice at some time in their distant past. Animal hunting, violent in itself, may well lie behind both sacrifice and by extension a series of other ritualised events found in ancient contexts from athletic contests to beast hunting and gladiatorial displays. Athletic games, religious in nature as they were, saw athletes strive for victory not only in events involving no physical contact (for example races), but also in the so-called ‘heavy events’ involving wrestling and boxing. Some even suggest that originally the athletic victor won the right to be sacrificed to the god himself rather than to lead the sacrifice, as he did in historical times. Even Romans sacrificed human beings as late as the darkest days of the Second Punic War, when Hannibal threatened their gates (Livy 22.57). The arena played a central role in city communities across the Roman Empire. Spectators watched beast hunting, criminal executions and of course gladiatorial combat (though not usually to the death). The games began life as part of religious festivals, despite their later gloss of mass entertainment. This ritualised violence reinforced community and identity. Spectators were arrayed by class and status, but all were free people of some standing. Those whom they watched were slaves and criminals. If the Flavian Amphitheatre held 50,000 Romans, that represented perhaps as few as 5 per cent of the population of the city of Rome. In a less well-known context, violence lay at the heart of theatre and other staged events. Tragedies always


centred around murder or war, naturally the extreme moment in any relationship. Family and community underpinned the power of violence to rend people apart and bring them together. Antiquity presents us with the stark realities of every level of violence and its interaction with every facet of society.

Violence and the End of Antiquity

This volume concludes chronologically with the traditional historiographic transformation from antiquity to the Middle Ages. Recent research has shown a growing interest in the ‘global’ interactions of the medieval period, yet, as we have shown here, in terms of violence and warfare there were already major connections across Eurasia as early as the Bronze Age. The end of antiquity saw the end of the expansion of the Roman and Han empires and the growing strength of ‘barbarian’ migrations and conquests across the steppes and beyond. The fall of both the Han dynasty and the Roman Empire, admittedly under very different circumstances, forms the focus of the last chapters in this volume and lays the foundations for the volumes that follow, exploring as they do the medieval, early modern and modern ages. The fall of empire is usually seen through the lens of conquest and chaos, in Edward Gibbon’s terms ‘decline and fall’, but we should be mindful too of Peter Brown’s delineation of this significant if fluid time period passing the baton from one age to the next and thus also as one of ‘continuity and change’. Warfare remained the domain of the elite. Roman military titles like dux (later ‘duke’) and magister passed into this later age, but they simply masked more substantial change. In this latter period smaller cavalry and mobile field armies dominated battlefields, non-Romans increasingly fought what were no longer Roman wars. As separate kingdoms emerged, especially in the west the centralised nature of warfare collapsed as did the size of military operations. Violence remained a crucial power marker, but one exercised by new and emerging feudal elites.

PART I

THE ORIGINS OF CONFLICT
Human violence, and especially warfare, is a topic of both deep concern and revulsion. The suffering and deaths over millennia are staggering and almost incomprehensible. Yet, the level of collective action involved in warfare probably exceeds that of any other human endeavour. Many try to wish violence and warfare away; others yearn for a peaceful past in the hope that we can return to such times. We spend considerable time and thought trying to get to grips with the violence and warfare of the last couple of centuries, yet we give comparatively very little thought to these matters in the deep past. Surely, unravelling the origins of violence must be key to our overall understanding of it, and that understanding must likewise be key to its elimination from the human condition. While history and archaeology are not the only kinds of knowledge that can be brought to bear on the question, they no doubt have a central place. Our goal is to understand how to use and develop such information with the wide range of tools now at our disposal.

Darwin’s On the Origin of Species was a summation of evidence for evolution. It quickly provided the foundation for the study of living organisms. From that point on, once Darwin’s work was generally accepted, one had to cast one’s thinking, questions and interpretations in an evolutionary framework. If warfare was as prevalent and significant in the past as many now feel, perhaps we are on the cusp in the fields of ancient history and archaeology of having to do much the same thing. In other words, should not our thinking, questions and interpretations always consider the role warfare might have played? This does not mean that all historic outcomes were the result of warfare, but its role should always be considered. From big questions – such as migrations or rapid cultural change – to small ones – such as why a site was on a hill or why there was a multiple burial – should we not, if we believe warfare was common, always consider its potential role? Such an intellectual approach will go far in deepening our knowledge of warfare and violence. This may not be the usual archaeological paradigm, but it can and should be.
Human violence can take many forms from intra-family domestic violence to battles lasting days or months and involving tens of thousands of individuals. In order to understand when and where such violence occurred in the past, much less the reasons for it, it is necessary to examine it in specific detail and depth. That is, we need to have a more fine-grained understanding before we try to formulate sweeping generalities. To lump together an intra-village club fight with the battle of Verdun would seem to be folly at our present level of understanding of either type of violence.

Perhaps the most important distinction with the broadest implications that we can make is that between warfare and intra-societal violence. By ‘warfare’ I, and many others who study it, generally mean socially sanctioned conflict between independent polities; that is, collective action by one group against another, without there being a larger overarching political entity, the membership of which includes both groups. This concept of warfare allows one to jointly consider forager raiding parties and pitched battles between chiefdoms and states as manifestations of the same general behaviour. This approach gets beyond the often held distinction between ‘raiding’ and ‘true warfare’, a false distinction which has hindered rather than enhanced our understanding of the topic. Raiding was every bit as deadly as ‘true warfare’ and had just as great an impact on people’s lives for millennia over much of the world.

Intra-societal violence can include personal violence, such as murder, or less lethal acts perpetrated on members of one’s own group. As discussed below, the complication is what is ‘one’s group’? It can be one’s close kin, or it can be all those people who come together for common defence and may number in the thousands.

In the recent past, including the so-called ‘ethnographic present’, we can define social groups with some notable exceptions. For example, some forager societies have such broad kin networks that it is possible to see all fighting as intra-personal feuding and settling personal disagreements within a social group. At the other extreme in terms of social complexity, in parts of historic Peru communities engaged in almost ritual warfare, with at least the implicit acceptance of the ruling state. Is the social group the community or the state? However, in essentially all these ambiguous instances, strong social sanctions were in place to limit deaths and injuries to members of the social group. A wound would settle a score; a death was not required or often not even allowed. In some instances, such as in the South Pacific, inter-village brawls were carefully managed by the elites. One could throw rocks but could not use a machete. A lot of people could get hurt, but no one was supposed to get killed.
Once we move into the past, such distinctions about social groups and intra-group rules of behaviour are much harder to find and evaluate. Because intra-societal or intra-personal violence covers a vast range of behaviours, and most are very hard to tease out of the archaeological record, such violence is not the central focus here and is considered only briefly.

Warfare is different. While there were often conventions governing how wars were to be fought, for most of human history there were few constraints on individual behaviour. In some places, areas were set aside for trade with no conflict allowed, or universally accepted tokens proclaiming peaceful intent were used by people transiting hostile territory. Such conventions were relatively minor and few, and if an individual or group broke them, there was little recourse, so rogue behaviour was hard to control and a threat even in situations deemed peaceful. Our present concerns about killing prisoners and outlawing certain weapons are developments of the last several centuries. For the most part, warfare has been anarchic. Anything goes: treachery, killing helpless captives, taking captives and killing a few at a time as you retreat so the enemy is discouraged from following you, torturing and mutilating captives, displaying body part trophies so all know how well you fight, killing the children of women you capture, and other such very unpleasant behaviours are known from archaeology and historic accounts. And killing is the goal, along with the capture of women, territory and treasure. Moreover, there are numerous lines of evidence that show how much warfare existed in the past. Warfare can be defined, and it can be studied archaeologically. Like many topics in archaeology, it is not easy to study, but it can be and has been done successfully.

**Warfare: Deadly and Pervasive**

To anticipate much of what follows, in spite of the limitations of the data and regardless of some opinions to the contrary, I believe it is possible to formulate a good picture of warfare in the past based on archaeology, ethnology and early historical accounts of many societies. The summation of our knowledge of warfare including forager warfare, which is considered in more detail below, is that it was extremely common and very deadly. In fact, acephalous society warfare was probably deadlier than that of more complex societies on the basis of the likelihood of an individual dying from warfare. This is a rather shocking conclusion to many.

The consensus among many archaeologists and others who have investigated the issue is that death rates due to warfare were substantial in the past.
Most of these deaths were due to raids and other small encounters where only a few individuals would be killed. However, such encounters were very common, and so the death tolls accumulated. While some have considered raiding, the common type of acephalous warfare, to be almost game playing with few deaths, in fact the opposite is the case. Even though the number of individuals killed in each raid was typically low, such raiding was far more significant than most realise. Raiding could be almost continuous, although it was often seasonal in some climates. One group might be raiding and being raided by multiple other groups. In such small societies, the number of deaths from such raids could become very substantial. Various scholars have tried to estimate the death rates from such raiding, including the occasional massacre. One of the best sets of data is from lowland South America. Some archaeology has also given us some useful data. The somewhat shocking estimates are that between 15 and 25 per cent of males and about 5 per cent of women died from such warfare (about 9 per cent female deaths for South America). Given these high death rates, the term ‘warfare’ is appropriate because of the consequences, not the methods.

Most men in these societies slept with and never went outside without their weapons. Some told early ethnographers that they had nightmares about being killed in attacks. They located their communities for defence, and they under-utilised vast portions of their territories because it was too dangerous to go there. While groups would try to defend the most productive parts of their territory, there is ample evidence that the dangerous parts had useful resources which were quickly exploited if they became safe – a state of affairs that was the case for foragers but especially true for farmers. This significantly reduced the resources consumed and would have led to deprivation or even starvation or death. Every male you met that was not a close relative or member of your local group was a potential threat. Lives in the past were those of fear, war, worry and hunger.

4 Steven A. LeBlanc and Katherine E. Register, Constant Battles: Why We Fight (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2003).
What Does Archaeology Have to Contribute to the Study of Violence?

Archaeology in its various forms provides the bulk of the information available about the deep past with respect to violence in general and warfare in particular. In this conversation, I lump archaeological data together with ancient historical, that is written data, and include settlement pattern data, osteology and relevant past climate data. And while many fear that the archaeological record is so incomplete and so hard to interpret that our inferences from it will always be limited and cloudy, this has not been borne out over time. The discipline continues to develop new methods and interpretive frameworks, and our grasp of the past is ever more detailed and nuanced. Regardless of the possible limitations, archaeology is our only window into the deep past, and it provides the additional benefit of being worldwide in its coverage. We have surprisingly rich information from most places on earth, and we can make quite strong statements about what we know.

So, the question is, are these data good enough to serve as the basis for saying meaningful things about warfare and/or violence in the past? The question may be better phrased like this: how good are archaeological data for determining the presence, absence and degree of warfare in the deep past? Evidence for peace is probably harder to find than evidence for warfare. In any case, as is well known, the further one goes back in the past, the thinner the archaeological record, because both fewer remains survive and there were fewer people to leave remains. Moreover, less complex societies leave less complex remains. We would not expect fortifications for Upper Palaeolithic foragers, much less from pre-anatomically modern humans.

Despite the limitations, we have human remains themselves that can and do have wounds of various types. As George Milner has demonstrated, of arrow wounds inflicted in the historic period, only one case in three results in evidence that a bioarchaeologist can identify on a skeleton.\(^5\) We are on the cusp of being able to recover ancient DNA evidence of bacterial infections, and so we may soon find another line of evidence for battle wounds. We have indirect evidence of warfare in the form of multiple burials, but these have been little used in evaluating evidence of conflict, with rare exceptions.\(^6\)

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There are, of course, fortifications. While moats, walls and the like are susceptible to multiple interpretations, we do have the methods to evaluate them. As is well known, not all excavations extend to the edges of sites where we would most likely find some forms of fortifications, but in such cases, indirect evidence in the form of very tight house spacing may be a means of determining whether communities were bounded by walls, palisades, stockades or other defensive structures. We also have settlement pattern data. This type of information has often been ignored in the search for evidence of warfare, but it can provide useful evidence. Other lines of evidence such as weapons manufacture also exist or surely can be developed.

Not only do we have the potential to recover such information; in reality it is often recovered. It is probably safe to argue that for any period or locality for which we have a reasonable data set, there is at least some evidence that can be interpreted as related to violence or warfare. The archaeological record is far from empty in this regard; it just needs careful evaluation.

On Warfare Origins

It appears that many early archaeologists assumed warfare was common. They tended to work in the recent past and with complex societies, so evidence for warfare was both common and obvious. Notable exceptions, such as the early tendency to ignore evidence for warfare among the Maya, did exist, but they were rare. There then appears to have been an interval in the history of archaeology when warfare was downplayed or ignored. Why this happened need not be considered here, but it seems that Keeley’s War before Civilization was a wake-up call to many archaeologists, and from that time onwards there has been a plethora of attempts to consider the problem on a regional or larger scale. Although this refocus is more than twenty

10 Keeley, War before Civilization.
years old, the archaeological consideration of warfare is still quite patchy and often rather innocent in its approaches.

One can see the question of origins as having two different meanings. On the one hand the question can be, what are the reasons for warfare? Are there some broad generalisations about why we fight? On the other hand, it can be a question that assumes there was a time in the past when there was no warfare, and we can therefore ask, when did such behaviours first appear? I believe the first meaning is valid and important, and our goal should be to try to determine what general principles are behind this worldwide phenomenon. If we as humans ever hope to eliminate warfare, then we must understand why it exists. If it has been part of our existence for millennia, then information derived from archaeology is critical to this understanding. One could easily see this as one of the great goals of archaeology: explaining why we have fought.

The second meaning of origins, which implies a worldwide peace or Garden of Eden, is, in my opinion, invalid, as it assumes a state of behaviour that we do not know existed. At best it is a question to be addressed; a peaceful past is not a given. This is a contentious area. There has been considerable opposition to the idea that warfare is an integral part of the human past; there is even more objection to the concept that warfare had any impact on our genes. Most of these objections imply that it began after farming or as the result of colonialism.

There is ample evidence for warfare in the deep past, and the ethnographic evidence that such scholars use to suggest otherwise is largely irrelevant


because it is invariably negative evidence such as a lack of identified fortifications, when location or vegetation might have been the major mechanism for defence; or few violent deaths when only a select few were buried in a way that preserved them, and these were very likely to be individuals not killed in warfare. Equally problematic is that just because a particular society was peaceful for some period of time (and ample examples exist), this does not justify the assumption that humans are inherently peaceful and that there once was an Eden-like world. Moreover, such thinking leads to the notion that a peaceful past is something that must be refuted by those who disagree. They feel that the burden of proof lies with those who see warfare as pervasive. Yet, this is a fallacy. Those who claim peace are under just as strong a requirement to demonstrate that peace existed as those who claim ancient warfare existed. Demonstrating peace in the past is very difficult. There are few, if any, examples of a study where all the lines of evidence that can be brought to bear on the issue have been examined and lead to the conclusion that there must have been peace. This has not been accomplished for recent ethnographic cases, much less the archaeological ones.

In short, the case for peace is not a reasoned argument but simply a position reflecting a desire for it. This issue is dealt with in some depth elsewhere, but it remains an impediment to honest discussion of this important topic.

Current Issues Surrounding Warfare

Assuming we can get beyond the issue of the existence of significant warfare in the deep past, what are the major questions that we might address? Some of the more obvious ones are as follows. What impact did such warfare have on societies? What caused warfare? Or better put, what caused changes in the intensity of warfare?

Warfare’s impact on societies could have been profound. Ian Morris argues, as does Peter Turchin, that as horrible as war is and was, it did produce positive social changes. I have argued that warfare may have been the primary means by which social systems jumped forward in terms of social complexity. To the extent that this type of argument is valid, warfare would

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14 Morris, War! What Is It Good For? ; Peter Turchin, Ultrasociety: How 10,000 Years of War Made Humans the Greatest Cooperators on Earth (Chaplin, CT: Beresta Books 2016).
have been a prime mover in the past for social change, a concept rarely considered for the pre-industrial age. Equally contentious are the causes of warfare. Of the many proposed, one to which archaeology can perhaps bring unique and important information is the role of climate change on changes in warfare intensity. It has long been proposed that changes in the Nile’s flooding patterns led to some of the Egyptian kingdom collapses and the social chaos that followed, perhaps exposing Egypt to at least partial conquest. Similar arguments of climate change leading to social disruption and conflict have been made for historic period China. Climate has been implicated in societal collapse in the proto-historic Middle East, with less emphasis on warfare intensity change. Less well known are various arguments that the beginnings of the Little Ice Age in North America led to increased conflict throughout the present-day United States. Climate change has also been implicated in the Classic Mayan collapse, with its attendant increase in warfare. One strongly suspects there are many more such instances of climate impacting on social systems with the consequential intensification of warfare. However, to find such instances, one needs to recognise the existence of warfare, to have good enough climate data to be able to build a convincing argument about the linkage between the two, and to accept the logical relationship between them.

Warfare and Human Evolution

If warfare was common for very long periods over much of the globe, did it lead to selection for traits that resulted in warfare success? That there could have been Darwinian selection among humans for being good at warfare is

highly unpalatable to many. Many such knee-jerk objections to there being a genetic component to human warfare are based on a simplistic and naïve understanding of how genes and evolution work. There is often confusion between propensities and deterministic outcomes; that is, males may be prone to violence, but that does not mean all males are violent. While a couple of genes have been proposed as being related to violent behaviour, one even having the unfortunate label of the ‘warrior’ gene, one would expect any genetic factors to involve multiple genes interacting in complex ways, as most behavioural traits do. Nevertheless, arguments relying on warfare in the archaeological record as their basis have been made. Thus, the archaeological record for warfare is of wide and important relevance, and we need to both get it right and make our findings widely and easily available.  

Can We Reconstruct Ancient Forager Warfare?

If we want to consider the evolutionary impact of ancient warfare then we must consider forager warfare. For most of human history humans were foragers or were organised into small non-hierarchical societies with no hereditary or permanent leaders, which are also known as acephalous societies. Humans were mobile, stored few resources for any length of time, and group sizes were small. Adult males in the group were usually related to one another, but the adult females much less so. If there is a genetic component to warfare, it most likely evolved while we were foragers. Thus, understanding the frequency, nature, and outcomes of forager warfare is critical to developing a framework for thinking about warfare and human evolution. It turns out that there are some societies that farm but that otherwise are organised very much like true foragers – or at least not very differently from them. An example is the Yanomamo of South America.  

There are other societies that are organised still more complexly but are not classified as complex societies, such as the Dani of New Guinea. These societies can provide additional relevant comparative information on warfare in acephalous societies.


Our forager society data comes from two sources: recent foragers for whom we have historic and ethnographic information, and prehistoric foragers for whom we have only the archaeological record. We have some ethnographic information from most continents about such peoples as the Bushmen, pygmies and Hadza in Africa, all societies of Australia, some societies in New Guinea, a few in South East Asia, a few in India, and a number in the Americas from the Eskimo in the north to the Fuegians in the south. The challenge in using the information on these foragers relates to when it was obtained. In many instances, by the time they were studied by anthropologists, their numbers had been decimated, they had access to metal tools and guns, and they were no longer highly mobile. Equally problematic are the data describing small societies surrounded by farmers. Teasing out what we know about such peoples as actual foragers where their neighbours were also foragers (which is the relevant model for our deep past) is difficult though not impossible.

An important question here is whether we can use historic data on recent foragers as models for earlier human behaviour concerning warfare. Equally important is how relevant are data from recent foragers who live surrounded by farmers and state-level societies? This issue is further complicated by those who feel that our closest primate relatives, the chimpanzees, provide a useful analogue for very early humans in their warfare-like behaviours. This is outside our concern here, but the chimpanzee data are very intriguing.\textsuperscript{24} If we can use these various types of data, it would greatly enhance our ability to have more than just the very limited direct data from the deep past at our disposal. I think the answer is yes, we can use such information, but we must be extremely careful to understand the quality and relevance of such information and how valid such analogies might be.

For example, ethnographic data on foragers suffer from two major drawbacks. First, virtually all such studies have been of people who no longer had the potential for unfettered warfare due to the presence of, and control by, more complex societies, so what information was obtained about warfare

was from stories about the past rather than direct observation. Also, virtually all forager societies that have been studied by ethnographers have had their numbers drastically reduced due to diseases and other impacts. They have also obtained new tools such as metal knives, guns, axes and cooking vessels. These two factors greatly changed their relationship to their carrying capacities: lower numbers and more efficient tools made them much less near the carrying capacity compared with pre-contact times.

By the time ethnographies of virtually all foraging societies were done, there had been a shift in their carrying capacities either through reduced population or by access to new technology. If warfare is the result of, or strongly related to, competition over resources, then the picture of warfare that emerges in these ethnographies is not at all the same as what it would have been when these foragers were living only among other foragers.

Examples occur in Australia, California, and among non-complex farmers such as the Mountain Arapesh of New Guinea. In the classic case of the Mountain Arapesh, Margaret Mead maintained they were and had been peaceful, yet there is solid evidence that no more than a generation earlier they had engaged in substantial warfare, thus demonstrating the problem that arises involving warfare with all such studies. Thus research by university-trained anthropologists of the twentieth century is much less useful for understanding forager warfare than the early accounts of explorers, missionaries and patrol officers. Such early historic and ethnographic data on the Alaskan Iñupiaq and Aboriginal Australians can be extremely enlightening. These early accounts have the potential for bias and lack of completeness and must be used with caution, but such is the case with all data. It appears that the failure to comprehend the problems with recent, twentieth-century ethnographic studies renders the opinions of people like Douglas Fry and Brian Ferguson about peaceful societies virtually worthless.

Genetic Consequences of Warfare

Given the current limitations on our ability to understand the evolutionary impact of ancient warfare, are evolutionary inferences currently somewhat

limited? What should be the most obvious but in fact is often overlooked are
the differences between males and females that are likely attributable to their
different roles in warfare. The obvious difference of sexual dimorphism,
usually attributed to mate competition, is equally explained by male inter-
group conflict. In addition, there are also behaviour differences of some
magnitude. Behavioural differences are considered by Joyce Benenson, who
argues that males are genetically programmed for fighting and competing, as
well as cooperating with small groups of other males. In contrast, females are
programmed to survive in a dangerous world and are especially focused on
ensuring their children will survive. These two evolutionary responses reflect
different selective pressures.27

There are alleles for a few genes that might have had their frequencies
selected due to warfare. The most obvious and famous is the unfortunately
named ‘warrior’ gene. No studies of such potential genetic impacts have been
taken very far, and none to my knowledge has looked at such genes through
time using ancient DNA. This is an area of research that is likely to see great
changes in the not too distant future. We can hope that the researchers will
be careful in their interpretations and that society in general is sophisticated
about such research and does not condemn it out of hand for failing to be
‘politically correct’.

Another question is to what extent is warfare rational, innate or irrational?
Overall, we find several lines of evidence for very rational behaviour in
leaderless warfare; for example, there is evidence that warfare can end
quite abruptly when conditions change. In particular, the intensity of warfare
does correlate with climate. This is best seen in the archaeological record
where there is significant time depth. A very good example is from North
America. Here, conditions favouring population growth seem to have existed
during the Medieval Warm Period, and the carrying capacity appears to have
been substantially reduced during the subsequent Little Ice Age. The result
was a great increase in warfare over most of the continent, with a population
crash in the American south-west and with intense warfare in the south-east
that involved large, empty buffer zones between polities.28 Thus, we have
evidence that some component of warfare is innate based on different genetic
propensities between men and women best explained by male-focused war-
fare as discussed above; some is rational as we can see from the climate
change data, and we all know of its irrational aspects.

University Press, 2014).
28 LeBlanc, Prehistoric Warfare; Milner, ‘Warfare’.
Intra-societal Violence versus Warfare

As noted, it is hard sometimes to distinguish between intra-societal violence and inter-group warfare among small-scale societies. For such societies, we have considerable ethnographic evidence but not much information derived from early contact. Archaeological evidence of intra-societal violence (almost solely in the form of skeletal trauma) is hard to separate from evidence for warfare. Ethnographic evidence is almost always collected in an environment in which there is no warfare. Thus, intra-societal conflict appears to be the dominant form of conflict in more modern ethnographies. This can be seen for foragers such as the !Kung or the Netsilik Eskimo, for which ethnographies contain considerable evidence for intra-societal conflict but do not discuss warfare because it had ceased before the ethnographers were on the scene.\textsuperscript{29}

Most early historic accounts do not benefit from writers having had the close interactions that ethnographers do, and so they almost always describe inter-group violence. As a result, they provide us with little useful information on intra-group violence. For example, William Buckley discusses warfare extensively among Australian Aborigines, but barely mentions intra-societal conflict.\textsuperscript{30} Similarly, Burch, in his reconstruction of Iñupiaq conflict before meaningful European contact, focuses on inter-group fighting but sees any intra-societal conflict as not nearly as important.\textsuperscript{31}

These differences are probably extremes. The Yanomamo exhibit an interesting mix. There is ample real warfare with the usual high death rates. There are conflicts between allied groups where presumed allies are invited to feasts, then attacked and killed. Which is this: warfare or intra-societal conflict? Then there are axe fights where fighting among the men of the same village takes place and heavy dangerous blows are exchanged. Yet, there is a strong attempt to make sure no one gets killed. Murders seem to be impulsive and not pre-planned; or, at least, not hidden. Thus, where the information is rich, like among the Yanomamo, one finds useful information on actual warfare, on conflict between groups that is not quite warfare, and on intra-community-controlled violence.


\textsuperscript{30} Morgan, \textit{Life and Adventures of Buckley}.  
\textsuperscript{31} Burch, \textit{Alliance and Conflict}. 

52
A final form of intra-societal violence that is very significant is the collective killing of one male by the other males of the group. The rationale for such killings seems to be that the male singled out for killing has become so violent and dangerous that he must be eliminated in order to protect the group from further episodes of unnecessary intra-group violence or dominating behaviour. As far as one can tell, such individuals are typically very good warriors. They seem to authenticate their value to the community by displaying their fighting ability. They bully and injure or kill other males in the group, they likely access other men’s women (although that is likely played down in the accounts of such incidents to the recorders), and their behaviour is so intolerable that they become more dangerous to the community than their value as a good warrior warrants. Because they are dangerous, killing them needs to be done carefully. Moreover, if not done properly, their relatives may feel it was unjust and seek revenge. In some cases, the community instructs the individual’s close relatives to kill him in order to eliminate any basis for revenge. In others, it is a community act. There is one account given to me directly by a Yanomamo tribesman visiting the United States of a Yanomamo dangerous warrior who, it is decided, must be killed. He is tricked into climbing a tree, and by necessity leaves his weapons behind. As he climbs down, weaponless, he is beset by all the males and killed.

Feuding

Posing great danger to a society are family or lineage feuds. These feuds seem to take place in societies larger than forager bands. They are most common among tribally organised groups. Since tribes can split and reform, feuds tend to be intermediate forms of conflict. What might begin as an intra-group feud or revenge situation might evolve into a social split in which the original unit becomes two competing units. Feuds can last over generations and obviously weaken the overall society’s ability to repel external enemies. Thus, mechanisms will exist to control or eliminate them. One solution is to force the payment of indemnity for past violence in order to end a feud. This is a large topic that is not covered further here, but it is an example of violence that tends to bridge the gap between personal violence and warfare.

In all these cases, the goal of the society at large is to minimise intra-group violent behaviour. On the one hand, others may fear getting involved or becoming victims, and, obviously, dead males and males that are prone to violence against each other do not make for a strong defence. This is important because among small-scale societies offensive action is usually undertaken by part of the group, whereas defence is undertaken by all. Every effort would be made to maximise each individual’s defensive abilities, since failure to do so jeopardises all. Thus, male intra-group violence is an existential threat to all.

Finding Violence in the Deep Past

The further one goes back in time, the more difficult it becomes to make these distinctions between intra-group violence and warfare. On the one hand, the only evidence one recovers for intra-group violence is evidence of wounds, so it must be grossly underestimated. Warfare among complex societies generates evidence such as shields, armour and site locations. Members of less complex societies are not very likely to bring bodies killed in warfare away from the community back to the community for burial. Shields and armour would have been made from perishable materials in such societies. Thus, our ability to recognise violence in the past diminishes as societies become less complex. This is even more the case for warfare deaths than it is for intra-societal violence. The famous Ötzi Tyrolean Iceman mummy was killed almost certainly in warfare, was not buried, and was preserved only by extreme circumstances. Little of his weaponry would have been preserved in a typical archaeological context. Similarly, the famous Kennewick Man of North America, who had a spear-point in him, was also not buried within a community and most likely was not formally buried at all. In contrast, an individual who suffered various non-lethal wounds inflicted either as the result of warfare or intra-societal violence but who died from another cause and was buried in the community would be likely found by archaeologists.

The unavoidable errors associated with being unable to recognise all warfare deaths in skeletal remains and studying only skeletal remains of individuals who were buried compound to result in an underestimation of warfare. This underestimation is further compounded as we go back in time, as skeletons are less complete and a smaller number of people had formal burials. Thus, as we go back in time, the evidence for violence suggests it was less lethal and less likely the result of warfare.
A similar problem exists with ambiguous skeletal evidence of violence in female remains. There is evidence of intra-community violence among women who held low social status.\textsuperscript{33} There is also other evidence of violent deaths among women that seem to be from warfare, for example in California.\textsuperscript{34} In these cases, the incidence always seems to be lower than that for men, which is not surprising given that most inter-community warfare is between men, and women are often captured and not killed in warfare. In fact, one of the goals in some warfare is to capture women for wives. However, some women are killed in warfare, and so again the presence of skeletal evidence of violence does not necessarily demonstrate unequivocally either the existence of warfare or intra-societal violence.

The Future of Research

Where do we go from here? Often in the field of archaeology particularly well-developed case studies can provide the type of in-depth analysis and interpretation that can lead to the proposal of new models and the posing of new questions. These cases do not have to be definitive, but they can be useful if they lead to further testing and alternative model building. Keeley’s argument for warfare between foragers and Linearbandkeramik (LBK) farmers in northern Europe at the beginning of the Neolithic is a good example.\textsuperscript{35} Just laying out the case for warfare and the nature of the extant data can, in some areas, be a useful advance, an example being exploring the evidence for warfare in the early Greek Neolithic.\textsuperscript{36} A number of recent edited volumes have taken this approach.\textsuperscript{37} However, it appears that some of these papers do not provide enough data to convince researchers that these directions should be pursued, or they do not become mainstream examples read by students at large. This is a fertile field for which much evidence has not yet been pulled together.

At the same time, there have been few studies that look at regional or temporal transects of warfare. While such research is hard to carry out, it will be vital in helping to fix warfare’s role in human history. We need more well-controlled time sequences. If we want to determine the role of climate

\textsuperscript{33} Debra L. Martin ‘Violence against Women in the La Plata River Valley (AD 1000–1300)’, in Martin and Frayer (eds.), Troubled Times, pp. 45–76.
\textsuperscript{34} Lambert, ‘Patterns of Violence’.
\textsuperscript{36} Runnels et al., ‘Warfare in Neolithic Thessaly’.
\textsuperscript{37} Allen and Jones, Re-examining a Pacified Past; Arkush and Allen, Archaeology of Warfare.
change or socio-political shifts in increases or decreases in warfare, we need to have long enough time sequences where we can estimate the level of warfare. This has been attempted for periods for which we have written records, and it has proved difficult enough. It has been attempted for prehistoric areas in California and perhaps among the Maya, but for most areas of the world the prehistoric record has not been dealt with in a systematic enough way to allow for meaningful comparisons over long time spans.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to get beyond arguments around whether or not there was warfare. Once one defines a time frame that is long enough to allow meaningful statements (anything less than 100 to 200 years simply does not allow for very meaningful statements), and defines an area large enough to contain a society and its neighbours, the answer is, yes, there was warfare. Even the Egyptian kingdoms had warfare on their boundaries and fell into chaos with conflict between kingdoms. And Egypt was an exception for its level of peacefulness, just as Japan was for several centuries in the Tokugawa period. It is why warfare essentially ceased in such cases as these that is of interest. It is only by looking at a time frame long enough to see a change from warfare to peace (and too often, or almost always) back to warfare again, that we can move our understanding ahead. Simply to note that peace did prevail in a short time or space tells us nothing we do not know about the human condition.

Bibliographic Essay


This rethink spawned a number of more specific studies, such as those in Mark W. Allen and Terry L. Jones’s edited volume, Violence and Warfare among Hunter-Gatherers (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014), and Patricia M. Lambert’s ‘The Archaeology of War: A North American Perspective’, Journal of Archaeological Research 10.3 (2002), 207–41. Several new syntheses of the extent, great time depth, deadliness and relevance of ancient warfare also appeared, including Azar Gat’s extensive War in Human Civilization

38 Turchin, ‘Warfare’. 
The Origins of Warfare and Violence


Violence in Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Hunter-Gatherer Communities

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The culturally defined Palaeolithic is a rather large time period spanning from the earliest stone artefacts around 2.6 million years ago until the end of the last glacial around 10,000 BP. The geologically defined Pleistocene also covers this time span. The period is divided into three main parts: the Older Palaeolithic (2.6 million years to 300,000 BP), linked with Homo erectus and Homo heidelbergensis; the Middle Palaeolithic (300,000 BP–40,000 BP), linked with Homo neanderthalensis in Europe and parts of Asia, and Homo sapiens in Africa and the Near East; and the Upper Palaeolithic (40,000 BP–10,000 BP), linked with Homo sapiens. The Upper Palaeolithic is divided by culturally and technologically defined periods, or techno-complexes, such as the Aurignacian (43,000 BP–30,000 BP), the Gravettian (29,000–20,000 BP), the Solutrean (22,000 BP–17,000 BP), the Magdalenian (17,000 BP–12,000 BP) and the Final Palaeolithic (12,000 BP–10,000 BP). The Mesolithic (10,000 BP–5,000 BP) is a culturally defined period which starts after the end of the last glaciation (Dryas III) and is usually linked to the Holocene hunter-gatherers of Europe. Outside of Europe the term ‘Epipalaeolithic’ is used.

This chapter relies almost completely on human remains. Weapons or projectiles that were used exclusively for fighting are not identified in these times. Due to the rather low numbers of human remains in the earlier stages of the Palaeolithic, no information on identifiable skull trauma exists in early Homo (Homo habilis, Homo rudolfensis). The later species Homo erectus/Homo ergaster appeared in Africa from 1.8 million years ago, and remained present until roughly 600,000 BP, but continued to exist in Africa and Asia until 200,000 or even 40,000 BP. Around 600,000 BP Homo heidelbergensis developed from the later Homo erectus forms in Africa and Europe. These were ancestors to Homo

Neanderthalensis in Europe and northern Asia, existing from 200,000 until around 40,000 BP. Neanderthals became extinct after the arrival of anatomically modern humans (Homo sapiens) in Europe around 40,000 BP. Homo sapiens developed from Homo heidelbergensis in Africa around 200,000 BP.

The identification of violent behaviour on human remains from the Palaeolithic is a difficult task. The major problem is the small number and fragmentary nature of the remains. Especially in the older periods of the Palaeolithic, the preservation of human remains is often restricted to skull and jaw fragments. Complete bones or skulls are rare discoveries. The preservation of complete skeletons is an exception for the Palaeolithic, but is more common in the post-glacial Mesolithic or Epipalaeolithic, where more isolated burials and even graveyards are preserved. On skulls, injuries are usually easily recognisable and occur quite often in cases of interpersonal violence. In general, injuries related to violence are usually located on the cranium and lower arms. Usually it is possible to distinguish between dry breaks and perimortem (around the time of death) breakage patterns on bone. The main criteria for identification of skull trauma caused by blunt objects are defects with oblique fracture angles, radiating and circulating fracture lines, as well as a smooth fracture surface. A major criteria is the so-called internal bevelling, showing the chipping of bone on the inner table of the skull. The location of injuries on the cranium caused by interpersonal violence is usually frontal-parietal. Right-handed attackers cause lesions more frequently on the left side of the skull of the attacked person, assuming that both combatants are facing each other and are standing upright. A rather weak argument for interpersonal violence are lesions located above the so-called hat-brim-line. According to some forensic data, lesions caused by interpersonal violence should occur above this line. This has, however, to be treated with caution, as several forensic studies seem to contradict this general rule. Using published data, we have to be aware of the fact that reports on injuries are highly variable in quality and usually do not use comparable bioarchaeological or forensic diagnostic criteria or comparative methods, especially in older reports.

Evidence of Violent Behaviour in Homo erectus and Homo heidelbergensis

The first signs of violent behaviour among Pleistocene people are documented on Homo erectus and Homo heidelbergensis skulls from the Middle

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3 Klein, Human Career.  
Pleistocene (780,000–126,000 BP). All of these skulls show only minor healed lesions, usually small rounded defects on the outer surface of the skulls. None of the impacts penetrated the skulls. The small depressions are located in most cases on the parietals, that is, the side of the head (twelve cases) and on the frontal bone, that is, the front of the head (seven cases). The occipital bone (back of the head) was only affected in three cases. There is no secure evidence for interpersonal violence in these cases. There are, however, two cases from the Middle Pleistocene that seem to demonstrate more severe skull traumas. The skulls from Hulu cave, Nanjing, China (620,000–550,000 BP) and Maba, China (around 150,000 BP), are discussed as possible evidence for violent behaviour among early humans, although accidents cannot be excluded as a cause for these well-healed traumas. Recently, the famous site of Sima de los Huesos at Atapuerca, in Spain, has shown convincing evidence for interpersonal violence in the Middle Pleistocene.

Cranium 17 shows two penetrating perimortem lesions with oblique fracture angles and radiating fracture lines, and a smooth fracture surface. Any signs of bone remodelling is absent, indicating a lethal scenario. Both lesions are located on the left side of the frontal bone and show different orientations and trajectories. Together with the breakage pattern of two further skulls (crania 5 and 11), a violent scenario might be a probable explanation – although the general possibility that perimortem fractures were caused during the fall of the bodies into the lower chamber of the cave cannot be ruled out – the location of the site where the human remains were found is just below a vertical shaft linked with a larger cave system above.

Violent Neanderthals?

A number of minor non-lethal injuries are identified on Neanderthals and their ancestors as well as on early modern humans from Europe and the Near East between 30,000 and 40,000 BP. Similar to the *Homo erectus* and *Homo heidelbergensis* cases, these lesions are only evident on the outside surface and did not penetrate the skull. In 1995 Thomas Berger and Erik Trinkaus published the

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results of a study that showed that lesions on Neanderthals are focused on the skull and upper extremities. A comparison with recent and archaeological material revealed high similarities with lesions from American rodeo riders. Their explanation for this pattern of lesions was a risky hunting strategy resulting in close encounters with larger game. In a later study these results were modified; the pattern of traumatic lesions was not only restricted to Neanderthals but was also found in later hunter-gatherer communities. In addition, hunting strategies were not the only reason identified for this pattern of trauma; the study showed that interpersonal violence could not be excluded as an explanation and might have played an important role. All the injuries show bony reactions, indicating healing without any complications. Besides these injuries there are also a number of cases that show a more severe pattern of trauma on the post-cranial skeleton, mostly concentrated on the lower arms, ribs and shoulder girdle. These injuries had also healed without complication but certainly would have limited the daily life of the affected person. As in earlier cases, it remains a general problem to distinguish between an accidental nature and interpersonal violence as a cause for a lesion or trauma.

A whole series of traumas both on cranial and post-cranial remains is present in the Neanderthal remains from Krapina in Croatia (Figure 2.1). About 900 skeletal elements representing a minimum of twenty-three individuals makes this site one of the most important with Neanderthal remains. Analysis of these remains shows that trauma frequency and localisation on the skull and the post-cranium is similar to recent hunter-gatherer groups where violence is usually seen as the reason for skull trauma. The comparison is, however, limited due to the high degree of fragmentation of the Krapina remains. Nonetheless it seems plausible that the trauma present, especially on skull fragments 4, 5 and 20, in terms of shape, size and localisation, is caused by interpersonal violence. Only one further trauma (Krapina 34.7) is below the so-called hat-brim-line. Because this is an uncertain

criterion, it cannot be ruled out that these lesions were also caused by personal violence and not by accidents or other circumstances.

Another case is the Neanderthal from Saint-Césaire, Roche-à-Pierrot, France, represented as a partial skeleton. Here the fragmentary skull reveals a well-healed lesion on the left parietal (Figure 2.2). It has been suggested that a blow with a sharp object caused this skull fracture. It is unclear whether the blow came from the back or front, but the affected individual must have been standing upright. The blow seems to have penetrated the skull at least partially as the skull was fractured and parts of the affected bone were dislocated. The effects of the injury were probably serious, with heavy bleeding and probably temporary impairment. It seems to be plausible that assistance and help from other members of his group would have been necessary for this individual to survive.12

Clear evidence of interpersonal violence among Neanderthals seems to be present on the skeletal remains of burial 3 from Shanidar in northern Iraq. The ninth rib on the left side of the body shows a deep cut and callus formation indicating that the process of healing was ongoing at the time of death. Death seems to have occurred about two months after the injury, but

any correlation is unclear. Experimental approaches showed that a sharp instrument with a low kinetic energy and a low mass probably caused the incision.\textsuperscript{13} Although a hunting accident or an attack with a thrusting spear cannot be ruled out, it seems to be more plausible to suggest a stabbing weapon like a knife-like flint artefact. The effect on the individual was probably severe as the weapon not only penetrated the rib but entered the thorax and perforated the lung. The circumstances that led to the death of the individual are unclear, as no inflammatory processes are present on the preserved remains. The injuries, however, strongly suggest a case of personal aggression among Neanderthals.

Another case from the Middle Palaeolithic is juvenile burial 11 from Qafzeh in Israel, dated between 90,000 and 100,000 BP, which presents a healed skull injury. A young adolescent of about 12–13 years was buried in a pit with deer antlers.\textsuperscript{14} According to previous studies and a recent analysis using three-dimensional imaging methods, the juvenile died

\textsuperscript{13} S. E. Churchill et al., ‘Shanidar 3 Neandertal Rib Puncture Wound and Paleolithic Weaponry’, \textit{Journal of Human Evolution} 57.2 (2009), 163–78.

\textsuperscript{14} H. Coqueugniot et al., ‘Earliest Cranio-Encephalic Trauma from the Levantine Middle Palaeolithic: 3D Reappraisal of the Qafzeh 11 Skull, Consequences of Pediatric Brain Damage on Individual Life Condition and Social Care’, \textit{PLoS ONE} 9.7 (2014), 1–10, \url{https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0102822}.
some time after suffering a major skull and brain trauma to the frontal bone. The location and shape of the depression fracture leaves open the possibility of an accidental injury or interpersonal violence. The individual most likely suffered from significant neurological and psychological disorders because of the injury, including problems with communication. However, despite these limitations the community in which they were living took care of them during their lifetime and in death. The deliberate and ceremonial burial was equipped with accompanying goods (red deer antlers), which are rare in the Middle Palaeolithic. This might indicate that despite their young age and disabilities following the skull trauma, this individual was important for the community and was buried in a special way.

**Violence in Upper Palaeolithic Hunter-Gatherers**

During the Upper Palaeolithic, human remains from the Gravettian period from Dolní Vestonice, Pavlov and Mladec (Dolní Vestonice 3, 13, 16; Pavlov 1; Mladec 5) show a number of healed traumas on the skulls that did not penetrate the bone: the impacts left small rounded depressions on the outer surfaces of the skulls. Their almost identical localisation on the frontal areas of the parietals could indicate that they may have been caused by repeated violent interactions. Besides these more random injuries, a small number of more severe cases are present that have healed without inflammatory reactions or other complications. The crouched burial of a female individual, Dolní Vestonice 3, shows a noticeable facial asymmetry, which was caused by a trauma to the side of the mandible. As this trauma is long healed and shows no specific characteristics, it cannot be excluded that this injury was caused by an accident, but a violence-related origin is equally feasible. A further case is a healed skull injury on Dolní Vestonice 11/12. A larger defect is situated on the mid frontal bone, resulting from a more severe trauma. Again, the location and shape of the injury might be indicators for interpersonal violence. The most striking evidence for lethal violence in the Upper Palaeolithic is the case of the famous burial Sunghir 1, an adult male also dated to the Gravettian period. During the reinvestigation of these remains a centimetre-long cut was found on the body of a thoracic

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vertebra (mid spinal region). Any signs of healing were absent. To cause such a defect, an object must have penetrated the body, destroying vitally important blood vessels and causing the death of the victim. It seems, therefore, that a projectile such as a thrown spear killed the man from Sunghir. This seems to be the first reliable evidence of a person being killed by a projectile weapon.

Cases of Violence from the Final Palaeolithic

We have to wait for the Final Palaeolithic for further evidence for injuries caused by projectiles. This might be related to technological changes, especially the appearance of the bow and arrow. One cannot, however, easily distinguish between projectiles such as arrowheads or spear tips and those shot with a spear thrower (or atlatl). From the cave site of San Teodoro in Sicily the remains of five individuals were excavated in 1937. The pelvic bone of an adult female buried with a red deer antler was found with a broken flint projectile embedded in it. Signs of healing indicate survival of the injury for many years. This was only possible because the arrow did not penetrate the abdominal area. Otherwise, the chances of surviving such an injury would have been negligible or non-existent.

A clear case of a lethal projectile injury from the Final Palaeolithic is the double burial of two children, aged 2 and 3 years, from the Grotte des Enfants (Grotta dei Fanciulli) in Liguria, Italy. This burial was excavated in 1875 and dates to around 11,000 BP. The children were buried side by side. In the pelvic area, hundreds of perforated snail shells belonging to the clothing of both individuals were found. During a reinvestigation of the remains, researchers found that a triangular arrowhead embedded in the bone had hit one of the upper thoracic vertebrae of one of the children. The location of the projectile and the fact that traces of healing are absent indicate a lethal injury.

There are further examples of projectile injuries from both the Final Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic. This is indicated by isolated finds like the only broadly dated vertebra from Montfort Saint-Lizier, France, that shows a

perforation from a quartzite point still embedded in the bone. An embedded projectile was also found in the seventh or sixth thoracic vertebra of a middle-aged male from Kebara cave in Israel from the early Natufian, an Epipalaeolithic culture in the Near East.

All these cases are isolated and may have resulted from intra- or inter-group conflicts. There are no signs of conflicts at a larger scale in Europe during this period. In northern Africa the graveyard of Jebel Sahaba, in the Sudan, may indicate another level of conflict at the end of the Pleistocene. The site belongs to the Epipalaeolithic Qadan culture and is about 11,600 years old. The actual age might be even older, taphonomic processes having affected bone samples used for the radiocarbon dating. At least twenty-three of fifty-eight individuals (40 per cent) exhibit direct injuries or projectiles within the body area. Direct hits on the bone are in a minority (four cases), but 110 projectiles were found in direct association with the bodies. According to a recent analysis of the preserved remains, traumatic incidents might be more frequent than previously noted. Healed blunt force trauma on the skulls, defence fractures on the lower arm and on hands and feet indicate that violent behaviour was a common occurrence in the lives of these individuals. Besides these well-healed traumatic lesions, two previously unknown projectile injuries and cut marks on upper leg bones were recorded.

Violence in the Mesolithic

The Mesolithic is often described as a period when evidence of violence is rising. Sometimes this proposed rise is thought to be related to a higher

level of organised inter-group conflict and violent interactions in general, as well as to a rise in population in certain areas, resulting in a higher level of territoriality, causing stress and more potential for conflicts between groups.\textsuperscript{25} In a recent report of a discovery near Lake Turkana, in Kenya, a case of potential inter-group violence is described. The remains of twenty-seven individuals were excavated along a sandy ridge and on a small mound at a site called Nataruk. Although fifteen skeletons were exposed and fragmentary, twelve fully articulated skeletons were found.\textsuperscript{26} The human remains were embedded in sediment from an ancient lagoon which was dated to around 9,500 to 10,500 years BP. A major difference to Jebel Sahaba is that these bodies were described as impiously deposited. They include male and female adults that were lying on their backs sometimes face down or in unnatural crouched positions. Trauma is described as blunt and sharp force; perforations and projectiles were found in body cavities and embedded in cranial bones. The location of the injuries is clearly concentrated on the head, and in a few instances the neck, thorax, knees and feet were affected. Another disturbing fact is that in four cases the hands of the victims seem to have been bound. This might not only indicate fighting with bow and arrow as well as blunt and sharp implements, but also the possibility of the execution of captives. The interpretation of the site has not remained undisputed, however; doubts have been raised about the existence of some of the perimortem skull trauma, the dating of the site and the claim that the bodies were not buried.\textsuperscript{27} The amount of violence present and the interpretation of Nataruk therefore has to remain open. Hopefully, a more detailed description of the find circumstances and the trauma will provide more and clearer information for this site in the future.

The question of an intensification of violence in the Mesolithic compared to the Middle and Upper/Final Palaeolithic is difficult to prove based on the skeletal remains. An important aspect is the state of preservation concerning not only the quality but also the quantity of remains. The higher levels of

\textsuperscript{27} C. M. Stojanowski et al., ‘Contesting the Massacre at Nataruk’, \textit{Nature} 539 (2016), E8–E10, https://doi.org/10.1038/nature19778.
fragmentation in the Palaeolithic, on the one hand, and the high level of preservation in Mesolithic human remains, on the other hand, lead to a non-comparable situation. In the European Mesolithic at least 1,700 burials are preserved.28 Recent discoveries, re-dating mostly ‘Palaeolithic’ human remains, and the fact that there is a considerable number of isolated human remains in the Mesolithic context has increased this number to well above 2,000 individuals. As a result, the number of traumas recorded in the Mesolithic is higher than in any other previous phases. According to a study by V. H. Estabrook29 there are seventy-seven traumatic incidents recorded for the Mesolithic to date. The comparison between blunt force trauma on the skull and post-cranium versus projectile injuries gives a surprising result. The number of injuries caused by projectiles (n = 17) is indeed higher than in the Upper Palaeolithic (n = 3), which is plausible due to the well-documented use of the bow and arrow. However, the percentage of projectile injuries in comparison to blunt force trauma is quite similar, with 28 per cent in the Mesolithic and 23 per cent in the Palaeolithic.

It is less clear whether most of the cranial and post-cranial trauma is related to violent interactions or to accidents. Studying the injuries, the location on the body, and the taphonomic context might help to clarify the cases. As in modern forensic cases, most injuries related to violence tend to be located on the cranium, mostly on the frontal and parietal, the face (nasal bones, maxilla and mandible), as well as the lower arm (radius and ulna), resulting in so-called parry fractures of the ulna.

Some studies deny an increase of violence for the Mesolithic when comparing the evidence to other groups of sedentary or semi-sedentary hunter-gathers.30 Even in coastal areas described as densely populated, as in the Portuguese shell middens, the rate of violent injuries recorded is very low. Most of the pathological lesions related to trauma from the region were linked with daily activities (injuries, accidents) and not with violent encounters between or within groups.31

In the Iron Gorge area, namely from the sites of Lepenski Vir and Vlassac, only six individuals with mostly healed lesions were identified. The injuries were mostly blunt force trauma, located on the frontal area, and indicating face-to-face fighting. On the post-cranial skeleton, a fracture of an ulna with an unhealed but survived fracture (pseudo articulation) and an embedded projectile in a pelvic bone were recorded. Due to the absence of bone remodelling the projectile injury indicated a fatal wound that was not survived for more than two weeks. According to radiocarbon dates, most of these cases can be related to a horizon earlier than the contact between Mesolithic groups and early farmers. As a result any possible increase of violence caused by an interaction between these groups and early farmers is chronologically excluded.\(^\text{32}\)

At Schela Cladovei, where a number of individuals (15 per cent of all examined) show signs of trauma, radiocarbon dates indicate the late pre-contact/early Neolithic contact period.\(^\text{33}\) At this site, the injuries reported are blunt force trauma, parry fractures and embedded projectiles (flint tips and bone points).\(^\text{34}\) Most of the information concerning traces of violence is, however, restricted to Area III. The radiocarbon dates here seem to group between 8,300 and 8,600 BP, that is, the period before the arrival of early farming communities. According to the pattern of injuries, these burials showing signs of violence that could represent either a single episode of group violence or a series of related events within a short time span. As both sexes were victims of violence it might be plausible to think of a whole group being targeted, indicating inter-group conflict that may be called warfare or raids. Especially, the occurrence of projectile injuries seems to cluster in the Late Mesolithic of the area. Violence seems to have occurred variously during the Mesolithic at the Iron Gorge; these violent encounters within or between groups cannot be associated with early farming communities.

A unique scenario is represented by the Dnjepr Rapids cemeteries Vasilyevka I–III in the Ukraine, dating to the transitional period between the Final Palaeolithic and the Epipalaeolithic, between 10,800 and 9,980 BP. In


total, the three sites contain eighty-two burials in mostly flexed positions. In six cases, several projectiles were found in close association with the skeletons, without damaging any bone. Some of the individuals were hit by several projectiles. This might indicate an ambush situation similar to the Late Neolithic case at Eulau from Saxony-Anhalt. According to the evidence from Vasilyevka III, it seems plausible that younger adults aged 18–35 years were targeted. The loss of reproductive males and females from a fisher-hunter-gatherer community might have had a serious impact on this population.

The evidence of violence in northern central European and Scandinavian regions is mostly limited to burials from the Kongemose and early Ertebølle culture (c. 8,400–5,400 BP), but one case dates to the earlier Maglemose culture (c. 10,800–8,400 BP). In southern Sweden and the eastern part of Denmark in particular, a large numbers of burials are represented, including those from cemeteries (Vedbæk-Bøgebakken and Skateholm). In total, there are twenty-one individuals from Denmark and Sweden with definite and possible injuries caused by blunt instruments and projectiles. Most injuries, especially skull traumas, were healed. The location of the injuries on the frontal and parietal bones makes it likely that all these injuries were caused by violence. Only two victims were female, with a severe case from Vedbæk-Gøngehusevey showing a deep impression. Only three cases show evidence for projectile injuries from arrows, in two cases with bone points. All injuries were fatal shots, in two cases in the pelvic area (Stora Bjers, Skateholm I, grave 13) and in one case (Vedbæk-Bøgebakken 19A) between the lower cervical vertebrae of the neck. In total the percentage of individuals with fatal injuries from burials in Denmark and Sweden is below 3 per cent.

36 C. Meyer et al., ‘The Eulau Eulogy: Bioarchaeological Interpretation of Lethal Violence in Corded Ware Multiple Burials from Saxony-Anhalt, Germany’, Journal of Anthropological Archaeology 28.4 (2009), 412–23; see also Chapter 14 in this volume.
Individuals showing blunt force trauma is 12 per cent for Denmark and 6.5 per cent for Sweden.

A different story are the so-called ‘skull nests’ from the Ofnet Cave in Bavaria, southern Germany. Excavated in 1907 by Robert Rudolf Schmidt, these finds represent an extraordinary feature. The skulls have been radiocarbon dated to the Late Mesolithic, between $7360 \pm 80$ BP and $7560 \pm 110$ BP (OxA 1571, 1572, 1573, 1574, 1575).\(^{40}\) Deposited in two pits at the entrance of the cave, thirty-four skulls with mandibles and cervical vertebrae were found in anatomical connection, indicating a quick deposit after death. In nine cases, the third or fourth cervical vertebra exhibit cut marks from the separation from the trunk. Together with the heads of twenty children (mostly below 6 years of age) and fourteen adults (mostly between 20 and 30 years of age), personal ornaments were deposited.\(^{41}\) One hundred and eighty-eight perforated red deer canines and 3,773 perforated snail shells are preserved.\(^{42}\) Together with their careful placement and the use of red ochre, these ornaments indicate a deliberate burial of the heads. Despite the fact that only the heads were deposited, the feature matches Mesolithic burial traditions. A ritual treatment of the heads and a deliberate burial seems plausible.

Quite early on, after the first morphological analyses of the skulls at the beginning of the twentieth century, signs of violence were recognised by Mollison while re-analysing the remains.\(^{43}\) He assumed that axe-like weapons were responsible for the lesions and the fragmentation of the skulls. In the 1990s two independent studies were carried out focusing on the trauma of the Ofnet skulls.\(^{44}\) The results differ in several aspects, but it became clear that a minimum of eight individuals show traumatic lesions caused by fatal blows.

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to the head. In several cases, the traumatic character of the lesions could not be clarified. The reason is the fragmented nature of several skulls, especially those from children and the intensive reconstruction that has been carried out with plaster and other materials. In most cases the outline of the impact is unambiguous although variable, which might be the result of the use of different weapons and/or different angles in which the axes penetrated the skulls (Figure 2.3). Looking at the location of the injuries it becomes clear that most (eight) are located in the occipital (posterior) part of the skull. In two cases four injuries are located on the frontal and the parietals (Figure 2.4). Injuries located in these areas seem to be restricted to male individuals. This might point to a scenario where males opposed the attackers while women

Figure 2.3 Ofnet, Germany, occipital view of skull 21 of a young adult male with various lethal traumas.

Figure 2.4 Ofnet, Germany, location of blunt force trauma on at least eight individuals from the large head deposition.
and children tried to flee from the attack but were struck from behind and killed. It remains, however, an open question if and how the remaining individuals whose skulls do not exhibit any kind of trauma were killed.

The skull nests and their interpretation are a highly debated topic. There are two basic questions, is Ofnet a single event, or did the heads accumulate over several hundreds of years? In addition, is there a connection between the violent death of these individuals and the fact that the heads were cut off and only then were buried? AMS measurements of bone fragments from five Ofnet skulls give a Late Mesolithic age. The dates have a range of about 600 years between 6100 and 6700 BCE. This allows for an interpretation of a simultaneous burial event, as well as a successive deposition of the heads. The heads were placed within two pits, a larger and a smaller one. This might indicate that the structures have a differing age. In order to answer that question, a new joint project in which all of the skulls will be reanalysed concerning trauma and AMS dating, including the use of Bayesian modelling, is being carried out at the Universities of Berlin, Hamburg and Oxford.45

Similar to Ofnet is the find from Hohlenstein-Stadel. There we find a deposition of three heads in a pit filled with red ochre: an adult male, an adult female (20–30 years) and an infant aged 1½–2 years were discovered in the entrance area of the Stadel cave. Twelve perforated teeth of Rutilus meidringeri, a cyprinid fish, were found associated with the female skull. The fish teeth probably belonged to some kind of ornament placed around the neck or head of the deceased woman. The skulls were placed carefully within the small pit, with the male in front and the female close behind. The small child’s head was found beside the female individual. An AMS date of the male individual gave an age of 7835 ± 80 BP (ETH-5732) or 6743 ± 139 BCE placing the deposition of the heads in the Late Mesolithic. The vertebrae of both adults show cut marks resulting from a careful separation of the head from the body. The skulls of the adult individuals also show signs of perimortem blunt force trauma, which led to the death of both individuals. The skull of the infant did not reveal clear signs of trauma but showed the pathological indication of hydrocephalus, a disease with variable causes and very heterogeneous aetiology, resulting in an enlargement of the skull.

by an increase in volume of skull fluid. Additional finds of isolated skulls associated with mandibles and upper cervical vertebrae such as Kauftersberg, Lkr. Donau-Ries and the skull from Oberlarg, Mannlefelsen, in Alsace show several similarities to the Ofnet and Stadel skulls. Direct AMS dates are missing from both sites and a number of differences are evident in comparison. Only the skull from Mannlefelsen shows cut marks related to skinning/scalping and signs of burning, but a fatal blunt force trauma is also evident. The occurrence of fatal skull injuries at Ofnet, Hohlenstein-Stadel and Mannlefelsen raises the question of an increase of violent behaviour during the Late Mesolithic of central Europe. A recent study of ornaments (perforated shells and red deer canines) from the Ofnet skull nests not only revealed a complex acquisition pattern but also an active large-scale exchange network in the Late Mesolithic.

Conclusion

The question of whether violence within and between groups played an important role in the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic is still difficult to answer. Recent publications clearly indicate that it has gained more and more importance. Earlier approaches to the interpretation of trauma in the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic in comparative studies by Fergusson and Estabrook were limited by various factors. Besides the fact that preservation and the incomplete osteological record limit diagnosis and quantification, another problem is evident: in cases where a clear trauma is diagnosed, distinguishing between accident and interpersonal violence seems problematic.

During the older Palaeolithic from the Middle Pleistocene onwards, only a few finds seem to point to isolated cases of violent behaviour. None of them

48 Rigaud, *Objets de parure*.
seem to have been fatal with the exception of the individual represented by cranium 17 from the Sima de los Huesos at Atapuerca, which might be the first evidence of intra-human killing. In the Middle Palaeolithic the lesions found on the remains of Neanderthals are mainly located on skulls and upper extremities. A major focus of recent studies has been on Neanderthals, resulting in a number of published reports. Several injuries can be related to interpersonal violence but might also be the result of risky hunting strategies. Violence seems to have played a role in the formation of this pattern of trauma; however, this pattern of traumatic lesions is not only restricted to Neanderthals but is also found in later hunter-gatherers of the Upper Palaeolithic and in *Homo sapiens*. Human remains from the Gravettian, which are more numerous, show a number of healed trauma wounds on the skulls that did not penetrate the bone.

The Sunghir I burial provides striking evidence for lethal violence in the Upper Palaeolithic. The impact of a projectile is found in one of the thoracic vertebra. This first case of a killing with a spear projectile is followed by other cases in the Final Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic in Europe and the Near East where the first lethal and survived injuries from arrow projectiles are documented. Further evidence for projectile injuries and for blunt force trauma is documented for the European Mesolithic or the post-glacial Epipalaeolithic in other regions. Sites like Nataruk, at Lake Turkana, Kenya, and Jebel Sahaba in Sudan seem to indicate a new dimension in intra-human violence. These sites present the first conflicts of a larger scale at the end of the Palaeolithic or the transition to the Epipalaeolithic. The question of an intensification of violence in the Mesolithic compared to Palaeolithic times cannot be proved based on skeletal remains. The good state of preservation and the numerous burials with about 2,000 individuals preserved is certainly the reason why this period is often described as a violent one. Sites like Ofnet, however, do show that the potential for conflict was present in the Mesolithic, and violent encounters sometimes resulted in an intentional killing of individuals or even groups of people. Another aspect, however, is that besides violent behaviour there is also sporadic evidence for treatment and care of injured and impaired individuals. The cases of Saint-Césaire, Shanidar 3 and Qafzeh 11 show that Neanderthals and early modern humans took care of injured people, whether they survived trauma caused by accident or interpersonal violence or other diseases. Neanderthal individuals like Shanidar 1, who suffered a number of degenerative diseases, trauma, atrophy of the right arm, probably
blindness of the left eye as well as hearing loss, were able to reach an age of about 40 to 50 years.\textsuperscript{50} Without the help of their group, including treatment of their wounds and daily support, these injured or impaired people would have been unable to hunt or collect food and would have been vulnerable to larger carnivores, which were ubiquitous in their habitats. Although the degree of support that would have been necessary for their survival remains unclear, the presence of social support for Pleistocene and early Holocene hunter-gatherers is undisputed.

Due to the increase in interest in the topic of violent behaviour among prehistoric hunter-gatherers, it seems plausible to suggest that more cases from the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic will be diagnosed in the near future. Besides all the restrictions that have been mentioned, it seems clear that violence does not occur more often in Neanderthals than in later and probably earlier times. Violence seems to play a significant role not only in recent hunter-gatherers and nomadic groups, but also among Palaeolithic and Mesolithic hunter-gatherers.\textsuperscript{51}

**Bibliographic Essay**


76


Settled Lives, Unsettled Times: Neolithic Violence in Europe

MARTIN J. SMITH, RICK J. SCHULTING AND LINDA FIBIGER

The European Neolithic was a period of enormous cultural, social and economic change affecting subsistence strategies, settlement patterns, technology and population size, as well as ideologies and world views. By its closing stages around 2500 BCE, established lifeways in central and western Europe had been permanently transformed from being based on mobile or semi-mobile hunter-fisher-gatherer groups to settled communities relying on mixed farming economies and extensive trade and exchange networks. The extent and significance of violence within and between communities during this period has been a subject of ongoing debate since the nineteenth century, with prevailing opinions fluctuating over time as to the frequency and importance of such hostilities in relation to other societal changes occurring across this transition. The idea of relative peace and social/economic stability as synonymous with the Neolithic has seen significant revision in the last few decades, including suggestions that violent conflict between groups and individuals might have been a result, by-product or at times even a catalyst for some of the changes and developments observed. In this respect shifting views on the Neolithic can be seen as a microcosm of wider debates regarding the nature and significance of violence as a phenomenon of importance to human societal development in general. The key questions addressed in this chapter focus on changes in general patterns of violence with the onset of the Neolithic, as well as on regional and diachronic variation through the period. Underpinning our approach is a reliance on the evidence of skeletal trauma. While objects interpreted as weapons and structures identified as defences are certainly important lines of evidence, both are fraught with problems in that neither can indicate how much actual violence took place during a given period. In this regard human skeletons offer the only direct and unequivocal evidence for violent acts while also constituting a form of remains
that is consistent between human societies and so is directly comparable.

While there is a certain consistency in the kinds of trauma observed among Neolithic burial assemblages, this can be attributed to a degree of shared material culture (e.g. the lack of metal weapons) and social organisation throughout the period. However, we are by no means seeing a completely homogeneous pattern. The manifestations of violence observed throughout the study region and period suggest considerable variation in the contexts and potential roles of conflict. In many respects it may be the case that violent interactions in the Neolithic differed little from those that took place in preceding periods. At the same time, aspects of an increasing scale of conflict – involving larger numbers of participants, with apparently greater levels of organisation than previously seen – imply that something new had indeed happened to facilitate social strategies manifesting hostility in ways that some modern observers would characterise as warfare rather than simply homicide. This chapter also explores possible causative factors of such a far-reaching development.

While the skeletal record for the Neolithic has yielded unambiguous evidence for large-scale violent events for some time (for example, evidence from the Early Neolithic mass grave at Talheim was first published in 1984), this evidence initially had relatively little impact on views of Neolithic society, which tended to emphasise the new productive economy, new material culture, trade and exchange, ideology, ritual and ceremony. More recently, there has been a shift from the idea of peaceful farming societies to a more complex picture involving intra- and inter-group conflicts, with the latter sometimes resulting in mass-fatality events like those seen at Talheim, Asparn-Schletz, Schöneck-Kilianstädten, Wiederstedt, Halberstadt and Eulau. At Talheim, thirty-eight men, women and children appear to have been killed in a single event and buried hastily in a mass grave, while Halberstadt appears to show execution-style killings of adolescent and adult males. While there has now been a shift towards general acceptance that the Neolithic was not always peaceful, there remains considerable debate over the prevalence and scale of conflict, its causes and its wider implications. Recent publications have highlighted instances of extreme lethal violence carried out against men, women and children, making the period seem

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1 See Chapter 14 in this volume.
increasingly bellicose. But of course, while one can find physical evidence for violence, one cannot point to concrete evidence for peace.

**Defining Violence**

What is violence and how do we recognise it in prehistory? For most of the Neolithic, specialised weapons are generally absent, and while ostensibly fortified sites exist, these may reflect expressions of power and/or community solidarity rather than defence. This chapter therefore focuses primarily on bodily, that is, skeletal signs for violence, as the most direct evidence for its occurrence. We follow a definition of violence as ‘physically aggressive behaviour that does or potentially could cause injury or death’.\(^3\) We acknowledge that there are other concepts of violence which entail emotional, psychological, sexual or material damage rather than bodily harm; that physical injury can result in emotional and psychological damage;\(^4\) and probably most importantly, that different cultural norms exist for what actually constitutes physical violence.\(^5\) The latter aspect is important in terms of trying to infer intention and meaning from evidence dating back millennia. While we focus here on violent trauma severe enough to affect the skeleton, osteological analysis also has the potential to provide a degree of insight regarding what is currently termed ‘structural violence’ and inequality, through skeletal indicators of health and nutritional status. However, many other aspects may not be evident, including the threat of violence and emotional and psychological maltreatment.\(^6\) It is also important to note that skeletal signs of violence provide us with only a minimum number of individuals affected, as not all violent injuries will affect the skeleton.\(^7\)

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What Came Before

If early farming communities have until relatively recently been perceived as having been for the most part peaceful, this applies even more strongly to the hunter-gatherers of the preceding Mesolithic period. Yet to some extent this impression can be argued to be little more than a semantic sleight of hand. Hunter-gatherer social organisation, including community membership, is often portrayed as highly fluid, so that the notion of distinct polities does not apply. This being the case, inter-group conflict, the *sine qua non* of warfare, becomes impossible, and all conflict is seen as occurring within the group and so is termed ‘homicide’. There are a number of problems with this characterisation, the most relevant of which for our purposes is that hunter-gatherer societies are highly variable and exhibit a wide spectrum of social organisation. Group membership was not always so fluid, and indeed there is archaeological and isotopic evidence for territorial behaviours on a relatively small spatial scale. This evidence is complemented by a well-documented body of ethnographic evidence for territoriosity and ‘sensitivity’ to trespass as being extremely common among forager societies.⁸ Nor is there any shortage of evidence for violence-related trauma on Mesolithic skeletons; indeed, in some cases it exceeds that known for the Neolithic.⁹ There is also possible evidence for large-scale conflict, such as that seen in the ‘skull nests’ found at Ofnet, Bavaria, where the heads of thirty-four men, women and children, many exhibiting lethal blows, were deposited into two pits in a cave. The presence of the uppermost cervical (neck) vertebrae, a number of which show stone tool cut marks, demonstrates the removal of fleshed heads rather than, for example, the ritual removal of crania once the flesh had decayed. Violence, then, was certainly present before the appearance of farming.

Social Impacts of the Neolithic

It seems increasingly clear that the Neolithic brought with it a significant shift in almost all aspects of society across much of Europe. What are the implications of this in terms of conflict? First, there is no clear evidence of conflict between Mesolithic hunter-gatherers and Neolithic farmers. Mesolithic population density across much of Europe is likely to have been

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low, with the exception of some particularly rich coastal and riverine habitats. This, in combination with highly variable bone preservation – such that many areas do not have sufficient skeletal assemblages from either period – prevents us from concluding that such conflicts never occurred: they almost certainly did. This is true even if we conceive of the process of Neolithisation as involving a significant element of local adoption of the farming way of life, as it no doubt did in some instances, though, as discussed below, the genetic evidence is increasingly indicating a surprisingly high degree of population replacement coincident both with the start of the Neolithic and with the onset of the Late Neolithic/Chalcolithic.\(^\text{10}\) Arguably, conflict may have been even more likely in such situations, given the greater potential for misunderstandings between communities with different backgrounds, initially not speaking the same languages, and the very different ideas concerning ownership and expectations regarding the moral obligation to share, especially foodstuffs, between closely related individuals and families, contrasted with the farmer’s imperative to preserve stock and seed grain.\(^\text{11}\)

Given the length of the Neolithic period, and the rapidity with which the farming way of life came to dominate the European landscape with a concomitant rapid population rise\(^\text{12}\) – which is likely to have been the case despite appropriate misgivings over the use of radiocarbon dates as direct proxies for population\(^\text{13}\) – and the propensity to inter the dead in large cemeteries or in monuments, there is considerably more evidence available for the Neolithic. The increase in population, together with evidence for larger social aggregations, brings the potential for much larger-scale violence than seen previously. The large earthwork enclosures of the Early and Middle Neolithic provide evidence for large numbers of people coming together for communal projects. New dating evidence suggests that many enclosures in Britain and Ireland were built over much shorter timescales than previously envisaged,\(^\text{14}\) making the number of people that must have been engaged in

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their construction correspondingly higher. The usual accounts of these projects emphasise their ceremonial character and their role, through the very process of working together, in the creation of a sense of community. They have been seen as places of exchange, gossip and match-making, much like medieval trade fairs.

This narrative, while it may be partly apt, is incomplete. If large numbers of people can be mobilised for the creation of these monuments, they can be co-opted for less peaceful pursuits. The creation of a strong sense of community inherently implies boundaries beyond which lie other communities. While relations between these communities will often be amicable, whenever things do go wrong, whatever small differences exist – real or imagined – can lead to an ‘us vs. them’ scenario. At least some enclosures in Britain show clear evidence of having been attacked by substantial numbers of antagonists, probably in the hundreds, as seen for example at Hambledon Hill, Crickley Hill and Carn Brea in southern Britain.\footnote{R. J. Mercer, ‘The Origins of Warfare in the British Isles’, in J. Carman and A. Harding (eds.), \textit{Ancient Warfare, Archaeological Perspectives} (Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1999), pp. 143–56.} Similar evidence exists from the Continent. That being said, the majority of enclosures do not appear to have been built with defence uppermost in mind. It may be that the general idea of an enclosure was modified into a fortification at certain times and places when outbreaks of violence were anticipated. Ironically, then, projects that initially functioned to bring people together for a common purpose contributed to a situation in which any latent conflicts of the kind that invariably occur in any society (e.g. jealousies, rivalries, accusations of wrongdoing) could be escalated to embroil the entire group in retaliatory actions. Once a community creates a strong identity, its members are subject to social substitutability, in which any member can be held accountable for the actions of anyone in the group.\footnote{R. C. Kelly, \textit{Warless Societies and the Origins of War} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).} Thus they become legitimate targets for revenge killings, which are by far the most commonly cited motive for inter-group homicides in ethnographic, historical and modern accounts.\footnote{K. F. Otterbein, ‘Killing of Captured Enemies: A Cross-Cultural Study’, \textit{Current Anthropology} 41.3 (2000), 439–43.} This is not to say that social substitution did not feature among Mesolithic hunter-gatherer societies, but the scale at which it applied likely increased considerably with the Neolithic. However, the extent to which this suffices as an ultimate (as opposed
to proximate) explanation for conflict is debatable. Revenge is called upon strategically and situationally and there are many contexts in which payment (‘blood money’) can be substituted for blood vengeance.\(^{18}\)

**Quantifying Violence: Assessing the Prevalence of Trauma**

The last decade or so has seen a shift from case-based to regional studies that apply a large-scale, population-based approach to the question of prevalence of violent interaction. This has, for the first time, allowed researchers to put local data into a broader context, to identify patterns and to characterise regional and national evidence for violence within a broader European context (see Map 3.1).\(^{19}\) This ‘big picture’ approach is also important because it draws attention to normative funerary contexts; that is, places that reflect the largest proportion of the skeletal assemblages of the period but are often neglected in narratives in favour of the more spectacular mass graves sites. Rather than reflecting one-off, larger-scale violent events, these assemblages provide insights into ‘day-to-day’ violence within society and are probably more representative of the lived experience of most individuals during the Neolithic.

Neolithic chronology varies regionally, such that the data on healed and unhealed cranial trauma summarised in Table 3.1 range from the mid sixth millennium BCE in Germany to the early second millennium BCE in Scandinavia. This does not include projectile injuries, which will always be under-represented in skeletal remains, with many striking soft tissue only and so leaving no detectable traces on bone.\(^{20}\) Thus, for example, while only one cranium from the Late Neolithic site of San Juan ante Portam Latinam (SJAPL) is reported as exhibiting an unhealed fracture, another six individuals have embedded arrowheads with no evidence of healing, while many others have broken arrowheads in close association with the skeleton, many of which were likely also implicated in the cause of death.\(^{21}\) Injuries to the head

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18 Kelly, Warless Societies.


Map 3.1  Map showing locations of Neolithic human remains bearing injuries consistent with violence, and of settlements and enclosures with signs of being attacked and mass burials consistent with massacres. On the one hand this distribution corresponds broadly with that of excavated human remains from Europe in general. However, on the other hand, the relative sparsity of locations in eastern Europe is more likely to reflect differences in the level of attention given the topic to date and in the respective publications and reports failing to reach a wider international audience. We suspect that many more examples from these latter regions will be brought to wider attention in years to come.
may also have a significant impact on the individual without necessarily resulting in fractures. Thus, estimates of the prevalence of violence-related trauma in skeletal remains should be considered as very conservative.

With the exceptions of Portugal and northern Spain, there is remarkable consistency in the prevalence of lethal cranial trauma, ranging between around 3–5 per cent of the population. Including the above-mentioned unhealed projectile trauma at SJAPL would place it in the same category. What would these

Table 3.1 Skeletal trauma dating from the European Neolithic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>% of individuals with cranial trauma</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-lethal lethal total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>12.6 4.6 16.9</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>Fibiger et al., 'Patterns of Violence-Related Head Trauma'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>6.8 2.6 9.4</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>Fibiger et al., 'Patterns of Violence-Related Head Trauma'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Spain (SJPL)</td>
<td>11.5 0.5 12.0</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>Vegas et al., 'Prehistoric Violence'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>8.3 3.7 11.9</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>W. Lorkiewicz, 'Skeletal Trauma and Violence among the Early Farmers of the North European Plain: Evidence from Neolithic Settlements of the Lengyel Culture in Kuyavia, North-Central Poland', in Schulting and Fibiger (eds.), Sticks, Stones, pp. 51–76.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
numbers have meant for people at the time? Considering that we are dealing with small-scale societies with settlements consisting of extended family groups or clans, the death of just three individuals in a community of a hundred would be the proportional equivalent of 3,000 deaths in a city of 100,000. This provides a context for sites like Talheim (38 individuals), Asparn-Schletz (67+ individuals) and Kilianstädtten (26 individuals) (see Chapter 14 in this volume), which take on the character of genocide, potentially involving the elimination of entire communities or substantial portions thereof. Such events would have had long-lasting repercussions, and in the absence of a strong central political authority, the responsibility for what would be perceived as ‘justice’ falls into the hands of the surviving kin and allies of those killed.  

Table 3.1 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>% of individuals with cranial trauma</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-lethal</td>
<td>lethal</td>
<td>total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

forego it altogether would be a dangerous sign of weakness. The wider economic, social and political circumstances are crucial factors in whether, when and how the memories of past injuries and insults are brought into play.\textsuperscript{23}

**In-group versus Out-group**

One of the more difficult aspects of dealing with the evidence for traumatic injury in the prehistoric archaeological record is differentiating between violence occurring within the group and that occurring between two groups. It is the latter, of course, that defines warfare. That large-scale conflict did occur is seen in the evidence from the above-mentioned enclosures as well as the mass killings at Talheim, Asparn-Schletz, Kilianstädten and other sites. Given the number of victims, these events are very unlikely to have taken place within the local community. Rather, they approach the size of entire local communities. In the case of Talheim, the age and sex distribution of the thirty-eight individuals recovered is consistent with that of a living community, while at both Asparn-Schletz and Kilianstädten young women are under-represented, suggesting that they may have been taken as captives (see Chapter 14 in this volume). This is taken to its extreme at Halberstadt, where the nine individuals present in a mass grave are all adolescent or adult males (ibid.). A similar demographic is seen at Wayland’s Smithy I chambered tomb in southern England, where eleven of the fourteen individuals found were adult males. One individual has the tip of an arrowhead embedded in the pelvis and two others had broken arrowheads in close association, but in this case there were no signs of cranial trauma. Whether this is a mass grave is thus uncertain, though Bayesian modelling of the radiocarbon dates suggests that the burial deposit accumulated over a short period of time.\textsuperscript{24} In both cases, the killing of so many males from what were presumably single communities (chambered tombs are usually interpreted as the burial places for local groups) implies that the survivors – disproportionately females and children – would be severely compromised in terms of their ability to defend themselves. The ethnographic literature attests that the capture of young women is both a common practice and a motivation in warfare in small-scale societies.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} A. Whittle, A. Bayliss and M. Wysocki, ‘Once in a Lifetime: The Date of the Wayland’s Smithy Long Barrow’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 17.1 (2007), 103–21.
\end{itemize}
As well as these mass graves, however, evidence for violent death is also found within the cemeteries, caves and mortuary monuments that constitute the normative burial practice for that time and/or region. The context in these cases is more difficult to interpret. Many could represent killings taking place within the group. Most of the lethal injuries that have been recorded are the result of blows to the head, with either a blunt instrument such as a wooden, stone or antler club, an axe or a sling shot. Since the actual weapons are not found in association, there is no means of using stylistic criteria to distinguish in-group versus out-group conflict. In cases where embedded projectile points are present, this does become possible at least in theory. Arrowhead styles were generally shared across large regions that would have contained multiple communities and polities, however these are defined, but there are some hints; for example, the flint arrowhead shot into a body at the Linearbandkeramik (LBK) cemetery of Mulhouse-Est was not of a type known locally, suggesting that this may have been the victim of a raid by a party coming from some distance.26 Further experimental work is addressing the issue of better identification of implements used from trauma patterns alone,27 but the bigger question remains as to what a given violent act signified.

Implications for Understanding Neolithic Society: Violence as Communication

Any analysis of the past suffers the burden of ideologies, moralities and expectations shaped by present experience. Most people today would probably evaluate the use of physical force against others as a last resort, while throughout much of human history physical violence would have been seen as an acceptable and societally integrated course of action. This does not mean its detrimental consequences for the individual and the group – from impairment to death, from economic hardship to loss of personal or political independence – were experienced less profoundly, though on the flipside others would have benefited. The final phases of the Linearbandkeramik at the end of the sixth millennium/beginning of the fifth millennium BCE provide a good case study to illustrate the difficulties

faced when trying to integrate disparate data sets and theories while trying to ascribe origins and meaning to individual and collective incidences of violence.

While the normative skeletal record for the *Linearbandkeramik* does not provide evidence for an increase in violent interaction, the previously mentioned mass fatality sites certainly do, since most or all date to the closing stages of the LBK period (see Chapter 14 in this volume). This has in turn evoked the notion of a large-scale crisis, sometimes supported by other destructive acts accompanying instances of interpersonal violence (such as the deliberate smashing of artefacts seen at Herxheim). There is agreement that neither climatological data (which, at any rate, cannot be chronologically fine-tuned to be convincingly correlated with individual mass graves) nor socio-economic data (which do not indicate discontinuity when compared to the earlier LBK) can serve as a single catalyst or explanation. Violence, whether against people (and other animals?) or things, may also be viewed as societally sanctioned, planned and executed, another argument for considering it within societal norms at the time, whether resulting from a perceived crisis or not. More importantly, though, societal norms change and adapt to lived experience, and widespread physical manifestations of violence, like those seen in a number of late LBK mass graves, or indeed the endemic levels of violence seemingly present throughout the Middle and Late Neolithic of Denmark, did not exist in a vacuum. The late LBK mass fatality sites form a distinct and unusual temporal and to some extent geographically constrained cluster, while the Danish evidence suggests more stable levels of small-scale acts of violence over time, though this picture could change in the future with a single find of a ‘massacre’ site. Whether or not resulting from an ideological or otherwise constituted crisis or perceptions of what constitutes the accepted norm in terms of violent interaction may not be as important as the fact that evidence for real, physical violence does exist. In the case of the LBK, larger-scale violent events were arguably more prevalent than in the immediately preceding and succeeding periods.

The Genetic Evidence for Population Migrations

There is increasing genetic evidence for significant incoming populations across large parts of Europe at least twice during the Neolithic, first with its initial appearance, and secondly with the arrival of people with steppe ancestry.\(^{28}\) Much detail concerning these movements still remains to be

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resolved, but they provide the impetus for a (re)consideration of the degree to which these apparently large-scale incursions brought conflict. While evidence has been found for traumatic injuries to skeletons of the early *Linearbandkeramik*, the cultural horizon representing the earliest Neolithic in central Europe, there appears to be little indication of large-scale conflicts at this time. However, Lawrence Keeley and colleagues have long argued that a number of enclosures along the ‘western frontier’ in Belgium were constructed with defence in mind, given the presence of V-shaped ditches backed by palisades.²⁹ As this was the limit of early LBK expansion, defence would have been against hunter-gatherers further to the west. Interpretation of these sites is not unambiguous and has been contested,³⁰ and there is little direct evidence for conflict, and certainly none that could be attributed to a confrontation between farmers and hunter-gatherers. The situation is quite different for the late LBK, as reflected in the previously mentioned mass fatality sites of Talheim, Asparn-Schletz and Schöneck-Kilianstädten.

The second major population immigration event identified is placed at the end of the fourth millennium BCE and is marked by the appearance of the Late Neolithic Corded Ware culture (CWC) in central Europe, by people with steppe ancestry.³¹ In contrast to the beginning of the Neolithic, the CWC may well exhibit heightened levels of violence. Comparisons of the prevalence of skeletal trauma across such a large area and time span are far from straightforward, however, and at present we can only say that the evidence tentatively suggests an overall increase.³² It is important to emphasise that this trend was identified before the results of the ancient DNA studies became available. While population movements have been implicated previously for the CWC, this has been heavily contested, as no doubt the genetic data will be.³³ The CWC is also associated with the first appearance of formal weaponry in the form of stone ‘battle-axes’. Although their uses can be debated, they are clearly not functional as woodworking tools (unlike earlier Neolithic polished stone axe-heads, though even these

too were clearly sometimes also used as weapons). While they were no doubt symbols, they were not arbitrary; their form makes it clear that one of the things being symbolised was the potential for lethal violence.

However, as with the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition, it may be difficult to find direct evidence of conflict between the now indigenous earlier Neolithic farmers, and those who entered central Europe in the Late Neolithic. Nor is it yet clear on what scale we should be envisaging this population movement, or over what timescale. Needless to say, the distinctive material culture of the CWC need not be a marker for an ethnic group, as it may have been widely adopted even if originally introduced from outside. There may also have been knock-on effects, with conflict extending beyond the sphere of the CWC itself. Sites in northern Spain and southern France appear to show increased levels of violence in the Late Neolithic/Early Chalcolithic (c. 3000 BCE), specifically in the number of individuals with arrowhead injuries.34 As elsewhere in Europe, these appear to affect mainly males, suggesting a different context for violence from that seen in the Neolithic of central and north-western Europe. There, males often tend to show more healed injuries but unhealed injuries affected males and females to virtually the same extent.

Conflict and Inequality

A central question raised by Neolithic violence is whether anything ‘new’ is in evidence or whether such behaviours simply become more visible from this time onwards. As noted above, in terms of the types of implements available for use as weapons and the specific nature of violent acts at the level of individuals, the Neolithic did not differ substantively from the times that preceded it. There are no obvious differences between the types of violent injury that have been identified on Neolithic remains and those recognised in Mesolithic skeletons.35 There are also various examples of lethal violence between groups that predate the advent of domestication and presumably of sedentism by several millennia, though the latter point is open to further research. We have no reason to assume that the mindset of the participants in such actions was any different from later periods (regarding any member of an opposing group as representative of the whole and therefore a legitimate target). Nor are forager groups necessarily any less territorial than more settled communities; in fact, the former have

commonly been observed to be highly sensitive to trespass.\textsuperscript{36} In this respect it can reasonably be argued that the behaviour exhibited by groups of Mesolithic people raiding and feuding may have not have differed significantly from their Neolithic successors. What had changed, however, is the scale at which such hostilities were conducted. The various aforementioned enclosures with signs of massed assaults followed in several cases by massacres constitute the earliest evidence from Europe and possibly the world, of large, coordinated groups of individuals acting collectively to attack similar sized groups within substantive fortified structures. The significant undertaking involved in constructing such defences elsewhere, especially where additional defensive features such as palisades were subsequently added, it has been argued, indicate a perception of predictable external threat, at least in the immediate and mid-term future on the part of the builders. This latter point might suggest that the frequency of violent interactions had increased along with the numbers of potential participants.

The implied increase in the scale, frequency and degree of organisation involved in warfare then raises further questions: first, regarding what had changed to make these developments possible in practical terms; and second, regarding the nature of the underlying social drivers that caused such new patterns of hostility to manifest themselves at this time. As has been noted, there is often little convergence between proximate and ultimate causes for conflict between groups, and the overall consistency with which warfare appears to have intensified following the shift to domesticated resources (even taking regional variation into account) would suggest that much of the answer likely lies in the economic base on which these new societies relied. Subsistence by foraging tends to keep group sizes small, with limited potential for material inequalities to emerge between individuals, while marriages among hunter-gatherers tend to be monogamous with relatively low levels of polygamy. This latter observation, based on a sample of 190 recently observed forager groups, is suggested to have also held true in the past on the basis of phylogenetic analysis of hunter-gatherer populations.\textsuperscript{37} Should conflict arise in such a society consisting of scattered bands of mobile foragers, the opportunities to call upon the support of others to join one’s cause would be relatively limited, as would the potential rewards for joining such a fight. Consequently, while there is certainly evidence for hostility between groups during the Mesolithic, with the potential for brutal massacres of one band by another, as at Ofnet, we have no reason to think that such actions ever exceeded the scale of perhaps a few dozen participants on either side.

\textsuperscript{36} LeBlanc, \textit{Violence and Warfare}, pp. 26–46.
The switch to reliance on domesticated plants and animals also prompted a range of social developments with implications that went far beyond a change in diet. In considering the wider basis of human sexual relationships, Matt Ridley noted that this shift brought new opportunities for personal advancement of a kind that had not previously existed. Unlike previous lifeways, farming and herding offer considerable rewards for those with the greatest aptitude. The skilful herder who breeds more cattle and the most adept farmer who grows more crops are in a position to generate substantial surpluses. This latter development would place such individuals in the previously unknown position of being able to buy the labour of others less successful than themselves. In this respect not only did the Neolithic see the appearance of substantive economic inequalities, but also the first manifestations of the now familiar axiom, ‘wealth generates more wealth’. Furthermore, the new economy also had far-reaching implications for family life. Whereas group sizes had previously been largely limited by the carrying capacity of the wild resources available in local environments and the difficulties of maintaining mobility with multiple small children, a life based on domesticates both facilitated and rewarded larger families. This change led to a population explosion popularly termed the Neolithic Demographic Transition, after which a return to foraging was no longer feasible. But what may have been an even more far-reaching change to familial relations was that the most successful and ‘wealthy’ individuals were now in a position to support more than one spouse.

Studies of recent pastoralists repeatedly concur in noting that in such societies marriages are exogamous and patrilocal and also polygynous, with the most powerful and successful men having the greatest number of wives. Given that the ratio of men to women will normally be roughly equal, in a society practising polygyny some men will never be able to marry. Such disparity is further heightened within a generation or two when polygynous men generate large numbers of descendants, with wealth (in the form of cattle) owned and inherited down the male line further reinforcing and increasing inequality over time. Customs like these could lead to the emergence of very powerful patriarchs who were in a position to command the allegiance of many more individuals through family ties than they could ever have done as a member of a small-scale band of foragers. These new social networks would also have created larger

groups of related individuals who by being less mobile also became more territorial regarding the smaller area over which they now ranged. Rather than the stable, egalitarian society imagined by many not so long ago, the Neolithic might in fact be more accurately characterised as an unequal and inherently unstable society, which may explain the signs of violence apparent in human remains from this period. There was now more to fight over in terms of livestock and harvested crops to steal, and grazing and cleared arable land to move into, but a further target of raiding may have been other people. In a situation where wealth and the opportunity to marry were now unevenly distributed, those with the most to gain would also have the least to lose. Such inequalities may therefore explain the unusual demographic compositions among the skeletal assemblages at Aspam-Schletz, Schöneck-Kilianstädtten, Halberstadt and Wayland’s Smithy.

Conclusions

The body of recognised evidence for Neolithic violence across Europe has increased markedly over the last few decades. This increased appreciation of the presence of violence has in turn led to much greater attention being accorded to this aspect when analysing human skeletal remains both from recent and older excavations, leading to further discoveries. In some cases, a clear context for violence is discernible, most notably with the massacre sites of the late LBK. In other cases, however, the contexts for violence are ambiguous, and could reflect within-group conflict, up to and including homicide, as well as conflict between groups. While this certainly presents great challenges in understanding particular instances of conflict, it is possible to suggest some plausible scenarios for the broader setting. The scale of community cooperation required for the construction of large enclosures in the Neolithic was a novel development of the period, but could be co-opted for less peaceful ends. The increasing evidence for the targeting of males in lethal violence suggests a pattern in which women (and possibly children) may sometimes have been taken as captives. Cattle were likely also a prime target for raids, as they invariably represent a major source of wealth and status in those societies keeping them in any numbers, a situation which certainly describes the Neolithic across much of central and northern Europe. For much of the period there is an absence of material culture overtly glorifying warriorhood or at least none that is recognisable archaeologically. It would appear, therefore, that most men acted in this capacity when it was deemed necessary (or desirable), using weapons that were not too dissimilar from the tools used for quotidian tasks. A powerful motivation would have been revenge for real or imagined past injustices. Since such impulses are not always acted
upon, and other avenues to their resolution are always possible (e.g. through compensation payments), it is possible that leaders (e.g. family or clan heads) drew upon and manipulated past events to their own ends, a well-trodden pathway to power. Thus, it seems probable that the increased scale of conflict seen in the Neolithic went hand in hand with increased socio-economic and socio-political inequality, though this need not imply any unidirectional progression. As has been outlined, a great many of the insights described remain relatively novel. A major task now facing researchers in this aspect of the Neolithic is to obtain a more developed sense of the spatio-temporal variability in inequality in the European Neolithic and how this impacted on the scale and expression of violence. We would argue that the importance of the Neolithic in the development of organised violence in particular among human societies is hard to overestimate, and understanding this variation may shed more light on the conditions that promote peace as well as those that result in outbreaks of conflict.

Bibliographic Essay

Notions of a peaceful, egalitarian Neolithic were prevalent in the processual views of the 1960s and 1970s, but by the close of the century accepted paradigms were beginning to shift. Lawrence Keeley’s *War before Civilisation: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) had significant impact in deconstructing the ‘pacified past’ that had characterised previous consensus. New considerations of evidence for prehistoric violence reflected an invigorated debate and a willingness to reassess old material that had been previously overlooked or dismissed. This includes important chapters in J. Carman and A. Harding (eds.), *Ancient Warfare: Archaeological Perspectives* (Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1999) and also J. Guilaine and J. Zammit’s *Le Sentier de la guerre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), the latter focusing largely on France, with an English translation in 2008. Raymond Kelly’s *Warless Societies and the Origin of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) had important theoretical ramifications, particularly in summarising the now oft quoted ‘Theory of Social Substitution’, characterising the internal logic of group conflict and offering an alternative to simply studying violence on a behavioural level.

Neolithic crania provided much needed quantification of this phenomenon in Britain in 'In this Chambered Tumulus were Found Cleft Skulls …', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 71 (2005), 107–38.


The most comprehensive text to address the issue of hostilities in Neolithic Europe at a continent-wide level is Rick Schulting and Linda Fibiger (eds.), *Sticks, Stones and Broken Bones: Neolithic Violence in a European Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). This was followed by the publication of C. Knüsel and M. J. Smith (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Bioarchaeology of Human Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2014). This work has been viewed as significant because of its specific focus on the social contexts of violent acts (Debra Martin, book review in *International Journal of Palaeopathology* 14.1 (2016), 60–1). Chapters covering the Neolithic include a summary of evidence for Britain as well as an important chapter on western Asia and a chapter focusing on children, who are often left out of the violence narrative.

Violence during the Later Stone Age of Southern Africa

ALAN G. MORRIS

The late 1960s witnessed an important academic debate over the nature of humankind. Robert Ardrey published three popular science books all heavily based on the research and opinions of anatomist Raymond Dart;¹ his basic premise was that humans evolved as inherently aggressive animals for whom the violence of hunting for meat was a normal occurrence. At the other pole was palaeoanthropologist Richard Leakey, who proposed a much gentler origin for humanity, one in which meat was obtained only by scavenging.² Inherent in the discussion was the question of human nature: were we violent because of our evolutionary roots, or was violence something learned only in recent human history? If the latter was true, then we could ‘unlearn’ our aggressive traits and live better with our geopolitical neighbours. Was sharing in our nature, or were we doomed to compete violently with everyone else?

Embedded in this evolutionary debate were references to a specific group of living hunter-gatherers who were either gentle or aggressive, depending on which side of the academic fence you sat. In the 1960s the San (‘Bushmen’) of the Kalahari had recently been exposed to a worldwide audience through the romantic writings of Laurens van der Post and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas.³ To a large degree, Dart had already popularised a vision of the Khoesan as ‘living primitives’ who provided a model for us to understand the nature of our more distant hunting and gathering ancestors.⁴ Taken together, these earlier ideas provided a basis for the Kalahari Research Group that began systematic studies of the

lives of the San in the 1960s. Their new ethnographies of the San provided a rich corpus of knowledge about these people, but on the assumption that the San not only represented an unchanged remnant of the past but also had been largely unaffected by cultural contact with their ‘more advanced’ neighbours. Such views have been challenged by scholars, but to a large extent the San remain the model by which we interpret the archaeology of their distant genetic ancestors, who lived in the subcontinent of southern Africa from the appearance of the Later Stone Age some 100,000 years ago to the arrival of Europeans in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Ethnographic evidence for the Kalahari San has assumed that these people live in a natural balance where the killing of animals is strictly for use as a food source. The Kalahari ethnographies argue that simple foraging communities were inherently peaceful and, wherever possible, avoided violence via conflict resolution. Yet historical evidence and some ethnographic data suggest that violence was more common than previously assumed. Richard Lee noted that violence among San groups focused on disputes over women, and he recorded a surprisingly large number of fatal interactions. If his data are statistically extrapolated, the murder rate among the Dobe !Kung was three times higher than New York City’s murder rate in the 1970s, and twice as high as the peak New York murder rate in 1990. Such statistics simply do not fit the preconceived idea of the ‘gentle San’ and suggest that the underlying assumption may be very wrong.

Academics have agonised over the apparent conflict they see between the social anthropological perspective of the gentle hunter-gatherer in ecological balance with their environment and historical records of extreme violence.

None dispute the historical evidence, but all feel that the historical period was a special case that cannot be applied to the past. Mathias Guenther in particular suggests that the ‘San’s peaceful ways in recent times’ is a reactivation of the pre-colonial lifestyle based on ‘egalitarianism, openness and sharing’. For him, the violence of the historic period is an aberration rather than the cultural norm.

Archaeological Evidence for Violence in the Later Stone Age

The first archaeological evidence from southern Africa indicating violent death was a skeleton recovered at Quoin Point, near Cape Agulhas, in the middle 1960s. Unfortunately there was little burial information as the bones were exposed by dune deflation and were recovered from the surface, but a radiocarbon date of 2220 ± 40 years BCE (Beta 241163) has placed the burial securely within the Later Stone Age. The evidence of violence on the skeleton is unambiguous: two bone arrow points are embedded in the lower thoracic vertebrae of the young adult female skeleton (Figure 4.1). Reconstruction of the events at death indicated that the victim was likely to have been lying on the ground in a prone position when the arrows were shot into her lower back. Although the exact cause of death could not be confirmed, the unhealed wounds suggested that death occurred soon after injury.

The identification of violence in the case of the Quoin Point specimen was straightforward, but cases where the instrument of injury is no longer present are much more difficult to confirm. In order for a bone fracture to indicate intentional violence, it must be unlikely that it resulted from an accidental or disease process. Traumatic bone lesions can be classified into those that occurred antemortem (with evident signs of healing), perimortem (without healing but with signs of bone damage while still ‘green’) and post-mortem (with signs of dry bone damage after soft tissue decomposition). Cranial lesions provide the most solid evidence of violent intent when the nature of

the impact point can be identified, and these can be seen as depressed bone segments or radiating fractures. It is never possible to be absolutely sure whether an injury was due to accident or violent intent where the evidence is based solely on bone fractures, but similar patterns of injury over many individuals is strongly suggestive of non-natural injury.\textsuperscript{12}

Susan Pfeiffer and I have been independently reviewing the osteological evidence for violence in the Later Stone Age of southern Africa, examining human skeletons dating from the middle to late Holocene between 8,000 to around 2,000 years ago. We have found twelve cases with seventeen individuals where violent events can be identified.\textsuperscript{13} Table 4.1 lists each of these cases in order from unambiguous at the top to cases with weaker evidence towards the bottom.

The most obvious cases are where remains of the implement that caused the injury are still present. Quoin Point has already been mentioned, but


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case*</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Wound</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCT 317</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>20–30</td>
<td>Bone arrowheads in thoracic vertebrae</td>
<td>Parkington &amp; Morris, ‘Prehistoric Homicide’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quoin Point</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Durban Museum Ballito Bay B</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>&gt;40</td>
<td>Stone flake in healed cranial lesion</td>
<td>Pfeiffer, ‘Two Disparate Incidences’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM 6054 a,b,c Modder River</td>
<td>3 children</td>
<td>1,6 &amp; 12</td>
<td>Cranial trauma from implement Depressed fractures with radiating cracks</td>
<td>Pfeiffer &amp; van der Merwe, ‘Cranial Injuries’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM 6348 a,b Melkbosstrand</td>
<td>female &amp; child</td>
<td>adult &amp; adolescent</td>
<td>Perimortem cranial trauma</td>
<td>Pfeiffer et al., ‘Violent Human Death’</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCT 332 Langklip</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>adult</td>
<td>Perimortem cranial trauma</td>
<td>Morris, ‘Trauma and Violence in the LSA’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCT 372 Sniufklip</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>&gt;50</td>
<td>Two antemortem cranial lesions</td>
<td>Morris et al., ‘Human Remains from Snuifklip’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faraoskop</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>UCT 386</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>40–50</td>
<td>Perimortem radiating cranial fractures</td>
<td>Parkington &amp; Dlamini, ‘First People’; Dlamini, ‘Notes on Faraoskop’</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCT 387</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>UCT 394</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>+/-50</td>
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<tr>
<td>A 2787 Andrieskraal</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>old</td>
<td>Antemortem depressed fracture with radiating cracks</td>
<td>Pfeiffer, ‘Cranial Trauma’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case*</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Wound</td>
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<tr>
<td>A 1187 Whitcher’s Cave</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>adult</td>
<td>Antemortem depressed fracture</td>
<td>Morris, ‘Trauma and Violence in the LSA’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM 6372 a Saldanha Bay</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>adult</td>
<td>Bone point found near cervical vertebrae</td>
<td>Dewar, ‘Late Holocene Burial Clusters’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCT 591 Buffel’s Bay</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>adult</td>
<td>Bone point associated with skeleton</td>
<td>Pfeiffer, ‘Population Dynamics’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMB 5 Plettenberg Bay</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>30–50</td>
<td>Healed cranial lesions, possibly caused by animal attack</td>
<td>Pfeiffer, ‘Two Disparate Incidences’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* UCT (Department of Human Biology, University of Cape Town); SAM (Physical Anthropology Collection, Iziko Museums, Cape Town); A (School of Anatomical Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand); NMB (National Museum, Bloemfontein)
Pfeiffer has identified another case from Ballito Bay on the Natal coast where an embedded stone fragment remains in a healed cranial lesion in an older male. A second set of individuals (from Modder River, Melkbosstrand, Langklip and Snuifklip) all demonstrate very distinctive cranial lesions. The point of impact is localised and suggests a bluntly pointed implement with a narrow circular diameter as the agent of injury (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Superior view of cranial vault of UCT 332 individual 3 (Langklip) showing perimortem injury on the right parietal caused by a bluntly pointed object.

of Snufklip, the individual survived the assault, whereas at Modder River, Melkbosstrand and Langklip the injuries are perimortem. The next set of cases (Faraoskop, Andrieskraal and Whitcher’s Cave) indicate a blunt form of trauma with radiating cracks extended from a broader impact site. The two individuals from Andrieskraal and Whitcher’s Cave survived the impact and subsequent cranial fractures, but the cranial damage at Faraoskop is more extensive and perimortem in origin. Of the six crania and mandibulae preserved (from thirteen individuals), Nonhlanhla Dlamini is convinced that four show perimortem injuries consistent with violence, of which the three reported here (UCT 386, UCT 387 and UCT 394) clearly demonstrate trauma with radiating fractures leading off from a specific point of impact. UCT 386 and 387 show classic ‘coup-contrecoup’ injuries where a crushing blow is delivered to one side of the head on the ground resulting in additional radiating fractures from the location of the skull in contact with the substrate (Figure 4.3).

Two sites noted by Pfeiffer and Genevieve Dewar have the weakest evidence, but still could be included in this sample. While the specimens from Saldanha Bay and Buffel’s Bay do not show bone trauma, either antemortem or perimortem, in each case bone arrowheads similar in form to the two recovered with UCT 317 at Quoin Point were found in direct association with the bones. These were not grave goods and could conceivably have been artefacts included with the grave fill, but at least in the case of the woman from Saldanha Bay, the bone point was in close association with the cervical vertebrae suggesting that it was lodged in the covering soft tissue before decomposition. The last case (NMB 5), from Plettenberg Bay, is a reminder that injuries could have other causes unrelated to interpersonal violence. Pfeiffer has proposed that the series of three healed lesions are consistent with bite marks from a large predator such as a brown

16 John Parkington and Nonhlanhla Dlamini, First People: Ancestors of the San (Cape Town: Creda Communications, 2015); Pfeiffer, ‘Compleat Archaeologist’; Morris, ‘Trauma and Violence’.
hyaena. In this case, the person suffered significant injuries but must have survived the attack.

Summarising eleven sites (excluding the Plettenberg Bay case as a possible animal attack), there are some obvious patterns. Men, women and children were all victims and, in some cases, the wounds suggest that there could be no other reason for the violence except to kill the person. Pfeiffer has described the three children from a single grave at Modder River where each child had been killed by cranial trauma from an implement that is consistent with a Later Stone Age digging stick. Pfeiffer in particular has focused on the time and geographic location of these events. Only one case is

Figure 4.3 Posterior view of cranial vault of UCT 386 (Faraoskop) showing impact point on left side and radiating fractures on both sides of the skull. Scale in cm.

Pfeiffer, ‘Two Disparate Instances’.
not from the western or southern Cape coastal region, and there is a particular cluster of cases from the 150-kilometre-long coastal belt running north from Cape Town. Nine of the skeletons have been dated to between 2,100 and 2,700 years ago, with a mean of around 2500 BCE.

Later Stone Age Violence in Context

The interpretation of the bone lesions is difficult. It is always possible that some could have been accidental, but the context of the skeletons and their archaeological association tends to confirm non-natural injury. Pfeiffer has looked at the pattern of healed trauma on the long bones of human skeletons from 152 South African Later Stone Age specimens. Healed fractures were found in eleven individuals and the location distribution is consistent with accidental injuries – the most common sites being the radius and ulna. All of the fractures were without complex breakage patterns and no fractures were found on any femur, the largest post-cranial bone element. Although both men and women were affected, there was ‘no observation of healed trauma to any juvenile post-crania and crania’ despite the presence of the five cases of healed cranial trauma in adults.

Yet four out of sixteen individuals with signs of violence (25 per cent) were juvenile and all were perimortem.

As already noted, Lee described a significant number of violent deaths from interpersonal contact among the Kalahari San whom he studied. Almost always it was men who were victims and the cause was invariably sexual jealousy. The weapon used was almost invariably a poisoned arrow. The pattern seen in the archaeological specimens is entirely different. Men and women were victims but there were also children prominent among the dead. In possibly three cases an arrow was involved (assuming that the presence of bone arrowheads in close approximation to the body was linked to the cause of death) but in at least six cases the injuries to the crania were caused by a small bore stick-like instrument, and in a further four or more cases the cause of death was blunt trauma. In a world where the poisoned arrow was the ultimate arbitrator of arguments, why kill your neighbours with the violence of the bludgeon?

Pfeiffer has presented a model in which community distress was the trigger for these prehistoric events of violence. She has combined a range of archaeological and environmental data to suggest that the time period of

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108
3,000–2,000 years ago was one of depleted resources and an intensification of residence at specific sites where food was more available. This was especially true along the west coast of Western Cape Province where huge shell middens (‘mega-middens’) of shellfish remains were accumulated in this period. Pfeiffer has paired with this the biological observation that body size among these people was more variable during this time because it included some exceptionally short adults. She has suggested a causative negative link between population density and stature and has suggested that intensification of territoriality in the southern and south-western Cape resulted in ‘non-egalitarian social structures’ reflected in inter- (and perhaps intra-) community violence.

Anthony Humphreys has come up with a broader proposition that would be applicable to a more general view of the hunter-gatherers in the region. He argues that the rich linguistic variation across the Kalahari is inconsistent with regular contact and inter-marriage (gene flow) between groups. It only makes sense if territory is fixed and language is being used as an ethnic marker. His argument is rooted in behavioural ecology in which genetic relatedness and rigid ethnic identity would be more important than reciprocity and altruism between strangers. Violence would be a regular occurrence between bands as they contest territorial ownership. This would be consistent with Pfeiffer’s stress period for the south-western Cape coast, but Humphreys would extend it to all of the foraging groups over a wider range of time; not just for specific periods of environmental tension. Modern ethnography has given possible glimpses of such a model. Hilary Deacon and Janette Deacon refer to the restricted territories of Kalahari language groups and note that within a given territory specific bands have water sources which they regard as their own. Other bands may access these resources, but permission must be requested before they do. Since water is the scarcest resource in the desert environment, it is not unexpected that these water sources would be actively defended. Ardrey (who had a vested interest in showing the San to be aggressive) noted that ‘Bushmen may wound an animal in the Kalahari Desert; but, famished though they may

27 Hilary Deacon and Janette Deacon, Human Beginnings in South Africa (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999).
be, they will not follow it if the animal crosses the neutral zone into the next band’s territory.  

There are also some historical data that suggest that the San, at least to outsiders, were far from ‘harmless’ and were seen as dangerous adversaries to be feared. These historical descriptions are not unbiased, reflecting as they do the period of intense conflict between the San and European colonists in South Africa and Namibia between the eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries. During this period the San were entirely dispossessed of their lands and livelihood in a manner which can only be described as genocidal.  

The San began to use stolen or traded European firearms as this war progressed, but primarily used the bow and poisoned arrow in its initial stages. The San do not appear to have possessed weapons specifically designed for war; their spears, arrows and sticks were all part of their hunting and gathering tool kit. The lethality of poison was of particular importance and the use of this weapon by the San, especially in the form of ambush, had a significant psychological impact on the invaders, as is evidenced by this oral testimony from Bantu speakers in nineteenth-century Natal: ‘an Umutwa is there under the grass; and the man feels when he is already pierced by an arrow; he looks, but does not see the man who shot it. It is this, then, that takes away the strength; for they will die without seeing the man with whom they will fight.’  

Both Guenther and Robert Gordon have described how European colonists’ views of the San changed. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the San were depicted by colonists as ‘murderers’ and ‘bandits’, and the shift to ‘harmless people’ or ‘tame Bushmen’ only came as their power to fight back failed. Even though the fight between the San and the colonists was very unequal, the San were able to invoke significant fear along the colonial margin with their comparatively limited weapon technology.  

The rock art of the San also provides some testimonies of San conflict in the few hundred years before historical contact. Patricia Vinnecombe

surveyed the art of the Drakensberg Mountains for her seminal 1976 study.\textsuperscript{32} She identified 115 images of fighting out of 4,530 images recorded. The weapons recorded were bows and arrows and knobbed sticks. A few pictures were of San fighting other San (Figure 4.4), but conflict with Nguni cattle keepers was also recorded (Figure 4.5). Although these pictures are older than the historical record, they are still relatively recent in terms of the great depth of the Later Stone Age in southern Africa. The pictures only record men fighting and there are no signs of women or children as opponents or victims.

Figure 4.4 Tracing of rock art from Hippo Shelter, Qacha’s Nek, Lesotho, showing men fighting with bows and arrows.

The historical and rock art data do suggest that foraging communities in southern Africa indeed had the occasion and capacity to inflict violence on each other in the recent past, but it is very unlike the archaeological evidence of violent injury from the earlier sites. The intense warfare between incoming Bantu speakers and European settlers was different and cannot be

\textsuperscript{32} Patricia Vinnicombe, \textit{People of the Eland} (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009).
accepted as a pattern typical of the period earlier than 2,000 years ago. The archaeological evidence from the skeletons suggests that violence was regular but relatively rare, usually involving only one or two individuals. But there are glimpses that such violence had at times escalated to broader conflict.

Pfeiffer and colleagues have described the three fatally injured children from one grave, but the Faraoskop site may have involved as many as thirteen individuals. The site at Faraoskop is still under active investigation, so any conclusions about the skeletons remain preliminary. There are several clues in the archaeology that indicate that all of these individuals may have died in the same event. The radiocarbon dates for the six dated skeletons cluster around 2030 BCE and are within one standard deviation of the mean. The burials do not have the usual ritual patterns seen in graves from the same period, and John Parkington has argued that the bodies were all buried at the

33 Pfeiffer et al., 'Violent Human Death'.
same time. Dlamini’s careful skeletal analysis tells us that at least three and possibly more of the people were killed by physical trauma.\textsuperscript{34} Parkington and Dlamini have gone so far as to suggest that this was ethnic conflict between a San band and incoming Khoekhoe pastoralists, but more information is needed before this is confirmed. The argument for violent ethnic conflict at Faraoskop is strengthened by the results of a recent investigation at West Turkana in Kenya.

Twenty-seven individuals were recovered from the site of Nataruk at a location which would have been a shallow lagoon in early Holocene times.\textsuperscript{35} The people were hunter-fishers who lived somewhere between 9,500 and 10,500 years ago. Twelve individuals were articulated skeletons excavated \textit{in situ} and the balance of the individuals were bones exposed on the surface by erosion. There were no formal burials and the particular preservation of the site indicates that the bodies decomposed in various postures after death.

\textsuperscript{34} Parkington and Dlamini, \textit{First People}.
Twenty-one were adults and six were children. Eight males and eight females were identified from sexual features of the skeleton. Five, possibly six, cases of sharp trauma were found on the head or neck. There were five cases of blunt force trauma and three microlithic artefacts were found within or embedded in two of the bodies. Marta Lahr and colleagues have speculated that Nataruk reflects an intensification of settlement and a ‘materially richer, and demographically denser way of life’, which may have triggered this antagonistic encounter between two social groups.

How far back can we trace this evidence of prehistoric violence between African foragers? With the exception of the site at Nataruk, there is nothing in sub-Saharan Africa which suggests large-scale violence. The scale of violence at Nataruk (and possibly Faraoskop) would be consistent with the kinds of violence seen in the historic period between San and invading Bantu speakers and Europeans, but it remains inconsistent with the cases seen in my and Pfeiffer’s analysis of the skeletal remains. We can envision a pattern where low levels of violence were always present between neighbouring bands resulting in occasional mortality, but this might have been triggered into intensive conflict because of special circumstances when resources were constrained. But why aren’t more cases present throughout sub-Saharan Africa over the whole of the Later Stone Age starting from 100,000 years ago? There are probably several reasons. The concept of analysing human skeletons in what we would call a ‘bioarchaeology’ context is relatively new. Nearly all of the studies of skeletons excavated before 1950 concentrated on the race of the individuals to the exclusion of palaeopathology and the reconstruction of past lives. And even though bioarchaeological studies became more common in the 1970s and 1980s, researchers did not look specifically for signs of violence because of the underlying assumption that all of the foraging populations of Africa were non-violent. The last reason has been the difficulty in differentiating between perimortem and post-mortem injuries to bone. The flowering of forensic anthropology in the last two decades has sensitised researchers to look for evidence of events at death. The only paper in southern Africa that talks about violence in the archaeological context is that of Biden and Kling. They identified without evidence

36 Lahr et al., ‘Inter-Group Violence’.
elaborate and imaginary funeral rites including murder of the wife on the
death of the husband. Although their interpretation of the skeletons is not
valid, the lesson learned now is that all multiple burials need to be closely re-
examined to see if indeed there are signs of violent death.

Direct archaeological evidence of ancient violence has changed our inter-
pretation of aggression in the foraging groups of the Later Stone Age in
southern Africa. The descendants of these people, who culturally survived
into modern times, were thought to be an example of non-aggressive
egalitarian foragers, but the picture from the past suggests more complex
roots. Although intra-community violence has been noted among the living
San in the form of murder of males over sexual jealousy, the evidence from
the past suggests that antagonism between groups was a regular, if perhaps
not common, phenomenon. Men, women and children were affected, and
although evidence of death by arrow has been recovered, most of the cases
involved trauma caused by a narrow or blunt instrument. Pfeiffer in parti-
cular argues that this violence is focused in one region over a specific time
period, but other models suggest the practice may have been more wide-
spread. The evidence presented here is drawn solely from the Holocene
Later Stone Age of southern Africa, but it does suggest that we must not
assume that low density prehistoric foragers were by nature non-aggressive.
We need to be exceptionally careful in using modern or historical ethno-
graphic material, especially that drawn on the Kalahari San. Although sites
like Nataruk and possibly Faraoskop indicate that large-scale violent events
similar to historical events did occur in the past, the pattern of violence seen
more generally in the archaeological record is very different.

Bibliographic Essay

Discussion of whether or not the San are a good model for prehistoric foragers at the start
of human evolution has been at the root of the writings of Raymond Dart, but especially in
approach to the San, on which Ardrey based his conclusions, has been severely criticised in
Robin Derricourt’s ‘The Enigma of Raymond Dart’, *International Journal of African
Historical Studies* 42.2 (2009), 257–282, and most recently by Christa Kulian in *Darwin’s
Hunch* (Cape Town: Jacana, 2016). This debate has also been part of the discussion known
as the ‘Great Kalahari Debate’ between Richard Lee and Ireven DeVore’s classic *Kalahari*

39 Pfeiffer, ‘Exploration of Interpersonal Violence’.
40 Justin Pargeter et al., ‘Primordialism and the “Pleistocene San” of Southern Africa’,
*Antiquity* 90.359 (2016), 1072–79.
Hunter-Gatherers: Studies of the !Kung San and Their Neighbors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) and Edwin Wilmsen’s revision and argument that the Kalahari San were not isolated from their neighbours in Land Filled with Flies: A Political Economy of the Kalahari (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). The crux of the debate was how much contact with neighbouring people had impacted on the San way of life and whether or not that had invalidated them as a model for late Pleistocene hunter-gatherers.

The forensic medicine literature on bone fractures and their causes is extensive, but Alison Galloway’s Broken Bones: Anthropological Analysis of Blunt Force Trauma (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1999) and Erin Kimmerle and José Pablo Baraybar’s Skeletal Trauma: Identification of Injuries Resulting from Human Rights Abuse and Armed Conflict (Boca Ratan: CRC Press, 2008) give a reasonably thorough overview of the nature of perimortem fractures and how they are interpreted in forensic evidence, as does Alan Morris’s Missing and Murdered: A Personal Adventure in Forensic Anthropology (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2011).


Evidence for the antiquity of violence among the Mesolithic populations of Europe is examined by J. Guilaine and J. Zammit, The Origins of War (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). This book is Euro-focused and relies to a large extent on early research that may not have been of the methodological standard that modern archaeologists demand, but Larsen’s Bioarchaeology outlines how the new bioarchaeology approach has exposed a range of skeletal assessments of prehistoric violence with a bibliography of case reports from around the world. The South African evidence is described and enumerated in Alan Morris’s ‘Trauma and Violence in the Later Stone Age of Southern Africa’, South African Medical Journal 100.6 (2012), 568–70, and Susan Pfeiffer’s ‘An Exploration of Interpersonal Violence among Holocene Foragers of Southern Africa’, International Journal of Paleopathology 13 (2016), 27–38.
The transformation of warfare in the Bronze Age was perhaps the most profound transformation in human history. There is no doubting that our knowledge of the conduct of later wars and the impact of technologies such as gunpowder is vastly superior. Yet it was over the course of the second millennium BCE that the commonplace weapons of the battlefield – swords, shields, lances, battle-axes, helmets and body armour – were either invented or first became widespread in societies across Europe. The weapons used, the forms of violence performed, and the ways that bodies of armed warriors moved together and against each other using these weapons established a pattern that was to remain broadly in place for thousands of years. This chapter analyses these developments from a European perspective, drawing on material from the Mediterranean, the Continent, the Nordic region and the Atlantic islands to trace developments in warfare from the third millennium BCE until the twilight of the Bronze Age in the early first millennium BCE. Violence against individuals, visible on human remains, is widely attested, ranging from males of warrior age at Thormarton (England) to women, men and children at Sund (Norway), or heads as totems or trophies at Gradište Idjoš (Serbia). Understanding violence against individuals or communities relies on a few widely dispersed examples, and so our primary focus here is on the broader picture of new developments in institutional forms of violence, particularly warfare-related activities as revealed through the study of weaponry and imagery. We use a general initial Bronze Age (IBA) for when metal weaponry was scarce and primarily made from arsenical copper, broadly from the early third millennium until about 1600 BCE. Our full Bronze Age (FBA) is characterised by the widespread use of tin bronze, broadly from the middle of the second millennium BCE until the end of that millennium.
Coming in Swinging: The Initial Bronze Age

For millennia before the Bronze Age, combat was dominated by a limited range of bodily motions to inflict injury using material culture. Weapons such as clubs or axes would be swung in arcing motions and bladed objects like knives or daggers would follow closely the motion paths of empty-hand attacks like punches. Spears could be used with a greater variety of movements, though lethal injury was most commonly through linear thrusts. The weapons used were made from combinations of polished or chipped stone and organic media like wood, bone and string. Projectile weapons like bows and slings were also used. Taken together, the bodily techniques of combat – essentially the ways in which people moved using particular forms of material culture – were a combination of fighting styles using weapons and techniques drawn from hunting and craft activities. There was thus a strong similarity underlying the engagements with material culture and the intended effects of these tools – splitting, piercing and breaking.

By the end of the fourth millennium BCE this began to change. Metal weapons such as halberds, daggers and axes begin to be manufactured in Mediterranean Europe, and by the early third millennium BCE they occur throughout central Europe.¹ The fundamental advantage of metal over stone tools lies in the balance between hardness and toughness. For bladed weapons hardness may be loosely defined as a measure of the ability of one material to cut others. Stones can be very hard and sharp, but they have extremely limited ability to flex and so long bladed objects are impractical. Metal tools and weapons, on the other hand, can have hard cutting edges and be very sharp, but they have higher toughness values, allowing objects to absorb shocks more effectively through flexing or ductile deformation like bending or indentation, thereby resisting chipping, fracture or breakage. This highlights perhaps the most revolutionary thing about metal; its ability to be intentionally manipulated to focus different degrees of hardness and toughness on distinct parts of an object through thermal and mechanical

treatments.² In this way metal-smiths were able to explore and exploit the balance between hardness and toughness for weapons, and in turn this paved the way for casting long weapons like swords and beating relatively thin weapons like shields by the FBA. The malleability of copper alloys also allowed for easier repair, and thus increased the longevity of weapons. These qualities were recognised and began to be exploited in the first tentative steps towards metal daggers, spears and halberds in the IBA.

The halberd was the first unequivocal weapon designed for interpersonal violence. Halberds had double-edged blades hafted perpendicularly on a wooden shaft. They show that since the first widespread use of copper, that metal was employed for innovations in warfare. Combat with halberds can be seen to be rooted in the bodily techniques of preceding periods using multifunctional tools. However, they introduced the capacity of piercing as well as slashing (percussive/lacerating) and cutting (slicing) action in one weapon, thus establishing a social context for designing objects for the principle purpose of fighting other people. IBA daggers were short triangular blades mounted on a metal or organic hilt. For fighting, these were used in more or less the same way as their lithic predecessors, though a greater emphasis on slicing or lacerating cutting attacks was emerging. In the Nordic sphere, possibly as a testimony to their effectiveness in fighting, flint daggers were used into the second millennium BCE but came to mirror the general shape of metal ones.

The earliest spearheads were commonly small in size, usually less than 25 cm, such that most fell within the size range possible for lithic spearheads. Ground stone axes continued in use, in some regions occurring in aesthetically pleasing and elaborate forms. Archery had a strong Neolithic heritage – for example, the embedded arrowheads from Eulau, Germany (grave 90) – and continued to be important across Europe with arrowheads made from lithics in most areas throughout the IBA.³ Finds of human remains with injuries from arrows, for example from Tollense, Poul nabrone and Armenoi, support the possibility that archery was employed in conflict in different parts of Europe in the Bronze Age.

² Tobias Kienlin, E. Bischoff and H. Opielka, ‘Copper and Bronze during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age: A Metallographic Examination of Axes from the Northalpine Region’, Archaeometry 48 (2006), 453–68.
Stelae from Petite Chasseur, in Switzerland, appear to depict schematised humans armed with bows and daggers, which may be intended to represent warriors.

Fortifications

The portable material culture of war tells us much about how people fought, but fortifications can inform us about some of the ways they prepared for conflict or averted it. Stone-built fortification walls, many with clear bastions, emerge in the later third millennium at sites such as Kastri on Syros, Koukounaries on Paros or Lerna in the Greek islands and mainland in particular, and settlements in Crete were often located in defensible positions. Defensible hilltop settlements including walls were established in south-east Iberia, for example at La Bastida. Elsewhere in Europe fortifications are rare despite their occasional presence in parts of Neolithic Europe. Recent dating of a fort with three rings of defensive walls and complex gate systems at Monkodonja in Croatia places its construction around 1800 BCE, some three centuries before the wave of fort building in this region and over four centuries before the well-known forts of the Mycenaean world in Greece.

Making the Cut: The Full Bronze Age

In the FBA, the invention of the sword and the shield represent perhaps the clearest break in traditions of warfare with humanity’s deep past. The entirely new character of these weapons and the techniques of the body for using them represent watershed moments in human violence because neither had parallels in other fields of craft or social activity and they required dedicated combat training to be used effectively.

The earliest shields include the figure-of-eight and tower shields from the Aegean Bronze Age, which were in use by the seventeenth century BCE at the latest. Perhaps our best evidence for the use of shields comes from the shaft graves at Mycenae (seventeenth to fifteenth century BCE). On the Lion Hunt dagger and the silver Battle Krater we see warriors armed with very long spears/lances held in two hands and a shield hanging on their shoulder via a telamon. Their shields had no handle and were used in a historically unusual fashion somewhere between a cape, body armour and a shield, the movement of the torso controlling their placement. The scenes indicate that shields could be used to provide a broad defensive front for lines of battle involving groups of warriors. Spears were the main offensive weapon depicted, yet in both depictions archers move within the ranks of spearmen. Archers wear the same form of helmet, indicating a similar social status. On the contemporary Silver Siege Rhyton, also from Mycenae, and the slightly later Miniature Fresco from Akrotiri on Thera, we once again find lines of battle. By the thirteenth century BCE in the Aegean round shields with a central handle appear, replacing the earlier large body shields, and they are depicted as being of similar proportions and morphology as shields used elsewhere in Europe, though there are certain differences in size and design between the regions. Round wooden and leather shields from Ireland (Figure 5.1) have been scientifically dated as ranging from the second quarter of the second millennium BCE until the end of the millennium. These represent materials and forms of shield used widely across Europe but not preserved due to the perishability of the materials. That they once existed is indicated by the numerous stelae from the Iberian peninsula (e.g. Solana de Cabañas, Carmona or Badajoz) that depict precisely this type of shield with decorative notches, though no physical organic shields are preserved.

Surviving bronze shields are far more common, and some possess broadly similar notches and U-notches to the organic ones from Ireland, with finds as far afield as Scandinavia and Greece. A few metal shields are incredibly thin (less than 0.3 mm) and it is doubtful these would stand up to robust combat, but others can be up to 1.5 mm thick, forming very serviceable weapons. Circles portrayed in southern Scandinavian rock art may represent shields because they are associated with warriors bearing swords and spears, though

7 Marion Uckelmann, Die Schilde der Bronzezeit in Nord-, West- und Zentraleuropa (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012); Richard Harrison, Symbols and Warriors: Images of the European Bronze Age (Bristol: Western Academic and Specialist Press, 2004).
8 Uckelmann, Schilde der Bronzezeit, pp. 56–9.
we cannot use these data to identify any formations. In most parts of Europe, metal and organic shields generally range from 50 to 70 cm in diameter, though in the north-west there are metal examples that are much smaller, at around 30 cm diameter. The difference is significant, because the former size category encourages cooperative forms of fighting with mutual control of space, whereas the smaller ones are very much individualistic because they need to be moved around a lot to intercept incoming attacks. Combatants using shields may be encouraged to fight collaboratively with peers in a coordinated fashion that ensures mutual visibility and co-dependent security. This perhaps contributed to the self-awareness of warriors as a distinct social group, because on the battlefield they need not rely only on themselves but could coordinate, cooperate with and protect their fellow fighters.

Swords

The first swords in Europe were developed in the Aegean region. They were in use in the early stages of the FBA and were quite homogeneous in form,

9 Uckelmann, Schilde der Bronzezeit; Barry Molloy, 'For Gods or Men? The Use of European Bronze Age Shields', Antiquity 83,322 (2009), 1052–64.
being long, double-edged weapons with a high central midrib and ranged from 55 cm to over 100 cm. A probable date for their invention is the eighteenth century BCE, but our evidence for their common use dates from the sixteenth century BCE and this general type of long, thin sword continued in use until the thirteenth century BCE in some areas. These weapons were capable of making thrusting attacks and inflicting both lacerating and incising cuts using long, drawing motions. The midrib served to strengthen the long blade, but its presence also limited the depth of the cutting edge. This may suggest that non-lethal but bloody wounds were common, hinting at a display element to fighting or intentional blood-letting without killing as a consequence of some combats at least. By the fourteenth century BCE robust and effective shortswords became increasingly common in the Aegean, such as Types Dii, F and G.

In Europe, swords developed along quite different lines. The earliest forms emerged sometime around the end of the seventeenth century BCE in a zone running from the Carpathian Basin to southern Scandinavia. These swords have a bronze handle and a blade either with a midrib that could have tapering edges or in a leaf shape that was 30–45 cm in length. These items exhibit the effective exploitation of the mechanical properties of bronze to produce weapons that were simply not practicable using lithic technologies. Other early swords in Europe have a bewildering array of different typological names, but all are in essence similarly functioning short swords. If we reimagine the long-lost organic hilts on these weapons, we find that a range of very similar swords came into use across large areas of Europe from Ireland to the Balkans and from Scandinavia to Spain by the early sixteenth century BCE. These shortswords were relatively light (usually less than 500 g), making them fast and effective, and while regional variation can be noted, in many parts of Europe these weapons had similar functional characteristics.

Over the following century in Europe, the range of swords with organic and metal hilts diversified notably. In northern Italy, the Balkans and the Carpathian Basin types of sword emerged by the end of the fifteenth century BCE that which had all or part of the handle cast as an integral part of the

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11 Molloy, ‘Swords and Swordsmanship’.

blade. The Balkans was an interface between central Europe and the Aegean, and notably local variants of Aegean type swords were manufactured there by the fifteenth or fourteenth century BC. This is salient because at this time, long and thin swords that functioned in a similar fashion emerged in central Europe. Notably, the sword from Tetovo in the central Balkans is derived closely from an Aegean form but has incised decoration on the blade that we find on Type Sauerbrunn-Boiu swords of Europe, indicating knowledge of both traditions.\textsuperscript{13} The swords in this wider area thus suggest contact that led to increasing similarities in how swords were used, though local traditions of use and appearance remained more dominant.

By the fourteenth century BCE swords such as Type Aseikofen, from Germany, and similar swords in France were being made in Europe, and they adopted the same range of sabre and hammer grip and cutting techniques that we find on Aegean swords.\textsuperscript{14} At this time in the Aegean, a short robust type of sword, called the Type F, develops with surprisingly standard lengths of 38–42 cm. This remained popular for centuries until the very end of the Bronze Age, and other shapes of sword were made in similar proportions suggesting a form of close-quarters sword fighting that became very popular. In the Balkans and Italy, contemporary finds of shortswords that functioned similarly to these Aegean types are known from many sites (at least six pieces from Grotta Manaccora, in Apulia, alone).\textsuperscript{15} While these weapons all look somewhat different in relation to their hilt, no doubt a product of local craft or aesthetic traditions, most were suited to similar modes of fighting.

We have dwelt on these sword forms briefly because they are indicative of how closely linked European societies were at this time, where innovations in one region are often rapidly integrated, though adapted, often at a large regional scale. While regional differences remain strong, some common strands to the material conduct of violence can be detected across Europe. This is most clearly seen in the case of grip-tongue swords of the general Naue II family that are found from the Aegean to Great Britain. The earliest dated examples occur in the middle of the thirteenth century BCE in Italy and Mycenae,\textsuperscript{16} showing that they

\textsuperscript{15} Peroni, Schwerter in Italien.
\textsuperscript{16} Kilian-Dirlmeier Schwerter in Griechenland; Reinhard Jung, Mathias Mehoffer and Iannis Moschos, ‘Fonevontas me ton idio tropo: Oi eirinekes epafes yia ton polemo metaxi
developed rapidly and were used within a widespread milieu. In central and northern Europe these swords strongly influence local smithing and combat traditions. On the Iberian Peninsula there are a few transitional types between those made with separate handles and those with grip-tongue handles, indicating a relatively rapid transition due to external influences. A similar development occurs in Britain, France and Ireland, where an early use of blades with leaf-shaped blades may indicate that this tradition spread eastwards from there into Europe.\textsuperscript{17}

Southern Scandinavian and central European octagonal hilted swords from the fourteenth century B.C.E. are also indicative of how some basic ideas of how a sword should look and handle can ‘move’ between regions while local craft and combat traditions are meaningfully integrated or built upon. It has even been suggested that objects of the latter local tradition came to hold a certain prestige value while the grip-tongue technology of swords with organic handles were regarded as being more workaday.\textsuperscript{18}

Similarities in the function of swords in different parts of Europe suggest that aspects of combat practice were being shared and variably interpreted by warriors and smiths. Combat itself may have been a driver behind these globalising influences, yet in most regions innovations were firmly grounded in existing preferences and traditions. Most swords of the FBA are properly considered shortswords, being less than 70 cm and weighing less than 1 kg (most commonly much less for both measurements). These light weapons had blades well suited to making thrusting attacks and relatively tight arced cutting attacks, which do not of necessity move the sword far from a frontal guard position. The light weight, short length and overall poor elastic deformation (flexibility) qualities of bronze swords suggests that few, if any, of the swords of Bronze Age Europe were suited to making open-arced swings that build up kinetic energy thereby allowing a swordsman to make robust percussive strikes. This means that they relied on edge sharpness as the primary means to inflict injury through cuts, requiring drawing motions that pull the blade along the target. Despite


\textsuperscript{17} D. Brandherm, Las Espadas del Bronce Final en la Peninsula Iberica y Baleares (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2007); Barry Molloy, ‘Nought may Endure but Mutability: Eclectic Encounters and Material Change in the 13th to 11th Centuries BC Aegean’, in Molloy (ed.), Of Odysseys, pp. 343–84.

our typological range of nomenclature, by the thirteenth century BCE most swords in Europe were shortswords with strong hilt–blade connections, and a hilt shape that enabled both hammer and sabre grips to be used effectively. These two ways of holding a sword shift the balance between tight-arced robust cuts and more sweeping draw-cuts respectively.

Spears

By the advent of the FBA spearheads across Europe had sockets that were cast with an opening to receive the shaft. Only the spears of the Aegean tradition are technologically distinct, having a split socket which had to be forged closed around a shaft. Broadly leaf- or kite-shaped blades of various proportions occur in most parts of Europe by the early stages of the FBA. Only small fragments of wooden shafts survive within the socket of the spearhead, making it hard to tell the length or weight of the full composite wood-bronze weapon. It remains possible that certain weapons we term ‘spears’ could have been hafted on much shorter shafts and used somewhere between a spear and a sword, making them capable of both cutting and stabbing attacks. Joachim Tarot and Richard Davis have argued for differing fighting styles based on the design of the spearhead, particularly their length.19

In the Atlantic islands and western continental zone, spearheads can vary from very short affairs to much longer varieties that are around the same length as contemporary swords. Aegean spearheads of the fifteenth to thirteenth centuries BCE have robust points and cross sections indicating that some were made for penetrating armour as well as flesh.20 While these and earlier Aegean spearheads could reach the same lengths as the longest of those in the north-west, by the twelfth century BCE there was a greater trend towards quite short and compact weapons of around 20 to 30 cm. They are significantly influenced by prototypes from Italy, central Europe and the Balkans, where these relatively short and robust spearheads dominate.21 The picture is broadly the same in central Europe,22 and in the Nordic world an initial diversity of spearhead sizes from the sixteenth century BCE gives way

19 Joachim Tarot, Die bronzezeitlichen Lanzenspitzen der Schweiz (Bonn: Habelt, 2000); Richard Davis, The Early and Middle Bronze Age Spearheads of Britain (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012).
22 Marek Gedl, Die Lanzenspitzen in Polen (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2009).
to a much more restricted size range by the thirteenth century BCE that broadly accords with what we find in central Europe.\(^{23}\)

It is assumed that longer spearheads would have made a more intentional use of the blades to cut, and use-wear evidence from the very variable Irish and Nordic spearheads dating to the beginning of the FBA suggests that all types were employed for a similar fencing style, including thrusts, cuts and slashes.\(^{24}\) The presence of cutting edges on most European spears enabled warriors to inflict lacerating injuries even when the point itself missed its target.

The proposition of mixed weapon combat is supported by new evidence from Medbo, Sweden. Here one spear-bearer engages with a fighter wielding a club or a sword.\(^{25}\) Evidence for killing opponents with a spear can be found in Sweden, for example in Brastad and Lövåsen (Figure 5.2). There are battle scenes on seals and sealings from the earlier part of the FBA Aegean that indicate that the spear was often used in combination with a shield, but the sword was often used in isolation from other weapons.\(^{26}\) This changes by the thirteenth century BCE at least, and looking to other figural art in Europe we see spear-bearers in Scandinavian rock art that could also carry swords alongside their shield.

**Axes**

We have little direct evidence for how axes in any area of Europe were used, because metalwork-wear studies are very rare for this category of artefact. However, it cannot be assumed that any axe was destined for a single mode of use, given its versatility as a tool or weapon. Central European axes with deeply collared shaft holes and one long, slender axe blade or spike with a protrusion on the opposing side ending in a disc, spike or another axe bit are not very ambiguous in their nature; these items would be wholly unsuitable for carpentry but well suited to combat (Figure 5.3). Contemporary to these finds, a series of Baltic battle-axes in north-eastern Europe appear equally martial in character, with elongated blades and a percussive device on the other side, but lacking the characteristic collar of central Europe. On the Adriatic coast the heavy Albano-Dalmatian

shaft-hole axe type emerges late in the Bronze Age and also appears to be intended for battle on the basis of its shape. Shaft-hole axes in the Scandinavian Bronze Age can also occur in very large sizes and rock art strongly suggests that axes were used as weapons as well as tools; in some scenes they appear alongside unequivocal weapons such as swords and spears or are associated with phallic males, for example in Simrishamn.\(^{27}\) Later axe-bearers also carry swords and are occasionally part of fighting scenes, for example in Fossum.

**Archery**

We have images of archers in the Aegean world engaged in interpersonal combat and we find chipped stone arrowheads deposited in well-furnished graves at Mycenae and Knossos. Bronze arrowheads were also used commonly in the Aegean,\(^{28}\) but the evidence for their use in Europe is less clear.

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They are rare in hoards in central Europe and do not appear to have been used in the Atlantic region at all. At the site of Velim, in the Czech Republic, arrowheads have been found in contexts that indicate they were used when this site was attacked in the fourteenth century. Bronze arrowheads with both sockets and tangs are known from the Carpathian Basin, including one from a burnt deposit at a causeway across a fortification ditch at Gradište Idjoš, Serbia. Heart-shaped flint arrowheads occur in considerable numbers in graves in the Nordic lands around 1700–1500 BCE alongside swords, for example in Baven, Germany. Scandinavian rock art shows archers engaged in several activities, for example in a scene in Aspeberget in Sweden that

could be regarded as a cattle raid. The bronze and flint arrowheads used to kill warriors at the Tollense battlefield around 1350–1200 BCE suggest both technologies were in use side by side, and the continued use of non-metal weapons in battles is emphasised, for example, by wooden bow and arrow remains from De Zilk and Weerdinge (Netherlands), Edington Burtle (Britain) and Fiavé-Carera (Italy). The use of slings is suggested in art from the Aegean world in the context of battle and possible ceramic sling stones come from Santana Cetatea Veche, in Romanian Banat.\(^{30}\)

**Armour**

The development of sheet metalworking technology by the end of the fifteenth century BCE paved the way for making corselets, helmets and greaves from bronze. The first corselets were manufactured from sheet metal and were comprised of many parts, such as the entire suit recovered from the site of Dendra, Greece. Over the course of the thirteenth century BCE this form of armour appears to have been simplified and the central components of a separate front and back plate came to be the most common type. The evidence for armour remains piecemeal in the Aegean,\(^{31}\) and although the record is even poorer in Europe, it is clear that two-part plate metal corselets of broadly similar form were in use by the thirteenth century BCE. A handful of scales from armour exist in the Aegean as well as some smaller plates, indicating that lamellar forms of armour found in North Africa and Asia were in use there. In western Europe, the beautiful cuirasses from Marmesse, France, for example, are evidence that plate armour continued to be popular in Europe up until the end of the Bronze Age.\(^{32}\)

Unpublished experimental archaeological studies (by Barry Molloy) demonstrate that 10 per cent tin bronze plate armour of 1.5 mm thickness is capable of withstanding thrusts from contemporary swords, thrown light spears and substantial bronze-tipped arrowheads shot from a 57-pound composite recurve bow at 10 metres. Scale armour manufactured from this same bronze was also effective, but arrows could force their way between


\(^{32}\) Mödlinger, ‘European Bronze Age Cuirasses’.
overlapping plates on occasion. Multiple layers of linen found in a chamber tomb at Mycenae are the best surviving evidence we have for the use of organic armour in this region, which could be presumed to exist on the basis of iconography. Armour made from twelve layers of linen soaked in animal bone glue and backed by ten unglued layers was not penetrated fully by hand-held or projectile weapons, even from the above almost point-blank range.

From the Nordic Bronze Age, a rare find should be mentioned, because it illuminates what we usually miss in the archaeological record. In Östra Gerum, Sweden, a cloak potentially dating to the middle of the second millennium and made from heavy fabric has been discovered in a bog.\textsuperscript{33} This fascinating find is oval in shape and about 200 cm by 248 cm in size. Several ancient cuts and elongated holes suggest that its wearer was attacked at least once with a bladed weapon while wearing it. The number of cuts suggests that the cloak itself may have played a part in the defensive strategy. A skilled fighter may employ it in movements to obscure where limbs and body are or to get the opponent’s weapon stuck. Perhaps this find indicates that there were alternative defensive measures other than shields and body armour.

The bronze cap helmet from the New Hospital site at Knossos demonstrates that metal helmets were in use by 1400 BCE. These occurred alongside the well-known boar’s tusk helmets that had been in use since the second quarter of the second millennium and were at once items of defensive armour and symbols of a warrior’s prowess on the basis of the number of boars that needed to be hunted to make one. There may have been a close relationship between the development of these helmets in quite different materials,\textsuperscript{34} which is important because numerous finds of helmets in Europe are virtually identical to that from the New Hospital site in Crete.

Aegean iconography suggests a much wider variety of forms of helmet were being used by the twelfth century BCE. We also find many forms of helmet in continental Europe, some being basic caps akin to the above-mentioned Cretan one, others made from multiple pieces of bronze sheet mechanically joined together. Of these, the Pass Lueg helmet is interesting because recent analyses have shown that this has a complex biography, having being modified to accept

\textsuperscript{33} Andreas Oldeberg, Die ältere Metallzeit in Schweden I (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1974), no. 2549.

parts from other helmets, presumably when original pieces were lost or damaged. This suggests that items of armour had a certain workaday aspect to them whereby they were not expected to look pristine all of the time, yet it also indicates that specific pieces could be retained over time rather than being recycled, perhaps indicating they held personal meanings for their owners. The horned helmets from Vekso, Denmark, indicate that sometimes certain pieces of armour could have been made for purposes other than the battlefield.

Greaves are found in central Europe and the Aegean, and display considerable similarities. They had notable differences in their specific technological details, but functionally speaking were ovoid sheets of metal, probably backed by organic material like leather, and were generally supposed to protect the shinbone.

Taken as a whole, it is clear that bronze armour may be at once functional, visually impressive and commonly used, but, like shields, its deposition followed very different paths to offensive weaponry and so it is under-represented archaeologically speaking.

Osteoarchaeology

FBA skeletons exhibiting unambiguous trauma suffered in combat are very rare. Skeletons with weapon-inflicted trauma occur at sites in many parts of Europe, and though these typically consist of single or small groups of victims who experienced violent combats, the context of their death is less clear and may or may not be a direct consequence of war. In many cases the injury may be to the back. For this reason we may ask if these victims were injured fleeing the scene of battle or in a chaotic combat situation with an opponent coming up from behind. It is also possible that they were victims of execution or murder, or in some cases even hunting accidents, but the use of weapons to injure and kill is certain. Pictorial evidence for killing of fleeing men may, for example, be provided by the rock art panel from Lövåsen, in Sweden, while there

is a swordsman and hound chasing down a fleeing foe from Agia Triada in Crete.  

At Velim there are a considerable number of human bones in (probable) non-mortuary contexts, some from articulated skeletons, which are believed to have been victims of a violent attack. Because many were from contexts that cannot be considered normal burials, the excavators argue that at least some were victims of violence when the site was attacked by aggressors on several distinct occasions. Similarly, finds of human remains from defensive ditches in the south-east Carpathian Basin of this date are indicative of circumstances for human remains to be placed in settlement rather than cemetery contexts, suggesting a form of social violence. Some further possible victims of war-related violence have been found at Čaška Veles, northern Macedonia, where children and older adults were found partly burnt in a burned-down house. Notably absent from the deceased are males of warrior age and women of childbearing age – the former possibly away fighting in a remote location and the latter taken away, a pattern also seen at some Neolithic sites. At Sund, Norway, an informal burial of people included men, women and children, and these had died by being struck by a range of weaponry. 

At the Athenian Agora, Greece, and Olmo di Nogara, Italy, the evidence is particularly instructive: there were burials with weapon-inflicted trauma that had no weapons accompanying them and others with weapons in the burial which had no injuries evident. Clearly, the use of material culture to construct identity in the mortuary events were not of necessity reflecting all aspects of a person’s identity in life. At the site of Mochlos, there was a house from around 1400 BCE that contained the burnt remains (presumably already dead or trapped when the structure burned down) of many individuals. These cases make clear that

38 Harding, Warriors and Weapons, pp. 86–8. 39 See Chapter 14 in this volume
violence in many parts of Europe was not restricted to warriors killing other warriors.

An example of unambiguous war-related violence is the recently discovered thirteenth century BCE battlefield at Tollense. The story of this site is still unfolding, but hundreds and perhaps thousands of warriors fought a battle here, with many being left at the site following it. In one area that has been explored at least ninety-one individuals were discovered. Most of the dead were males below the age of 40. Exploration of their injuries shows that the ways in which they were killed or injured were diverse, from examples of warriors with arrowheads still embedded in their skulls to those that had been stabbed by spears with considerable force and others with various forms of trauma to the cranium. The osteology suggests that simple percussion weapons were used, such as the wooden clubs, of varying dates, recovered from the same site.

Tollense also tells us about the potential size of armies at this time – the first chance we have to consider this in more detail for the Bronze Age. Previous estimates of bands of tens of men may remain correct for many conflict situations, but Tollense tells us that this could escalate to levels where many times this number were fielded. This in turn indicates levels of social organisation that would both support the resourcing of large numbers of warriors while also the capacity to bring them together in common cause. For this reason, we can begin to speak more confidently of the existence of armies in Bronze Age Europe.

Fortifications

The citadels of the Mycenaean world are particularly imposing structures and their defensive features are undeniable. Built from dry-stone masonry using colossal blocks of locally quarried rocks, they included the capacity to store resources to withstand sieges and had many overt and subtle defensive features. At both Mycenae and Tiryns, for example, approaching warriors are forced to expose their sword (rather than shield) arm to the fortification walls and there are a series of gates through which they must then pass at Tiryns. These citadels belong primarily to a horizon from the fourteenth to thirteenth centuries BCE, potentially influenced by stone forts from regions to the north, given the modest

44 Spyros Iakoúdës, Late Helladic Citadels on Mainland Greece (Leiden: Brill, 1983).
size of these endeavours. Such inspiration may be found in the castellieri stone forts of Istria, Friuli and the Dalmatian coast, which are increasingly common from around 1500 BCE onwards and are often multivallate constructions. In north-east Italy there is a move to fortified sites in the Po Valley from around the fifteenth century BCE, which are destroyed or abandoned by the early twelfth century BC. Massive forts are constructed and apparently abandoned in the south-east Carpathian basin following a very similar chronology to north Italy.\footnote{Elodia Bianchin Citton, ‘Il Veneto tra Bronzo Recent eBronzo Finale: Popolamento e aspetti socio-economici di un’area di cerniera tra l’adriatico e l’Oltralpe’, in E. Borgna and P. Cassola Guida (eds.), From the Aegean to the Adriatic: Social Organisations, Modes of Exchange and Interaction in Postpalatial Times (12th–11th BC) (Rome: Quasar, 2009), pp. 257–72.}

Overall, these large forts are clearly designed to hold attackers out as well as to display the wealth, power and prestige of their occupants. A similar story may be given in broad terms for the phenomenon of hill forts and other broadly circular earth and wood fortifications that become common in various parts of Europe from the thirteenth century. Increasingly popular since just before the first Mycenaean forts were built, these fortifications were often larger, sometimes many times larger, than the forts of Greece. The destruction by fire of parts of some, for example Santana Cetatae Veche, Romania, or other evidence for attack, as seen at Velim, Czech Republic, demonstrate that these structures had a military function, even if this was not exclusive.\footnote{Richard Osgood, Warfare in the Late Bronze Age of North Europe (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1998); Florin Gogâltan and Victor Sava, Sântana cetatea veche: O fortificaţie de pământ a e pocih bronzu lui la mureşul de jos (Arad: Complexul Muzeal, 2010); Anthony Harding and Carol Palmer, Velim: Violence and Death in Bronze Age Bohemia. The Results of Fieldwork 1992–95, with a Consideration of Peri-mortem Trauma and Deposition in the Bronze Age (Prague: Archeologicky, 2007).}

These places certainly constituted central places that were at once a declaration of control of a landscape and a challenge to those who may contest this. Violence against these physical places may be an outcome of various forms of conflict, warfare or otherwise, and indicates that the scale of violent acts could escalate to the entire obliteration of the central places of a community – as evidenced by abandonment following fiery destruction at many sites across Europe.

In Crete from the late thirteenth century BCE the natural landscape was used to build settlements that were occupied for centuries in highly defensible locations, from hilltops to massive gorges. In Scandinavia, fortifications emerge very late in the local Bronze Age and the onset of the Iron Age. This is significant, because there is pervasive evidence for the presence of war...
indicating that building fortifications is by no means a necessary reaction but depends on perception, ideology and the social rules of war conduct.  

**Discussion**

The shield is in essence a basic form of weapon, yet it may be seen as one of the most influential inventions of the Bronze Age. It materially encouraged warriors to fight in an increasingly cooperative fashion, paving the way for the development of armies, potentially already during the Bronze Age. To put this in context, controlling a shield with one arm and using the other to wield an offensive weapon completely transforms how the body moves in combat in relation to preceding periods. The coordinated use of one hand to deflect, buffet, entrap, redirect and control an opponent’s weapon and manipulate their personal space is accompanied by movements intended to stab, slice or strike them or their weapons. This requires particular motion paths of each arm independently and the body itself, including the commitment of weight and balance. These movements, and the coordinated use of weapons, have few parallels in craft or hunting activities, and can be seen therefore to reflect entirely new ways of using material culture and the body in unison. People began to fight in a way that required entirely new skill sets as an individual but also within their group/cooperative environment.

New forms of weapons in the Bronze Age also benefited considerably from the manipulation of the mechanical properties of bronze, making harder cutting edges around a tougher body (relative to each other). This maximised the possibility of cutting while minimising the risk of breakage when crafted effectively. It is this synthesis between the development of entirely new social traditions and the material and craft resources that underwrote them that mark the Bronze Age as a fundamental watershed moment in human development. Martial arts practices that were in themselves complex can be seen to emerge to support these frontier innovations in the use of metals in society.

The important questions of who these warriors were and what their status was is a frustratingly opaque aspect of our knowledge of Bronze Age society. The significant skill needed to use many of the weapons required training and the material resources for equipping warriors, and represent significant investments by a society. The appearance of images of warriors in elite contexts, such as the shaft graves at Mycenae, the important role of martial

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symbolism in art in Scandinavia and Iberia and even the very concept of idealising warrior identity through the material culture used in mortuary practices all tell us that warriors were important in society. Their capacity to change that society through acts of violence means that they played an important role in the balance between military, sacred and economic power. That warriors were part of the elite therefore appears quite certain in many parts of Europe. However, this raises two crucial issues for understanding societies: was warriorhood an exclusive or even dominant aspect of the identity of combatants; and did warriors belong to some form of elite class that were the only people in society expected to fight? We struggle to answer these questions, though it can be argued that the time required to master warriors skills implies that it was a significant manifestation of identity for specific members of society for defined phases of their life.

Paul Treherne argued that warriors would have had quite distinctive aesthetics cultivated through body modification (e.g. shaving), hairstyles and adornment.\(^48\) There are some difficulties of defining such appearances as an exclusively ‘warrior aesthetic’, but we may imagine that the physique and bearing of a person who invested time in preparing their body for combat would be another complementary visible marker. While the idea of warrior elites may therefore be hard to substantiate, the role of warriors in elite agendas would have included specialist training so that we can consider them to be a particularly influential form of craft specialist sharing a corporate identity in Bronze Age social and political networks. This places many of them in any given society within the realm of elite power dynamics without weighting this influence in any universalising sense.

The wooden clubs found at the battlefield site of Tollense may show a different side to this story,\(^49\) one where non-specialist warriors were involved in a battle involving large bodies of combatants. The alternative options of organic and metal shields, known archaeologically from Ireland but by implication in most or all of Europe, suggests also that not all warriors would have been equipped the same. This in turn implies that there was status and ranking among combatants, as we find repeatedly throughout recorded history. That those who used the more specialist weapons such as swords and shields should be considered warriors appears appropriate, but the use of organic weapons and archery in battles indicates that the battlefield


\(^{49}\) Jantzen, ‘Bronze Age Battlefield?’
could include a wider body of men, including those potentially coerced into fighting.

Conclusion

The Bronze Age saw a fundamental paradigm shift in the course of human history. Firstly metal technology enabled the creation of entirely new forms of object and the development and widespread adoption of the first specialised weapons was at the forefront of this event horizon. Smiths were pushing the boundaries of their skills to make longer and thinner castings that could more effectively balance hardness and toughness. During the FBA, sheet metalworking enabled armour and defensive weaponry to be the most elaborate and massive products of this craft in the era.

The social impact of this was enabled by a further crucial change that characterises Bronze Age social practice: the development of what can properly be considered martial art practices. By this we mean formalised and recognised sets of combat skills, which were transmitted and shared through training. The nature of damage on weapons throughout Europe clearly indicates that there was a skills base underlying their use, with many examples showing frequent yet not terminal damage. In an environment of escalating specialisation in many societies in Europe, from potters to smiths, this specialisation in warrior crafts may well be predicted. Warrior skills were no longer based on motor habit patterns or mechanical knowledge derived from subsistence practices or crafts, but were skill sets exclusively for war. The shortswords and shields imply fighting in confined spaces, which in turn indicates a close proximity between all combatants, such that the bodily relationships in battle changed with co-dependency and peer visibility, both transforming action and the expectation of action.

The question of how the changing identity of warriors might relate to emerging hierarchies or particular political systems such as chiefdoms is difficult, and impossible in some regions, to address on the basis of the archaeology alone. We may borrow ethnographic examples to test our evidence against, but these do not provide adequate foundations on which to build a fuller understanding of the rich, diverse and historically unique societies of Bronze Age Europe. To achieve this, we must build more comprehensive data sets through primary studies, including archaeometric,

osteological and experimental methods, which provide an empirical platform to
develop regionally nuanced pictures. In this way the future direction of the study
of Bronze Age warfare can effectively address the social conditions of violence
and conflict management – factors shaping the daily life of these past societies.

That many warriors and non-warriors died violently is clear from the
osteological record, though mortuary evidence also suggests that some
people were characterised as warriors in death (by the mourners?) even
though they may not have been in life. The symbolism of and participation
in warrior identity may thus have been very much historically and socially
contingent, with expectation, ambition, responsibility, obligation, pretence,
sport, display and ritual all playing roles in the manifestation of warriorhood
in society. The very real investment in fortification complexes as central
places in many Bronze Age societies underscores the importance of symbolic
displays of power to a society. This symbolism was, however, impotent if it
could not be materially supported, and so the very act of building a fortifica-
tion was a statement of real power backed up by investment in force of arms.
The combat innovations of the Bronze Age, including the invention of
specialised weapons and associated martial art traditions, were to shape the
future of warfare in Europe for millennia to come and enable the develop-
ment of armies in the Iron Age. Overall, a key development in violence in
human societies that characterises the Bronze Age is the institutionalisation
of violence through the ongoing innovation and large-scale production
purpose-made weapons for interpersonal violence. If it ever could have
been, violence can no longer be considered to have been a malfunction of
normal social processes by the Bronze Age – it was planned for, drew upon a
suite of labour and material resources and played a fundamental role in
structuring central places in the form of fortifications.

Bibliographic Essay

A fascination with bronze weaponry was an important feature of the antiquarianism that
laid the foundations of archaeology such as William Wilde’s *A Descriptive Catalogue of the
Antiquities in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy* (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, 1963). This is
perhaps emphasised by Heinrich Schliemann’s launch of Aegean Bronze Age archaeology
in his quest for the Trojan War in *Mycenae* (London: John Murray, 1878). The study of
warfare has had a chequered history in Bronze Age studies, though detailed research into
its conduct was rare. Anthony Snodgrass’s *Early Greek Armour and Weapons* (Edinburgh:
Edinburgh University Press, 1964), a treatment of Aegean Bronze Age military equipment,
was an early dedicated study of weaponry, and Robert Drews, *The End of the Bronze Age*
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), took the study of Bronze Age warfare a step
further by exploring in detail some possibilities for its role at the end of the Bronze Age. General studies of the Bronze Age came to place less emphasis on war, warriors and weapons as forces of social power and change, a factor contributing to Lawrence Keeley’s declaration in *War before Civilisation: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) that archaeologists by intent or omission were pacifying the past by not integrating the study of war more systematically in our vision of past societies. John Carman and colleagues were exploring the same theme in *Material Harm: Archaeological Studies of War and Violence* (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1997), and Bridgford’s chapter (‘Mightier than the Pen? An Edgewise Look at Irish Bronze Age Swords’) in this volume places the material culture of war back on centre stage. Richard Osgood had also been researching this theme and *Warfare in the Late Bronze Age of North Europe* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1998) collates and cross-references key data. In 1999 various contributors to J. Carman and A. Harding (eds.), *Ancient Warfare: Archaeological Perspectives* (Stroud: Allan Sutton) explored the social character and material evidence for war in the Bronze Age. While Keeley was certainly correct in highlighting the segregation of the study of warfare and social archaeology, it became clear that war was being taken seriously as a core aspect of Bronze Age society by many. In the Aegean region, the importance of war was embedded in archaeology from its outset, and a thorough treatment of the theme by leading scholars was explored in R. Laffin (ed.), *Polemos: Le Contexte Guerrier en Égée à l’Âge du Bronze* (Liège: Aegaeum, 1999). Richard Osgood and Sarah Monks (with Judith Toms) produced an overview volume, *Bronze Age Warfare* (Stroud: Allan Sutton, 2000), which dealt with a wide range of evidence though it continued a trend of isolating the study of war from wider social analyses. Contributors to *Warfare and Society: Archaeological and Social Anthropological Perspectives* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2006) edited by T. Otto, H. Thrane and H. Vandkilde went some way to redressing this imbalance by drawing attention to how the study of war linked into a range of other themes. Similarly, Mike Parker Pearson and I. J. N. Thorpe’s edited volume *Warfare, Violence and Slavery in Prehistory* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005) brought the study of warfare into a social light. The most recent edited volume to address the influence of warfare on social institutions such as trade, crafting, innovation, etc. is C. Horn and K. Kristiansen (eds.) *Warfare in Bronze Age Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Anthony Harding has produced one of the few single-author book-length publications on this theme, *Warriors and Weapons in Bronze Age Europe* (Budapest: Archaeolingua, 2007), using a broadly comparative approach to trace the development of warfare from the beginning of the Bronze Age until the emergence of iron.

Alongside these specialist and social studies of warfare, the Prähistorische Bronzefunde series had since the 1960s been publishing detailed catalogues of many categories of bronze artefacts, including weaponry. The many volumes in this series provide a foundation for detailed regional studies of weapons and warfare. Peter Schauer’s ‘Eine urnenfelterzeitliche Kampfweise’, *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 9 (1979), 69–80, and K. Kristiansen’s ‘Krieger und Hüftlinge in der Bronzezeit – ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des bronzezeitlichen Schwertes’, *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz* 31 (1984), 187–208, focus on the material culture of warfare, analysing the use-wear of swords and spears. Bridgford’s use-wear work has been influenced by that of Kristiansen, and she has brought the analysis of use-wear after a long hiatus into the new millennium, with an increasing number of specialised studies in recent journal publications (e.g. A. Dolfini and
R. Crellin ‘Metalwork wear analysis: The loss of innocence.’ Journal of Archaeological Science 66 (2016), 78–87. Peatfield’s contribution to Laffineur’s Polemos book (‘The Paradox of Violence: Weaponry and Martial Art in Minoan Crete’) has likewise considered the functional capacities of swords, which has complemented the use-wear approach. In the first decade of the twenty-first century the study of Bronze Age warfare was the subject of much new research. There was a strong material culture focus to this that employed experimental archaeology, and this led to a range of further studies, including the intentional linking of different analytical approaches to form a ‘Combat Archaeology’ perspective: see for example Barry Molloy’s ‘What’s the Bloody Point: Bronze Age swordsmanship in Ireland and Britain’, in B. Molloy (ed.), The Cutting Edge (Stroud: Tempus, 2007), pp. 90–111. The material focus was strongly in evidence at a European Association of Archaeologists session and workshop in Vienna, which was subsequently published by M. Mödlinger and M. Uckelmann in Warfare in Bronze Age Europe: Manufacture and Use of Weaponry (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011). Around the same time an interest in the performance of combat as a means to explore its social character can be seen in a number of studies, for example C. Horn’s ‘Harm’s way – An Approach to Change and Continuity in Prehistoric Combat’, Current Swedish Archaeology 21 (2013), 93–116. The osteological study of violence has often been part of relatively specialist studies or part of wider projects, but the discovery of the Tollense battlefield site is placing it at the heart of some new research, for example Detlef Jantzen et al. (eds.), Tod im Tollenseetal: Forschungen zu den Hinterlassenschaften eines bronzezeitlichen Gewaltkonfliktes in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Schwerin: LKDMV, 2014).
The archaeological evidence for violence and for the symbolic representation of violence in Iron Age Europe is abundant and complex. Some, such as wounds on skeletons and damaged and lost weapons on battlefields, is relatively straightforward, but this evidence is not abundant. Other evidence—such as weapons placed in burials, deposited in pits in the ground and dropped into bodies of water; and defensive walls encircling hilltop settlements—is more complex, and political and ritual explanations are often suggested, rather than strictly military ones. Representations of armed troops, both in the form of statuary of warriors and in scenes displayed on ornate metal objects, add to the richness and complexity of the evidence. Written sources from Mediterranean societies that had contact with Iron Age Europe provide another kind of information. This chapter will examine the evidence available from these different sources to provide a succinct overview of the various sources of information pertaining to violence in Iron Age Europe.

How Violent Was Iron Age Europe?

At the outset it is worth posing the general question, how violent was this period for the inhabitants of Iron Age Europe? To read the accounts of outsiders—Greek and Roman commentators—one would think that, at least during the Late Iron Age, the peoples who inhabited the lands north of the Mediterranean shores were very violent indeed. Greek writers tell of Celtic1 mercenaries serving in armies in the lands of the

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1 Greek authors referred to the Iron Age peoples of western and central Europe as ‘Celts’, Romans referred to the groups they encountered as ‘Gauls’. For discussion of the complexities of correlating the ancient textual sources with the archaeology, see P. S. Wells, Beyond Celts, Germans and Scythians: Archaeology and Identity in Iron Age Europe (London: Duckworth, 2001).
east Mediterranean, hired because they were considered so ferocious in battle. Caesar describing the people he called Gauls, and Tacitus commenting on the Germans, portray these groups as aggressive and always ready for a fight. But in considering such characterisations, we need to remind ourselves that these are accounts by outsiders, who witnessed or heard about circumstances when peoples of temperate Europe came into contact with societies in the Mediterranean regions. In the case of Caesar, he was leading his Roman legions against the peoples of Gaul – and of course the Gauls responded with violence. Thus we must interpret the Greek and Latin accounts with caution, since they describe circumstances that may have been unusual among peoples whose histories and diverse experiences they did not understand.

Weapons are abundant from Iron Age Europe, but it is no simple matter to move from an examination of them to the drawing of conclusions about violence. In earlier days of archaeological research, it was often assumed that weapons were a sign of violence, and much of European prehistory was interpreted in terms of raids and warfare. Today, as the database has grown and interpretive frameworks have become more sophisticated, many investigators interpret the evidence largely in symbolic and ceremonial terms rather than in terms of actual combat. Some authors, such as Simon James, have criticised this approach, arguing that the trend has gone too far in representing the Iron Age as a peaceful period. Niall Sharples, on the other hand, has argued that warfare was common during the British Iron Age. For the greater Rhineland region on the Continent, Nico Roymans notes the reputation of the local tribes as particularly adept fighters whom the Roman military readily recruited as auxiliary troops after the conquest of Gaul. In his study of representations of warriors on Iron Age coins, Fraser Hunter suggests that warfare in this period was an activity mainly of elite groups, represented by their images on coins and by swords and occasionally helmets.

3 See Chapter 21 in this volume.
and other weapons in their burials. This approach would suggest that at least for part of the Iron Age, military activity was conducted by small bands of elite warriors, not by substantial armies.

The period of time known as the Iron Age was eight centuries long, from about 800 BCE to the time of the Roman conquests, in around 50 BCE. Conditions changed over time and varied widely with geography. Hence we cannot generalise and say that Iron Age Europe as a whole was violent, or that it was not so. Instead, we need to examine closely the evidence available from specific sites and from different times.

Weapons

The most abundant kind of evidence in Iron Age Europe for violence, real or implied, is weaponry. The main categories of offensive weapons are swords, spears, lances, axes, bows and arrows, and sling stones. The principal categories of defensive weapons are shields, helmets and body armour. At the beginning of the Iron Age many swords, spears, lances, axes and arrowheads were still being made of bronze; by the end of the period these weapons were almost exclusively made of iron. Shields were often made of organic materials, wood and leather, but with bronze fronts, which were sometimes highly ornate. Helmets were most often of bronze, at the end of the Iron Age sometimes of iron, with padding inside of leather or some other soft material. Body armour was principally made of bronze, chainmail of iron. For the offensive weapons, it is usually not possible to distinguish weapons used for fighting other humans from weapons used in hunting. Many may well have been used for both purposes.

Weapons are recovered in three main kinds of contexts. By far the most are recovered in graves, typically placed next to the body of the individual buried or, in the case of cremation, set next to the cremated remains. Many weapons also occur in deposits, especially in bodies of water but sometimes in pits and ditches dug into the ground. Others were deposited in so-called ‘burnt offering places’ (Brandopferplätze), especially in circum-Alpine regions of Europe. Fewer weapons are recovered on settlement sites and on battlefields.

8 For illustrations and discussion of these different categories of weapons, see F. Müller, Art of the Celts 700 BC to AD 700 (Bern: Historisches Museum, 2009).
Chariots and trumpets are not strictly weapons, but they were associated with weapons and with military activity. Caesar describes the war chariots used by the peoples of Britain at the time of his invasions in 55 and 54 BCE.\(^9\) Chariots are often recovered in graves that also contain sets of weapons, especially in Yorkshire in northern England.\(^10\) Trumpets, known as carnyxes, are described in the classical textual sources; according to those accounts, the horns were blown as warriors engaged in combat. They are represented in the military scene on the Gundestrup cauldron (see below), and bronze carnyxes have been recovered on sites in different parts of Europe.\(^11\)

Horses were used in warfare as well. In his account of the wars he waged in Gaul, Caesar notes that he hired German cavalry troops because they were renowned as especially good at warfare on horseback.\(^12\) Both the Hallstatt scabbard, from about 400 BCE, and the Gundestrup cauldron, of around 100 BCE, bear images of warriors on horseback (see below).

**Weapons in Graves**

The great majority of Iron Age graves that contain weapons are those of men, though a small number of women’s weapon graves have been identified, especially in the Scythian region of eastern Europe.\(^13\) The percentage of men’s graves in any cemetery that contains weapons is generally low, rarely above 20 per cent. Often the majority of weapon graves contain the remains of a spear or lance head, and sometimes a shield. Ordinarily, only the most richly outfitted graves include a sword, until the latter part of the Iron Age, when a larger proportion contain swords in some cemeteries.\(^14\) Throughout the Iron Age, swords were special symbols of status for adult males. The most elaborately outfitted men’s burials include swords, and they are sometimes highly ornate, with hilts coated with ivory or gold and scabbards decorated with a variety of ornaments. During the latter part of the Early Iron Age, designated Hallstatt D (about 600–480 BCE), the sword was replaced by a dagger in the well-outfitted men’s graves.\(^15\) Both the hilt and the scabbard

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14 For examples of cemeteries, see works cited in this chapter’s Bibliographic Essay.
of most daggers are ornate. In the Hochdorf burial, the dagger and its scabbard are completely covered with highly decorated sheet gold.\(^{16}\) Finally, defensive weaponry – helmets and body armour – is rare in graves, and when it does occur, it is ordinarily only in the richest burials.

The weapons that archaeologists recover from graves are almost always in good condition and show little evidence of having been used. Thus it is clear that weapons played important symbolic roles even if they were rarely actually employed in battle. This symbolic significance to weapons is further emphasised in deposits and in representations. Two examples will illustrate some of the range of variation in the character of graves that contain weapons. At Grosseibstadt in northern Bavaria, Germany, in Mound 1 a 40-year-old man was buried with a four-wheeled wagon during the early part of the Early Iron Age, around \(650\) BCE.\(^{17}\) The man was laid flat on his back in an extended position, and an iron sword with a wooden scabbard was placed at his right side. Thirty-seven vessels were arranged in the burial chamber, including two bronze plates, a bronze amphora and thirty-four pottery containers, many of them highly ornate. Metal attachments for horse harnesses and a yoke were also recovered, along with animal bones, including those of cattle and pigs.

Whereas at Grosseibstadt the body and accompanying grave goods were laid out on the floor of the burial chamber, at Mailleraye-sur-Seine, in northern France, a cremation burial from the first half of the second century BCE was arranged vertically in a pit.\(^{18}\) At the bottom were eight vessels, including one of glass that contained the cremated remains of the individual. Six iron tyres were placed on top of the vessels. Next to these were placed iron lance points, axes, brooches and a bronze vessel. On top of the tyres were set two andirons (firedogs), two more iron tyres and a large bronze vessel that had been set upside down. At the very top of the assemblage were three swords with scabbards. Nearby were arranged three shield bosses and three lance points.

At the site of Filippokva in European Russia, in a region occupied by the peoples whom the Greek writers called Scythians, a cemetery of twenty-five mounds, or kurgans, included important burials that contained weapons. In

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16 J. Biel, Der Keltenfürst von Hochdorf (Stuttgart: Theiss, 1985), pl. 22.
Kurgan 1 was a grave dating to the fourth century BCE that contained, along with gold trappings for a horse harness, an iron sword and an iron dagger, both richly decorated with gold. The sword had gold wire inlay along the length of the blade and gold wire wound around the grip, the dagger had inlaid gold along the blade and two pairs of gold heads of griffins, one at either end of the hilt.19

**Weapons in Deposits**

Many weapons, including many of the most ornate, have been recovered in bodies of water, especially rivers and lakes, and, particularly during the Late Iron Age, arranged at complex dry-land sanctuary sites. At Hjortspring in southern Denmark, swords, spears, shields and other implements were deposited, enough to outfit a military force of some eighty warriors, together with a wooden boat, in a small pond in about 350 BCE.20 At the sites of La Tène and Port in Switzerland, hundreds of fine-quality iron swords were deposited, either thrown from the shore or dropped from a boat into the water. Many of the associated scabbards bear ornament at the top end. Each is decorated with a unique pattern.21 Similar sword deposits have been identified at the confluence of many of the rivers that flow into the Danube.22 Many ornate defensive weapons of bronze have been recovered from the Thames at London, including the Battersea Shield and the helmet from near Waterloo Bridge, and from the River Witham near Lincoln (see below).

Others were buried in pits in the ground. An outstanding example is at Tintignac in south-central France, where a number of swords and scabbards, ten bronze helmets and seven carnyxes were recovered in a pit over which subsequently was built a Roman sanctuary.23 The spectacular iron helmet, partially covered with gold and decorated with coral, from Agris in Charente,
France, was found in a cave, while a similarly ornate helmet was recovered from a stream bed at Amfreville in northern France.  

Weapons, especially swords, have also been recovered at sites that have been designated ‘sanctuaries’ in the landscape. In the ditches surrounding the rectangular site of Gournay-sur-Aronde in northern France, some 500 swords and their scabbards have been found, many of them intentionally bent far out of shape rendering them useless. Similar but smaller deposits of swords and other weapons have been recovered at Ribemont-sur-Ancre, also in northern France, at Nordheim in Baden-Württemberg, and at the great oppidum settlement of Manching in Bavaria, Germany. While Ribemont has yielded fewer weapons to the investigating archaeologists than Gournay, a large number of human skeletal remains have been recovered there. Many of the skeletons are without skulls, and the site includes systematically organised piles of human long bones, suggesting a complex ritual involving the treatment of dead warriors.

*Weapons in Representations*

Pictorial representations are not abundant from Iron Age Europe, but a small number of important ones relate to weaponry and warfare. Several stone statues show weapons worn by warriors, the Hallstatt scabbard and the Gundestrup cauldron show scenes of warriors with their weapons, and some Iron Age coins bear representations of weapons. These representations can be especially valuable for our attempts to understand how the people of the Iron Age regarded the individuals who bore and presumably used weapons to defend their communities or to gain wealth or territory. More than any other source, representations enable us, in a sense, to ‘see’ through the eyes of the creators of the images.

The life-size sandstone statue recovered next to a burial mound at Hirschlanden in northern Württemberg is represented wearing a dagger that is similar in shape to the daggers that occur in many Hallstatt D wealthy burials. At Vix in eastern France, one of the two seated stone statues at the ‘sanctuary’ near the rich woman’s grave is represented wearing a shortsword or dagger on his right side and with his left hand holding the top

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of a shield that rests on the ground in front of his calves. The nearly complete statue associated with the Glauberg tumulus near Frankfurt wears a shortsword on his right side and body armour covers his torso. All three of these represent warriors in ‘heroic’ poses.\(^\text{26}\)

The scabbard from Hallstatt grave 994 in Austria shows in its incised scene four horsemen wearing helmets and body armour and carrying lances.\(^\text{27}\) The second from the right wears a shortsword on his belt. The first is trampling a man and the second seems to be spearing him with his lance. To the left in the next register are three men marching, holding lances or spears and shields. At the far left end is a scene that seems to show two men fighting on the ground.

In the so-called ‘situla art’ of the Iron Age, dating roughly to \(600–400\) BCE and centred in north-eastern Italy, Austria and Slovenia, many scenes include representations of weapons and of people using them. The situla now at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island, shows a line of fourteen marching soldiers all wearing helmets and carrying shields and either spears or lances. The Certosa situla from northern Italy also shows rows of marching troops, include some carrying battle-axes; on this situla two horsemen wearing helmets also have battle-axes over their shoulders. A bronze belt plate from Vače in Slovenia bears a scene of two horseback riders fighting with lances and battle-axes.\(^\text{28}\)

Inner plate E of the Gundestrup cauldron from a bog in northern Denmark shows four horseback-riding warriors at the top, all wearing helmets and two of them carrying lances.\(^\text{29}\) Below them are six infantry troops, all carrying shields and spears or lances. At the right are three figures holding and blowing trumpets, similar to the trumpets found in the Tintignac pit deposit.

From the end of the Iron Age and into the early Roman period a series of small (average height 12.5 cm) figurines carved from limestone have been recovered in Britain. The majority of the complete figurines show the presence of a sword, generally situated vertically on the back of the figure.


Whatever these figurines may signify, they show that swords were important in the minds of the sculptors who fashioned them.30

Many Iron Age coins bear images of persons with weapons.31 Horseback-riding warriors carry swords, spears and javelins, and they often wear helmets and some type of armour. Some on horseback carry carnyxes, similar to those represented on the Gundestrup cauldron and in the deposit at Tintignac.

**Ornamentation of Weapons**

As a glance at any book about Celtic art will show, weapons are among the most highly decorated objects of Iron Age Europe. Military equipment in many cultural contexts is associated with ornament, in the modern world as well as the ancient, and military activity is often highly ritualised. The degree and complexity of decoration on Iron Age swords, shields and helmets makes it apparent that the weapons were intended to serve more varied and complex purposes than just fighting.

In the Early Iron Age sword hilts are sometimes decorated with ivory and gold, and both the scabbards and hilts of daggers sometimes bear inlay of coral. In ‘Scythian’ burial practices of eastern Europe, swords and other weapons are often elaborately decorated with gold, sometimes with figural imagery, as in the case of the objects from Filippovka cited above. In the Late Iron Age, from about 450 BCE onwards, sword scabbards bear a range of different kinds of ornament. Some, such as many in the assemblage from the site of La Tène in Switzerland, have incised relief at the top of the scabbard, where the decoration would be readily visible. Many sword-blades from all over Europe have signs stamped into the tops of the blade that have been made with a hardened iron die.32 Some scabbards of the Early La Tène period bear complex figural ornament or curvilinear patterns incised into the surface. In later periods stamped ornament was often applied to scabbards.

Shields and helmets are among the most ornate objects from Iron Age Europe. The bronze Battersea Shield, for example, thought to date to around 100 BCE, bears complex three-dimensional ornamentation of circles and spirals, with red enamel inlay. A shield from the River Witham near

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Lincoln also has elaborate three-dimensional ornament of circles, along with palmettes and other forms, as well as fine spirals of incised lines. The bronze helmet from the Thames near Waterloo Bridge has two conical ‘horns’ as well as complex relief patterns of lines and circles.33

Fortifications

From the Neolithic Period onwards in Europe, some settlements were fortified through the construction of walls around their perimeters. During the Late Bronze Age a great many hilltops were fortified, and the tradition was maintained in the Early Iron Age. Among the most extensively studied hill forts are Mont Lassois in eastern France, the Heuneburg in south-west Germany, Stradonice in the Czech Republic, and Maiden Castle in southern Britain.34 All of these sites, and tens of similar sites that are known but not as fully studied as yet, are situated on hilltops and have around them walls built of earth, timber and stone.

In the Late Iron Age, during the second and final centuries BCE, communities throughout the central regions of the Continent established the largest settlements of prehistoric Europe, known to modern archaeology as oppida after Julius Caesar’s use of that term in reference to the sites in Gaul against which he led his legions between 58 and 51 BCE. The great majority of the oppida, which can be hundreds of hectares in size, are situated on hilltops and have very large walls of earth, timber and cut stone blocks surrounding them. Manching in Bavaria, the most comprehensively excavated oppidum, unusual in being situated on flat land near the Danube River, was protected by the Danube on one side, by the Paar River on another, and by marshes on the other two. The amount of labour that was required to build its walls would have been immense. Herbert Lorenz estimates that the construction of the wall system at Manching consumed some 60,000 large trees, 15,000 pounds of iron nails and 250,000 cubic metres of earth and cut stone.35

Julius Caesar, in his account of the war that he waged in Gaul, describes with admiration the structure of the walls. According to his account, wooden beams were arranged on the ground two feet apart, then layers of cut stone blocks were added between and on top of the beams. The process was repeated until the wall attained its full height of several metres. Caesar notes that this technique of construction provides both strength and protection from fire. The horizontal beams form a solid skeleton for the structure, which could resist the force of a battering ram; the separation of the wooden beams by layers of stone made the structure impervious to destruction by fire. The archaeological results from excavations of the walls match Caesar’s description.

In earlier days of archaeology, the oppida and their walls were interpreted almost exclusively as defensive in purpose, but more recently many investigators have emphasised their demonstrative aspect – designed, it is argued, to impress friends and foes by the might of the community residing inside. But from Caesar’s account of his conduct of the war in Gaul it is clear that, when needed, they could serve defensive purposes (though they were not effective enough for the Gauls to hold off the Roman attackers). The continental oppida occur from central France in the west to Slovakia in the east, and from the Alps in the south to the North European Plain in the north. In Britain, the term oppidum means something different – an extensive Late Iron Age settlement, but without the hilltop siting or massive defensive walls. Yet hill forts are important in Britain throughout the Iron Age. Maiden Castle is the most visually striking hill fort in Europe, with its enormous multiple walls defending the hilltop location. It is just one of a whole series of important hilltop settlements of Iron Age Britain.

As examples of Iron Age hill forts, I cite here one from the Early Iron Age and two oppida from the Late Iron Age. The Heuneburg, situated above the upper Danube River in Württemberg, has been under investigation for well over half a century. The Iron Age occupation of the site dates to between about $600 \text{ BCE}$ and $480 \text{ BCE}$. The site is on a plateau above the surrounding land. Around the perimeter is a wall that was constructed in at least six different phases, attesting to the long-standing importance of the site during

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36 Caesar, Gallic War, Book VII, p. 23.
38 Sharples, ‘Warfare, Iron Age Wessex’.
39 A new overview of the Heuneburg with results of recent fieldwork is D. Krausse et al., Die Heuneburg – keltischer Fürstensitz an der oberen Donau (Darmstadt: Konrad Theiss Verlag, 2015).
the sixth and beginning of the fifth century BCE. Most of the building activity of the wall employed timber, stone and earth, but one consisted of mud brick. This phase in the history of the defensive architecture on the site is of special importance, because it represents the employment of a foreign military building technique. Mud-brick architecture was used in the Mediterranean world at this time, but it is not effective in the damp climate of temperate Europe. In fact, the individual bricks at the Heuneburg match in their dimensions those at Greek sites of the same period. At the same time as the mud-brick wall was constructed, a series of bastions, also of non-local character, were constructed along the part of the wall that overlooked the extensive settlement situated below the hill fort to the west.\footnote{For a reconstruction drawing see M. Steffen, ‘Komplexe Zentren nördlich der Alpen: Die Entstehung der Fürstensitze’, in D. Beilharz et al. (eds.), Die Welt der Kelten: Zentren der Macht, Kostbarkeiten der Kunst (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2012), p. 94.}

Staré Hradisko in Moravia in the Czech Republic is a Late Iron Age walled settlement of the oppida type.\footnote{J. Meduna, ‘Das keltische Oppidum Staré Hradisko in Mähren’, Germania 48 (1970), 34–59.} These walled hill fort settlements date from the beginning of the second to the end of the first century BCE, and some continued in use into the first century CE. Excavations at the site revealed a complex settlement, with roads dividing the site into distinct precincts, each with residential structures, storage pits and craft workshops.

At Manching in southern Germany, a comprehensive study of the numerous weapons found on the site has shown that both warfare and ritual deposition are represented.\footnote{S. Sievers, Die Waffen aus dem Oppidum von Manching (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2010).} They include swords, scabbards, chain-link sword-belts and belt hooks, spearheads, lance points, metal parts of shields, arrowheads and fragments of helmets and of chainmail. The identification of both major functions of weapons at Manching – as implements of combat and as ritual objects – underscores the multiple purposes that weapons served during this period.

Battlefields

For all of the evidence of weaponry in graves and in deposits, and the fortified hilltop sites, including the oppida with their massive walls, the direct evidence of violence is relatively sparse. At the present state of our understanding, it is not clear whether this is because actual battles were rare, because most armed conflict was carried out on a small
scale and thus did not leave much material evidence, or because we have not yet found the places where battles took place. From the final decades of the Iron Age, however, a few well-documented battlefields provide direct evidence of the military events that took place at them. Five examples will illustrate the character of the available data.

In Julius Caesar’s account of the Gallic War the final major battle between united groups of Gauls and the Roman army took place at the site of Alesia in central France in the year 52 BCE.43 Excavations on the site have yielded a wide variety of weapons of the time, including swords, spears, lances, arrowheads and helmets.44 The majority of the weapons recovered through excavation are of characteristic Iron Age types, not Roman. This aspect may reflect the fact that many of the soldiers fighting on the Roman side were members of Iron Age groups who were allied with, or conquered by, Rome. The fewer typical Roman weapons are predominantly of types that were thrown from a distance rather than weapons that were employed at close range.

At the northern end of a pass through the Alps into southern Bavaria, the site of Döttenbichl has yielded large quantities of both Iron Age and Roman types of weapons.45 Among the Roman weapons are iron catapult bolt points, at least one bearing the insignia of the 19th Legion – LEG XIX – providing strong evidence for the presence of that unit. The interpretation of the site has been much discussed during the last few decades. Is it the site of a battle between Roman forces attacking in 15 BCE, when the Roman armies conquered the lands between the Alps and the Danube River in what is now southern Bavaria? Or is it a site where weapons and other objects were deposited, perhaps shortly after a victory by local fighters over a contingent of Romans? Recent research suggests that it was a place of ritual deposition used by local peoples between 100 BCE and 50 CE, and that weapons from the Roman invasion of 15 BCE were included in the deposits.

Since excavations that began in 1987, the site of Kalkriese in northern Germany has yielded strong evidence that it is where what has become known as the ‘Battle of the Teutoburg Forest’ took place in the year 9

43 Caesar, Gallic War, Book VII, pp. 75–89.
A number of Roman and Greek sources mention this battle, at which three legions, the 17th, 18th and 19th, and many accompanying units of troops were virtually wiped out by local fighters under the command of a native leader called Arminius by the Romans. Excavations have recovered thousands of weapons and pieces of military equipment, the great majority of them of Roman type, as well as over 1,000 coins. In addition to slingstones, lanceheads, daggers, swords, chainmail and helmets, bones of mules, horses and humans have been recovered. The local topography of the battle site corresponds roughly to that described by the ancient authors. Archaeologists have studied the locations of different weapons and remains of equipment, such as nails from Roman soldiers’ sandals, to reconstruct the progress of the battle.

At the site of Cadbury Castle in Gloucestershire in England, archaeologists have recovered both skeletal evidence and weapons that indicate a military event that took place sometime around the middle of the first century CE, perhaps corresponding to the Roman conquest of Britain, which began in 43 CE.47 Human bones of some twenty-eight individuals were uncovered, along with local Iron Age and Roman weapons, and many local brooches, or fibulae. The small number of individuals represented in the excavated finds would not represent a major battle, but it may be representative of many small skirmishes that took place in the course of the Roman conquest of Britain. Also in Britain, since the original excavations at Maiden Castle from before the Second World War, the small cemetery discovered at the site has been interpreted as a ‘war cemetery’. Recent analysis of the human bones from this cemetery confirms that some of the individuals were killed through violent actions during a battle sometime during the final century BCE or first century CE.48 A Roman iron catapult bolt point among the vertebrae of one individual provides strong evidence that the conflict was with members of the Roman army, perhaps at the time of the conquest of Britain.

Texts

We do not possess any written information about war or military activity from the Iron Age peoples of temperate Europe themselves to supplement the evidence of burial, deposition, military architecture, battlefields and bog bodies. We do possess, however, written information from their southern neighbours, the Greeks and Romans. We must approach these sources with great caution, though, because they come from people who did not understand the historical development of the peoples about whom they were writing, and in most cases they regarded the Iron Age peoples as enemies. Nonetheless, these texts constitute a source that must be considered.

In the fourth and third centuries BCE writers inform us of the service of ‘Celtic’ mercenaries in armies in lands of the eastern Mediterranean, noting that they were known as exceptionally fierce fighters. The sources do not tell us what they mean when they designate them as Celts, nor do they say from what part of Europe they came.

The most detailed account of Iron Age military activity is that in Julius Caesar’s account mentioned above. From him we learn about the defensive aspects of the oppida, the fighting tactics of the Gauls, as well as many details about the Gallic way of life. The weapons he describes match closely those found in burials and deposits. In recounting his invasions of Britain in 55 and 54 BCE, he describes the Britons fighting from chariots, and chariots have been found in Iron Age burials there.

Conclusion

While abundant evidence attests to the hardware of conflict and warfare – weapons, hill forts, wounded bodies, pictorial representations and textual sources from the Greek and Roman worlds – it is difficult to assess just how much actual violence and war occurred. Conditions varied during different periods of the Iron Age and within different parts of Europe. Skeletons with marks of damage caused by weapons, clear causes of death apparent on many of the bog bodies, and the written descriptions from Caesar and other writers make clear that there certainly was violence during this period. But the large proportion of weapons that are recovered in ritual contexts – in graves and in deposits of various kinds – also makes clear that they played important

demonstrative and symbolic roles. Their meanings were much more complex than simple implements for combat. The fortifications built around hill forts also had important roles as expressions of status and power, as well as defences against invasion. The amount of effort that was devoted to decorating weapons also points to their functions as ways of demonstrating power and status and communicating identity.

Thus it seems that much of the evidence that relates to the topic of violence and warfare was designed to intimidate potential enemies, to express military readiness and power, in ways that served to avoid war. It is also important that weapons played major symbolic roles in Iron Age Europe. While many, including the often abundant spears and swords, were frequently plain and seem to have been intended for purely functional purposes, others were highly ornate, decorated with bronze and even gold, in some cases with the addition of coral and ivory. The placement of weapons in burials and in what appear to be votive deposits further attests to their roles far beyond strictly military uses.

What, then, is the meaning of all of the archaeological evidence for weaponry, fortifications and battlefields, interpreted in the light of the Greek and Roman texts about the peoples of Europe? How violent was Iron Age Europe? The eight centuries of the Iron Age in Europe were not especially violent times. As in all human societies, there were times when competition over resources, including land and accumulated wealth, led to violence. But before the arrival of the Roman armies of conquest there is no evidence for large-scale military confrontations, nor is there evidence that communities were constantly at war with one another. Sites such as Hjortspring, Gournay, Ribemont, La Tène and Manching seem to reflect the defeat of organised bands of warriors, but such sites are few and far between, and the scale of warfare was small, involving a few hundred combatants at the very most. More common were even smaller-scale confrontations, between small raiding parties and even individual persons, members of what we would call ‘elites’, vying for control of their communities or of particular resources. The scenes of sword-fighters on the back of the Hochdorf couch indicate such individualised combat, and the high degree of ornamentation on many weapons makes clear their association with a very small group of individuals of high social status.

This situation of relatively rare and small-scale violence changed with the arrival of the thousands of heavily armed troops of the Roman legions. With

50 See Chapter 21 in this volume.
Caesar’s invasions of central and northern Gaul during the 50s BCE, subsequent conquests of lands south of the Danube from its headwaters to the Black Sea, and the later Roman invasion of Britain in 43 CE, Europe became a much more violent place. Not only did the peoples of the regions directly attacked by the Roman armies become highly militarised, but the effects of the Romans’ large-scale violence permeated the lands north and east of the major battlefields. The many weapons deposits in the bogs of northern Germany, Denmark and southern Sweden attest to these far-flung effects. The militarisation of the peoples of temperate Europe just before and during the time of the Roman conquests had a major impact on social and political organisation of the communities. Before the Roman armies arrived, however, the Iron Age peoples of Europe were not unusually violent. The Greek and Roman texts that describe them as warlike were based on very particular circumstances that were not typical of Iron Age Europe as a whole.

Bibliographic Essay


Finally, for fortifications see I. Ralston, *Celtic Fortifications* (Stroud: Tempus, 2006).
This chapter examines the origins and early history of violence in the Japanese islands, focusing on the Jōmon (c. 14,500–900 BCE) and Yayoi (c. 900 BCE–250 CE) periods. Although the rise of bushi (samurai) warriors has been widely studied in comparative perspective, early trends in violence and warfare in Japan have received less attention outside specialist circles. For several reasons, however, the Japanese archipelago is a good place to think about the links between violence and historical change. One such reason is that it possesses a long sequence of hunter-gatherer settlement that can contribute to ongoing debates over violence and agriculture. Full-scale farming societies did not reach western Japan until the first millennium BCE and in Hokkaido in the north, hunting-gathering continued until the early twentieth century. Secondly, hunter-gatherers in the Japanese islands display great diversity due to both ecological and historical factors. Ecologically, there was a wide range of foraging habitats from sub-tropical islands in the south to sub-arctic tundra in the north. Social organisation ranged from the relatively simple to some of the most complex hunter-gatherers known from the archaeological record. The fact that many hunter-gatherers in prehistoric Japan
were engaged in some sort of plant cultivation leads us to a third factor: if (as widely assumed) agriculture was an important stimulus behind organised warfare, then at what point along the continuum between forager cultivation and full-scale farming did violence take on that new mantle? Finally, the position of Japan at the periphery of the East Asian world system offers the opportunity to investigate the role of ‘tribal zone’ and similar colonial processes in contexts very different from those theorised in the existing literature. In what follows, after a brief discussion of historiographic trends, we summarise the archaeological and related evidence for violence in the Jōmon and Yayoi before presenting a concluding discussion on the links between agriculture and violence in early Japan.

Research Trends

As in other parts of the world, questions relating to violence and warfare received little attention in Japanese archaeology until quite recently. Stone arrowheads and bronze weapons were not infrequently discovered in premodern times, but such objects were given a range of sometimes fanciful interpretations. Scientific archaeology began in Japan in 1877 with excavations by the American zoologist Edward Morse at the Ōmori shell midden in Tokyo. Morse’s suggestion that human bones excavated from Ōmori bore traces of cannibalism was not confirmed by later research, but he influenced the development of archaeology and anthropology in Japan through his emphasis on histories of ‘racial’ mixing. The Victorian idea that certain races or ethnic groups were naturally more powerful than others precluded the need for a specific concern with violence as a historical process in need of analysis or explanation. The role of censorship also needs to be considered at a time when Japan had launched upon a project of modernisation which involved frequent wars and colonial conflicts. Anthropologist Shōgorō Tsuboi, for instance, was a clear supporter of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5). At the height of this conflict he wrote one of the first essays on anthropology and war published in Japa...
in Japan, yet this text uses ethnographic examples from Africa and the Americas to naturalise the role of warfare in human history and studiously avoids any mention of violence in the Japanese past. From the 1930s, censorship became more overt and profoundly influenced the practice of archaeology, anthropology and history in Japan until 1945.

Japan’s defeat in World War II made it possible for archaeologists to contribute to a new ‘democratic’ history of Japan that explained and critiqued the role of the emperor. If the imperial system was responsible for the rise of despotic power in Japan, then it followed that earlier periods in Japanese prehistory had been characterised by more peaceful, egalitarian communities. In the late 1940s, excavations at the Yayoi period Toro site in Shizuoka seemed to provide the perfect example of such a community. One exception to the post-war emphasis on the peaceful roots of ancient Japan was Egami’s ‘Horse rider’ invasion theory, but this was widely criticised in both Japanese and English. By the 1960s, however, Japan was confronted with the growing consequences of industrial pollution and with the international tensions of the cold war, socio-political trends which became coupled to a new interest in conflict in Japanese history. In particular, an expanding archaeological record made it clear that the Yayoi was characterised by extensive evidence for violence, especially in western Japan. This changing interpretation was crystallised by excavations at the Yoshinogari site in Saga, a large settlement enclosed by multiple ditches and palisades with watchtowers (Figure 7.1). The fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II further stimulated research and by the turn of the twenty-first century a new consensus had been established on the evolution of violence and warfare in prehistoric Japan. Although the

possibility of some small-scale raiding in the Jōmon period was not denied, it was widely concluded that organised warfare began with agriculture in the Yayoi. Japanese research has thus concentrated on developments related to violence after the beginning of agriculture and has continued to downplay conflict among preceding hunter-gatherers.

Violence and the Archaeological Record

Archaeological signatures of violence are discussed by various authors in this volume and Table 7.1 presents some widely agreed criteria. As discussed below, with the exception of scalping and cannibalism, evidence for almost all of the criteria is found in Japan from the Yayoi period onwards.

Skeletal Trauma

Individual finds of arrowheads embedded in human bones and other similar, clear-cut traces of violence have long been known in Japan as elsewhere. However, since physical anthropologists have historically been most interested in addressing questions of population affinity, they have often underestimated the evidence for skeletal trauma. Where research has specifically focused on traumatic injuries in prehistoric material, many additional
Table 7.1 Widely found archaeological signatures of violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skeletal trauma</td>
<td>Weapon trauma, parry fractures, scalping, cannibalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapons/military equipment</td>
<td>Specialised homicidal tools, shields, armour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlement</td>
<td>Fortifications, inaccessible village locations, refuge sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burials</td>
<td>Mass graves with trauma, ‘warrior’ graves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic depictions</td>
<td>Depictions of weaponry and/or actual conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual treatment of weapons</td>
<td>Special depositions, hoards, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples are often found, leading to a significantly increased prevalence of interpersonal violence in many regions.\(^{16}\)

In Japan, the oldest example of skeletal violence is a probable perimortem injury to the young adult female skull 4 at Minatogawa, a late Pleistocene site on Okinawa dating to 20,000 to 16,000 years ago. The report on this skull concluded that ‘the perforation is considered to be the result of some violent outside force, such as an arrow point shot from a high place to the forehead’.\(^{17}\) Another well-known example comes from the Final Jōmon shell midden site of Hobi on the Astumi Peninsula, where an elderly male was found with numerous blunt force injuries to the cranium. Hisashi Suzuki suggested that at least two or three attackers were involved, with a number of blows being struck from behind.\(^{18}\) While only a single case, this is interesting because of the extreme violence employed. Nevertheless, it is still not possible to determine whether this was ‘in-group’ or ‘out-group’ conflict, the latter being one of the criteria for ‘warfare’. A recent review of the Jōmon period by Nakao and colleagues lists twenty-three individuals with apparent

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evidence for lethal injury – in the form of blunt force injuries to the cranium and embedded stone and bone projectile points in the post-crania with no signs of healing – providing a prevalence of 1.8 per cent of adults dying violently.\textsuperscript{19} The authors of this study conclude that this is a low prevalence, but such literature-based reviews are problematic and further research would certainly increase this figure. As one example of this problem, we offer the case of a large perimortem blunt force injury on the right parietal of an adult probable female from the Late Jōmon site of Sakaeiso, Shimamaki (top) and adult female skull of the Epi-Jōmon found at Minami-Usu 6 (bottom), with images on right showing internal bevelling.

Epi-Jōmon (a period excluded from Nakao and colleagues’ study) found at the Minami-Usu 6 site, in southern Hokkaido. The published account of this skull focused on craniometrics to show a close affinity with Ainu skulls, but also mentioned as an aside the presence on the left parietal of ‘an egg-sized bony defect . . . presumably due to an artificial injury’. This cranium was recently re-examined by Rick Schulting, who confirmed it as a case of perimortem injury (Figure 7.2). Blunt force cranial injuries with evidence of healing also occur in Hokkaido and the other islands, affecting both females and males (Figure 7.3). These cases are in the process of being systematically compiled.

Reports of violence for the Yayoi period can be found in Chinese chronicles such as the Wei zhi, which describe a state of warfare in western Japan in the third century C.E. Without more texts, however, only archaeology is able to offer some traces of violence and warfare for the preceding centuries. In his reviews of warfare during the Yayoi, Hashiguchi collected data for western Japan on up to 262 cases of violence at 118 sites (either traces of violence on bones or weapon tips excavated from tombs that were assumed to have been originally lodged inside victims). Cases from northern Kyushu alone represented 228 examples from 97 sites. Among all these cases, 21.2 per cent date

from the Initial and Early Yayoi, 64.3 per cent from the Middle Yayoi, and 6.8 per cent from the Late Yayoi, leaving 7.7 per cent not related to any specific phase. The over-representation of northern Kyushu and the Middle Yayoi is a preservation bias due to the tradition of burying the dead in huge jar coffins during that phase. However, the detailed data for the Middle Yayoi show that the first third of that phase appears to be far more violent (34.8 per cent of all cases) than the second (18.6 per cent) and final thirds (10.9 per cent).

Among the cases identified by Hashiguchi, forty-two are clear traces of wounds on bones, either cuts, missing heads or halberd/sword/arrowhead tips stuck into bones. The earliest individuals showing traces of violence known for this period date to the transition between the Final Jōmon and the beginning of the Yayoi. Two individuals from the Nagano Miya-no-mae site (Fukuoka) are thought to have suffered a violent death. In tomb 12 the bones have not been preserved but the body location is indicated by black pigment that originally covered the corpse. Two stone arrowheads of Korean style have been found in the chest area, both missing their tips and stems, a fact which led archaeologists to exclude them being burial goods. In tomb 5 at the same site, a stone arrowhead with a missing tip was found in the body area and interpreted in the same way. The first certain traces of violence from weapons left on bones is at the Shinmachi site (Fukuoka), dating from the transition between the Initial and Early Yayoi. This is a male individual from the stone-lined wooden coffin tomb 24–1, who has the tip of a stone polished arrowhead of Korean willow-leaf type embedded in his left femoral head. Two other fragments of this arrowhead were found around the femur and the position of these finds suggest that this individual was struck from above and behind. No traces of healing have been observed on the femur, so it was concluded that this wound – or others received at the same time – had caused this individual’s death.

These traces of violence on individuals from the beginning of the Yayoi are all related to settlements of the first rice farmers who came from the Asian continent during the period. Until the middle of the Early Yayoi phase, all these finds are situated in the northern coastal areas of Kyushu. Following this, during the second half of the Early Yayoi and the first half of Middle Yayoi, traces of violence extend to the interior of Kyushu in the Saga, Chikugo and Nakatsu plains, and then to the Kumamoto plain and Iki and Hirado in Nagasaki. This period corresponds with the time when the first bronze weapons appear in tombs in northern Kyushu. Then, from the middle of the Middle Yayoi phase onwards, traces of skeletal violence seem to disappear from northern coastal Kyushu and increase rapidly in the Saga.
and Chikugo plains. We know, for example, of an adult male who bears traces of a blow from a blunt object on his forehead at the Kuma Nishioda site (Fukuoka), two examples of heads buried alone at Kuma Nishioda and Fujisaki (Fukuoka), and two examples of beheading at Yokokuma Kitsunetsuka (Fukuoka) and Yoshinogari (Saga). Moreover, at the Nagaoka site (Fukuoka prefecture), six individuals show multiple wounds, as do several others at Kuma Nishioda. At the same time, the first traces of violence on human skeletons begin to be found in the Inland Sea and Osaka Bay areas, including sword injuries at Minamikata (Okayama) and Tamatsu Tanaka (Hyōgō).

**Burials**

The Jōmon period lacks so-called warrior graves. Graves with multiple individuals are known from several Jōmon sites, often representing secondary burials of disarticulated and rearranged remains, but no direct evidence of skeletal violence has so far been reported from these. By contrast, ‘warrior graves’ containing elaborate weaponry have been found from the Middle/Late Yayoi onwards. The first set of bronze weapons of Korean origin is found in the M3 wooden coffin tomb in the Yoshitake Takagi site (Fukuoka prefecture) at the beginning of the Middle Yayoi phase. Two bronze swords, a bronze spearhead and a bronze halberd were deposited along with a Korean-style bronze mirror, beads and a small pottery jar. These (sword, spear and halberd) are the three main bronze weapons for the Middle Yayoi period. Seven other tombs on the same site contain one bronze sword each. For the Middle Yayoi, this kind of tomb is limited to the northern Kyushu-Yamaguchi area; tombs with weapons begin to appear outside this area from the Late Yayoi onwards. According to Terasawa’s database of Yayoi tombs in western Japan, tombs containing bronze or iron weapons represent 63.2 per cent of the tombs containing burial goods. Tombs containing weapons are

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more frequent during the Middle Yayoi (79.9 per cent of all tombs with burial goods for this phase) than during the Late Yayoi (54 per cent). Unfortunately, as Terasawa does not mention the overall total of tombs, it is impossible to estimate the importance of tombs containing weapons among the total of tombs known for the Yayoi period (the scale is 438 tombs with burial goods against several thousand tombs lacking goods). The number of tombs containing weapons varies from site to site, generally concentrated in areas reserved for the elites, as in Yoshitake Takagi, Yoshitake Ōishi, Yoshitake Hiwatari, Tateiwa (Fukuoka), Karakodai (Ehime) or Miyauchi funkūbo (Tottori). Most of the tombs contain only one weapon (81.9 per cent of the tombs of the northern Kyushu Middle Yayoi and 66.7 per cent of the tombs of the Late Yayoi), generally a bronze or iron sword, sometimes a bronze halberd.

Weapons and Artefacts of Violence

One of the problems with discussing Jōmon conflict is the apparent absence of specialised weaponry. But the lack of formal weapons is not uncommon in hunter-gatherers and simple horticulturalists worldwide. Instead, everyday implements such as stone-headed axes, clubs, spears and the bow and arrow are brought to bear as and when required. The lack of any elaboration of weaponry may relate more to the absence of a specialised class of warriors who seek to differentiate themselves within their community through material culture. A further issue is that, given the inclination to downplay violence, objects that could have been used for this purpose tend to be interpreted as something else. The stone ‘rods’ (sekibō) that are a feature of the Jōmon period, for example, have usually been interpreted as ritual phalli, though Yasushi Kosugi has argued for their use as clubs in conflict, and they indeed could have been responsible for the kinds of blunt force cranial injuries noted above. Late and Final Jōmon examples sometimes have a flatter shape possibly influenced by bronze knives from northern China, leading them to be termed stone ‘swords’ (sekken or sekitō).

The first weapons clearly not for hunting (unlike arrowheads, which can be used to hunt game or people) are polished stone daggers of the Initial and

Early Yayoi phases. These items are mainly found in tombs that show a special status (such as the shisekibo tombs with large capstones that are termed ‘dolmens’ in the West) and are clearly associated with individuals with an important social – and probably political – status. They originated on the Korean peninsula and were one of the numerous elements that were imported into northern Kyushu by immigrant farmers. When deposited complete in tombs, they are no doubt markers of status. Yet the tips of such daggers have also been found in tombs, such as burial jar 3 at the Sudare site (Fukuoka), where the tip was stuck between the second rib and second vertebrae of the buried individual.

Bronze weapons appear from the beginning of the Middle Yayoi in northern Kyushu and the Yoshitake Takagi cemetery (Fukuoka) is reputed to be the first site to hold them. These weapons (bronze swords, halberds and spearheads) are mainly found in tombs and are sometimes associated with Korean and then Chinese bronze mirrors for the richest burials.

Iron weapons appear in tombs in northern Kyushu at the end of the Middle Yayoi and replaced almost all bronze weapons and stone arrowheads during the Late Yayoi phase. Iron swords and arrowheads predominate, with some spearheads and halberds. In the Middle Yayoi iron weapons are associated with Chinese bronze mirrors and glass beads in the richest tombs of northern Kyushu. They also begin to appear in tombs outside Kyushu at the end of the Late Yayoi. All these weapons, in bronze or iron, are first imported from the continent, mostly from the Korean peninsula but several Chinese weapons are known too, such as the bronze sword from the Yoshinogari mounded tomb. Weapons of Korean style are produced locally in regional centres, while the Chinese ones are seldom imitated.

The most numerous weapons during the Yayoi period are sling stones (mainly found in settlements ditches) and arrowheads. Arrowheads are first made of stone, then of bronze (Middle Yayoi) and finally iron (Late Yayoi). Yayoi arrowheads were mainly used to hunt, but we can be sure they were also used as weapons as many examples have been found embedded in human skeletons, such as individual 124 at the Doigahama site (Yamaguchi), who had thirteen such embedded stone arrowheads. Some wooden weapons are also known, such as clubs, daggers or swords, halberds, arrowheads and bows. Wooden breastplates have been found at several sites including Minamikata (Okayama) and Sasai (Fukuoka). At Sasai, a breastplate was found with two fragments of a wooden lacquered shield, both dating from the Late Yayoi. The breastplate is decorated with incised strips of triangles and braided patterns and the shield is lacquered red on one side.
and black on the other. This is not only specialised armour but also suggests that, at least for some, war was a high-status activity. The wooden daggers and swords could suggest formal training in combat.

Settlements

The apparent absence of any fortifications or refuge sites throughout the entire Jōmon – more than 10,000 years – is striking and suggests the absence of organised warfare, that is, large-scale armed conflict between polities/communities. The only Jōmon site with a surrounding ditch is Shizukawa in southern Hokkaido, but the fact that only two pit buildings were found inside the ditch may suggest a function unrelated to violence. What is assumed to be a large, raised-floor ceremonial structure at the Sannai Maruyama site (Aomori) may have been a watchtower. While perhaps not unique, this apparent lack of fortifications does seem unusual, for example in contrast to the complex hunter-fisher-gatherers of North America.

Yayoi settlements with ditches appear during the Initial phase at the Naka and Etsuji sites (Fukuoka). Inside the ditch of the latter, houses of Korean (Songgukri) type have been found. Ditched settlements continue to be built during the Early Yayoi, for example at Itazuke, Ishizaki Magarita and Nabatake in Fukuoka and Saga prefectures. At Itazuke, the V-shaped ditch is fully preserved and totally enclosed the village in an oval measuring 110 metres from north to south and 81 metres from east to west. The ditch’s width varies between 1.5 metres and 4.5 metres and its depth ranges between 0.7 metres and 2.3 metres. Each side of the ditch was bordered with an earthen bank. There is only one interruption (4 m wide) in the south-west to allow passage. An inner ditch delimitates a small area in the north-west part of the village containing storage pits. The ditch was no longer used during the Middle Yayoi occupation of the site.

In his study of Japanese enclosed settlements of the Yayoi and Early Kofun periods, Arbousse-Bastide found that 18 per cent of the sites in his database (600 sites) date from the Initial and Early Yayoi, about 35 per cent from the Middle Yayoi, 44 per cent from the Late Yayoi and only 3 per cent from the Early Kofun. The majority (70.5 per cent) of the sites

are situated at relatively elevated altitudes on plateaus, hills or river terraces. The ditches, which can be simple or multiple, are mainly curvilinear with V-shaped or trapezoidal profiles. Their dimensions range from 10 metres to several kilometres of circumference (depending on site preservation and extent of excavation), 3 metres to 5 metres in width and 1 metre to 3 metres in depth. While banks are rarely preserved more than 5 centimetres to a metre in height, they are clearly evidenced. They are situated outside or inside the ditch, the latter especially on multiple ditched sites. It is inferred that most of the sites had wooden fences atop the banks’ summits, there being numerous examples of defensive stakes planted on the trapezoidal ditch’s side, such as at Yoshinogari. In sites on the plains, the ditches could be seasonally flooded, such as at Karako-Kagi (Nara). The entrance gates were generally simple, comprising an interruption in the ditch and the bank flanked with two large postholes for a wooden door. Sometimes the ditch is not interrupted and a wooden footbridge allows passage. Some chicanes are known, as in the north entrance of Yoshinogari, and consisted of an additional L-shaped ditch. Watchtowers are attested to at Yoshinogari, where they are built over bastions protecting the Late Yayoi settlement. Twelve éperons barrés (promontory forts) are known, especially in the Inland Sea area (Yamaguchi and Ehime prefectures), dating from the Middle and Late Yayoi. These forts were clearly built to watch and defend important trading routes between Kyushu and the Osaka and Nara plains.

Construction of the Warrior’s Image and the Symbolism of Weapons

From an iconographic point of view, the Yayoi people have left us few traces of their artistic production. The few human representations we have are of hunting scenes or representations of individuals wearing costumes that have been interpreted as ‘shamans’ performing ‘rituals’. There are a few representations of armed individuals on some bronze bells (dōtaku) and pottery. For example, a jar from the Shimizukaze site (Nara) has an incised scene on the shoulder depicting two human figures each holding a shield and a halberd and wearing a possible feathered cap associated with images of a raised-floor building, a wounded deer and four fish. However, images of warriors are rare among Yayoi human representations. This contrasts with many societies where the importance of warfare or of violence in the elites’ system...

In the Yayoi, such representations of warriors can mostly be seen in tombs. In northern Kyushu during the Middle and Late Yayoi periods, bronze and iron weapons are associated with elite groups whose tombs were constructed apart from the burials of commoners, which did not contain any such prestige goods. In western Japan outside Kyushu, these weapons are generally not found in tombs until the end of the Late Yayoi, even if bronze was known and used to make large bronze bells and bronze weapons (swords and halberds) that were buried in hoards, sometimes with bells, as at the Kōjindani site in Shimane. These hoards are generally interpreted as ‘ritual’ deposits, but the standardisation in size of the 358 bronze swords seen at Kōjindani also suggests that they may have been used as a proto-currency in trade and exchange.

During the Late Yayoi period in Kyushu, while bronze weapons disappeared and were replaced by iron weapons, very large bronze spearheads were produced. These spearheads are too soft to have been used as weapons due to the high lead content in the alloy, and are clearly symbolic. The fact that their distribution in the western Inland Sea area is mutually exclusive with that of the bronze bells which were produced in the Kinai (Kyoto-Nara) area and distributed in the eastern Inland Sea area is remarkable and a sign that both were used as political symbols and/or prestige goods.\footnote{M. J. Hudson, ‘Rice, Bronze, and Chieftains: An Archaeology of Yayoi Ritual’, \textit{Japanese Journal of Religious Studies} 19 (1992), 139–89.}

It is also interesting to note that in the richest tombs of the Yayoi period, the most numerous grave goods are Chinese bronze mirrors. For example, in the Fukuoka prefecture, the Mikumo Minami Shōji i tomb produced thirty-five mirrors with one bronze sword, two bronze spearheads and one bronze halberd. The Middle Yayoi Suku Okamoto D tomb produced about thirty bronze mirrors, five bronze spearheads, two bronze swords and one bronze halberd. In the Late Yayoi, thirty-nine bronze mirrors and only one iron sword were found from the Hirabaru tomb. The leaders of these communities seem to have had a dual role and image: one more ‘spiritual’, symbolised by the bronze mirrors, and one more ‘warlike’, symbolised by the weapons.
Agriculture and Violence in the Japanese Islands

Since at least the 1980s it has been widely accepted by Japanese archaeologists that agriculture was the primary cause of the growth in the scale of warfare and violence in the archipelago from the first millennium BCE. This process is usually explained in economic terms: farming saw an increase in population which in turn led to conflicts over imbalances between available resources and mouths to feed. If, however, the Jōmon period also witnessed at least some phases during which resource affluence led to population increases and considerable social complexity, then should not similar conflicts have also occurred during that period? Warfare was certainly common in the affluent foraging societies of the North Pacific that are often compared to the Jōmon. Jōmon villages were also quite sedentary, and the use of cultivated plants appears to have been more common in the Jōmon than in most other North Pacific hunter-gatherer societies. If Jōmon populations were already engaged in early forms of agriculture, then should not warfare have been a significant element in the Jōmon period?

In the first chapter of this volume Steven LeBlanc argues that human populations including hunter-gatherers will always increase until carrying capacity is exceeded and that increased violence and warfare is associated with the ensuing resource conflicts. High mortality from violence has been demonstrated in a Venezuelan hunter-gatherer group but a long-term analysis of hunter-gatherer demography in western North America concluded, contra LeBlanc, that forager populations adjusted to changing climatic conditions. Significant chronological changes in Jōmon population levels are known especially from eastern Japan; the causes of such changes have long been debated but there is currently no evidence that violence was associated with this population pressure.

32 Matsugi, Hito wa naze tatakau, pp. 12–17.
36 See e.g. Takamune Kawashima, ‘Social Change at the End of the Middle Jōmon: A Perspective from Resilience Theory’, *Documenta Praehistorica* 40 (2013), 227–32.
The relationship between Jōmon food production and violence is rarely discussed in the literature but is an important problem in the comparative study of the origins of warfare. In attempting to explain the apparent contradiction of Jōmon peaceful affluence, Matsugi proposes ideological factors: just as the Jōmon people knew about but avoided adopting full-scale agriculture, it is suggested they made a cultural decision to defuse resource conflicts by other (unspecified) means and avoided full-scale warfare. The problem with this explanation is the scale – both temporal and spatial – over which it must be applied, and the comparative homogeneity in Jōmon world view and socio-political structure that it implies. Any group that chose a different route, one of conquest and expansion, would be expected to profit immensely, at least initially. Why, then, do we not seem to see evidence of this strategy? Keith Otterbein has argued that raiding and warfare hinder or even prevent plant domestication, a proposal that may be consistent with the Jōmon evidence.

In a contrasting approach, however, Robert Rowthorn and Paul Seabright have modelled the transition to farming as a type of prisoner’s dilemma wherein the increased costs of defending agricultural resources and facilities led to the rapid spread of that economic system. Note that in this last model, societies develop a greater potential for organised violence even if the actual prevalence of warfare does not always increase.

In Japanese archaeology, the appearance of elite individuals is often interpreted within a Marxist framework whereby community work in rice paddies needs considerable labour and organisation to create embankments and irrigation systems and that, as a result, some individuals might have been nominated as ‘mediators’ between communities to deal with conflicts related to land and surpluses. These individuals would eventually acquire more and more authority and power, developing symbols and manipulating violence and oppression to consolidate that power. As we saw above, obvious traces of Yayoi period conflict are found on skeletons from northern Kyushu to the Kinai area and, considering the importance of an increasing population during the Middle Yayoi and the limited size of the agricultural plains, such conflicts must have been inevitable. At the same time, moated settlements develop, some with very sophisticated defence systems, and the first bronze artifacts appear.

37 Matsugi, Hito wa naze tatakau, pp. 17–21.
38 Keith Otterbein, How War Began (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004).
weapons begin to appear in tombs. However, traces of violence in a given
area do not necessarily mean that the chiefs of that area established their
authority through violence or that they tried to win or extend that authority
with violence, nor that there were recurring and organised conflicts or even
well-trained armies.

Conclusions

This brief overview demonstrates that violence has always been a feature of
human social life in Japan from the very earliest colonisation of the islands. 
Nakao and colleagues propose a figure of 1.8 per cent mortality from violence
in the Jōmon period. This figure is lower than in a number of other pre-
historic societies, yet it is certainly not insignificant, particularly as it is very
likely to be a minimum estimate. This is both because cases of violent trauma
may be under-reported, and also because only a subset of individuals dying
violently will display skeletal evidence, most notably in the case of projectile
injuries. The contexts in which violence – whatever its prevalence – occurred
in the Jōmon period remain far from clear. It is noteworthy that the two
above-mentioned lethal cranial injuries from Jōmon Hokkaido are found on
females rather than males, but then the expectation that it is primarily males
who are affected by conflict in small-scale societies is clearly unwarranted.41 Is
this, then, evidence of domestic violence? Alternatively, the targeting of
women and children in acts of revenge and retaliation is a recurrent feature
of inter-group conflict in small-scale societies. While often cited as an emic
motivation for conflict, however, it is debatable how well revenge serves as
an ultimate explanation and there may be underlying socio-political/eco-

41 R. J. Schulting and L. Fibiger, ‘Violence in Neolithic North-West Europe: A Population
Perspective’, in A. Whittle and P. Bickle (eds.), Early Farmers: The View from Archaeology
42 R. B. Ferguson, ‘Explaining War’, in J. Haas (ed.), The Anthropology of War (Cambridge:
archaeologists, resources such as land, water and iron were the main source of conflict in the Yayoi period. Chiefdom-like political units fought each other for influence in a process that became even more violent in the following Kofun period when new military technologies introduced from the Asian continent completely transformed the nature of warfare in Japan.

Bibliographic Essay


PART II

* PREHISTORIC AND ANCIENT WARFARE
Slaughter and Celebration in a Nilotic Context

Although the culture of ancient Egypt was centred on the Nile Valley, the Upper Egyptian proto-kingdom (c. 3250–3100 BCE) out of which dynastic Egypt developed was itself the child of interactions between desert dwelling groups and their Nilotic counterparts during the fifth and fourth millennia BCE. Already during the Naqada I period (c. 4000–3500 BCE) – the first of a continuous sequence of cultural phases leading directly to the First Dynasty and the birth of the unified Egyptian state – representations of human conflict appear as the ritually interpreted counterparts to activities within and involving the animal world. Iconographic allusions to military activity more frequently reference the results of warfare, even the ritualised presentation of captives, than dwelling upon any specifics of the conflict itself.

This early ritualisation of warfare, and its depiction, recurs throughout the iconography and literary descriptions of the roughly three millennia of the ‘pharaonic’ state. Even a hymnic royal text of the late second millennium BCE could blithely reference the public display of trophies of bloody conflict as counterparts of animal sacrifice in the context of the ritual setting that more often than not masks the reality of ancient Egyptian warfare: ‘How pleasant is your going forth to Thebes, / your chariot bending from the severed hands, / foreign chiefs pinioned bird-like before you’. The description of the return of the conquering pharaonic hero in the Ramesside text P. Anastasi II 5, 3–4 reveals the often fleeting recognition of violence and gore in Egyptian texts and images, almost always represented as the messy but necessary prelude to a resulting celebration of the militarily ensured triumph of Nilotic order over foreign chaos.
Hunting and Warfare

During the fourth millennium BCE Upper Egyptian iconography reveals an equation of warfare and hunting. A canid predator (more rarely a feline) may follow groups of animals (or a single object of prey) and represent human agency; a depiction of the animal object of human ritual hunting, beset by canids, may balance an image of the zoomorphic royal domination of a human enemy, the latter also receiving the label of an addax, a symbol of sacrifice.1 Scenes of complex rituals incorporating hunting and sacrifice from the end of the Naqada II period (in both Egypt and Nubia, c. 3250 BCE) include images of human conflict and its results, and a later pharaonic artist could describe his competence in terms of the paired icons of hunting and warfare.2 Such juxtapositions appear on the monuments of New Kingdom Egypt – on the towers of the first pylon of the mortuary temple of Ramesses III (c. 1184–1153 BCE) at Medinet Habu, on the west bank of ancient Thebes, scenes of the ruler smiting his enemies on the front (east) faces of the towers have counterparts in a scene of military activity on the back of the north tower, and a scene of the king hunting bulls on the back of the south tower.

Ritualised hunting and capture of certain desert game by elite members of Predynastic society, and the return of those animals for proper sacrifice in a Nilotic setting, with depiction of those activities on both the desert rock surfaces and on the bodies of some of the participants, enacted a process of Niloticisation of the desert.3 The activities of hunting and sacrifice, many focusing on annual festivals, imposed ritual order on the natural world, symbolically expanding the ordered cosmos. The earliest Egyptian depictions of human conflict insert subjugated foes into the role of sacrificial animal,

providing the template for much of the imagery, iconography and later literature of pharaonic warfare. As late as the New Kingdom, major military campaigns could coincide with hunting expeditions. At the dawn of the New Kingdom an association of a hunting expedition with military activity appears to be in place, a grouping repeated throughout the first half of the Eighteenth Dynasty. So Thutmosis I (c. 1504–1492 BCE) in northern Syria fought a battle with human enemies from Mitanni (northern Mesopotamia) and hunted elephants in Niye; Thutmosis III (c. 1479–1425 BCE) on northern campaign repeated the hunting of elephants in Niye, and added as an aside to a campaign in Nubia the hunt of rhinoceros.

Combat in Rituals and Festivals

Combat rituals celebrating the Egyptian subjugation of foreigners were associated with a number of religious festivals and celebrations, appearing in the festival cycle in evidence already during the late Predynastic period and later including the Jubilee (reaffirmation of royal power after ideally thirty years on the throne) and the New Kingdom durbar celebrations. With the reign of Amenhotep II (c. 1427–1400 BCE), and the replacement of the routine military campaigning of his father Thutmosis III with a more stable satellite state in Nubia and regular diplomatic relations with the ancient Near East, scenes of ritualised foreign presentation of tribute appear as an icon of pharaonic universalism. Just as the image of the sporting king replaced the truly militarily active ruler of the earlier Eighteenth Dynasty, so displays of competitive physical prowess appear in the form of sporting matches accompanying festivals, including those of foreign tribute.


183
In scenes of wrestling and stick fighting from the Ramesside period, Egyptian soldiers fight foreigners (perhaps themselves in Egyptian service, performing a role in non-lethal combat); the speeches recorded for the Egyptian participants in the matches are in keeping with the non-lethal nature of the activities, and add a light-hearted aspect to the engagements.\(^8\) Maintaining an association of ritual animal sacrifice and the subjugation of foreigners within later, New Kingdom contexts, fattened cattle for sacrifice could wear between their horns representations of the heads of foreign enemies, small hands attached to the tips of the arm-like horns, the sacrifice of the bovid becoming the symbolic elimination of an icon of foreign power.\(^9\)

In depictions of celebration of Egyptian domination of foreign regions – so in both the \textit{durbar} scenes of Tutankhamun’s (c. 1336–1327 BCE) viceroy of Nubia, and in Horemheb’s (c. 1323–1295 BCE) depiction of the celebrations surrounding the victorious return of a successful Egyptian campaign into Nubia – foreign prisoners may contrast with presumably Egyptianised members of that same foreign region taking prominent roles in the celebration of Egyptian victory and domination. More physically violent, the punishment of foreign enemies may appear as a magical mirroring in the punishment of Egyptian malefactors, with the forks of a pillory post terminating in the heads of foreign enemies. Similarly, on execration figurines, names of foreign enemies and Egyptian rebels and criminals may appear, evidence of the essential equation of all outside the social norm.\(^10\)

No Egyptian religious texts describe any concept of innate evil within humans or the cosmos, although people are capable of wickedness;\(^11\)
combat is thus a means of maintaining an equilibrium and expanding the realm of ultimate order – Egypt – against the outer chaos – the region on the edge of which foreign lands teeter. Textually, enemies appear as overwhelmingly bad, animalistic and chaotic, yet their natures and the actions taken against them usually appear in a formalised language employing a limited number of generalising terms. Inscriptions of soldiers stress more martial prowess and the capture of prisoners than any overt bloodlust.

Rituals of foreign execration and criminal execution may appear during the Early Dynastic period, with the apparent beheading of enemies, perhaps subsequent to a smiting ritual. At the Middle Kingdom Egyptian fortress of Mirgissa, on the Second Cataract in Nubia, a beheaded body, buried in sand with crucibles to represent the fiery punishment of the damned, broken ritual vessels, and execution figures, appears to represent the use of an actual execution within the context of magical practice. The king might threaten a foreign ruler with death by fire (attested to by rebels), perhaps related to the burning of execution figures. The destruction of a donkey, a typhonic animal symbolising chaotic forces and opposition to cosmic order, could also represent the control of enemies both human and more elemental. Even in the standardised depictions of bound foreigners, the ropes tortuously wrapped around the captives’ upper arms are perhaps more evidence of enemies compared to sacrificial birds than representations of actual
constraints, the latter attested in visual and textual references to manacles and sticks bound to neck and wrists.\textsuperscript{17}

The close association between ritual and warfare continues into the New Kingdom, with cosmological concepts influencing how the Egyptians displayed the results, if not practice, of warfare. Thutmose I suspended the body of a Nubian leader – killed by the Egyptian ruler himself – from the prow of his vessel during his return to Egypt. Hanging inverted, the corpse of the enemy suffers the inversion of the damned so commonly depicted in the Netherworld Books of New Kingdom Egypt; as the royal vessel appears about to sail over him, the Nubian becomes a literal depiction of the defeated chaos serpent Apep, eternally defeated and overridden by the bark of the triumphant solar deity.\textsuperscript{18} Having personally killed seven rulers of Takhsy (northern Beqaa Valley) by means of his mace, Amenhotep II – mirroring Thutmose I – suspended their inverted bodies from the prow of his royal falcon-bark; six of the bodies eventually hung from the wall of Thebes, the seventh from the wall of Napata in Nubia.\textsuperscript{19} A western Asiatic enemy ruler within a cage suspended from the yardarm of an Egyptian vessel during the reign of Tutankhamun evokes the imagery of ritualised fishing and fowling,\textsuperscript{20} which could symbolise the subjugation of enemies both personal and cosmic within both royal and private spheres. Captives can also appear as though strapped to the cab, yoke and horses of the royal chariot, with others trailing behind on ropes, evoking functional


elements of the chariot – such as lynch pins – that could be carved in the shape of the heads of foreign enemies.  

Icons of Power: The Ruler Smites his Enemies and Tramples them Beneath his Soles

In place by the late Naqada II period, with harbingers during Naqada I, and persisting into the Roman period, a scene of the ruler grasping a kneeling enemy, or several foes, and raising a weapon – usually a mace – as though about to smite what he grasps, serves as the principle icon of victory.  

Originating in the discoidal and pear-shaped maces of the Predynastic period, the pear-shaped mace survives as the most common weapon symbolising royal domination through violent action. The image of a single triumphant figure violently establishing order over his foes represents a focus on the ruler that develops during the Protodynastic period. The mace may early appear as the disembodied representation of royal power, and a bow or a boat may become a personified agent of domination, obviating the need for anthropomorphic representations of the early ruler. Continuing the association of warfare and hunting, a ruler may smite a theriomorphic manifestation of chaos in the same manner as that in which he smites the depiction of a human enemy.  

A depiction of a male figure wielding a mace above the head of a bound prisoner (or group of prisoners) recognisably appears at the end of the Naqada II period (as a small vignette within a larger scene of

ritual events), and again during Naqada III (as a more prominent element within a depiction of what may be a ritual celebration of the aftermath of a conflict).\textsuperscript{25} In both of those examples the event occurs outside of battle, within a ritual context, and the same striking pose could appear in other rituals as a consecratory gesture.\textsuperscript{26} Evidence from bodies of soldiers dating to the early Twelfth Dynasty suggests that such a blow was indeed given as a \textit{coup de grâce} to hopelessly wounded combatants, and at least some versions of the smiting scene may have been acted out within a ritual setting.\textsuperscript{27} The reigns of both Akhenaton and Merneptah indeed provide evidence for the revelation of royal victory going beyond the display of corpses to the otherwise rarely attested use of impalement of defeated enemy leaders.

According to the texts and iconography of pharaonic power, Egyptian deities both sanctioned warfare and influenced the Egyptians’ martial success. By the New Kingdom the Egyptian ruler clearly derives his authority to make war from the gods, who present him with a weapon – usually a sickle sword – while the king adopts the smiting pose; this presentation is common in iconography, and is even attested to as the subject of a dream appearance of the god Ptah. The divine ruler himself would also trample enemies beneath his feet. The bases of statues, the pavements of ritual structures and palaces, and the soles of sandals could bear images of bound enemies, and the handle of a royal sceptre might take the form of an enemy bent in the back-breaking pose of the object of the king’s wrath in the gesture of \textit{waf-khasout}, ‘bending back the foreign lands’.\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{26} Arno Egberts, \textit{In Quest of Meaning: A Study of the Ancient Egyptian Rites of Consecrating the Meret-Chests and Driving the Calves 1}, Egyptologische Uitgaven 8/1 (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1995), pp. 54–7.


Combat in Earnest

Although evidence for human conflict during a time of climatic change is present in the form of ‘overkilled’ human remains from a Palaeolithic cemetery at Gebel Sahaba in Nubia (at least 11,600 years ago), the earliest continuous and iconographically informative evidence for the imagery of human conflict begins in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia around the cusp of the fifth and fourth millennia BCE. Parallel to the ritual equation of hunting and warfare, organised conflict in ancient Egypt emphasised speed and manoeuvre over the clash of major opposing forces that would underpin hoplite battles of the second half of the first millennium BCE. This general eschewing of shock tactics led to the increased employment of mercenaries, particularly during later phases of the Pharaonic period, with resulting implications for Egyptian society. Nevertheless, military training could be violent itself, and may have involved considerable exercise in hand-to-hand combat, along with the development of the physical stamina necessary for rapid movement over long distances. Scenes in the Middle Kingdom tomb of Baket at Beni Hasan show what appear to be 220 different wrestling positions/holds, in decoration that depicts military activity that involves the storming of a fortified position.

Both the pictorial evidence and human remains suggest that the majority of injuries resulting from both projectile weapons and the crushing blows of close combat were to the chest and abdomen. Although not referenced in any royal monument, conflicts both within Egypt and on the periphery thereof could take the form of a monomachy.

(duel) between champions. Nevertheless, in scenes and laudatory texts, the king ultimately battles directly against the enemy leader, all other combat seemingly incidental. A victory hymn of Old Kingdom date suggests that a truly successful campaign involved both defeat of the enemy and the safe return of the Egyptian force. No ancient Egyptian source expresses reluctance to kill the enemy, although a scribal text (in P. Lansing) suggests that Egyptian soldiers could be discomfited by care for prisoners. Soldiers may have waded amongst the dead and dying, dispatching the latter (in reality perhaps as the result of medical triage, for which Papyrus Edwin Smith may be a surviving manual), but plunder during the battle appears only in a negative light.

After the battle, the collection of booty is the source of long and monumentally memorialised lists. Although dismemberment as deconstruction of the damned appears throughout the New Kingdom Netherworld Books, the only well-attested and sanctioned application of mutilation to an enemy on the battlefield is the New Kingdom tradition of removing a hand from an apparently deceased opponent as proof of a kill; a soldier might carry the hands gruesomely transfixed on his spear. From their Libyan opponents, Ramesside period Egyptian soldiers might similarly remove the phallus and testicles, perhaps at once a reference to what for the Egyptians was the odd appearance of the uncircumcised Libyans, and a graphically physical attestation of the defeat of enemies likened to the elimination of their ‘seed’. For presentation of such trophies, a combatant might receive the ‘gold of valour’. In addition to allowing for a tally of the enemy slain, the severed body parts could have formed part of a display of victory in Egypt. Texts make occasional allusions to the painting of the body with the blood of enemies, but the contexts are those of royal epithets and the symbolic toilet of the personification of the city of Thebes as warrior goddess.

Egyptian military scenes do not often emphasise sufferings of the enemy populace or punishment of the defeated, except in smiting scenes. The reigns of Akhenaton and Merneptah provide evidence for the impaling of enemy commanders – the former following a relatively small raid led by the viceroy of Kush against an Eastern Desert group apparently threatening the gold-mining regions, the latter following a large battle resulting from a Libyan invasion of Egypt.\(^{37}\) The Egyptian idiom, ‘placed atop a stake’, does not indicate whether living bodies or corpses were involved. The treatment is otherwise attested for Egyptian criminals,\(^{38}\) and reveals – as do the earlier execration texts – that all those outside of \textit{maat} (cosmic order), both Egyptians and foreigners, could expect similarly damning treatment. From the reign of Ramesses III, depictions of the attempted land invasion by elements of the ‘Sea Peoples’ attacking Egypt show the families of the invaders, transported in great carts alongside the invading military force, coming under attack by pharaonic troops.

Egyptian forces could employ food as a weapon, both during internal Egyptian struggles and foreign campaigns. Devastation of foreign vegetation probably provides the background to the trees appearing alongside foreign animal resources on the Predynastic ‘Libyan Palette’, and appears again in the iconography of Ramesside warfare, devastation of foreign landscapes corresponding to the destruction of enemy fortifications.\(^{39}\) A Middle Kingdom rock inscription from Nubia describes a scorched earth policy in which an Egyptian military force burns both dwellings and food supplies of the Nubian foe, part of a general royal approach.\(^{40}\) The Nubian King Piye (c. 744–714 BCE), during his subjugation of the northern portions of Egypt at the time of the establishment of Twenty-fifth Dynasty hegemony, could bemoan the plight of horses discovered in a besieged city, although this appears as part of a royal reproach against an enemy ruler; the tribulations of the human population receive no attention, as apparently they are perceived as having


brought it on themselves by opposing the victorious Piye and thus set themselves against the cosmic order.

**Transition of Foreigners from Agents and Objects of Violence to Members of Society**

Foreign acculturation could be the result of voluntary submission to the Egyptian ruler and subsequent passing through the status of hem-servant – a process that could involve participation in work details – a class from which unacculturated foreigners remain separate. Passage through hem-status as a means of Egyptianisation would also be the path of the properly instructed prisoner of war. In pictorial representations of the fate of captives, the process of acculturation of prisoners of war marks a boundary between the unrestrained behaviour of the foreign captives and corresponding violence meted out to them by their Egyptian captors, and the ordered behaviour of the pacified and properly Egyptianised – albeit suitably deferential – foreigners and their now allied fellow Egyptians. This need not necessarily be an egalitarian process; the concept of working into a civilised state, predicated on an assumption of a native idleness, figures in arguments for forced labour in viceregal Mexico, where the concept of the New World natives as *persona miserable* corresponds to the common Egyptian use of the adjective ‘wretched’ describing Nubia and Nubians. Acculturation through military service could involve a physical change such as branding, circumcision, the learning of Egyptian and ultimately the acquisition of land.


The foreigners could, at the same time, retain a peculiar identity in auxiliary military units.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{Women and War}

Although the Egyptian ruler could view Egypt’s foreign opponents ‘as women’, foreign women fare better than men in Egyptian descriptions and depictions of warfare; so Asiatic women care for their panicked and injured male compatriots in late Old Kingdom imagery, and in a description of a Seventeenth Dynasty Theban attack on the Hyksos capital only Hyksos women make some appearance on the enemy palace walls and sound the alarm.\textsuperscript{46} In iconography, female captives do not appear as restrained, although the Late Egyptian story of the \textit{Capture of Joppa} appears to refer to both sexes as handcuffed. No reference to the rape of enemies appears in either texts or iconography, suggesting that sexual violence was not an ideologically encouraged aspect of warfare.\textsuperscript{47}

The female Egyptian ruler, who does not visually participate in domination of foreigners in earlier imagery, becomes an active participant during the late Eighteenth Dynasty. The early queens of the Eighteenth Dynasty appear to have exercised a more than ceremonial role in military matters and foreign relations. During a period of particularly well-attested and elaborate diplomatic letter exchanges, the queen (Nefertiti) may appear in the pose of smiting foreign women, might stand behind the king in a smiting scene brandishing her own weapon (Ankhesenamun), and could even appear in the guise of a female sphinx trampling foreign women.\textsuperscript{48}


\textsuperscript{46} Manassa, \textit{Imagining the Past}, pp. 91–4.


Violence and Warfare in Egyptian Literature

The earliest literary descriptions of military activity appear in autobiographical inscriptions in non-royal tombs of the late Old Kingdom, with royal self-presentation all but absent prior to the reign of Monthuhotep II (c. 2061–2010 BCE) at the dawn of the Middle Kingdom (late Eleventh Dynasty). The advent of fictional literature in the Twelfth Dynasty expanded the possible genres in which the ancient Egyptians could expostulate upon warfare and violence, although in the extant corpus from the Middle Kingdom those two themes appear only rarely. In the Story of Sinuhe the protagonist, who has fled from Egypt into Syria-Palestine after overhearing news of the death (and possible assassination) of Amenemhat I, engages in single combat with the ‘hero of Retjenu’, a designation that alludes to formulae employed in execration rituals.49 The duel between Sinuhe and the hero of Retjenu, vividly described in near royal terms, is a prearranged event. The man of Retjenu attacks Sinuhe in the Egyptian’s own encampment; Sinuhe’s victory – the triumph of Egyptian archery over the javelins and close combat weapons of his foe – enables the Egyptian to carry out the very actions his foreign opponent had threatened to enact (after piercing the neck of the Syrian with an arrow, Sinuhe leaps upon his dying foe and delivers the mortal blow with his attacker’s own battle-axe). In contrast to the single combat between Sinuhe and the hero of Retjenu, which appears mimetic by comparison, the Instruction of Merikare employs the topos of the Asiatic forever in a state of combat, neither able to conquer nor be conquered, and who does not – thief-like – announce the day of fighting.

Another textual genre that develops during the early Middle Kingdom and sees its full development in the New Kingdom is that of the ‘royal novel’.50 The term refers to a historical text centred on the person of the king, usually involving military activity, in which the king must respond to foreign aggression, often associated with consultation of a council. Inevitably the ruler rages against an act of foreign aggression – failure to acknowledge Egypt and to respect her borders are inherently hostile actions, even before any forces joining battle – and orders a response. Within the template of the

genre, some variation is possible, suggesting how actual events may be worked to fit within an established but somewhat malleable prototype. In at least one instance (the Nubian war of Sety I), the king’s order is to await the development of the enemy plans; in another (the Megiddo campaign of Thutmose III), an impetuous royal suggestion for a swift attack is countered by an ultimately honoured request to delay the onslaught so as not to leave the rearguard of the army in a potentially dangerous situation. The royal novel genre displays an Egyptian penchant for presenting and interpreting events within ideologically informed templates, consistent with their view of the duality of time, a linear form progressing within and reinforcing the cosmic relevance of cyclical time, in which unique and personal events echo and foreshadow the repetitions of order triumphant. It is probably a literary reflection of what we see in the Early Dynastic (and possibly Predynastic) period in which festivals occur in conjunction with historical events, and at times involving actors within those very events.

With harbingers in the semi-fictionalised frame story of the earlier royal novel, a new literary tradition emerges during the New Kingdom (particularly the Ramesside period), and an innovative genre – historical fiction – develops, which focuses almost exclusively on conflict and combat. Even in the small corpus of historical fiction – only four tales are partially extant – the level of violence within the narrative varies dramatically, from taunting letter-writing to a siege that results in no casualties (Egyptian or foreign) to fictional portrayals of battles.

The surviving iconographic and textual evidence from ancient Egypt reveals an essential equation of warfare and hunting as parallel and necessarily repeated means of ensuring and demonstrating the triumph of order over chaos. Both texts and scenes emphasise the successful outcome of this eternal conflict, often obscuring historical detail and all but eliminating details of the bloody reality of military conflict. As the Egyptian ruler was both the chief administrator and supreme priest, the image of the ruler and the icon of the king smiting his bound and helpless enemies loom large. While public execution may have occurred at least on occasions, the Egyptian representation of warfare veils the details of the shock of combat and the gruesome results thereof behind the image of a recurring triumph of order over chaotic forces. This template of *maat*-order appears also to allow even traditional enemies to enter Egyptian society after acknowledging the supremacy of Egypt, enabling the Egyptians to avoid – at least until late in pharaonic civilisation – the complete demonisation of foreigners and military opponents.
Bibliographic Essay

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Recent Advances in the Archaeology of Maya Warfare

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Explorers of the early nineteenth century, such as John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, speculated that Maya society had been dominated by kings and warriors, just as other ancient civilisations had been. In addition, violent activities are frequently mentioned in early colonial accounts. Yet despite this, Mayanist interest in these themes has been lacking until quite recently.¹ Classic period Maya society (c. 250–1000 CE) was depicted in some popular works as comprising peaceful theocracies governed by priests from vacant ceremonial centres. Violence and warfare, when they did occur, were assumed to be limited largely to ritually motivated human sacrifice and raids for acquiring sacrificial victims, and did not include material motivations such as territorial gain. However, the tide began to turn with the discovery of the Bonampak murals, decipherment of hieroglyphs and demonstration by Tatiana Proskouriakoff that Classic period monuments often record the military exploits of Mayan rulers.² Additional evidence came from field studies, some of which documented the construction of defensive fortifications early in Maya history.

Since approximately 1980 the pace of research into violence has increased considerably. Interest in the many iconographic depictions of sacrifice and war has burgeoned. A growing number of archaeological projects have been aimed explicitly at investigating the material evidence of such activities, such as defensible settlement patterns, defensive architecture, deliberate destruction of structures and monuments, artefact assemblages that suggest rapid abandonment, abrupt changes in material culture and weapons. Maya burial patterns are also figuring in arguments for the occurrence of violence.

Despite a rapidly accruing body of data and the growing recognition of warfare’s importance in cultural developments throughout Maya history, there is still much disagreement over a number of fundamental aspects of Maya warfare, such as who participated, how it was conducted, the scale of conflicts and what the motivations were. This chapter provides a brief synthesis of our current knowledge and controversies in the field. New findings produced by a diverse array of methods and specialists are placed side by side and situated within their chronological and regional context. As comprehensive reviews of the study of Maya war are available elsewhere, the goal here is instead to fill in areas that have seen recent advances, in particular new archaeological evidence on the Pre-classic roots of Maya warfare, epigraphic advances showing the complexity of geopolitics during the Classic in particular involving the Kaanul Snake kingdom, Post-classic mass burials and contact period war among the Maya and between the Maya and the Spanish. First, however, I begin with a brief overview of who the Maya are, the geographic region they have inhabited for over three thousand years, the periods under study and general patterns in how they conducted warfare.

Who Are the Maya?

The Maya are the largest group of indigenous peoples inhabiting modern-day southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador and western Honduras, numbering approximately 6 million people. Thirty-two distinct yet related Mayan languages have been identified. The most common today is Yukateko, which is spoken in the Yucatan Peninsula. The speakers of Yukateko referred to themselves as ‘Maya’ at the time of the arrival of the Spanish, but the term did not apply to any other group. The ancient Maya were never unified politically under a single empire. Instead, the Maya territories were organised into mutually competing city-states. Some of the larger cities, such as Tikal and Calakmul, which may have been inhabited by as many as 100,000 people at their peak during the Classic period, did exert some level of control over a number of subordinate sites. While we do not know whether the ancient Maya conceived of themselves as being related, extensive archaeological research has documented close cultural and genetic ties extending back several millennia.

Maya history may be broken down into time periods, as shown in Table 9.1. The initial colonisation of the Americas took place during the Palaeoindian

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3 E.g. Webster, ‘Not So Peaceful Civilization’.
period by nomadic peoples following a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. While its exact timing and nature is the subject of some controversy, the most popular theory holds that populations in modern-day Siberia crossed into Alaska near the end of the Pleistocene via the now submerged Bering land bridge that was exposed owing to much lower sea levels at that time. The oldest evidence for human occupation in the Americas that has wide acceptance by the scientific community comes from Monte Verde in southern Chile and dates back approximately 14,800 years. The oldest evidence for human occupation in the Maya area is nearly as ancient. In 2007 divers exploring the extensive underwater caverns of Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula discovered a nearly complete human skeleton that has been dated to between 12,000 and 13,000 years BCE. While the subsequent Archaic period lacks evidence of permanent settlements, agriculture was gradually adopted by these nomadic peoples, with squash, corn, beans and chilli peppers among the earliest cultivars. Some consider the introduction of maize farming in the region, which occurred at least 4,000 years ago, to also reflect the arrival of the first Mayan-speaking peoples, while others interpret the widespread adoption of pottery and settled village life after 1000 BCE in the Middle Preclassic period to reflect the original entry of Maya in the region.

The Maya area is at the south-eastern end of the larger culture area of Mesoamerica which extends as far north as the deserts of northern Mexico. Mesoamerica was one of the few regions globally to witness the independent rise of state-level society and the invention of writing, and was one of the major population centres of the ancient world. The peoples of Mesoamerica

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display immense cultural as well as genetic variability. The two best-known Mesoamerican groups are the Maya and Nahua, the latter commonly referred to as the Aztec in popular works, though many more groups are present now and have been in the past. Despite the region’s great diversity its peoples share a number of common cultural aspects including the following: the belief that the world went through several failed creations before the current one; the belief that objects could have souls; the playing of games in ball courts with rubber balls; and the prominent place of corn, beans, squash, chilli peppers and cacao in the diet. The roots of many of these shared traits are often traced back to the Olmec, the makers of the colossal head stone sculptures at sites near the southern coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

Commonalities in the conduct of warfare are also apparent. As elsewhere, there were a number of important material as well as ritual motivations. Owing to the lack of draft animals, controlling large areas was logistically difficult; polities tended to wield hegemonic as opposed to territorial control. Rather than annihilate or directly administer opposing city-states, war was usually aimed at subordinating them to establish schemes of tribute, though these conventions sometimes broke down into more destructive conquest warfare, especially among the Terminal Classic period Maya. The oldest evidence for raiding and conquest in the region closely aligns with the first appearance of settled villages and states, respectively, providing support for models stressing the key role of warfare in the advent of socio-political complexity.

Trophy taking and human sacrifice were practised throughout Mesoamerica and were intimately connected with warfare. Evidence from art, colonial documents and human remains indicates that trophies commonly included the head or parts of it, especially the facial skeleton and mandible, while long bones were sometimes made into musical instruments. With regard to human sacrifice, it is widely acknowledged that the capture of live victims to be brought back home for execution in public ceremonies was an important goal of warfare. The remains of sacrificial victims are often encountered in large mass graves recovered from public ceremonial spaces. Strontium and oxygen isotope analyses routinely find that these individuals are non-local, while elevated frequencies of healed injuries indicate that prior exposure to violence was common. The humiliation, torture and execution

of captives in public ceremonies had a variety of religious and social motivations. They commemorated the feats of leaders and warriors while also allowing non-combatants to share a common experience with them. Thus, while warfare waged against outside groups allowed for the pursuit of strategic goals such as gaining control over important trade routes, the commemorations that followed encouraged cohesion and the formation of a shared identity within the group.

Preclassic Period Maya Warfare

The earliest potential evidence of warfare in the Maya area dates to the time of the first settled villages in the region, the first half of the Middle Preclassic period (1000–700 BCE). These early full-time agriculturalists would have been interacting with neighbouring populations of hunter-gatherers whose life-ways differed markedly from their own. Recent discoveries from the site of Ceibal in the Pasión River region of the southern Maya lowlands in Guatemala have significantly advanced our knowledge of warfare and related activities during this early period. The evidence encountered includes the skeletal remains of three possible sacrificial victims, two of whom were infants while the third, an adult, had their arms behind their back as well as a war trophy in the form of a carved shell depicting a decapitated human head.7 These findings were made under the floor of the main ceremonial plaza. Thus, from its earliest manifestations, Maya warfare appears to have placed importance on trophy taking, violence in public ceremonies that commemorated warfare, and also the central roles of community leaders in the performance of these ceremonies and, possibly, the actual conduct of war.

The latter part of the Middle Preclassic period (700–400 BCE) exhibits a considerable increase in the number of permanent settlements, indicating that most populations were now sedentary. Greater cultural homogeneity is further indicated by the widespread adoption of Mamom pottery, which is ‘characterised by distinctive red, black, and cream slips, sometimes with a waxy tactile quality’.8 With this as the backdrop, archaeologists have encountered more evidence of warfare than in the preceding period, though it largely continues the focus on violence in public ceremonies that

8 Rice, Maya Calendar Origins, p. 150.
commemorate warfare, and which likely included war captives. It has been suggested that this focus on captive taking resulted from cultural homogeneity between the groups engaging in warfare which, in turn, encouraged the development of cultural regulations of battle conduct. Recently recovered evidence from Ceibal includes the dismembered remains of two children below the floor of the East Court and two adults in the Central Plaza. Post holes near the latter may have been for scaffolds that supported the victims’ bodies. A slightly later skeleton of an adult male from this site exhibits perimortem penetrating trauma of the left frontal and contained a fragment of an obsidian blade within the skull.\(^9\)

In the subsequent Late Preclassic period there is rapid growth in the number of permanent settlements. Analyses of the imagery in the recently discovered murals at the site of San Bartolo indicate that the institution of divine kingship was established by this time. El Mirador, which had the tallest pyramid and may have been the largest of all pre-Hispanic Maya sites, dates to this period. It dwarfed all contemporaneous sites and presided over a period of considerable cultural homogeneity, as reflected partly by the widespread distribution and degree of uniformity of pottery belonging to the Chicanel Ceramic Sphere. In this context of increasing socio-political complexity, archaeological evidence of warfare in the form of defensible settlement patterns, defensive architecture, mass burials and skeletal trauma grows in abundance and indicates further intensification of conflicts. Changes in settlement patterns at numerous sites indicate greater concern with site defensibility. In the Petexbatún Lake region, Middle Preclassic villages were situated at low elevations along the Pasión River, whereas in the Late Preclassic new settlements such as Aguateca were established on top of the escarpment.\(^10\) Walls, moats and/or fortifications were built around a number of sites, such as Becan and El Mirador in northern Petén.

Evidence in human skeletons of warfare-related violence also increases during this time. Two mass burials collectively representing the remains of forty-seven sacrificial victims were excavated under plaza floors at the site of Cuello in Belize.\(^11\) Several elements exhibit cut marks suggesting defleshing and dismemberment. These remains, nearly all of which pertain to males,


also exhibit a number of healed fractures of the skull and post-cranium, suggesting that some of these individuals had participated in violent activities, perhaps warfare, well before their deaths. Healed skull fractures reflecting engagement in interpersonal or inter-group conflict have also been reported in two males from the small northern lowland site of Misne located near modern-day Merida.\(^\text{12}\)

In summary, the evidence for warfare in the Preclassic period, while not extensive, has been slowly accumulating. The pattern beginning to emerge is that there is considerable time depth to several important aspects of Maya warfare that become clear in the subsequent Classic period. This includes the sacrifice of captives in public ceremonies, trophy taking and an association of warfare with rulership.

**Early Classic Period Maya Warfare**

While the origins of the institution of divine kingship can now be traced to the Late Preclassic, during the Early Classic royal dynasties were established at a number of important lowland Maya settlements such as Tikal, Calakmul, Copan and Palenque, to name but a few. There was little clear evidence for warfare during this period until the decipherment of hieroglyphs revealed the possible involvement of the great central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacan in the establishment of several of these royal lines. Epigraphic research indicates that in 378 CE an individual named Sihyaj K’ahk’, bearing the exalted title *Kaloomte’* and associated in some way with Teotihuacan, arrived at Tikal, after which a new royal dynasty was established that would rule for several centuries.\(^\text{13}\) About fifty years later, in 426/427 CE, this new dynasty was, in turn, responsible for establishing a long-lived dynasty at Copan in the southeastern periphery of the Maya area that lasted until 822 CE. While there is no unequivocal evidence of warfare in these founding events, some scholars believe conquest is implied. These new Maya kings were often portrayed in the garb of Teotihuacan warriors, including spear throwers as opposed to the spears usually associated with the Classic period Maya. This advertised their military prowess, whether they themselves fought in actual battles or not.

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Evidence from the skeleton of K’inch K’uk’ Mo’ himself, the founder of Copan’s royal dynasty, suggests this may indeed have been the case. His remains preserve an impressive array of healed injuries sustained during life, including fractures of the right radius and ulna, three ribs, the scapula and skull.\textsuperscript{14} Whereas previous interpretation of the relative lack of warfare-related events in Copan’s inscriptions suggested little involvement in warfare, the direct evidence of skeletal trauma described above hints at the importance of warfare in the rise to power of an important Maya kingdom during a period that has revealed little direct evidence of violence.

Perhaps the most direct indications of warfare during the Early Classic period come from the northern lowland site of Yaxuná. Evidence of peri-mortem skeletal trauma, anomalous burial positions and associated artefacts recovered in burial 24, which dates to the fourth or early fifth century CE, suggests that it represents a massacred royal family which may have had ties to the Kaanul Snake kingdom.\textsuperscript{15} This event may have involved the Teotihuacan-inspired arrival of Sihyaj K’ahk’ who, as noted above, may have played a key role in establishing royal lines at several southern lowland sites, intimately tying important political changes at this northern lowland site to processes further south in the Classic Maya ‘heartland’. It is likely this event also involved the important centre of Oxkintok in the north-western extreme of the Puuc hills, based on ceramic and architectural similarities that begin at the end of the Early Classic and continue into the early part of the Late Classic. In addition, healed cranial trauma possibly due to participation in interpersonal or inter-group conflict has been reported in Early Classic remains from this latter site.\textsuperscript{16}

Political rivalries that were to become long-lasting had been established between a number of important Maya centres by the end of the Early Classic period, though how much further back in time they go is difficult to establish. Hieroglyphic inscriptions on carved stone monuments refer to a number of wars between Tikal and the Kaanul or Snake kingdom, about which much new information has come to light in recent years. The Snake kings, who were based during the Early Classic at Dzibanché in southern Quintana Roo, Mexico, developed an extensive network of allies and subordinate sites that


\textsuperscript{15} Vera Tiesler et al., Before Kukulkán: Bioarchaeology of Maya Life, Death, and Identity at Classic Period Yaxuná (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017).

included such large centres as Caracol in Belize. One of the earliest securely
dated descriptions of a warfare event mentions the defeat of Tikal at the
hands of Kaanul king Sky Witness in 562 CE, after which Tikal entered a 130-
year period of decline. No new dated monuments were erected at this site
until well into the Late Classic, while centres associated with the Kaanul
kingdom experienced a period of florescence. The ambition of the Snake
kingdom was further demonstrated when King Scroll Serpent defeated
Palenque on the western periphery of the Maya area in 599 and 611 CE,
representing the furthest military expeditions currently known for the Maya.

In sum, the Early Classic serves as a good example that absence of evidence
of warfare does not imply evidence of absence, for wars were not recorded in
hieroglyphic inscriptions until the sixth century CE. Warfare-related events
do become common themes on Maya monuments and, as a result, a large
part of what we know about Maya warfare derives from epigraphy, though
this caveat should be kept in mind when evaluating such evidence for
temporal trends in warfare and the related implications for political relation-
ships between developing Maya polities.

Late Classic Period Maya Warfare

In the Late Classic period evidence for warfare becomes much more abun-
dant, particularly as documented through hieroglyphic inscriptions. Rivalries
that had originated in the Early Classic continued, such as those between
Tikal and Kaanul, and Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras, while new ones also
appear, such as those between Palenque and Tonina, and Copan and
Quirigua. The sites served as capitals of networks of allied sites, though
allegiances frequently changed. New discoveries of inscribed monuments
have even allowed epigraphers to determine that the powerful Kaanul Snake
kingdom capital changed from Dzibanche in the Early Classic to Calakmul in
the Late Classic, and further that this change occurred due to a civil war in 636
CE.

On the western edge of the Maya area, King Bahlam Ajaw (Jaguar Lord) of
Tortuguero in Tabasco commemorated his defeat of the most westerly
major site of Comalcalco in 649 CE on monument 6. After this date

17 S. Martin and N. Grube, Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).
Comalcalco stopped using its own Joychan emblem glyph and instead adopted the Baakal, or bone, emblem glyph; emblem glyphs were compounds of signs associated in some way with distinct political entities, though they are incompletely understood. The Baakal emblem glyph is usually associated with Palenque but was also claimed for a period by the site of Tortuguero. This suggests political subordination, but it is unclear at present whether this was to Tortuguero or, ultimately, Palenque, then ruled by its most famous king, K’inich Janaab Pakal.¹⁹

Though Palenque kings were rarely depicted as warriors, the site was involved in numerous wars with its neighbours for control over trade routes along the Usumacinta River. Its major rival was Tonina, located 64 km to the south in the highlands of Chiapas. At this latter site public art commemorating its military successes is prominently displayed. It defeated Palenque on several occasions, including in 692 CE, 711 CE and possibly again later in the eighth century, though Palenque king K’inich Kan Bahlam II appears to have captured and killed Tonina’s ruler in 687 CE.²⁰

Another important rivalry in the Usumacinta River region was that between Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras. Carved monuments describe numerous conflicts between these two centres spanning from 359 to 808 CE, including four victories by Piedras Negras and six by Yaxchilan.²¹ The extent of warfare in this region has been further underscored by the discovery of a fortified territorial border dating to the eighth century CE between these two polities, which also supports arguments in favour of material motivations for war.²²

In the northern lowlands, the construction of the longest road in Mesoamerica directly connecting Coba with Yaxuna 100 km to its west has been interpreted as infrastructure designed for the purpose of rapid troop deployment and, thus, as evidence of military expansion. This road, which may have been commissioned by Queen Lady K’awiil Ajaw to help Coba gain the upper hand against its ascending Puuc rivals in the north-western part of the peninsula, could have been constructed with the approval of

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²⁰ Martin and Grube, Chronicle, p. 181.
Kaanul allies. However it fell into disuse by 700 CE, as Chichen Itza began its rise to dominance in the region.23

The Tikal–Kaanul rivalry was also felt in the south-east periphery of the Maya region. Copan, in western Honduras, was a long-time ally of Tikal and had established Quirigua as a colony in 426 CE. Hieroglyphic inscriptions at Quirigua, however, record its defeat of Copan, which resulted in the capture and sacrifice of Uaxaclajuun Ub’aah K’awiil, the thirteenth ruler of that site, in 738 CE.24 This revolt may have been stimulated by the powerful Kaanul kingdom, based on Quirigua’s much smaller size compared to Copan and the fact that it received a lord from Calakmul just two years earlier.

Terminal Classic Period Maya Warfare

Some of the most dramatic archaeological, osteological and hieroglyphic evidence of conquest, destruction and collapse dates to the Terminal Classic period, in particular at sites along the Usumacinta and Pasión river systems. Hypotheses put forth to explain this pattern include, most prominently, status rivalry among elites, overpopulation, drought, or some combination thereof. The famous murals of Bonampak were commissioned at the end of the eighth century CE by King Shield Jaguar III of Yaxchilan, to which the site was subordinate. They appear to show a battle waged outside of any settlement, evidence for which is rare in the Maya area. Some scenes take place back in the settlement after the battle and involve the torture and execution of naked captives who have been stripped of any signifiers of status. Three carved lintels from this structure depict warriors subduing captives on specific dates in 780 and 787 CE, attesting to the historical nature of these events.

The Pasión River sites of Dos Pilas, Aguateca and Cancuen contain abundant archaeological as well as epigraphic evidence of conquest and collapse. Dos Pilas was founded as an offshoot of the Tikal dynasty in 648 CE, even employing the same emblem glyph, yet fought a series of bitter wars against it with the aid of the Kaanul Snake kingdom, now based at Calakmul. Dos Pilas king B’ajlaj Chan K’awiil’s defeat of Tikal in 679 CE is commemorated on hieroglyphic stairway 2 with an unusually gruesome description: ‘the blood was pooled, and the skulls were piled into mountains’.25 In fact,

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23 Tiesler et al., Before Kukulkán.
a mass grave of decapitated and modified skulls has been reported at the site, and this likely consists of the remains of sacrificial victims captured during one of its military campaigns. The site was conquered and abandoned in 760 CE after which the royal family fled to Aguateca, the other twin capital of the Petexbatún kingdom. The latter site only lasted until 800 CE, however. Aguateca exhibits considerable evidence of deliberate burning and destruction of elite structures inside of which was found abundant de facto refuse. Apparently, the attack was so sudden that many valuables were left behind, a rare archaeological finding akin to sites buried by sudden volcanic eruptions. Numerous lances and arrowheads that had broken due to impact were also recovered. The site of Cancuen succumbed to attack at around the same time, possibly at the hands of former trade partners in the highlands just to the south. Evidence here comprises two mass graves containing the remains of fifty-five individuals, including its last king and queen, dumped unceremoniously in two palace cisterns, as well as the ritual termination and abandonment of the site.

At a time when many Maya sites in the central and southern lowlands were being depopulated, Chichen Itza in the northern lowlands was at the peak of its power. Warfare has long been seen as a particularly important tool for political control at this site, due in large part to the prominence of military themes in its art. Murals from the Upper and Lower Temples of the Jaguar depict large-scale battles at various settlements, including one in steep hilly country and another on the coast. In addition to traditional Maya weapons, in particular spears, numerous warriors brandish spear throwers and darts. Actual spear thrower dart shafts and points have been recovered from Chichen Itza’s Sacred Cenote. Chichen Itza has the earliest known tzompantli, or skull rack, in Mesoamerica. This structure has sculptures of impaled skulls covering its facade and is believed to have supported an actual skull rack. Evidence that it actually served this purpose comes in the form of six skulls recovered from the Sacred Cenote with large holes punched into the

sides, which is the same technique observed in skulls that had been placed on later Aztec skull racks. The skeletal remains of well over a hundred individuals have been recovered thus far from the Sacred Cenote, which continued to be a prominent pilgrimage site long after Chichen’s collapse. Studies of these remains found that they pertain to individuals of all ages and both sexes and exhibit cut marks due to dismemberment and defleshing likely associated with the post-mortem processing of sacrificial victims. The clearest evidence of a military offensive by this site comes from Yaxuna, a long-lived site only 18 kilometres to the south-west of Chichen. There is evidence of destruction at Yaxuna in the early Terminal Classic, after which the site is abandoned. Pottery of the Sotuta ceramic complex, which date to the Terminal Classic and are associated with Chichen, have only been found in a small rural reoccupation at Yaxuna. Chichen may have ultimately succumbed by the middle of the eleventh century to the worst droughts of the last 2,000 years.

Postclassic Period Maya Warfare

The Postclassic is traditionally divided into the Early Postclassic (1000–1200 CE) and the Late Postclassic (1200–1517). The Early Postclassic period is marked by a dramatic reduction in overall population sizes, with many sites having been abandoned by the end of the Terminal Classic period. There is also a general shift in settlement away from the interior in favour of rivers, lakes and the coast, quite probably so as to take advantage of more reliable food sources and long distance coastal trade and political networks during an extended period of severe drought.

Archaeological traces of occupation are more abundant in the Late Postclassic, suggesting population levels had rebounded to some degree compared with the Early Postclassic. Evidence of warfare is also more abundant and comes in the form of greater site nucleation and defensibility, fortifications, mass graves and colonial documents. The fortifications surrounding Tulum and Mayapan are well-known examples. In highland Guatemala, the K’iche’ and Kaqchikel built their capitals of Q’umarkaj and Iximché, respectively, on hilltops surrounded by steep ravines. Evidence in human burials for

31 Tiesler et al., Before K’uk’uk’b’al.
violence and warfare during this time includes the remains of numerous sacrificial victims excavated at the gulf coast site of Champotón,\textsuperscript{33} a mass grave of desecrated remains at Zacpetén in the Lake Petén-Itza region of Guatemala,\textsuperscript{34} and a deposit of forty-eight decapitated skulls at Iximché.\textsuperscript{35}

Mayapan had risen to ascendancy in the north-west corner of the northern lowlands and appears to have exerted control over an extensive area. Mayapan-style pottery, specifically Chen Mul modelled effigy incense burners, are common throughout much of the lowlands during this time, and the site was larger than its contemporaries by an order of magnitude. Evidence for the important role of warfare in geopolitics in the region is abundant and comes from a variety of sources, including art, weapons, burial patterns, injuries in skeletons and ethnohistoric accounts. Mayapan’s wall is the ‘largest example of a walled enclosure known in Mesoamerica’ and clearly indicates a strong concern with defensibility.\textsuperscript{36} Radiocarbon dating of the structure predating and buried within Mayapan’s focal ceremonial structure the Temple of Kukulkan places it between 1020 and 1170 (two-sigma calibrated \textit{CE}).\textsuperscript{37} This structure has clear military themes. Its facade preserves stucco figures with exposed ribs and hovering vultures suggesting they represent deceased sacrificial victims. In place of heads are niches where actual skulls had been placed.

A series of mass burials at Mayapan date to the latter half of the site’s occupation and also around the time of its collapse, indicating that warfare played an important role not just in the site’s rise to power but in helping to maintain it, and also in its demise. One of these contained a face-down skeleton of an adult female with the tip of an arrowhead embedded in her right scapula, the only example of a point embedded in bone reported thus far for Mesoamerica.\textsuperscript{38} Another mass burial, this time recovered at the entrance to the outlying Itzmal Chen architectural group, contained the burned and butchered remains of at least twenty individuals mixed with numerous Chen

\textsuperscript{38} Serafin, Lope and González, ‘Bioarchaeological Investigation’, 140–51.
Mul effigy censer sherds and projectile points. It has been suggested that this plaza was associated with the Kowoj social group based on colonial documents mentioning a Kowoj as guardians of Mayapan’s eastern gate. The Kowoj social group is better known from colonial accounts from the Peten Lakes region of Guatemala in the central lowlands, which describe it and the Itza as bitter enemies. A mass burial of the desecrated remains of nearly forty individuals excavated recently at Zacpetén has been interpreted as an act of war by the Kowoj against the Itza. This mass burial shares similarities with that recovered from the Itzmal Chen group at Mayapan.

Evidence for abundant warfare also comes from further south in the Guatemalan highlands. Colonial documents describe the K’iche’ as a belligerent social group that ruled over a conquest state by perhaps the thirteenth century. Colonial accounts also describe how their former vassals, the Kaqchikel, broke away and founded their own competing kingdom in around 1470.

In sum, we know little regarding the prevalence of warfare in the century or more between the fall of Chichen Itza and the rise of Mayapan, but rapidly accruing evidence from the subsequent Late Postclassic bears out the long-held view of this period as a time of increased militarism. The renegotiation of social and political relationships following the breakdown of old political orders and large-scale depopulations in the Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic likely played an important role. The widespread adoption of the bow and arrow during this period is well known, but the potentially significant socio-political implications of this technological shift have received little attention. Interestingly, this period coincides with times of increased warfare in North America and the Andes, and hemisphere-wide disruptions to climate may have been a factor as well.

Colonial Period Maya Warfare

Our knowledge of contact period Maya warfare is based largely on the abundant body of historical documents available for this period. According

42 Elizabeth Arkush and Tiffany A. Tung, ‘Patterns of War in the Andes from the Archaic to the Late Horizon: Insights from Settlement Patterns and Cranial Trauma’, *Journal of Archaeological Research* 21.3 (2013), 307–69.
to these documents, violent conflict was common, though not universal, between the invading Spanish and the numerous independent Maya groups that they encountered. Common strategies employed by different Maya groups against the Spanish include diplomacy, intelligence gathering and urban ambush.

The Maya of Yucatan were the first to be encountered by the Spanish. The first contact came in 1502 when Christopher Columbus’s brother Bartholomew encountered a Yucatec Maya canoe near one of the Bay Islands off the coast of Honduras. Columbus seized valuables and the ship’s captain. News of this encounter may have spread, for in 1511 when a small group of shipwreck survivors from Pedro de Valdivia’s expedition washed up on the shores of Yucatan they were captured by a local Maya lord and several were sacrificed. When the expedition under Francisco Hernández de Córdoba landed at the north-eastern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula at Cabo Catoche in 1517, a number of large canoes full of Yucatec Maya came out to meet the Spaniards and encouraged them to come to shore, after which they were quickly ambushed and forced to beat a hasty retreat. De Córdoba’s fleet followed the coast of the peninsula west and then south before low reserves of drinking water forced them to land at Champotón. The following morning they were set upon by a large and well-organised Maya military offensive that ultimately claimed the lives of most of the expeditionary crew. The ambush strategy continued to prove effective, as in 1532 when the Yucatec Maya of the Chel and Pech polities feigned friendship with the Spanish expedition under Montejo the Younger in order to lure them far inland. The Spanish believed they had finally managed to establish a permanent capital at Chichen Itza but eventually found themselves under siege and forced to escape. It was not until 1542 and after three attempts at invasion that the Montejo family was able to establish a permanent capital at Merida.

Not all violence was aimed at the Spanish, as some enmities born in the Post-classic continued after contact. The best-known episode involved the Cocom and Xiu, two noble families who had been among the most powerful at Mayapan. The Cocom had ruled that site until the Xiu led a violent overthrow that led to its collapse in the K’atun 8 Ahau from 1441 to 1661 and the death of all but one Cocom son. This act was not forgotten, for nearly a hundred years later, when the opportunity arose, the Cocom exacted revenge. During a period of drought, in 1536, a contingent of Xiu sought and were ostensibly granted safe passage through Cocom land in order to

reach the Sacred Cenote of Chichen Itza to perform rain-bringing ceremonies. The Cocom massacred the Xiu at Otzmal, employing ambush tactics similar to those they used against the Spanish.

In highland Guatemala, establishing a permanent Spanish presence required two massive invasions, one in 1524 and the other in 1527, that together lasted five years and resulted in much bloodshed. Their Nahua and other Mesoamerican allies played a crucial role in this victory, a fact that is given greater recognition in native accounts of these events. The fact that the Spanish were met with such fierce resistance is likely due to the fact that at contact the Maya of this region, in particular the K’iche’, Kaqchikel and Tz’utujil kingdoms, were frequently at war with each other and, thus, were in a state of military preparedness. Despite the Balkanised nature of Maya polities, intelligence gathering could cross borders, as when Aztec emperor Moctezumah warned the K’iche’ of the arrival of the Spanish in 1519. Maya accounts written in K’iche’ and Kaqchikel using the Latin alphabet make it clear that they knew of the impending arrival of Pedro de Alvarado and his forces in 1524 and describe the large-scale preparations made in advance of the fighting, including the feting of General Tecúm, bloodletting, songs, dances and processions, and the gathering of 8,400 warriors from throughout the kingdom. In one episode of the war, the K’iche’ lured Alvarado into Quetzaltenango (Xelajub’), which they had deserted. Six days later the town was suddenly surrounded by K’iche’ forces. The Spanish side managed to escape the siege and engage the Maya forces. The latter feigned surrender and, attempting another urban ambush, invited Alvarado into their capital of Q’umarkaj, which with its steep terrain and narrow streets would have rendered Spanish horses a liability. Alvarado apparently suspected that a plot was afoot, quickly turned around and fought the awaiting K’iche’ forces on the open plain outside the capital. Native accounts stress the bravery of Tecúm, who cut the head off of Alvarado’s horse but was stabbed and trampled. Accounts by Nahua allies of the Spanish, meanwhile, stress the frequent use of staked horse pits by the highland Maya. A unique method of Maya psychological warfare mentioned in a Kaqchikel description of Alvarado’s visit to their capital of Iximché in 1524 involved his housing in the ghost-infested Tzupam (skull rack) palace, directly adjacent to where archaeologists discovered a pit containing forty-eight decapitated skulls, in order to give him nightmares.

It was not until 1697 that the Spanish subjugated the last independent Maya kingdom with its capital at Tayasal on Lake Flores in Guatemala. Conquest was not complete, however, and various independent Maya communities continued to exist far from the centres of Spanish control.

In sum, studies of colonial Maya warfare emphasise the importance of diplomacy, intelligence gathering and urban ambushes as typical strategies employed against the Spanish as well as other Maya groups. These strategies may have considerable time-depth in the region, though much additional work is needed to verify this claim. Despite the abundance of ruins dating from throughout the colonial period in the Maya area, this period remains relatively unknown archaeologically, though this is slowly changing. A large-scale project at Tipu in Belize included excavation of a Spanish church and cemetery directly beneath it that contained over 500 interments dating to the period 1544–1707. Analyses of these remains found surprisingly little evidence of violence given the numerous rebellions and reprisals that are described in colonial accounts for this frontier area. Future studies of early colonial sites and skeletal remains in particular promise to transform our knowledge of Maya warfare and its role in the momentous changes in Maya society during contact.

Conclusions

It is now widely acknowledged that warfare played an important role in cultural developments throughout Maya history, including from its earliest origins. Recent research at Middle Preclassic Ceibal in the southern Maya lowlands has shed light on the important role of warfare in the significant social changes that accompanied the emergence of inequality and settled villages. The evidence from this early period consists of the remains of victims who were likely captured in raids and brought back to the home site for execution in public rituals that allowed the entire community to share in the battle experience, in this way encouraging cohesion and the formation of a shared group identity.

Recent research at Classic period sites has shown that war had both ritual and material motivations. The capture and sacrifice of high-ranking enemies is attested to in numerous public monuments, and these acts allowed sites to establish dominance and exact tribute from subordinate sites. They also

allowed victorious sites to install new royal dynasties and gain control over important trade routes. In fact, warfare is now implicated in the origins of royal dynasties at a number of sites in the Early Classic period, such as Tikal, Copan and Oxkintok. Regarding the Kaanul Snake kingdom, newly discovered hieroglyphic texts reveal that it forged an intriguingly complex web of political allegiances to dominate its foe Tikal. For the Terminal Classic period, the list of sites with evidence for collapse due to warfare continues to grow. During the Postclassic, meanwhile, archaeological evidence indicates that warfare played an important role in the emergence of the regional capital of Mayapan.

While there is still disagreement over fundamental aspects of Maya warfare, such as the scale of conflicts, who participated and who was targeted, evidence related to warfare has been rapidly accumulating in recent years, as this chapter has sought to demonstrate. This suggests that we will soon be better placed to resolve some of these questions. LiDAR-based laser mapping surveys promise to give us a much better idea of the relationship of Maya centres with their hinterlands and thus the true extent of Maya polities. This will likely lead to the identification of previously unknown defensive features on the landscape and allow more systematic evaluation of the importance of territorial motivations for going to war. Strontium and oxygen isotope analyses of human remains are well advanced and have shown that sacrificial victims are often non-local. They have also shown that the founder of Copan’s dynasty, whose skeleton bears injuries consistent with those of a warrior, likely came from Tikal, while Yax Nuun Ayiin I, a king from this latter site suspected of being the son of Teotihuacan’s ruler, was local. Palaeodietary reconstructions based on carbon and nitrogen isotopes have shown the disruptions in food production and distribution wrought by warfare at Terminal Classic Piedras Negras, but have also shown the stability of food production systems in the face of endemic warfare at Late Post-classic Mayapan. Further developments in these areas, coupled with skeletal analyses of trauma and activity patterns, have the potential to provide further insights into who participated in warfare, especially the role played by commoners, which has implications for the size of the forces that could be marshalled. Advances in palaeoclimate reconstruction, AMS radiocarbon dating and Bayesian statistical modelling are allowing for the development of more precise site chronologies and provide a firmer empirical basis with which to evaluate the roles of drought and overpopulation in causing war. Such research has shown that drought may have contributed to the collapse of a number of Classic period sites, including Chichen Itza, though whether it
contributed to the endemic warfare of the Terminal Classic and Late Postclassic periods has yet to be demonstrated. Theoretical advances, meanwhile, have demonstrated the importance of culturally and historically situated interpretation in determining what constitutes evidence of warfare in the first place, as well as the meanings it had to the ancient Mayans impacted by it.

Bibliographic Essay


Diverse theories have been proposed to explain patterns of Maya warfare. Webster’s materialist model emphasises population pressure and status rivalry (‘Warfare and Status Rivalry: Lowland Maya and Polynesian Comparisons’, in G. Feinman and J. Marcus (eds.), *Archaic States* (Santa Fe, CA: School of American Research, 1998), pp. 311–52) as driving war, which in turn played an important role in socio-political evolution (‘Warfare and the Origin of the State’, *American Antiquity* 40.4 (1975), 464–71). The earlier view that Maya warfare was largely limited to participation by elites (e.g. David A. Freidel, ‘Maya Warfare: An Example of Peer-Polity Interaction’, in C. Renfrew and J. Cherry (eds.), *Peer-Polity Interaction and Sociopolitical Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 93–108) is increasingly being supplanted as archaeological evidence of large-scale consequences accumulates (e.g. Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase, ‘Caracol, Belize and Changing Perceptions of Ancient Maya Society’, *Journal of Archaeological Research* 25.1 (2017), 185–249). Charles Golden and Andrew K. Scherer (‘Territory, Trust, Growth, and Collapse in Classic Period Maya Kingdoms’, *Current Anthropology* 54.4 (2013), 397–435) argue that direct interaction with rulers through public rituals such as sacrifice, and participation in communal activities such as warfare, helped to strengthen the polity by building trust, and that when growth in population and territorial extent made widespread participation in such trust-building activities no longer feasible, the polity began to splinter.
Violence and State Power in Early Mesopotamia

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Warfare and violence were central to the identity and experience of early states in the ancient Near East. The archaeological evidence shows that violence and warfare characterised these societies long before writing was invented in the late fourth millennium BCE, but we gain a much richer ability to assess their impact on these communities with the benefit of the documentary record. This chapter focuses on the evidence for violence and warfare in the earliest historical record, largely from Mesopotamia.

For the ancient Mesopotamians, violence was to be found everywhere, both in nature and in society. Southern Mesopotamia, in the south of modern Iraq, is where historians find their first evidence for studying the development of complex society. The earliest surviving written records were concerned with the affairs of the state, and therefore much of our focus in this investigation will be on the connections between violence and the state. The history of the ancient Near East in the cuneiform record runs from the late fourth millennium BCE down to the first century CE, but this chapter concentrates on the rise of kingdoms in Mesopotamia and their relationship with violence and warfare in the first half of this long era.

Historians define early Mesopotamia as the period from the beginning of the third millennium BCE down to the middle of the second millennium BCE. In political terms this is the period when Mesopotamia went from being a land of dozens of independent city-states to a large kingdom ruled from the great city of Babylon. As will be shown, the growth of these large kingdoms was experimental at first, and was closely connected to royal ideology and the exercise of violence. A significant aspect of this story, and a key factor in the rise of the state, was its relationship to warfare and violence.

The people of Mesopotamia created a very rich documentary record in antiquity covering more than 3,000 years. This record provides an abundance of sources related to violence and warfare. Royal inscriptions, literary texts, letters and administrative texts frequently took up the theme of violence.
Indeed, in some periods the proliferation of texts can be directly tied to episodes of violence and warfare. Writing was used from very early on to track the success of warfare, and especially the capture of resources, so that our evidence not only tells the story of violence but also reminds us that it was the impetus for the creation of many of our surviving texts.

Our ability to engage historically with this topic flows fundamentally from its prominence in the surviving record of royal inscriptions. This emphasis makes clear the centrality of violence to the growth of the state and to the expansion of royal authority. Indeed, I will argue that a rhetoric of state-sponsored violence developed in Mesopotamia that guided countless generations of behaviour. As a result, this is predominantly a history from above. In part because the legitimate exercise of violence was the exclusive domain of the state, we have relatively few documents that provide us with a sense of more mundane encounters with violence in daily life. However, the state’s administrative response to violence, in particular the recording of booty, tribute and the casualties of royal campaigns, allows us to see the economies of violence and warfare and their impact on daily life.

This chapter is divided into three basic parts. First, I will introduce a series of related topics that help us to understand how violence and warfare were imagined and understood in early Mesopotamia. This examination will include a discussion of how violence was defined, what its relationship was to the divine, and how this was connected to the growth of royal authority and the juridical conception of violence. Second, I will discuss violence in its early historical context by examining cycles of violence related to the growth of the state. Here we will look at the expansion of ideas of political community and their connection to military campaigns and the booty that those campaigns produced. The economics of warfare in early Mesopotamia was intrinsically linked to its violence. The armies sent into the periphery often returned with large numbers of human prisoners and livestock. In some cases, the booty generated by state-sponsored violence created a parallel economy based around concepts of tribute and patronage, and on which some Mesopotamian societies came to depend. Finally, I will briefly examine the later development of these kingdoms of violence and the royal rhetoric that accompanied their creation and expansion.

Violence and Warfare

At that time, I, Ur-Namma, mighty warrior, lord of the city of Ur, king of the lands of Sumer and Akkad, by the might of the god Nanna, my lord, by
the true command of the god Utu, I established justice in the land... I eliminated enmity, violence, and cries for justice. I established justice in the land.

(Ur-Namma, king of Ur, twenty-first century BCE)

The growth of the state in early Mesopotamia entailed a serious and sustained engagement with violence and warfare, and the state’s response to it was one of the hallmarks of its growing authority. Kings in Mesopotamia laid claim to the right to practise violence. Ultimately, the only violence that was legitimate was state-sponsored and divinely sanctioned. Kings promised to banish violence at home, except when performed under their auspices, and they pledged to bring the outside world to battle in a muscular extension of power over that world.

Violence was an ever-present theme in royal inscriptions, which meant the elites in early Mesopotamian communities were very familiar with its imagery and the language associated with its royal exercise.

Manishtushu, king of the world; when he conquered Anshan and Shirihum, had ships cross the Lower Sea. The cities across the sea, thirty-two [in number], assembled for battle, but he was victorious [over them]. Further, he conquered their cities, struck down their rulers, and after, he roused his troops, plundered as far as the Silver Mines. He quarried the black stone of the mountains across the Lower Sea, loaded it on ships, and moored [the ships] at the quay of Agade.

(Manishtushu, king of Akkad, twenty-third century BCE)

This royal inscription from the kingdom of Akkad in the late third millennium BCE shows the early development of language that described, often violently, Mesopotamian control of the surrounding world. This was sometimes seen as a struggle against nature, but more often as the securing of necessary resources. Much of our early evidence suggests that the most prominent royal military campaigns were essentially raids for the collection of booty.

The civilised world of ancient Mesopotamia was a demonstrably urban phenomenon. The cities, with their temples, were the most significant features of the landscape and their walls kept the outside world at bay. This emphasis was made most clear in the Epic of Gilgamesh, which invited the newly civilised Enkidu into that urban world with the following words:

1 Martha T. Roth, Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, 2nd edn (Atlanta, GA: Scholar’s Press, 1997).
‘Come to Uruk the Town Square, where you too will find your place, like a man.’ This epic is a good tool for measuring Mesopotamian attitudes towards violence both inside and outside of their communities. Preserved in the Mesopotamian literary tradition for 2,000 years, its themes were central to the manner in which readers and listeners understood their relationship with the world around them. Uruk, one of the earliest and certainly the largest of the Mesopotamian cities, was the model for urban civilisation. The epic traces Gilgamesh’s heroic journey, in the course of which he is rebuked for allowing violence within the city and praised for carrying violence into the wild periphery; it ends as it began, atop the mighty walls of Uruk, the defence of which is Gilgamesh’s chief responsibility.

Cities were the centre of civilisation in ancient Mesopotamia and their proliferation was the characteristic feature of the civilisation’s early history. And it was in those cities that kings like Ur-Namma (quoted above) promised an absence of violence. Violence itself, however, was understood to be an intrinsic part of that same civilisation. Zainab Bahrani began her study of the body and violence in Mesopotamia with a reference to the Sumerian mythical composition, Enki, and the World Order. In that composition, battle is identified as one of the arts of the civilised world (Sumerian ‘me’).

Ancient Mesopotamians understood that the victories of urban civilisation were based on the violent overthrow of both nature and their surrounding communities. This again connected their world with its divine origins. In the Sumerian composition Inana and Ebih, the mountainous east needed to be subdued and the responsibility lay in the hands of the goddess Inana, who presided over both war and the fertility of the agricultural hinterland.

Goddess of the fearsome divine powers, clad in terror, riding on the great divine powers, Inana, made perfect by the holy a-an-kar weapon, drenched in blood, rushing around in great battles, with shield resting on the ground, covered in storm and flood, great lady Inana, knowing well how to plan conflicts, you destroy mighty lands with arrow and strength and overpower lands. In heaven and on earth you roar like a lion and devastate the people. Like a huge wild bull you triumph over lands that are hostile.

This subjugation of the outside world often had a measurable economic component. Just as Gilgamesh brought timber back to Uruk from his violent

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5 *Inana and Ebih*, translation after the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature: [http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.3.2](http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.3.2).
encounter with Humbaba in the cedar forest, the real kings of Mesopotamia were expected to provide similar resources. Kings brought back rich booty from the defeats that they inflicted upon outsiders. In connection with this, we note that the famous stele of Naram-Sin, which depicted that king’s victory over the mountainous periphery, was itself taken to Susa as booty by an Elamite king. This pattern was repeated time and again in Mesopotamia when the royal monuments that proclaimed violent victories also became prizes taken upon their defeat. The famous stele of Hammurabi bearing his so-called ‘Law Code’ was also found by French archaeologists excavating the city of Susa, hundreds of kilometres from the city in which it had originally stood. These symbols of royal authority and its connection to violence were powerful enough to be taken as spoils of war and given new life in another royal court elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

The ability to routinely inflict defeats on outsiders, such a common theme in royal text and image, became one of the pillars of kingship in the Mesopotamian tradition. The king’s power to take control of violence, to shift the locus of conflict out of the community, reinforced his role as shepherd of the people. Royal imagery, from the third millennium BCE down to the first millennium BCE, often depicted the kings carrying baskets of earth on their heads to help build the temples and walls of their cities. The similarity of these images across 2,000 years illustrates extraordinary continuity in the conception of kingship. The king’s responsibility to lead was based on his ability to protect the community from violence by establishing administrative control over violence within the community and exercising violent control of the world beyond his civilisation’s borders through the regular pursuit of warfare. As we will see, the regularity of these military campaigns was such that they became virtually an annual event by the end of the third millennium BCE.

The king’s monopoly on the legitimate exercise of violence was based on the inheritance of that right from the gods. We have already seen the manner in which violence was a divine attribute of members of the Mesopotamian pantheon. The tremendous growth of the cities of southern Mesopotamia ultimately meant that violence was commonplace among these city-states and within the cultural boundaries of their civilisation. As the cities grew and

6 The Victory Stele of Naram-Sin and the Stele of Hammurabi are both in the Louvre, Paris, and can be viewed at the museum’s website.
7 ‘Yet he is the shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold, Gilgamesh, the guide of the teeming people. He is their shepherd and their protector, pre-eminent, expert, and mighty’: George, Gilgamesh, p. 4.
began to contest rights to land and water along their borders, so they needed to adopt an approach that would allow them to make war on each other beyond the walls of their cities but within the land of Sumer and Akkad. This led to a conception of just war in which the participation of the gods was both sought and assumed by royal authority, and this deepened the connection between divine authority and the mandate of the king to exercise violence. We gain insight into this process from royal inscriptions from the city of Lagash, home of the god Ningirsu, that date to the middle of the third millennium BCE.8

Enlil, king of all lands, father of all the gods, by his authoritative command, demarcated the border between Ningirsu and Shara. Mesalim, king of Kish, at the command of Ishtaran, measured it off and erected a monument there. Ush, ruler of Umma, acted arrogantly: he smashed that monument and marched on the plain of Lagash. Ningirsu, warrior of Enlil, at his [Enlil’s] just command, did battle with Umma. At Enlil’s command, he cast the great battle-net upon it, and set up burial mounds for it on the plain.

(Enmetena, king of Lagash, twenty-fifth century BCE)9

This idea of the just expression of violence was accompanied by an increasing dichotomy in which royal authority used its divine mandate to eliminate violence at home and carry war abroad, and the nature of this violence and warfare is graphically described in the texts and inscribed on the monuments that bore them. Many such royal inscriptions survived over the course of a century of violent conflict between the neighbouring cities of Umma and Lagash, whose people fought over access to the fertile fields along their border. The Stele of the Vultures, one of the most famous of these monuments, depicts on one side the ranks of soldiers pressing forth into battle behind the king, while on the other side the god Ningirsu engages in the slaughter of enemy soldiers with his mace, having first scooped them up in his battle net. Many of the inhabitants of these early states would have experienced this violence at first hand, as a characteristic feature was the broad participation of the people, and especially of elites, in combat.

The history of the third millennium BCE in Mesopotamia was characterised by the growth of the territorial state as a response to the inability of

8 These inscriptions document a long series of battles between the cities of Umma and Lagash; see Jerrold S. Cooper, Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions: The Lagash–Umma Border Conflict, Sources from the Ancient Near East 2.1 (Malibu: Undena, 1983).
the city-states to regulate their affairs non-violently, and this growth was accomplished through the calculated exercise of violence on a greater scale. In the end, it is too simplistic to assert that the state monopolised violence, but the Mesopotamian solution was to concentrate that violence in the hands of the king. We will return to a chronological investigation of the third and early second millennia BCE experiments in territorial state formation that were so richly documented, but first we must elaborate on the development of royal power and its insertion into all aspects of the ancient Mesopotamian human condition.

Mesopotamian kings routinely proclaimed themselves kings of the universe. This did not express an actual desire to govern the distant four quarters of the world, but rather to provide a claim to boundless supremacy at home. The stele of Hammurabi was carved towards the end of this long era of secondary state formation, and it marked a culmination of this process.

At that time, the gods, for the enhancement of the people, named me by my name: Hammurabi, the pious prince, who venerates the gods, to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, to rise like the sun-god over all humankind, to illuminate the land.

(Hammurabi, king of Babylon, eighteenth century BCE)

Hammurabi’s stele, in both text and image, made clear to the inhabitants of his kingdom that he recognised no limit to his authority. Of course, this claim to power over all humankind did not require the outright conquest of the outside world; instead, it was focused on what we might call the Mesopotamian universe, and it called for the land’s submission to the sovereignty of kingship that gave exclusive power over violence to the royal family. Good evidence for this idea is found in a text that modern observers call ‘The Nippur Murder Trial’. This trial was set at the end of the twentieth century BCE, but it was preserved in the second millennium BCE as a school exercise.

Nanna-sig, the son of Lu-Sin, Ku-Enil, the son of Ku-Nanna, the barber, and Enlil-ennam, the slave of Adda-kalla, the gardener, killed Lu-Inanna, the son of Lugal-apindu, the nishakku-official. After Lu-Inanna, the son of Lugal-apindu, had been put to death, they told Nin-dada, the daughter of Lu-Ninurta, the wife of Lu-Inanna, that her husband had been killed. Nin-dada, the daughter of Lu-Ninurta, did not open her mouth, [her] lips remained sealed. Their case was [then] brought to [the city of ] Isin before the king.

10 Roth, Law Collections, pp. 76–7.
[and] the King Ur-Ninurta ordered their case to be taken up in the Assembly of Nippur . . . In accordance with the decision of the Assembly of Nippur, Nanna-sig, the son of Lu-Sin, Ku-Enil, the son of Ku-Nanna, the barber, and Enlil-ennam, the slave of Adda-kalla, the gardener, were handed over to be killed.¹¹

The trial shows both the everyday violence of these early urban communities as well as the royal attempt to control such episodes.¹² Here three men accused of murder were brought to trial before a city assembly at the order of the king, under whose auspices the crime was punished. This text, and certainly the category of ‘Law Codes’ to which the Hammurabi stele belongs, demonstrate quite clearly that the kings could not prevent violent acts from occurring within the boundaries of their states, but we see a clear demarcation between permissible and impermissible violence.¹³

Historical Developments in Early Mesopotamia

If we now go back and examine the historical developments of this long era more closely, we can see how the rise of the state was accompanied by this twofold attitude towards violence in which it should disappear at home, except as exercised by divinely chosen monarchs, while at the same time it must be delivered abroad with muscular regularity. In early Mesopotamia the first struggle was with the environment. The same regional conditions that made this area the cradle of civilisation – its abundant fertile soil and available water – also made it a dangerous place. The rivers flooded at precisely the wrong time of year, and this made flooding a constant concern. Taking control of the hydraulic environment gave cities and their leaders the ability to create massive surpluses and support tremendous urban populations


¹³ The ‘law codes’ also scaled the punishments meted out to perpetrators of violence on the basis of their social status, thus reinforcing the power of the king and royal elites.
characterised by a high degree of craft specialisation. The proliferation of professions in early Mesopotamia included the scribes who left us our historical evidence and, a bit later, the soldiers who were tasked with the legitimate expression of violence against the outside world.

The first six centuries or so of the third millennium BCE in Mesopotamia comprise what historians label the Early Dynastic period. This is a reflection of the growth of secular authority in city-states that we identify with the institution of dynastic kingship. This was a time that has also been described as a Mesopotamian ‘warring states’ period, in which cities vied with one another for regional hegemony. The development of palaces and city walls as new features of monumental public architecture can be traced to the beginning of the third millennium BCE and provide a clear indication of the growth of military leadership within communities and the idea that the community needed to be protected from violence.¹⁴

Some of the most compelling archaeological evidence from the Early Dynastic period shows directly that this leadership brought with it new forms of violence. The Royal Cemetery at Ur, dating to approximately 2600 BCE, is our best and most famous example.¹⁵ The graves in the cemetery were filled with rich burial goods that highlight the ability of urban elites to extract wealth from the community in order to display their status. Significantly, the burials also show the manner in which violence was a part of that elite culture as well. One of the tombs preserved the bodies of seventy-four attendants, including soldiers and musicians who were killed and buried in an elaborate arrangement that mirrored the banquets held to celebrate major events in Mesopotamia. The ritual slaughter of attendants to


¹⁵ The objects excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in the Royal Cemetery are housed in the British Museum and the Penn Museum. Many, like the Standard of Ur to which I refer below, can be viewed on the websites of these museums. For all these objects, and additional discussion, see Julian Reade, ‘The Royal Tombs of Ur’ and ‘The Great Death Pit at Ur’, in J. Aruz and R. Wallenfels (eds.), Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus (New York: Metropolitan Museum of New York, 2003), pp. 93–107 and 120–32.
accompany elites in death was not a practice that endured in Mesopotamia, but the evidence from this royal cemetery demonstrates the ability of these rulers to mete out violence at home.

Much more enduring in Mesopotamia was the conception of the king as war leader that we find on one of the more famous objects also found in the royal cemetery, the Standard of Ur. On one side of the standard, as on the Stele of the Vultures, the king leads his troops into battle. The identities of the men being slaughtered and trampled on the standard are not immediately clear to us (they were perhaps outsiders or the soldiers of a neighbouring city), but the power of the great man at the centre of this violence is abundantly clear. The image on the other side of the Standard of Ur shows us the beneficiaries of that violence: the king and his court banqueting amidst servants and musicians. These elites presided over a highly structured community in which violence was used to maintain their prerogatives and wealth.

The long century of conflict between Umma and Lagash that was so well documented in the middle of the third millennium BCE illustrates the inability of the individual city-states of southern Mesopotamia to resolve the tensions related to their territorial growth. In this environment violence was a constant companion to state formation, but regular violence between the city-states was counter-productive, and moreover it did not fit neatly into Mesopotamian narratives that suggested that violence should be directed at the world outside of its alluvial plains. The Enmetena inscription cited above shows an early inclination towards diplomacy to mediate conflict among the Mesopotamian states. In that text we find the king of Kish establishing the boundary between Umma and Lagash at divine command. Kish was a city already known by the late Early Dynastic period as a military power, and that martial prowess gave it additional prestige among the Mesopotamian cities.

The establishment of the first large territorial state in Mesopotamia also had its origins at Kish, which was the initial base of operations for Sargon, who, as king of Akkad, united southern Mesopotamia into a single royal community.

Sargon, king of Agade, bailiff of Ishtar, king of the universe, anointed priest of An, lord of the land, governor of Enlil, conquered the city of Uruk and destroyed its walls. He was victorious over Uruk in battle . . . he captured 16 The Royal Cemetery at Ur was constructed around a century earlier than the so-called Lagash–Umma border conflict; and it is tempting to see the violence depicted on the standard in that context of growing rivalry and warfare among the Mesopotamian city-states.
Lugalzagesi, king of Uruk in battle and led him to the gate of Enlil in a neck stock. Sargon, king of Agade, was victorious over Ur in battle, conquered the city and destroyed its wall. He conquered Eninmar, destroyed its walls, and conquered its district and Lagash as far as the sea. He washed his weapons in the sea... To Sargon, lord of the land Enlil gave no rival. Enlil gave to him the upper sea and lower sea.

(Sargon, king of Akkad, twenty-fourth century BCE)¹⁷

Sargon’s rise to power was accomplished through the defeat of the numerous ancient city-states of the region in multiple campaigns. As he sought to normalise the subordination of previously independent cities he addressed the need to create space in southern Mesopotamia for a royal elite bound to the crown and not dependent on finding a socio-economic place within the old city-states. This was especially true for the soldiers who served the dynasty’s interests. These efforts included, famously, the construction of a new capital city, Akkad, which was later abandoned after the fall of the dynasty. The power and wealth of the new kingdom was established in violence and perpetuated in regular campaigns like the one mentioned in the Manishtushu inscription cited above.

The pull of the old city-states was strong enough that the kings of Akkad faced rebellion in southern Mesopotamia.

Naram-Sin, the mighty one, king of Agade. When the four quarters together revolted against him, through the love which Ishtar showed him, he was victorious in nine battles in one year, and the kings whom they had raised against him, he captured. In view of the fact that he protected the foundations of his city from danger, his city requested from Ishtar in Eanna, Enlil in Nippur, Dagan in Tuttul, Ninhursag in Kesh, Enki in Eridu, Sin in Ur, Shamash in Sippar, and Nergal in Kutha, that he be made the god of their city, and they built within Agade a temple dedicated to him.

(Naram-Sin, king of Akkad, twenty-third century BCE)¹⁸

Battle and warfare were a commonplace experience for the inhabitants of early Mesopotamian cities. In the inscription above, Naram-Sin’s successes were credited to his strong relationship with the gods, and his people called for him to be rewarded with divinity. Divine kingship was another of the state-building innovations introduced by Sargon’s dynasty. Like the ritual murders documented at Ur, divine kingship was a short-lived phenomenon

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 113–14.
that was not characteristic of Mesopotamian society after the third millennium BCE, but these experiments show the close connections between violence, divine mandate and the elite.

After three generations of successors, the dynasty established by Sargon fell at the hands of both internal rebellion and external threats, notably from a group of people from the Zagros mountains called the Gutti. The fall of the kingdom was documented by later generations of Mesopotamian scribes in texts like the Cursing of Akkad.19 One of the enduring images that emerges from this literature of collapse and lament is the picture of the Gutians as violent outsiders who threatened the civilised world. By this time the protection of the southern Mesopotamian cities required a larger kingdom on the model created by the kings of Akkad.

The kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112–2004 BCE), following in the footsteps of Sargon’s dynasty, once again united the cities of southern Mesopotamia into a single kingdom in the twenty-first century BCE. The period of their rule is one of the best-documented centuries in all of antiquity. Well over 100,000 texts are extant in museums, libraries and private collections around the world, and there are countless more unpublished tablets. Indeed, so dense is the documentary evidence that it is possible to track the activity in some royal workshops for almost every day of a given year. The bulk of these texts were administrative documents created for the crown and its dependants.

A striking aspect of this period, and its written record, is the ubiquity of warfare and state-sponsored violence. The conventions for keeping track of time in southern Mesopotamia included royal year names. Each year was named for a significant event, such as the building of a temple or cult statue, or a military campaign. The most common events recorded in the year names at the end of the third millennium BCE were frequent raids beyond the frontier of the kingdom. Nearly half of the years in the twenty-first century BCE were named for the defeat of foreign cities and lands. In the enormous corpus of texts that survive from the Ur III period, it is very difficult to find a moment of peaceful relations. The first references to military activity in the year names occur in the twentieth year of Shulgi when the citizens of Ur were organised as spearmen. The pace of military

19 See Jerrold S. Cooper, The Curse of Agade (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). This text is one in a series of texts that lamented the collapse of cities and kingdoms in ancient Mesopotamia, such as the Lament over the Destinations of Sumer and Ur. See the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=c.2.2*#.
activity really picks up in the aftermath of Shulgi’s defeat of Karhar, recorded as his twenty-fourth year name. According to the data gathered by Manuel Molina, Shulgi 25 is the first year from which more than a few dozen Ur III texts are known. From that year onwards there is a steady stream of surviving documents that peaks in the years of well-documented warfare. Therefore, the corpus of texts from this period was largely the product of violence.

There may have been no years under the kings of Ur in the twenty-first century BCE that did not witness warfare. Therefore, the kingdom was engaged in armed conflict for perhaps as much as a century without pause. Ultimately, the constant warfare in which the Ur III state engaged during this era was less a strategic imperative than a social and economic necessity. The ideology of kingship was intimately connected with the exercise of violence, and the king’s ability to successfully undertake military campaigns was essential to his public image. The crown relied on a military elite to enact this violence in the periphery. Both the royal family and this military elite became dependent on the wealth that these campaigns brought to their individual households. What I am describing is a form of patron–client relationship made possible through warfare. Increasingly, the kingdom was bound together by its participation in military campaigns and the direct economic benefits of that activity. Our texts even inform us of the banquets that the kings hosted after receiving booty from the campaigns – and these clearly echo the scenes on the Standard of Ur from half a millennium earlier.

The inauguration of constant warfare in the twenty-first century BCE was the culmination of a millennium of societal development in southern Mesopotamia connected to the political project of creating territorial states centred on the person of the king, his divine mandate and his martial prowess. Thousands of administrative documents record the results of campaigns to the north and east of the alluvial plains of Mesopotamia, and this is even more striking since we have not yet recovered the central state archives at the capital city of Ur, which must have contained the core military records. Of course, these campaigns were also memorialised in royal inscriptions.

Shu-Suen, mighty king, king of Ur, king of the four quarters, by the might of Enlil, his lord, and at the command Ninlil, his beloved lady, was victorious in those battles and combats. He killed both the strong and the weak. He sowed the heads of the just and the iniquitous alike like seeds. He piled up the corpses of the people into a heap. Their lords he took as bound captives . . . The men who had evaded battle and who, like birds, saved their lives by fleeing, did not escape his hand. He turned their established cities and villages into heaps. He destroyed their walls. He blinded the men of those cities, whom he had overtaken, and established them as servants in the orchards of the great gods. And the women of those cities, whom he had overtaken, he offered as a present to the weaving mills of the great gods. Their cattle, sheep, goats, and asses he led away . . .

(Shu-Suen, king of Ur, twenty-first century B.C.E.)

In this example, Shu-Suen, the penultimate king of the dynasty, campaigns in the north-eastern periphery in his eighth regnal year in an attempt to restore the power and prestige of his dynasty after several years of setbacks. His account includes the usual bloody tale of destruction, but it also carefully lists the booty hauled away from distant communities. Indeed, the text goes on to discuss the ongoing exploitation of resources there. In the aftermath of the campaigns and the initial collection of booty, these areas became a steady source of tribute in the form of livestock and foreign goods. These transfers were largely carried out by members of the military elite in Sumer and by allied leaders among the defeated communities.

The military activities of the Ur III kings to the east and north-east of their frontier were undertaken to ensure the continued flow of this tribute, both from dependent states and from military personnel and high-ranking officials of the kingdom. Significantly, these were raids aimed at securing resources and weakening outside groups; they were not aimed at the outright control of foreign territory. Certainly, the local economy was prosperous enough to support the large urban centres of southern Mesopotamia even without active foreign trade, but the prestige economy of the Ur III kingdom, and the patrimonial administration that that economy supported, required the constant injection of the resources that came from the domination of the eastern and north-eastern peripheries of the state. The tremendous administrative apparatus that developed in Mesopotamia under both the dynasties of Sargon and Ur-Namma was devoted in large part to registering the participation of elites in this system of patronage and control. The administrators

wrote and preserved long lists of offerings from notables that memorialised their contributions to the royal household.

The kingdom of Ur collapsed at the very end of the third millennium BCE, again as the result of internal struggles and outside forces. Indeed, the last king of Ur was carried off to the east by an Elamite king, a victim of the kind of violent campaigns that had become routine in this era. Following the fall of Ur, two centuries of conflict ensued among smaller kingdoms, each larger than an individual city-state but also much smaller than the earlier kingdoms of Akkad and Ur. By the eighteenth century BCE this era of warfare and battle had set the stage for the rise of the kingdom of Babylon and the establishment of its hegemony over the region under Hammurabi. His conquest of Mesopotamia was achieved through a combination of warfare and diplomacy that became characteristic of the ancient Near East for much of the second millennium BCE.

Ultimately, what I am suggesting is a broad pattern of state formation and its relationship with violence in which the kings of city-states first pushed violence outside of cities and the walls that grew up to protect them, and then the kings of territorial states pushed violence outside of the cultural boundaries of Mesopotamian civilisation. These kings then found themselves ruling over larger political communities in which it was necessary to insist that the only legitimate exercise of violence belonged to the kings acting on behalf of divine forces to which they were directly related.

All of these territorial kingdoms of early Mesopotamia were created and supported through violence; that each lasted only a few generations is indicative of their failure to craft more enduring institutions outside of those devoted to violence. They had successfully appropriated the legitimate exercise of violence for the state, but they had not built an idea of the state beyond the king’s extended military household. The ephemeral and experimental nature of these states was bound up in their use of violence.

23 The situation is well documented in the Mari archives. Mari, a commercial entrepôt located along the great bend in the Euphrates, was the meeting point of trade routes connecting Mesopotamia with the wider Near East. In the eighteenth century BCE it was conquered by Hammurabi of Babylon and its palace was burned, preserving much of the royal archives. The contest for power among rival kings is best preserved in a famous Mari letter: ‘No king is truly powerful on his own: ten to fifteen kings follow Hammurabi of Babylon, as many follow Rim-Sin of Larsa, as many follow Ibal-pi-El of Eshnunna, and as many follow Amut-pi-El of Qatna; but twenty kings follow Yarim-Lim of Yamhad.’ Translation after Jack M. Sasson, From the Mari Archives, an Anthology of Old Babylonian Letters (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), p. 82.
By the advent of the Late Bronze Age this idea of the territorial state had become fixed in the political economy of Mesopotamia, and its home was the city of Babylon. The long-term successors to Hammurabi’s dynasty were the Kassite kings of Babylon, and the extent to which they adhered to these patterns can be seen in the famous Amarna Letters, which record some of the diplomatic correspondence of the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs with their counterparts in the Near East. The letters preserve the efforts of the pharaohs and their correspondents to safeguard their kingdoms from the powerful states that now surrounded them while also maintaining access to prestige trade goods. The kings of states such as Egypt, Babylon and the Hittites could no longer campaign with impunity against outsiders, but they stood ready to go to war to keep their realms intact. These kings also acknowledged each other as the arbiters of violence within their own spheres of influence. The Babylonian king Burna-Buriash wrote to Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE:

My brother and I made a mutual declaration of friendship, and this is what we said: ‘Just as our fathers were friends with one another, so will we be friends with one another.’ Now, my merchants ... were detained in Canaan ... Canaan is your country, and its kings are your servants. In your country I have been despoiled. Bring them to account and make compensation for the money that they took away. Put to death the men who put my servants to death, and so avenge their blood. And if you do not put these men to death, they are going to kill again, be it a caravan of mine or your own messengers, and so messengers between us will thereby be cut off.

This letter demonstrates a number of assumptions that could be made in the royal courts of the second millennium BCE Near East as a result of the previous two millennia of historical developments. First, the proper exercise of violence was a royal prerogative. Second, this prerogative was exclusively exercised within the boundaries of states, and these boundaries were often culturally determined. Third, the benefits of the control of violence could be measured commercially. And finally, by the end of the Bronze Age this was a shared enterprise among numerous large and powerful kingdoms.

25 Bloody outbreaks of warfare still occurred, most notably the conflict between the Egyptians and the Hittites that culminated in the battle of Kadesh in the thirteenth century BCE.
26 Moran, Amarna Letters, p. 16.
Royal Rhetoric and Violence in Later Mesopotamian History

The later history of Mesopotamia is no less bloody than the early periods I have been describing. From 1200 BCE onwards down to the conquest of Mesopotamia by the Persians in the sixth century BCE and then the conquest of Persia by Alexander in the fourth century BCE, the inhabitants of the land between the rivers knew very few years of peace. The institution of the annual campaign became a fixed idea at court, though the scale ultimately changed. Around the end of the Bronze Age (c. 1200 BCE) we encounter a shift from regular raids of the periphery that reinforced notions of power and the acquisition of wealth, to the outright conquest of that periphery in ritualised annual expressions of violence.

By the time of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the first millennium BCE, Mesopotamian forces were carrying their arms as far afield as Cyprus and Egypt; however, the message, and the core understanding of violence, had not changed substantially since the mid third millennium BCE. The king as an emissary of the gods had a mandate to preserve order at home and carry out violence abroad.

Sennacherib, great king, strong king, king of Assyria, unrivaled king, pious shepherd who reveres the great gods, guardian of truth who loves justice, renders assistance, goes to the aid of the weak, and strives after good deeds, perfect man, virile warrior, foremost of all rulers, the bridle that controls the insubmissive, and the one who strikes enemies with lightning. The god Ashur, the great mountain, granted to me unrivaled sovereignty and made my weapons greater those of all who sit on royal daises.

(Sennacherib, king of Assyria, seventh century BCE)

What was new in the first millennium was the scale of the divine mandate. The kings no longer ruled solely over a Mesopotamian universe; now they lay claim to power over all kingdoms. The kings who held unrivalled sovereignty were compelled to make war on surrounding kingdoms, and the benefits of this conflict were tangible to the Mesopotamian elites. Ultimately, in ancient Mesopotamia, this violence could be expressed in numbers, and described in the most graphic terms:

I put to the sword the population of Hirimmu, a dangerous enemy who since time immemorial had not submitted to the kings, my ancestors, and I did not leave one alive . . . I returned safely to Assyria with 208,000 substantial captives, 7,200 horses and mules, 11,073 camels, 80,050 oxen, and 800,100 sheep and goats. This is apart from the people, donkeys, camels, oxen, and sheep and goats that all of my troops had carried away and appropriated for themselves. Moreover, I put to the sword the soldiers of the enemy, a recalcitrant force who had not submitted to my yoke, and hung their corpses on poles.

(Sennacherib, king of Assyria, seventh century BCE)

In the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions we find clear parallels with the language used by the kings of Akkad and Ur a millennium and a half earlier. The world outside of Mesopotamia was a staging ground for state violence and a source of wealth. The third millennium kings had made heaps of the enemy dead and taken away captives and livestock. The imperial powers of the first millennium increased the size of this enterprise, but not the state’s relationship with warfare. By carrying the sword beyond the boundaries of the kingdom, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians and Persians who succeeded them, forged empires out of violence that guaranteed their ability to support the system of patronage on which their thrones rested. These endeavours were encouraged by a long development of a rhetoric of violence that was a catalyst for royal decision making. In the ordered world of Mesopotamia, violence was restrained by royal decree, and the chaos that surrounded that land could be brought to heel through warfare sanctioned by the gods.

Bibliographic Essay


Davide Nadali and Jodi Vidal (eds.), The Other Face of the Battle: The Impact of War on Civilians in the Ancient Near East (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014) includes a number of contributions that assess some of the costs of warfare that are not easy to measure from the largely ‘official’ evidence that survives. The topics of resistance and rebellion are

28 Grayson and Novotny, Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, pp. 36–7.


Violence and the Roman Way of Warfare

JONATHAN ROTH

‘Roman way of war’ in the title of this chapter is a variant of ‘Western way of war’, the theory first articulated by Victor Davis Hanson that has been the subject of much critique, and which I do not accept. In any case, it is questionable how much a ‘Roman way of war’ might reflect something intrinsic to its culture or a Roman response to universal features of war. Even in reference to something as basic as weaponry, Rome’s army changed dramatically over time. In addition, the tendency to focus on Roman domin-

ion, rather than the Mediterranean world as a whole, can create a false impression of distinctiveness. For example, Susan Mattern’s discussion of Roman political and military values, the importance of glory, domination and prestige, is all very well and good, but is applicable to any imperial power. 

Until the middle of the twentieth century scholars viewed the Roman army as not especially violent, but rather characterised by restraint. In a classic treatment, Theodor Mommsen lauded Roman discipline but said nothing about it being cruel or brutal. In 1914, Tenney Frank proposed that the Romans went to war reluctantly, the so-called ‘defensive imperialism’ theory. At the beginning of World War II, H. H. Scullard, reviewing a privately published dissertation on Roman atrocities, significantly the first monograph written on the subject, concluded that ‘Roman military methods ... judged by the standard of modern (or rather, surely, compara
tively modern) warfare, they were singularly cruel, but judged by contem
porary war usages they were surprisingly humane’. 

5 H. H. Scullard, review of M. M. Westington, Atrocities in Roman Warfare to 133 B.C., Classical Review 54.1 (1940), 58.
The publication of William V. Harris’s *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome* in 1979 dramatically changed the consensus on the nature of Roman warfare, and this work remains influential half a century later. Harris posited a warlike Roman society, as reflected in its ideology and its institutions, and argues that this bellicose culture drove an above-average level of military violence and a bellicent imperialism. By the end of the twentieth century the idea of a Rome brutally and aggressively expanding into a relatively pacific Mediterranean world had become commonplace. If anything, the perspective has become more negative. Tim Cornell likens Rome to a criminal syndicate, implying its army could best be seen as the ‘muscle for a gang’. In a recent popular survey of the Roman Empire, Neil Faulkner calls it ‘a predator state feeding on the spoils of war.’

In 2006 Arthur Eckstein’s *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* challenged this view. While not denying Rome was warlike, Eckstein sees it embedded in a Mediterranean world of other equally militaristic states. In this perspective the Roman Empire was the result of rational decision making by its leaders, not of an innately martial culture. This nuanced revival of the ‘defensive imperialism’ model has been making inroads, but there is no consensus on what might be termed the ‘culturalist-realist’ debate among Roman historians.

**Royal and Early Rome**

The myths of Rome’s earliest history, from the eighth to the sixth centuries BCE, are full of military violence. In Vergil’s poem on Rome’s origins, the *Aeneid*, the prophet Sybil predicts: ‘I see war and all the horrors of war. I see Tiber streaming and foaming with blood.’ These stories have provided a backdrop for those characterising Rome as a particularly bellicose culture. It is worth noting, however, that virtually all of them that remain were written down in the Augustan age, some 500 to 700 years later. Additionally, Vergil is emphasising Rome’s bloody history as a counterpoint to the

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10 Primarily in Livy, Book 1 and Dionysius of Halicarnassus books 1–4.
peaceful golden age being inaugurated by Augustus Caesar. Such verbal pictures of violence need to be viewed critically.

The ancient historians of early Rome present it as powerful and aggressive, but it is impossible to say whether its kings were ‘imperialistic’. The large size of the sixth century BCE Temple of Jupiter suggests that Rome dominated central Italy, though whether this was through force or great wealth is unknown. After the overthrow of the Etruscan kings and the establishment of the Republic, the sources portray Rome as conquering areas that were already under its control under the kings. This either means that the Republic had lost and had to reconquer territory, or, more sceptically, that the earlier conquests were mythical. In any case, the legends of early Rome should not be taken to represent the actual character of royal Rome. The stories of war and noble heroes might overlay the history of a trading city and merchant families.

By the sixth century BCE Rome had a militia-style army made up of propertied citizens, which was called into service by magistrates and disbanded after wars. This was typical for a Mediterranean city-state of the period in having a Greek-style system of recruitment, weaponry and fighting, the so-called ‘hoplite system’. While later evidence makes it clear that clans (gentes) led by aristocrats were important in early Rome, what this tells us about early Roman military practice is debatable. Livy and Dionysius tell the story of the Fabii, or Fabian gens, organised as a clan force to fight the Etruscan inhabitants of Veii, though both characterise it as exceptional. There is little evidence, however, for the kind of endemic feuds and vendettas associated with powerful militarised clans in other times and places. Even in the case of the legend of Gaius Marcius Coriolanus, retold by Shakespeare, the focus is on a personal, not a clan, dispute.

Over the course of the fifth century BCE Rome fought a series of wars that established its hegemony over Latium, an area of about 894 square kilometres. At the same time it went through an extended period of struggle over power between the Patricians and the Plebeians. It is striking that while the ‘Conflict of Orders’ saw violent incidents, it did not lead to the sort of endemic intra-state violence and civil strife seen in contemporary Greek city-states, something that calls an automatic Roman recourse to violence into question. Stories of warfare relating to the Early Republic must also be viewed critically.

12 This hoplite army is described in Livy 1.43, although with how much accuracy is problematic.
13 Livy 2.48–50; Dion. Hal. 9.11.3.
Wars make up a big part of our historical narrative, but Livy is almost certainly inventing the details of early battles. For example, after defeating the Volscans in battle in 494 BCE Livy describes what happened thus: ‘More blood was shed there, in the promiscuous slaughter of all sorts of people, than had been in the battle itself. A very few were granted quarter, having come without arms and given themselves up.’\(^{14}\) The practice of killing inhabitants captured in a siege was a common, and Livy’s description should not be taken as referring to the Early Republic specifically. In another case describing military violence, Livy says that in the aftermath of a battle he dates to 462 BCE ‘The Volscian nation was almost wiped out there. I find in some of the annals that 13,470 men fell in the battle and the pursuit, and 1,750 were taken prisoners, whilst twenty-seven military standards were captured. Although there may be some exaggeration, there certainly was a great slaughter.’\(^{15}\) Livy is not necessarily inventing these numbers, and may have found them in an older source. Yet even if they came from a contemporary work (which is unlikely), we need to apply what the German military historian Hans Debrück called *Sachkritik*, that is, we need to judge the numbers found in ancient manuscripts by their reasonable likelihood.\(^{16}\)

Around 400 BCE Rome conquered the Etruscan city of Veii, doubling its size and population. This was a key moment in the state’s rise to dominance over the Italian peninsula. A Gallic raid that led to Rome’s sacking in 387 BCE led to the building of a defensive wall, but it did not interrupt this trend of conquest. In the century between this setback and the Battle of Sentium (295 BCE), Rome defeated the powerful Samnite confederation in central Italy, drove the Gauls out of the Etruscan territory and secured control of the valuable Campanian coastline. The conquered Italian peoples were institutionalised as *socii* or allies, who were nominally (and to some extent actually) independent. The allies were not taxed but were compelled to provide soldiers for Rome.

Rome faced intermittent revolts from these peoples from the earliest conquest, as well as some civil unrest, although the details and scale of both are difficult to ascertain reliably; nevertheless, there is no direct evidence of particular Roman brutality. Whatever its original motivations for establishing primarily indirect control over Italy, Rome’s way of organising power had a significant impact over time. In the short run, it may well have lessened the level of military violence vis-à-vis the allies, as the Roman army was not generally responsible for garrison or police duty. In addition, this

\(^{14}\) Livy 2.30.15.  \(^{15}\) Livy 3.8.10–11.  \(^{16}\) Arden Bucholz, ‘Hans Delbrück and Modern Military History’, *Historian* 55.3 (1993), 520–2.
method suggests less of an ideology of domination such as one sees in other imperial states. If there was an unusual feature to Roman expansion, it is not its bellicosity but its willingness to assimilate foreign populations and share power with them.

By 280 BCE Rome had subjugated, directly or indirectly, both northern and central Italy. In that year a war broke out against the Greek city-states of southern Italy, which were supported by King Pyrrhus of Epirus. Though defeated tactically, Rome’s ability to raise new armies led to its ultimate success, something that became a trend over time. This period saw the Roman hoplite-style legion gradually transformed into the more flexible manipular legion, which combined light and heavy infantry, some probably armed with shortswords, and used a more open formation than the hoplite-style phalanx. Now a major power in the Mediterranean, in the middle of the third century BCE Rome came into conflict with Carthage, leading to two Punic wars.

**Middle Republic**

We have two relatively complete accounts of the Punic Wars, Livy and Polybius, with the former relying at many points on the latter. Adding in the material in other sources, such as Appian and Plutarch, we have a fairly reliable account of the course of events. Our historical sources now routinely include numbers, of the size of armies, the number of those killed and wounded in battle, and sometimes descriptions of civilian dead and the number of slaves taken. Appian, for example states that a total of 300,000 Roman soldiers were killed in the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE). While this number might be questioned, it is clear that Rome fielded very large armies and suffered high casualties, though it is worth keeping in mind that a high absolute number of casualties is a function of the size of armies and navies.

A key passage upon which the idea of exceptional Roman brutality rests is Polybius’ description of the aftermath of the capture of Carthago or New Carthage by the forces of Scipio Africanus. The siege occurred in 209 BCE, during the Second Punic War, before Polybius was born, but he was a careful historian who had access to Roman records and eyewitnesses. Thus it is likely his graphic description is an accurate one.

[According to the Roman custom; their orders were to exterminate every form of life they encountered, sparing none, but not to start pillaging until]

the word was given to do so. This practice is adopted to inspire terror, and so when cities are taken by the Romans you may often see not only the corpse of human beings but dogs cut in half and the dismembered limbs of other animals.18

The slaughter of people in a captured city was not unusual in ancient warfare. It is the killing of dogs and other animals that strikes Polybius as extraordinary. Whether or not the Romans actually did this at New Carthage, or elsewhere, and whether it was normal practice for the Romans, and not others, to kill animals in such circumstances, hardly seems to prove that Roman military violence was more cruel than that of others. After all, the daily mass killing of animals was, and remains, a normal activity around the world. Reading further, however, we note that Polybius states that when ordered to by Scipio, the soldiers cease their killing, and then their subsequent pillaging; they obey in a disciplined fashion. Thus, Polybius presents the violence not as a symptom of mindless brutality but as an instrument of power, rationally applied.

The fifty years after the Carthaginian defeat at Zama in 202 BCE saw the Romans defeat the two remaining powerful Hellenistic monarchies, the Antigonids and the Seleucids, thereby becoming the premier state in the Mediterranean world. To control areas outside of Italy, Rome adapted the provincial system already in use for centuries in the Near East. Rather than developing an imperial civil service, however, it used the existing elites to rule and relied on its armies to punish rebellion or recalcitrance. The Italian system of allies continued to be used, and in addition the Romans left some states independent as clients, or even allies in the true sense.

While the time of its introduction is debated, certainly by this time the Roman legionary was fighting with the gladius or shortsword. This weapon required a more close-up type of combat than spears, and also had an impact on the way non-combatants were killed. Another locus classicus for the argument of an especially violent ‘Roman way of warfare’ comes from Livy’s description of the Second Macedonian War (200–197 BCE). After a skirmish with the Romans, King Philip V orders that the Macedonian dead be buried, thinking that this consideration will improve morale. Instead, Livy reports, it has the opposite effect, as his soldiers see mutilated corpses killed by gladius-wielding soldiers:

those who, being always accustomed to fight with Greeks and Illyrians, had only seen wounds made with javelins and arrows, seldom even by lances, came to behold bodies dismembered by the Spanish sword, some with their

18 Polyb. 10.15.
arms lopped off, with the shoulder or the neck entirely cut through, heads severed from the trunk, and the bowels laid open, with other frightful exhibitions of wounds: they therefore perceived, with horror, against what weapons and what men they were to fight.  

It is possible that Philip or someone else related this incident and it duly found its way into Livy’s text. Alternatively, Livy or someone else may have invented it. Whether or not this represents Philip’s attitudes, we need to keep in mind that indeed the shortsword resulted in more brutal wounds than the spear.

Killing and wounding enemy soldiers in battle is, of course, the purpose of armies. The question is whether the Romans were more brutal and vicious in battle than others. In ancient times violence was routine, and thus soldiers may not have seen military violence as a great contrast to their civilian life. Battle could occur in what is termed ‘open battle’, that is, two armies facing each other, in the case of Rome usually literally on a field of battle. In a description of the nature of such combat, Brian Campbell writes that ‘Fighting in the Roman army was a personal experience, involving face-to-face combat, in which men used muscular force and cutting weapons to inflict highly visible, bloody wounds.’

When reading accounts of battle, especially with an eye to understanding military violence, the reader should always keep in mind the rhetorical element of such descriptions. In addition, most of our sources, even those with military experience, are writing about wars they did not personally experience.

There is considerable debate about the tempo of Roman warfare, though generally the consensus is that it rose and fell in various periods. It was Harris who first made the case that the Roman Republic was almost constantly at war, a factor in his argument that it had an especially bellicose culture. It should be pointed out, however, that not all wars were created equal. It is necessary to distinguish especially long wars, such as the First and Second Punic Wars, and those involving intense fighting, such as the Pyrrhic War, from short and small-scale conflicts. It is not always easy to distinguish these, however. Even those wars described in the most detail contain many blanks, and in the case of many conflicts, we have only the bare mention of their occurrence. In others – and how many others is a key question – we have no evidence of their having happened at all.

19 Livy 31.34.3–4.
While Rome won a series of decisive victories in the east, the Republic showed an apparent reluctance to directly annex weak, but wealthy, regions such as Seleucid Syria and Ptolemaic Egypt. This led to vigorous debate over the nature of Roman imperialism. The school of thought following Harris explains the reluctance to annex by invoking the notion of indirect control, in which Romans exercised actual power while leaving states nominally independent. Those more convinced by Eckstein hold this hesitancy to annex feeble and rich territories as evidence for the revised defensive imperialism model.

In addition to the debate over the motives for Roman imperialism, there is the question of whether the Romans killed more enemies than other contemporary states. For example, Pliny states that in 121 BCE Fabius Maximus killed 130,000 Allobroges and Averni at the River Isara.\(^1\) Appian reports that after the Roman victory in the Third Punic War of 146 BCE, of the 700,000 people in Carthage, only 50,000 survived.\(^2\) Aside from the question of the reliability of such figures, unless we have similar ones for other ancient states, which we rarely do for this period, they have little meaning. The question is not whether the Romans killed people, even large numbers of people, during war, but whether this killing was on a larger scale or of a more brutal kind than that of contemporaries.

In 150 BCE Servius Sulpicius Galba, the praetor of Spain, invited the leaders of the Lusitanians to a negotiation and then slaughtered them. This is often cited as an example of Roman cruelty. The fact that Galba was prosecuted in Rome for his perfidy (albeit acquitted assisted by bribery) sometimes goes unmentioned.\(^3\) A Lusitanian victory the previous year, in which 7,000 Roman soldiers were killed, may not excuse but does help to explain the massacre. Although it can be debated whether Galba was punished for the slaughter or his perfidy, such massacres were, it seems, not regular Roman practice.

Mass enslavement is also used as an example of Roman military violence towards non-combatants. According to both Livy and Plutarch, in 167 BCE general Aemilius Paullus captured 150,000 people as slaves, who were supposedly taken by the Romans from seventy cities after the conquest of Epirus, modern Albania.\(^4\) The fact that there are two sources for this information does not give it any more credence, as both writers might well be drawing on a single exaggerated or invented source. As in the case of casualties, we are

\(^{1}\) Plin. \textit{HN} 7.51. \(^{2}\) App. \textit{Pun.} 19.130. \(^{3}\) E.g. by Faulkner, \textit{Rome}, p. 91. \(^{4}\) Livy 45.34.5; Plut. \textit{Aem. Paul.} 29.3.
rarely informed about such large-scale enslavements by other contemporary states, but there is no way to choose between this being a function of surviving evidence or of an especially cruel Roman practice.

The practice of mass deportation was common in certain ancient states, such as ancient Assyria and Babylonia, but seems to have been rare for Rome. It did occur, however. After defeating them in 193 BCE, the Romans drove the entire nation of the Celtic Boii out of their lands in Cisalpine Gaul, a clear case of ethnic cleansing. Shortly thereafter, in 180 BCE they deported some 80,000 Ligurians from their home in north-western Italy to the south of the peninsula. Such cases, though, are confined to this relatively brief period. They might represent an experiment of some sort or special circumstances of which we are unaware. Neither ethnic cleansing nor the deportation of populations became regular Roman practice, in contrast to other ancient (and modern) states.

An important attitudinal change was occurring in Rome over the course of the second century BCE. Romans became less willing to serve in the legions, as reflected in popular demonstrations against the levy in 151 BCE.25 Elite Romans became less likely to be personally engaged in warfare: cavalry units made entirely up of the wealthiest Romans disappeared, probably before 150 BCE, and were replaced by non-Roman horsemen. The entire notion of virtus (literally ‘manliness’) begins to change from meaning military skill and courage to more the philosophical idea of virtue.26 None of this disproves the idea of a continuously bellicose Roman culture, but it does raise questions about it.

Late Republic

By 100 BCE the Roman army had become effectively a professional one. The legion was now made up entirely of heavy infantry, organised into circa 600-man cohorts. Legionaries were trained to both fight and serve as combat engineers, a dual function that led to great Roman success at siege warfare. Antonio Santosuosso argues that it was this professionalisation of the military, and not the traditional Roman culture, that created an especially brutal and violent type of warfare.27 There is certainly evidence of extreme military

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25 Polyb. 35.4.4.
violence in the Late Republic, but it is difficult to tell if this is a matter of culture, the nature of the wars the Romans were fighting, or simply the survival of sources. We have a relatively large number of texts giving us information on military and other violence in the first century BCE: Sallust, Caesar, Cicero, Velleius Paterculus, Appian, Plutarch and Josephus.

In what is known as the Social War (91–88 BCE) the Italian allies rose up against Rome, during which, according to Velleius Paterculus, 300,000 were killed on all sides, a figure which matches that of the Second Punic War but is much less likely. While the fighting certainly was severe, it is worth noting that the war ended in large part through Roman accommodation and not through brutal suppression. The one exception to this was the treatment of the Samnites, whose lands were severely devastated. The fact, however, that this damage was carried out systematically six years after the war ended, suggests it might have been due to a political decision and not to emotion.

There was increasing civil unrest in Rome, often breaking out in violence, in which the army increasingly participated. In such civil strife, cruelty could be common: for example, the soldiers of Cinna displayed the heads of their political opponents in Rome in 87 BCE. When Sulla made himself dictator there was serious fighting in Spain, leading to a duel between two generals, Sertorius and Pompey. Excavations at the site of the ancient city of Valentia during the 1980s uncovered the remains of Pompey’s siege of the city in 75 BCE. In addition to weapons, fourteen skeletons were uncovered showing signs of torture. One older individual had been tied up and a javelin shoved into his rectum. A younger man had all his limbs hacked off. The excavators’ concluded these were followers of Sertorius who were executed after the siege. This is possible, although it also could be that they were individuals killed by the Sertorians. Such archaeological evidence can be very dramatic, but it can almost never be interpreted unambiguously.

Julius Caesar’s writings were rhetorical and tendentious, but he describes battle scenes that he personally witnessed in great detail and in general accurately. His numbers, however, are another matter. While he claims to be using the Helvetii’s own records, his figure of 263,000 for the tribe’s total population, and 153,000 for those killed fighting the Romans, is not credible. Figures from other sources need to be treated even more sceptically. Velleius Paterculus states that 400,000 Gauls died in the ten years of the Gallic Wars.

28 Vell. Pat. 2.15.3.
29 Martin Llorene Alapont et al., ‘La Destrucción de Valenta por Pompeyo (75 a. C)’, Quarderns De Difusio Arqueologica 6 (2009), 9–40.
30 Caes. BGall. 1.29. 31 Vell. Pat. 2.47.
Plutarch gives even higher figures: he writes that 3 million Gauls fought in the wars, a million were killed and a million captured.\textsuperscript{32} Such high numbers are questionable, to say the least, and ought not to be accepted uncritically.

Archaeologists from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam announced in 2015 that the remains of a battle near the city of Kessel had been carbon dated to the first century BCE, suggesting a connection to Caesar’s victory over two German tribes, the Tencteri and the Usipetes in 55 BCE. Descriptions of this discovery routinely cite a number of 150,000 Germans killed, though this number is not in Caesar’s description. The figure he does give, that these tribes had 430,000 warriors (not the tribe’s total population), is a figure that is suggestive of how such large numbers should be taken.\textsuperscript{33} While the remains of skeletons and weapons can tell us much, they say little about the nature of Roman violence. The fact that archaeology deals in objects does not necessarily make it more objective.

While isolated pieces of evidence can be illustrative, one has to be very careful in building a case based on them. In dealing with ancient literary passages or archaeological remains we must be cognisant of the fact that very little survives, and that what we do find is difficult to interpret. Of course, simply disregarding literary evidence because it is rhetorical (it is all rhetorical) or archaeological evidence because it is ambiguous (it is all ambiguous) is as misleading as simplistic credulity. Nevertheless, there is simply no basis for a definitive conclusion on the nature and extent of Roman military violence during the Republic.

Early Empire

After Caesar’s assassination and further fighting his grandnephew, Octavian, took power, and eventually adopted the name of Imperator Augustus Caesar. He is usually considered the first emperor. We have good sources for Augustus’ military operations in his autobiography, the \textit{Res Gestae}, in the historian Dio Cassius, and numerous other references. His reign, however, lacks the strong narrative of Tacitus, whose \textit{Annals} begin with his death. Augustus annexed the last Hellenistic monarchy, Ptolemaic Egypt, fought

\textsuperscript{32} Plut. Caes. 15.3.

a number of wars of conquest and instituted a wide-ranging reform of the military. The army, long actually professional, now became officially so, with set terms of service. The legions, made up of Roman citizens and auxiliary units of provincials, made up the bulk of the armed forces, supplemented by a navy and the Praetorian Guard stationed next to Rome. Although he is generally associated with a stabilisation of imperial policy, Augustus added more territory to direct Roman rule than any other ruler.

There were a number of serious rebellions during Augustus’ reign. The site of the famous Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, in which German warriors wiped out three Roman legions, has been found near the modern city of Kalkriese. The description given by Tacitus and the archaeological evidence are generally congruent. Both the literary and physical evidence illustrates a high level of brutality on the part of the Germans, torturing and killing captured Romans. This might suggest that Roman violence was no greater than that of others, but again, one must be careful in drawing conclusions. A contemporary uprising in Pannonia, although less well known, was far more serious and was put down only with great difficulty. Casualties among both armed forces, as well as civilians, were doubtless heavy, but are unknown. This should remind us that while some numbers are exaggerated, others are missing altogether.

Compared to the first century BCE, the first century of the Christian Era was a period of reduced warfare. Nevertheless, it is in this period that most evidence of extreme Roman military violence is drawn. The Romans invaded Britain in 43 CE, and expanded their power there over the succeeding few decades. Tacitus, in his Agricola, describes the violence during the revolt of British queen Boudicca in lurid detail, but the most frequently quoted passage with reference to Roman military violence comes from his description of Agricola’s campaign, in what is now Scotland, in 83 or 84 CE. He quotes Calgacus (the name or title of a Caledonian king or chieftain): ‘To ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace.’

The fact that a quotation is from a historical text, makes it no less rhetorical, but it is important to keep in mind rhetorical does not necessarily mean untrue or even false. When we read quotations, or speeches, in ancient sources, whether they represent the exact words or the basic meaning of a reliable source or witness is very relevant. In this case, it is (barely) possible

that Tacitus heard some details of a speech by Calgacus (which would of course have been made in some dialect of Celtic) from Agricola, who won the battle, or he may have heard a version from a Caledonian prisoner. Even if he heard some details of the speech, it is clear that Tacitus wrote it to express a view of his own and in his own words. Most historians believe, however, that this speech, like those in most ancient histories, is an invention of the author. Indeed, Tacitus may have invented Calgacus altogether.

Ironically, if the quotation of Calgacus is authentic, it is actually less likely to give us genuine information about the nature of Roman imperialism and its violence than if Tacitus had invented it. After all, the leader of a tribe or tribal confederation at the far end of an island itself on the margin of the Roman Empire would not have been very well informed about the history of Roman military practice. Tacitus was in a much better position to judge how the Romans had acted over a long time and a wide space. This having been said, the quotation should be read for the rhetorical flourish that it is, and not as hard evidence of Roman military violence.

There were some minor wars during the Early Empire, such as the Romano-Bosporan conflict of 49 CE, which we know of only through chance. This should remind us that while large casualty figures might be exaggerated, there were cases in which conflicts, and their human cost, went unrecorded or where our knowledge of which does not survive. Conversely, detailed surviving evidence can take on more significance than it perhaps deserves simply because it is available. Thus Josephus, who wrote an entire book on the Jewish War of 66–73 CE, and refers to it in other works, is frequently cited as a prime witness for Roman military violence. He states that as a result of the First or Great Revolt some 1,197,000 Jews were killed.\(^35\) Josephus’ lurid description of the slaughter and mass enslavement in the aftermath of the Jewish War has been seen as typical of Roman violence under the Roman Empire.

The lengths to which an army will go to crush any sign of resistance can be used as a measure of bellicosity. In a study of Roman military policy, Edward Luttwak claims that this was a Roman characteristic, citing the siege of Masada, a desert outpost held by rebels, in order to emphasise the Roman tenacity in stamping out even the smallest and most remote resistance.\(^36\) Despite being clear from Josephus’ text that the Romans ignored Masada for three years after the capture of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the fact that the siege

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occurred in (or around) 73 CE had led to the idea of a three-year-long siege. The siege, however, did not last for years, or even for months, but rather was a short one by Roman standards, perhaps as few as four to six weeks. Luttwak’s idea that Rome rooted out even the smallest and most insignificant sign of resistance is thus based on a mistaken reading of Josephus.

While Josephus’ account is often pointed to by those claiming a high level of Roman brutality, there are others who see this evidence in a different light. Indeed, Frank Russell argues Rome used restraint during the Jewish War. A careful reading of Josephus shows that while there were punitive measures taken, for example, banning Jews from the site of the Temple and instituting a Jewish tax, most Jews who did not participate in the uprising seem to have suffered no further punishment. Pro-Roman Jews, such as King Agrippa II and Josephus himself, were rewarded. Gil Gambash accepts that the Romans showed great brutality in the Jewish War, as graphically described by Josephus, but thinks it the exception rather than the rule for Roman counterinsurgency.

While the Jewish War raged, a revolt broke out among the Batavians, a tribe living in what is now the Rhine delta of the Netherlands on the other side of the Roman Empire. While there were heavy Roman casualties, possibly as many as 20,000, its suppression was not followed by severe measures. Certainly, the fact that Rome’s military resources were stretched and under stress played a factor, but such reticence to punish rebels needs to be considered, and explained, by those positing a ferociously cruel Rome. Both these struggles were ongoing when a military challenge to Nero’s rule arose that led to his death and the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. In this political upheaval, called the Year of the Four Emperors (69–70 CE), armies in Spain, Germany and Syria all acted separately to raise their own military commanders to the imperial throne. Tacitus complains that in the civil war during the Year of the Four Emperors, Roman armies treated Italian cities as they did enemy ones. The final result of all this fighting was the decisive victory of Vespasian and the establishment of the Flavian dynasty.

Historians call the period of the Flavian and subsequent Antonine dynasties, from 71 to 193 CE, the Pax Romana, or Roman Peace. Whether this was, as Gibbon thought, a real boon to humanity or a facade is part of the more general debate over Roman military violence. In 155 CE the orator Aelius Aristides, a Greek from Mysia in what is now north-west Turkey, gave a speech in the presence of the emperor Antoninus Pius. In ‘To Rome’ (or ‘Regarding Rome’) Aristides lauded the Empire, ‘You control a vast empire with a rule that is firm but not unkind.’ We have a copy of the speech and while it was no doubt edited, there is little reason to doubt it closely represents Aristides’ actual words. Of course, the fact that it is an authentic quotation does not mean it can be read at face value any more than Tacitus’ damming, but likely invented, words. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the ancients themselves disputed the nature of an empire in which they lived. This puts the present debate, 2,000 years later, in perspective.

There was a hiatus in offensive activities during the Pax Romana, but early in the second century Trajan undertook two wars (101–2 CE and 105–6 CE) to conquer the gold-rich kingdom of Dacia, modern Romania. Trajan’s Column, built in around 110 CE, illustrates these campaigns. Above a base, which held the body of Trajan after his death, the representation of a scroll winds up its 34 metres, containing 155 individual scenes. One shows soldiers displaying heads, apparently of Dacians stuck on poles outside a military camp. These may be ethnic Romans or auxiliaries. They may be Celts, who had a traditional custom of headhunting. The fact is that there are many possible interpretations of this image, which may or may not be relevant to Roman military violence.

The Pax Romana was interrupted in the 160s. The Parthians invaded from the east in 161 CE, initiating a five-year war, and the Marcomanni and the Quadi, German tribal confederations, along with the Sarmatians, a Persian-speaking steppe people, invaded along the Danube frontier. Marcus Aurelius spent much of his reign fighting them, which is commemorated in another column, certainly inspired by Trajan’s. The subject is, similarly, the emperors’ wars, although we know much less about the specific conflicts. In one scene, some Germans are decapitating other Germans, apparently under Roman supervision, although exactly what is going on is unclear. In another, Roman soldiers burn down a village – the act being less striking than the fact it is being illustrated so prominently. Indeed, there are more scenes of

violence against unarmed enemies and non-combatants in Marcus Aurelius’ column than Trajan’s.

The fact that one column’s series of illustrations shows more violence than another does not reflect the underlying reality, but even whether it tells us something general about the culture of Roman warfare is also questionable. We do not know why the Romans chose to illustrate particular scenes on these columns, nor who the intended audience was, nor whether other cultures had similar illustrations, which have not survived. Indeed, there is a fundamental distinction between a culture of representing military violence and a culture of military violence. Questions of accuracy and bias need to be asked of all physical evidence: sculpture, reliefs, painting and architecture. Much of the interpretation of Roman military art, especially in the context of military violence, is seen through the lens of the theory of cultural hegemony. While it is widely accepted, the idea that elites keep power through a sort of propaganda of images (or of writing, for that matter) is far from proven. Even in modern times, the impact of media, even state-directed media, is a highly controversial subject.

In the course of the debate over military violence modern historians of war have frequently referred to the overall rate of violent death. This is problematic, of course, as murders are, by definition, not deaths in combat. Yet there does seem to be some overall correlation between these two rates. Reliable evidence is lacking, especially for earlier periods, although some have tried to overcome this dearth of data by gathering what is termed ‘mega-data’. Such extrapolation should be taken with a grain of salt. It has been said that there are no statistics in ancient history, only arithmetic. While it is not a hard and fast rule, it is rare that enough data survives from antiquity to form a statistically significant sample.

Throughout military history undisciplined or poorly disciplined armed forces are much more likely to kill, maim and rape civilians and to steal or destroy property. *Disciplina* or ‘discipline’ is a Latin term and a fundamental element of Roman military culture. It covered a wide number of concepts but a basic one was certainly to instil in soldiers the idea that violence was to be

strictly controlled. Not only was combat done only under orders, but also violence against civilians, which was certainly widespread in ancient times, was a matter of command and control. This is especially true in the matter of the plundering and killing or capturing enemies, in the latter case, to be sold as slaves. A disciplined army is one that has a loyalty beyond a mercenary motive, although it may be professional. The reasons for this are obvious from the viewpoint of command and control.

In some military systems, soldiers are allowed to plunder for their own profit, as a reward or a punishment for an enemy. This certainly occurred at times under the Roman system. In general, however, plundering was undertaken systematically, something that tells us much about Roman attitudes towards the discipline of soldiers. Those studying Roman military violence need to clearly distinguish systematic plundering, which is a sign of discipline, and personal looting, a sign of indiscipline.

A factor that certainly affects the war in any state is the presence or absence of powerful and aggressive enemies. It has been frequently noted that during the Pax Romana the Romans lacked such an adversary. The Parthian Empire did attack the Romans but only infrequently. While Roman invasions of Parthia did take place, there were long periods of peace. The German tribes that begin to attack Rome in the second century CE were only able to make significant inroads in the fourth. This is relevant to the question of Roman aggression, as Rome clearly did not make the same effort to conquer its eastern neighbour or to reconquer Germany that it did to create its Mediterranean empire. This fact needs to be addressed by those postulating a highly bellicose imperial Roman culture.

After the reign of Marcus Aurelius the tempo of warfare certainly increased. There were increasing incursions from the northern German tribes and Iranian-speaking tribes from the steppe. After the rise of the Sassanid dynasty in Persia, there was increased conflict to the east as well. The assassination of Commodus ended the Antonine dynasty, and led to another civil war (191–3 CE) that ended with the establishment of the Severan dynasty, which ended with the death of Alexander Severus in 235 CE. The Roman army had adopted spears and the phalanx organisation again by the end of the third century. This would have had an effect on the ‘face of battle’, and we need to recognise that this is also a period of ‘Roman way of warfare’.

The Roman Empire’s Crisis of the Third Century (235–85 CE) saw endemic civil war, plague, inflation and foreign invasion. This might well have led to Rome’s end, had not the army saved it. It is certainly relevant to our view of Roman military violence to note that through a series of soldier-emperors the
army did not use its predominance to loot the empire’s accumulated wealth, but fought strenuously to keep the state united and to defend it.

Conclusion

That Roman war was violent goes without saying, but this of itself does not prove that either there was a specific Roman way of war or that it was especially bellicose, cruel or brutal. The study of Roman military violence in a vacuum cannot help but present a distorted picture. It is important that Roman warfare be seen as part and parcel of Mediterranean conflict in general. Indeed, we know enough about the military history of other ancient states, especially China, to be able to put Rome in a much wider context.

Not only does the breadth of study make a great deal of difference in the conclusions one draws, but also the implicit assumptions about the relationship of culture and war. This is a broad discussion among military historians, and beyond, but the interpretation of texts and images as reflective of underlying reality should be done only with explicit reference to the historiographical problems involved. In addition, while modern theory has contributed much to our understanding of Roman military violence, scholars should use, or draw on those who use, the critical tools for understanding ancient sources developed over centuries of the study of Roman history.

The fact of the matter is that despite the fact, or perhaps because of the fact, that we know more about Rome than virtually any other ancient culture, we are not in a position to definitively say whether Roman military violence was distinct. Historians frankly cannot state confidently that Rome was excessively bellicose or less warlike, or indeed the same as the other societies of its time, or indeed, of our own.

Bibliographic Essay


Specific studies are Adam Ziolkowski’s ‘Urbs direpta, or How the Romans Sacked Cities’, in John Rich and Graham Shipley (eds.), *War and Society in the Roman World* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and for the archaeological evidence of battles, Manuel Fernández-Gótz, *Conflict Archaeology: Materialities of Collective Violence from Prehistory to Late Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2017), about half of which is on Roman battles.

Historiographical and Historical Contexts

On the face of it, the proposition that warfare and associated violence were important features of late antiquity might seem uncontentious, given that the centuries in question – early third to early seventh century CE – included the barbarian invasions which contributed to the downfall of the Western Empire in the fifth century and the Islamic invasions which severely weakened the Eastern Empire in the seventh. However, that proposition is one which cannot be taken for granted without discussion, not least because of the way in which late antiquity has evolved as a field of historical study.

In historiographical terms, the field of late antiquity has a relatively recent pedigree, becoming established as a recognised period of historical study only in the last half-century. This reflects above all the influence of the scholarship of Peter Brown, starting with his seminal overview *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971). The centuries encompassed by late antiquity had of course received scholarly attention previously, but usually in a disjointed and dismissive manner, with different chronological and geographical elements being treated as adjuncts to other fields of historical study, whether it be the final declining centuries of Roman history leading inexorably to the fall of the Western Empire in 476 CE, the ‘dark ages’ out of which the early medieval West emerged, or developments in the eastern Mediterranean arising from the foundation of Constantinople which formed the prolegomena to the history of an inferior Byzantine Empire.

By contrast, Brown’s *World of Late Antiquity* took a more integrated and focused approach to the period, which it presented as one of resilience and creativity – a positive vision which helped to spawn a vast array of scholarship
and establish late antiquity as a historical field in its own right.\(^1\) Brown’s positive vision, however, was one which emphasised social and cultural transformation, and privileged developments in religious life and artistic expression over more traditional narratives focused on political and military events. At the same time, the assumption that barbarian invaders were intent on destroying Roman civilisation was being questioned, alongside minimising of their numbers, with the cumulative consequence that the violence of the barbarian invasions was increasingly downplayed. The most prominent reflection of this approach was Walter Goffart’s 1980 study of barbarian settlement in the Western Empire, with its telling subtitle, *The Techniques of Accommodation*, its opening description of that settlement as a ‘peaceful and smooth process’, and its closing suggestion that the fifth century was ‘less memorable for invasions than for the incorporation of barbarian protectors into the fabric of the West’.\(^2\)

While this approach can be seen as an understandable attempt to provide a more balanced view of the impact of the barbarian invasions in place of traditional stereotypes of marauding hordes flooding into the empire and wreaking death and destruction, it in turn provoked a reaction from those who thought it was important not to lose sight of the violence that accompanied the invasions – ‘the horrors of war’, to quote the title of an early chapter in one of the most sustained ripostes to the minimising school of thought: Bryan Ward-Perkins’s provocatively titled *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*. This appeared in 2005, but the beginnings of a reaction can be seen in the early 1990s, with a renewed emphasis on the violent dimension of interaction between barbarian groups and the Roman Empire.\(^3\)

Since this debate has concerned the impact of the barbarian invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries, it has primarily focused on the western half of the empire. However, a more holistic perspective, encompassing both the east and the full chronological range of late antiquity, from the third to the seventh centuries, can leave no doubt as to the importance of warfare and violence in late antiquity. Above all there is the Persian dimension. It was the overthrow of the Parthian Arsacid regime by the Sasanian Persians in the 220s which marked a significant reconfiguration of the strategic position of the

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Roman Empire – and for the worse. Remarkably quickly, the new regime in Persia began pursuing a more aggressive strategy towards the empire, inflicting a succession of major defeats by the middle of the third century and contributing significantly to imperial instability. At the other end of late antiquity, the early part of the seventh century, prior to the Islamic invasions, witnessed more than two decades of war between the Roman Empire and Persia during which Persian forces occupied all the eastern provinces of the empire and even laid siege to Constantinople itself in 626 C.E. The emperor Heraclius managed to hold out against the Persian forces and then surprisingly quickly turned the tables on their overstretched resources to secure an unlikely victory in 628, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this protracted war left both powers in a weakened state which facilitated the unexpected Arab successes of the 630s. In the intervening centuries the tempo of warfare between the Roman Empire and Persia varied significantly, with, for example, the fifth century largely peaceful, but there can be no doubt that the interactions of these two powers generated significant periods of hard-fought conflict.⁴

Nor were barbarian invasions from the north limited to the fourth and fifth centuries. The mid third century had also seen major inroads along the Rhine and Danube, and across the Black Sea, which had further contributed to the empire’s instability, even if order was eventually restored by the end of the century with minimal territorial losses. Similarly in the latter part of the sixth and early seventh centuries the empire faced significant challenges from nomadic Avars and Slavs in the lower Danube basin. Furthermore, although expansionist warfare of the type familiar from the Roman Republic was rare on the part of the empire during late antiquity, there was a significant exception during the mid sixth century when the emperor Justinian launched campaigns to regain control of the western provinces lost to barbarian invaders during the fifth century, and these campaigns resulted in significant warfare and violence in North Africa and Italy. Finally, in addition to conflict with external enemies, there were also major instances of civil war in nearly every century of late antiquity.⁵

Late antiquity was, then, a phase of Roman history when warfare was particularly prevalent. This has been implicit in the outline provided in the preceding paragraphs, but it can be reinforced by comparing late antiquity with the period which preceded it – the Principate (late first century BCE to early third century CE). This was the period traditionally associated with the phrase ‘Pax Romana’. Although the idea of a Roman peace was an ideological construct fostered in the interests of emperors and imperial rule, and by no means meant an end to military-related violence in the Roman world, it was the case that the Roman Empire of the Principate waged expansionist wars far less frequently than had been the case during the Republic and experienced only limited enemy incursions, while the period also marked an end to the chronic civil wars which had devastated the final century of the Republic, even if there were brief, albeit bloody, recurrences in 68–9 and 192–3 CE. There were also some significant provincial revolts, notably in Judaea and Britain, but these were exceptional.

Why, then, was there an intensification of warfare during late antiquity? As far as external conflict is concerned, the emergence of Sasanian Persia in the east was undoubtably of fundamental importance. For the first time since the Middle Republican period (third and second centuries BCE), the Roman Empire confronted an enemy commanding comparable material and military resources which enabled it to pose a very serious challenge to Roman power. It was, moreover, a particularly aggressive opponent, especially during the first century after its emergence, and while that can in part be attributed to the determination of successive Persian rulers to consolidate the position of their new regime by the tried and tested method of military success, it was also a response to repeated Roman aggression against the Parthian Arsacid regime in the second century, during which Roman armies had three times invaded deep into Parthian territory, thereby increasingly discrediting the Arsacids and helping to lay the ground for their overthrow by the Sasanians. So while the impact of Sasanian Persia might seem to be an exogenous factor

outside of Roman control, the empire had inadvertently played a significant role in its creation.

The same can be said about the parallel impact of barbarian groups from the north in the third century. The economically under-developed and politically fragmented communities north of the empire in the first century gradually enhanced their agricultural productivity and population size, so that, with increasing social stratification and political centralisation, they were able to pose more serious military threats to the empire by the mid third century. Those developments owed much to the effects of commercial and diplomatic interchange with the empire, which facilitated improvements in agriculture and channelled imperial subsidies to clearly identifiable leaders. The empire understandably preferred to deal with individuals whose authority held substantial sway because this made the conclusion and maintenance of agreements easier – but it also had the unintended consequence of encouraging the emergence of more powerful barbarian groups. And because the empire’s approach to relations with these barbarian groups was fundamentally exploitative (e.g. a significant element of commercial interchange was the channelling of barbarian slaves into the empire) and also involved periodic bouts of imperial military aggression, these more powerful barbarian groups were by no means favourably disposed towards the empire. Indeed, as in Persia, leadership was validated through successful warfare.8

The external military challenges of the mid third century in turn contributed significantly to an increased incidence of civil war within the empire. Emperors had traditionally been drawn from the senatorial elite, among whom military competence was valued but of less importance as a qualification for imperial office than dynastic ties. The multiple problems the empire faced on its frontiers during this period very quickly changed this, so that military experience became a desideratum (to the extent that it trumped all other requirements, including senatorial status). In this way, attaining imperial office became a realistic goal for senior military officers of ability and ambition, even if from a lower social background. Greater competition for imperial office ensued, and since the competitors were military men with troops under their command, periodic bouts of civil war were an almost inevitable consequence. This was particularly the case during the mid third century, but it remained a reasonably regular occurrence.

during the fourth and fifth centuries, despite the efforts of emperors to re-establish the principle of dynastic continuity. It was less of a problem during the sixth century, largely, it seems, because emperors adopted a strategy of placing individuals connected to them by ties of blood or marriage in positions of senior military command, but there was a recrudescence in the early seventh century against a background of renewed military crisis, on a scale comparable to that of the mid third century.  

What Was Distinctive about Warfare in Late Antiquity?

While it is evident that the frequency of warfare intensified in late antiquity, there remains the question of the extent to which its character was distinctive from warfare in earlier periods of Roman history, especially in relation to the theme of violence. The overall picture is in fact one of substantial continuities, but it is possible to identify certain shifts in emphasis. Starting from the perspective of the empire’s most important enemies, the forces of Sasanian Persia relied above all on their strengths in cavalry and archery, and in these respects were no different from their Parthian predecessors; the one area of warfare where they quickly proved to be much more adept than the Parthians – and this was an important change – was in the conduct of sieges, about which more will be said below. Northern barbarian groups continued to rely broadly on the same weaponry and tactics as their forebears during the Principate, while the empire had also previously confronted the horsemanship and archery skills of steppe nomads before the advent of the Huns and the Avars, in the form of such groups as Sarmatians and Alans in the first and second centuries. As far as the Roman army itself is concerned, heavy infantry deployed in close order remained of central importance throughout late antiquity. However, these troops were increasingly expected to acquire greater versatility in their weapons skills, especially missiles and archery – areas of expertise traditionally associated with light infantry – while there was also an increase in the number of specialist units of archers. It is also apparent that Roman cavalry numbers increased in late antiquity, with growing emphasis particularly on mounted archers, no doubt in response to the impact of the Huns.  

9 Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, pp. 66–73.

Of the two most important shifts in emphasis relevant to pitched battles – the greater roles played by cavalry and archery – it is the latter which is the more significant in terms of violence in battle, since it was almost impossible to make horses charge into a solid infantry formation. The principal roles of cavalry on the battlefield in late antiquity have been identified as: pre-battle skirmishing with and countering of enemy cavalry; placing psychological pressure on enemy infantry formations with a view to hastening their loss of cohesion; and either harrying a defeated enemy in retreat, or alternatively providing cover for the retreat of Roman forces. While these various activities could undoubtedly include significant elements of violence, especially where horse archers were involved, it was the greater use of archery, whether on foot or horseback, which had the potential to have a more obviously violent impact. The sixth-century historian Procopius includes a number of graphic descriptions of arrows penetrating the faces and bodies of individual combatants, usually with fatal consequences, but more significant is the bigger picture of how concentrated firepower from Roman foot archers deployed in a ‘crescent’ formation inflicted heavy casualties on Gothic forces in Italy at the crucial Battle of Taginae in 552 CE, and then again two years later on a Frankish and Alamannic army at Casilinum. While archery had undoubtedly been an element of Roman warfare before late antiquity, it does seem to have been used with increasing effectiveness in late antiquity as a deliberate tactical decision against enemies such as the Goths and Vandals who were unable to match Roman firepower. This is not to say that barbarian archery in this period was always ineffective: Gothic

13 Procop. Goth. 4.32.6–10, Agathias 2.9, with P. Rance, ‘Narses and the Battle of Taginae (Busta Gallorum) 552’, Historia 54.4 (2005), 462–3.
archery had played a part in the catastrophic Roman defeat at Adrianople in 378 CE, albeit when the progress of the battle left Roman infantry tightly bunched so as to provide an easier target for Gothic arrows.\textsuperscript{14}

If in other respects the basics of battle in late antiquity remained broadly constant compared with earlier periods of Roman history, there is nonetheless another rather different way in which the period offers a distinct perspective on battle, with particular relevance to the theme of violence – namely, how one of the most important historians of the period, Ammianus Marcellinus, includes battle narratives which allow readers to gain a more immediate sense of the experience of it, compared with other Roman historians (including, it seems, Procopius).\textsuperscript{15} This feature of Ammianus’ writing has been linked in modern scholarship with the so-called ‘face of battle’ approach to military history, as pioneered by John Keegan. This approach eschews the detached bird’s-eye perspective of the general in favour of the experiences of ordinary soldiers directly engaged in the thick of battle. As the subtitle of Keegan’s study indicates, his focus was on case studies from medieval and more recent periods of history, but his approach has gradually influenced the study of ancient warfare, albeit not without also encountering resistance in some quarters.\textsuperscript{16}

Although Ammianus was a junior officer rather than an ordinary soldier, he nonetheless had more direct military experience than most Roman historians in antiquity. ‘He had been in battles, had fought for his life, had seen people killed and had undoubtedly killed some himself, not at a distance, but hand to hand, knowing what he was doing and seeing the effect of it.’ The obvious exception in terms of military experience is Julius Caesar, but he of course wrote from a general’s perspective – a contrast emphasised in one of the most detailed assessments of the validity of Keegan’s approach in the context of Roman military history: Kimberly Kagan’s 2006 study \textit{The Eye of Command}. Although Kagan argues that Caesar’s approach provides a better understanding of the reasons for the outcome of battles, she nonetheless


\textsuperscript{15} Whately, \textit{Battles and Generals}, pp. 231–2 argues that Procopius’ perspective is much more that of the general than it is that of a common soldier.

endorses the idea that Ammianus’ combat narratives provide the participants’ perspective and the impression of realism valued by Keegan, even in the case of a battle such as Strasbourg (357 C.E.), when he was not personally present. While Ammianus’ accounts of battles undoubtedly include the sorts of lurid literary stereotypes which an ancient audience would expect, such as the ground being slippery with blood and combatants buried alive under piles of corpses, they also include details of the impact of weaponry which have the ring of authenticity, such as (at Strasbourg) the Alamanni trying to ‘cleave asunder with repeated sword-strokes the shields, closely interlaced in a wall formation, which protected our men’, and (at Adrianople) the effects of sword-blows on Goths ‘who had been hamstrung or had lost their right hand or been wounded in the side, on the verge of death’.17

However, perhaps unsurprisingly, the most sustained instance of Ammianus providing a ‘face of battle’ narrative of combat relates to an episode in which he was directly involved – the Persian siege and eventual capture of the Roman frontier fortress of Amida, perched high above the River Tigris, in 359 C.E. The siege lasted more than two months, and while Ammianus does not provide a continuous account, it is nonetheless very detailed and includes features which convey a convincing sense of the highs and lows of this type of warfare from the perspective of defenders, and the traumas it could entail.18 From among numerous vignettes, the following give some idea of the vividness of his narrative. The impact of the second day of the Persian assault is presented in gruesome detail:

Everyone tended his own wounds as best he could or as medical help was available; some of the seriously wounded gave up the ghost from loss of blood after a long struggle; others, mangled by sword-thrusts, were treated without success, and when they at last expired their dead bodies were thrown aside; in some cases of extensive injury the surgeons forbade any attempt at treatment, which would only inflict further useless pain; a number who faced the hazard of pulling out the arrows endured torments worse than death.

Towards the end of the siege, another perspective on this type of warfare is presented as he describes the approach of

formidable bodies of Persians supported by lines of elephants, whose noise and size make them the most frightful objects the human mind can conceive. But while we were beset on all sides by the combined pressure of armed men, siege-works and wild beasts, round stones hurled from the battlements by the iron slings of our machines shattered the joints of the [wooden siege] towers, and threw their artillery and those who worked it headlong down. Some died of the fall without being wounded, others were crushed by the weight of debris. The elephants, too, were forcibly repulsed. As soon as the firebrands thrown at them touched their bodies, they bolted and their mahouts lost control. But though we subsequently burned their siege-works the enemy gave us no rest.\footnote{Amm. Marc. 19.2.15, 19.7.6–7 (trans. W. Hamilton).}

Ammianus’ account of the siege of Amida is significant not only as a particularly good example of a ‘face of battle’ narrative, but also because, as previously noted, siege warfare was more broadly a notable feature of warfare in late antiquity, comprising, on one estimate, more than half the military engagements of the period. More specifically, it was a distinctive feature of Roman conflict with Sasanian Persia because, unlike the Parthians whose ability to conduct sieges appears to have been limited, the Persians very quickly demonstrated significant siege capability, whether because of superior logistical organisation and/or exploitation of the technological knowledge of Roman prisoners of war. One of the earliest demonstrations of that capability was their successful capture of the Roman fortress of Dura-Europos on the River Euphrates in 256 C.E. This well-preserved site provides a range of valuable evidence relating to aspects of siege warfare, including siege ramps, remnants of a range of projectiles (spears, arrows, catapult ammunition) and shield parts and armour. The most intriguing feature, however, is the remains of Persian tunnelling under the walls and Roman counter-tunnelling, with one tunnel found to contain the skeletons and equipment of twenty Roman soldiers and one Persian, apparently crushed to death when the tunnel collapsed as a result of the Persians deliberately firing the wooden supports. There have been various attempts to reconstruct the likely sequence of events, with a recent proposal that the Persian sappers may have deliberately fanned deadly sulphur fumes into the counter-tunnel, choking the Roman soldiers to death. Even if doubts remain about this suggestion of an early example of chemical warfare, one can still agree that ‘these gruesome deposits bring us as close as archaeology ever has to the immediacy, and the real horror, of ancient combat’.\footnote{For an estimate see Rance, ‘Battle’, p. 359; for Dura material see S. James, \textit{Excavations at Dura-Europos} 1928–1957, \textit{Final Report VII: The Arms and Armour and Other Military Equipment} (London: British Museum Press, 2004); for the tunnel see S. James, ‘The}
Material evidence such as this can be complemented with textual sources, as already seen in the case of Ammianus. Allowance needs to be made for the influence of literary stereotypes in the presentation of sieges, even when written by a participant such as Ammianus, but accounts based on personal experience still warrant attention. Another valuable source is the early sixth-century chronicle attributed to Joshua the Stylite, because, written in Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic), it was much less influenced by the canons of the Graeco-Roman literary tradition. The chronicle includes a detailed account of the Persian invasion of northern Mesopotamia in 502–5 CE, which predominantly comprised sieges of various cities, and although the author lived in one – Edessa – which received less Persian attention, and was writing from an explicitly Christian perspective, his account includes much valuable circumstantial detail less evident in other reports of late antique sieges. So, for example, his account of the Persian siege of Constantina (Tella) highlights communal suspicion of the Jewish inhabitants as a potential ‘fifth column’, which resulted in a pogrom. The author also refers to a range of incidents relevant to the important issue of food and logistics, some of which are relevant to the theme of violence. The Persian king Kavad is said to have abandoned his siege of Constantina because Persian plundering twelve months earlier had left the surrounding countryside so devastated that it was unable to provide supplies to support his forces, while during the Roman counter-siege of Amida following its capture by the Persians, in 503 CE, some of the surviving inhabitants were reduced to such a level of hunger that they resorted to cannibalism – not just of those who had died in the fighting or of malnutrition, but actively killing the elderly or young for food. The author also notes how unburied corpses from battles in the countryside encouraged scavenging by wild animals, who then became emboldened to attack solitary travellers and venture into villages to snatch children.²¹

As these episodes imply, late antique siege warfare had a serious impact not only on the troops involved but also on the civilian population of besieged cities and their hinterland. The successful capture of a city would

almost inevitably be followed by plundering and, especially if the siege had lasted for a significant period (as with Amida in 359 CE (seventy-three days) and 502–3 CE (three months)), by the random slaughter of inhabitants by soldiers venting their anger. Surviving soldiers and civilians were usually enslaved, with all that that implied in terms of deracination from family and community. Specific features of the Persian treatment of some captured Roman cities were less common – for example, the crucifixion of the Roman commander of Amida and his senior officers in 359 CE – and the sources provide particularly vivid insights into the harsh treatment of captives – for example, elderly and infirm prisoners who had difficulty keeping up on the journey to Persia had their calf muscles or hamstrings severed and were left to die. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that pillaging and the killing and enslavement of inhabitants were standard features of the denouement of sieges throughout antiquity. At the same time a case can be made for the distinctiveness of Persian practices when it came to enslavement. Whereas the normal expectation in antiquity was that war captives would make their way onto the slave market where they would mostly be purchased by private individuals, the Persians frequently relocated the entire populations of captured Roman cities to Persia, where they were put to work on state projects, above all the construction of irrigation schemes and of cities. This seems to have been part of a deliberate policy to supplement the workforce available to Persian kings, both numerically and in terms of skills.\

Northern barbarians were generally seen as less of a threat with regard to siege warfare, at least during the earlier centuries of late antiquity, partly because of lack of technological knowledge and partly because of their inability to organise the logistical infrastructure necessary for sustaining a successful siege. This did not, however, prevent them from trying their hand when circumstances seemed favourable, as when the Goths, after their victory at Adrianople in 378 CE, tried unsuccessfully to capture Constantinople. If anything distinguished late antiquity in this respect, it was the vulnerability of imperial centres to attack – and sometimes capture – which would have been unthinkable during the Principate. So Rome was famously blockaded three times by the Goths in 409–10 CE, and eventually sacked on the third occasion,

albeit only, it seems, through treachery, and in a similar manner the Vandals pillaged the city in 455. Rome was also subject to a number of sieges during the conflict between eastern Roman and Gothic forces in the 530s and 540s, while in 626 CE Constantinople was besieged (ultimately unsuccessfully) by combined Avar and Persian forces. Whether these attempts were successful or not, they gave the inhabitants of these large metropolises, to varying degrees, direct experience of war and its consequences in ways which had not been the case for many centuries.\(^{23}\)

Sieges and pitched battles understandably attract the most attention in the narratives of late antique historians, so it is important in concluding this section to note that much of the warfare and associated violence in this period consisted of low-level raiding which was not likely to have an impact at a strategic level, but could help to keep the enemy on the back foot and could certainly have just as serious an impact on non-combatants as other forms of warfare. So, for example, Roman forces based near the fourth-century Rhine periodically made incursions into barbaricum to destroy villages and crops, just as barbarians undertook raids into imperial territory in search of booty – as graphically illustrated by the discovery, in the river gravel at Neupotz in the early 1980s, of barbarian wagons which seem to have been returning home at some point in the mid third century laden with substantial quantities of Roman plunder, as well as prisoners. This type of small-scale warfare was certainly not unique to late antiquity, but there are some episodes from this period which show it in a particularly grisly light. While in charge of Gaul during the later 350s, the junior emperor Julian is reported to have incentivised troops undertaking raids across the Rhine by offering them a financial reward for every barbarian head they brought back; and during the conflict with Persia in northern Mesopotamia in the early years of the sixth century Roman troops raiding into Persian territory were apparently under orders (for reasons unstated) to kill all males as young as 12 years old.\(^ {24}\) However, these actions seem to have been atypical. In terms of what was distinctive about warfare and violence in late antiquity, the focus is better placed on such aspects as the increased use of archery and the increased incidence of sieges, with all that followed from these modes of warfare.

\(^{23}\) Much relevant material is in L. Petersen, *Siege Warfare and Military Organisation in the Successor States (400–800 AD): Byzantium, the West and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

\(^{24}\) For Roman incursions see Amm. Marc. 17.10.6–7, 17.13.12–14, 27.10.7, 30.3.1; for Neupotz see E. Künzl (ed.), *Die Alamannenbeute aus dem Rhein bei Neupotz: Plunderungsgut aus dem römischen Gallien* (Bonn: Habelt, 1993) (with the presence of shackles implying human booty); for headhunting see Lib. Or. 18.45; for young males see Ps.-Joshua, *Chronicle*, p. 96.
Institutionalised Military Violence in Late Antiquity

The focus so far has primarily been on warfare and its violent elements, above all in battles and sieges. However, military violence was not restricted to these obvious contexts. It is hardly surprising that the use of compulsion and violence should have played an important role in the maintenance of the army, an institution whose *raison d’être* was the use of force. The most obvious area where this was evident was the conscription of manpower into the army, but there were also other areas relating to the maintenance of the army which will be considered below.

Since armies in many periods of history have relied on conscription, the use of conscription in late antiquity might not seem especially significant. However, this is to lose sight of the more immediate historical context of the period, as well as some of the specific features of conscription in late antiquity. While conscription may sometimes have been used during the Principate more than traditionally assumed, it was not a constant feature of the period, especially in the latter stages, during the Severan period of the late second and early third century – perhaps because significant increases in soldiers’ pay and other improvements in conditions of service under the Severans encouraged more volunteers to enlist.\(^{25}\) Evidence for renewed use of conscription emerges under the emperor Diocletian at the end of the third century, but drafting of manpower had presumably become the norm again during the military turmoil of the (poorly documented) mid third century. As in other areas of government, Diocletian formalised arrangements and integrated them into his new fiscal regime, part of which required landowners to provide recruits according to size of their estates. The renewed use of conscription reflected the need for a larger army, which may have increased in size by between 25 and 50 per cent – necessary to meet the multiple threats which the empire now faced. One way in which reliance on conscription could require the use of force can be seen in circumstantial detail from a Coptic biography of the Egyptian monk Pachomius, who, as a young man in the early fourth century, was conscripted into the army; along with others, he was transported down the Nile to Alexandria, and en route the group stopped overnight at various points where they were kept in prison, clearly to prevent them from deserting. Another strategy for discouraging

desertion during the fourth century was the introduction of the tattooing of recruits on their hand or arm. In addition to the physical violation involved in tattooing, there was also the psychological damage arising from the use of a permanent method of marking previously reserved for slaves.26

Recruiting pressures only increased as the fourth century progressed, with major losses of manpower in the civil war Battle of Mursa (351 CE) and as a result of the defeats of the emperor Julian’s Persian expedition (363 CE) and of Adrianople (378 CE). It was in this context that a bishop in Asia Minor referred in passing to the habitual assaults and injuries inflicted by soldiers on local peasants during the process of conscripting recruits, and that the emperor Valens sanctioned the use of cudgels against monks who resisted military service (375 CE).27 The desire to avoid military service was apparently such that it became commonplace for individuals to respond with self-inflicted violence, in the form of digital amputation which rendered them unable to grasp a weapon – a practice which the imperial authorities tried to discourage by various strategies. Conscription continued to play an important role in maintaining the late Roman army throughout the remainder of late antiquity, even if specific evidence relating to its forcible imposition is more limited (there is a report from the 580s of clergy being coerced into military service and of recruiters dragging children from their parents).28

Unsurprisingly, the use of compulsion extended to other activities which supported the army. So, for example, the men who worked in the state arsenals producing weapons and armour (the fabricenses) – another distinctive late antique development – were also tattooed. There is also evidence that soldiers were sometimes used to assist in the collection of taxes;29 since they

28 For amputation see Amm. Marc. 15.12.3; Cod. Theod. 7.13 (with one emperor decreeing that recruits who turned up with missing fingers were to be burned alive). It is therefore surprising that a general in the 370s punished deserters by having their right hands cut off (Amm. Marc. 29.5.49). For later centuries see M. Whitby, ‘Recruitment in Roman Armies from Justinian to Heraclius (ca. 565–615)’, in Cameron, Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, vol. 111, pp. 61–124 (forcible recruitment is at p. 81).
29 For fabricenses see Cod. Theod. 10.22.4 (398). For tax collection see P. Abinnaeus 3 (mid fourth century); Theodoret Hist. eccl. 4.17.1 (later fourth century); Justinian, Novel 103 and Edict 13.9, 11 (mid sixth century). For this as a late Roman development see
were presumably deployed in this way so that the threat of force could be used against reluctant taxpayers, and since the army was the government’s main item of expenditure, this can be seen as another example of compulsion helping to maintain the armed forces. Finally, the munera sordida (‘dishonourable duties’) which civilians of lower status could be obliged to undertake by imperial officials now included the grinding of grain and baking of bread for troops – a task sometimes required on a significant scale, as the inhabitants of Edessa experienced in the early sixth century. The exaction of these tasks did not necessarily involve violence, but compulsion can easily metamorphose into force, and force into violence, depending on circumstances.

A fundamental change in the organisation of the Roman army in late antiquity also had significant ramifications in this area. By the early fourth century army units had been recategorised as belonging either to the mobile, field army forces (comitatenses) or to troops based in frontier provinces (ripenses, later limitanei). The latter were stationed in permanent camps and forts, as in earlier centuries, but the former, when not on campaign (and sometimes also when campaigning), were billeted in cities and towns. House owners were obliged to allow soldiers to occupy one-third of their dwelling – an arrangement which could be guaranteed to give rise to tensions between ‘host’ and ‘guest’ because of the inherent difficulty of demarcating a proportion of a property. However, on top of this, it is apparent that (unsurprisingly) soldiers also tried to use their status and the latent threat of force to extract supplies from homeowners – most commonly, firewood, mattresses and olive oil. It is clear from a succession of imperial laws aimed at controlling soldiers’ behaviour that this was a losing battle and that the soldiers often resorted to violence. The contemporary chronicle attributed to Joshua the Stylite provides the most detailed and graphic illustration of how far matters could get out of control. Troops billeted in Edessa in 505 CE are reported to have ejected house owners from their properties, and resorted to stealing food, clothing and cattle, and


For the obligation in the fourth and fifth centuries see Cod. Theod. 7.5.2; 11.16.15, 18; for Edessa, see Ps.-Joshua, Chronicle, p. 66 (630,000 modii of grain), p. 88 (850,000 modii). Its late antique novelty is implied by its absence from the list of munera sordida provided by the late third-century jurist Arcadius Charisius (Dig. 50.4.18); see further C. Drecoll, Die Liturgien im römischen Kaiserreich des 3. und 4. Jh. n. Chr. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1997), esp. pp. 261–3.
even raping local women: ‘those who came to our assistance ostensibly as saviours ... looted us in a manner little short of enemies’.\(^{31}\)

Since violent behaviour by Roman soldiers towards civilians was hardly a late antique novelty, it is worth emphasising that late antiquity will have witnessed a notable intensification of this phenomenon because of the fundamental changes in military organisation noted above – specifically, the creation of field armies and the basing of their units in urban centres. Similarly, the need for a much enlarged army and more centralised organisation of its support structures meant greater use of compulsion in areas such as conscription and logistics. So whatever continuities from earlier centuries of Roman history may be detected, there was nonetheless a significant step change in ‘institutionalised’ military violence in late antiquity.

**Christianity as a Mitigating Influence?**

A final question which warrants brief consideration is whether another distinctive feature of late antiquity – the increasing impact of Christianity – extended its influencing attitudes to, and the use of, violence in warfare. With the brief exception of the pagan Julian (361–3 C.E.), emperors from Constantine in the early fourth century onwards gave their official support to the Christian church, and demonstrated that support in various ways, including material resources for charitable activities and church construction. However, that support did not extend to embracing the pacifist elements evident in the New Testament (Old Testament warrior heroes like King David were more appealing role models), nor did church leaders expect emperors to relinquish their military role. Besides, in this phase of Roman history the emphasis was much more on defence than on imperialist expansion, which made it possible to view warfare as a justified activity defending a Christian empire against pagan enemies; but even when there were opportunities for expansion, as with Justinian’s sixth-century expeditions to regain the west, religion could be co-opted in justification, with Justinian presenting his campaigns as quasi-crusades against barbarian incomers who had meanwhile misguidedly embraced Arianism, a heterodox version of Christianity. Nor did Constantine’s adoption of Christianity initiate a thoroughgoing Christianisation of the military establishment. Soldiers’ religious loyalties during the fourth century seem to have been conservative, and emperors

\(^{31}\) For billeting in cities see Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, pp. 163–75; for imperial laws see *Cod. Theod. 7.9.1–4* (esp. 1, which refers to ‘seizing of items by violence’); for Edessa see Ps.-Joshua, *Chronicle*, pp. 103–4.
were more concerned to retain their political loyalties than to impose a new religion on them. The religious complexion of the army gradually changed after the fourth century, but obviously not in such a way as to take the violence out of warfare or out of soldiers’ behaviour towards civilians.32

There are two areas where it could be argued that Christianity did play a positive role in the context of warfare, although the first of these is perhaps ultimately less convincing. This is the role of Christianity in bolstering morale, whether it be a general encouraging troops about to face the enemy in battle by parading a holy icon, or a bishop reassuring defenders resisting a siege by leading them in prayers.33 However, this is not really so different from the use of pagan religious rituals to strengthen morale in the Roman army of the Republic or the Principate, or the introduction of new deities to encourage the inhabitants of Rome during the darkest days of the Hannibalic War.

A stronger case for Christianity making a difference in late antique warfare is the role of bishops and clergy in mitigating some of the worst effects of warfare, whether it be their increasingly prominent role in acting as negotiators for their communities when Persian kings or barbarian rulers besieged their city, their important part in facilitating the ransom of prisoners of war (often through the use of church resources), or their provision of food to non-combatant refugees dislocated by the impact of war.34 It is in these areas above all that one can see the sorts of developments highlighted by the approach to late antiquity popularised by Peter Brown – the increasing role of bishops in society at large and the charitable activities of the church – intersecting with the consequences of the undoubted violence which arose from the much greater incidence of warfare in late antiquity.

Conclusion

Military violence was endemic throughout Roman history, and so it would be unwise to try to draw too sharp a distinction between late antiquity and earlier periods. Nonetheless, a good case can be made for the greater frequency of warfare in late antiquity, certainly compared with the

32 For further detail and references see Lee, War in Late Antiquity, ch. 7.
34 C. Rapp, Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 228–34.
Principate of the early centuries CE. Moreover, because late antiquity was a period when the empire often found itself in the unfamiliar position of being on the back foot militarily, that warfare impacted on regions of the empire which were removed from the frontiers and which had largely been insulated from military conflict during the first two centuries CE. Siege warfare was a particularly common form of combat during late antiquity, with the result that civilian populations were much more exposed to the direct experience of the violence of war, while the expansion in the size of the army created pressures on recruitment and logistics which resulted in increased use of state force to maintain the army. Finally, the creation of field armies in the early fourth century, which were then often billeted on civilians, exposed a greater number of communities to the casual violence of their own soldiers. In these different ways, then, late antiquity can be viewed as a period of Roman history when military violence, whether in the context of warfare or maintenance of the armed forces, assumed heightened significance.

Bibliographic Essay

For a stimulating discussion of a number of major themes important for this subject, set within a broad chronological and geographical context, see Brent Shaw, ‘War and Violence’, in Glen Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar (eds.), Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1998), pp. 130–69. A different approach is provided by Philip Rance, who has published a steady stream of valuable articles on aspects of warfare in late antiquity over the last decade and a half; for a convenient summary of his views on a number of subjects of central importance, see his chapter on ‘Battle’ in the later Roman Empire section of Philip Sabin, Hans Van Wees and Michael Whitby (eds.), The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), vol. 11, pp. 342–78. My book War in Late Antiquity: A Social History (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) includes fuller discussion of the experience of war in late antiquity and the impact of Christianity, as well as other relevant matters.

For the evolution of the Roman army across late antiquity, chapter 17 of A. H. M. Jones’s magisterial The Later Roman Empire 284–602: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964) remains invaluable; it can also be traced in the relevant chapters by Brian Campbell, Doug Lee and Michael Whitby in volumes XIII, XIV and XV of the new edition of The Cambridge Ancient History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 1998 and 2000 respectively). Whitby has also written a valuable discussion of the army in the first half of late antiquity: ‘Emperors and Armies, AD 235–395’, in S. Swain and M. Edwards (eds.), Approaching Late Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 156–86. For helpful bibliographical surveys of a range of relevant topics (although not of violence in its own right), see the first volume of


Violence and Warfare in Early Imperial China

WICKY TSE

The modern Chinese translation of ‘violence’ is the word baoli, combining the characters bao, literally ‘fierce, sudden or drastic’, and li, literally ‘force, strength or power’. But while it is certainly a modern expression – it was introduced from the Japanese usage of Chinese characters¹ – the exercising of brute force to hurt or destroy persons or things so as to realise certain aims has absolutely not been strange to the Chinese people since remote antiquity. Bao and li, though used separately, are commonly seen in ancient Chinese texts since the Bronze Age to describe various behaviours that can be regarded as violent.

Violence was not considered intrinsically bad, though was always regarded as inferior to civil virtues, in ancient China. Whether a given act of violence was good or bad depended on who was using it against whom and for what purpose. From the point of view of the state – to borrow the Weberian definition – violence was legitimate when it was sanctioned with the pretext of maintaining peace and stability and upholding certain moral principles; otherwise it was illegitimate or illicit. For those who were against the state, this definition would certainly be reversed. Violence happened in different ways and on various scales. The largest and most devastating was undoubtedly war, but violence was also practised in forms of law enforcement, religious rituals, games, banditry, revenge, domestic violence, murder and so on. Since it is not possible to cover all such forms of violence in one chapter, in what follows I will focus mainly on warfare, which not only had a widespread impact on people and society but also always overlapped with other categories of violence.²

¹ The earliest example of usage of the term baoli is from the Meiji period (1868–1912) of Japan, with the Japanese transliteration as boryoku; see Tōru Satō, Gendai ni ikiru Bakumatsu, Meiji shoki kanwago jiten (Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 2007), p. 768.
This chapter aims to give an analytical overview of the perceptions and practices of violence vis-à-vis warfare in early imperial China, a period spanning the last quarter of the third century BCE to the late sixth century CE. China in this period experienced the emergence of early empires and then nearly four centuries of political disunity (roughly from the early 200s to the late 500s), witnessed different attempts by states to exercise and restrain violence, and weathered external and domestic warfare of varying intensities.

**Historical Background**

Since the period under study stretches over eight centuries, it is essential to set the scene by providing a brief outline of the historical development and certain relevant geographical details. In the third century BCE the region known in modern times as China proper (China minus Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan) was divided between seven major kingdoms and a handful of small polities. The number of states had been shrinking since the preceding centuries as a result of incessant warfare, in which strong states expanded territories at the expense of their weak neighbours. Violence in the form of warfare escalated and grew larger in scale from the fifth century BCE onwards when the seven major states came into direct and fierce military confrontation with small buffer countries, which they removed. The name coined for this era is the Warring States period, a name that clearly reveals its salient epochal feature. Qin, the westernmost of the seven powers, gradually achieved an incomparable military advantage and threatened the existence of the other states.

In 232 BCE the young king Zheng of Qin (d. 210 BCE, r. 246–210 BCE) launched massive campaigns of conquest. In a decade he had wiped out the rival states and established the first unified empire in the Chinese realm; in so doing he was entitled to become emperor, and he is known in Chinese history as the First Emperor. To ensure the stability and perpetuity of his nascent empire, the First Emperor attempted to monopolise the use of violence by confiscating private weapons, melting and then forging them into bronze musical instruments and twelve gigantic bronze statues to be installed in the capital. Nevertheless, warfare did not end. In fact, the emperor continued mobilising troops and laboured to expel the barbarians along the northern borders and to conquer new lands in the south, thus throwing the people who had survived decades of inter-state warfare and who were hoping to lead stable lives into onerous military operations once again. The untimely demise of the
First Emperor left an empire full of discontents for his immediate successor, who made the situation worse by imposing more stringent control over his subjects. Hence, quite contrary to the First Emperor’s wish of establishing an everlasting empire, the Qin collapsed shortly after popular uprisings broke out. Even more ironic was the fact that the rebels first rose up with improvised wooden weapons as a result of the prior sanctioned confiscation. The uprisings released widespread violence, which turned into a five-year civil war.

It was Liu Bang (d. 195 BCE, r. 202–195 BCE), a commoner riding the anti-Qin tide, who finally outmatched other contenders and established the Former or Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE). Unlike the short-lived Qin, the Former Han lasted for over two centuries and consequently became an ideal of unified empire which would be invoked frequently as a pretext to justify so-called wars of unification in Chinese history. The Former Han first focused on internal warfare, but later, with the increasing threat posed by the steppe warriors, it not only adopted defensive measures inland but also launched a series of expeditions into Inner Asia. These expeditions marked the first attempts of the Chinese Empire to conduct military operations far beyond its borders, in which the Han armies adapted and modified their way of warfare, including the strategies, tactics and types of armed forces being used. Military successes translated into territorial gains, and the Former Han reached its pinnacle with the consolidation of a vast empire.

Both the Qin and the Former Han were empires with political centres located in the north-western region, an area of high strategic value. The two regimes therefore laid strong emphasis on the defence of their northern frontiers, from which they projected their power into Inner Asia. However, the centre of gravity shifted eastwards in the first century CE when Liu Xiu (5 BCE–57 CE, r. 25–57 CE), a self-proclaimed descendant of Liu Bang, defeated other claimants to the throne in a civil war following the downfall of the regime that had usurped the Former Han and ruled from 9–23 CE, establishing the Later (sometimes given as Latter) or Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE). Though claiming to be a restoration of the (Former) Han empire, the Later Han was quite different from its predecessor. To fit with the vested interests of the

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eastern-based founding members of the dynasty, the Later Han moved the imperial centre to the east. As a consequence, the military presence of the Later Han also retreated from where the Former Han had deployed in the north-west.\textsuperscript{4} Furthermore, partly because of the lessons learned from the civil war, Liu Xiu abolished the universal military conscription practised in the preceding centuries with the aim of strengthening the state monopoly on the use of violence. The abolition, however, was blamed by later generations for the dynasty’s military inferiority as compared to its predecessors.\textsuperscript{5} Whether this argument is valid or not is open to discussion, but the Later Han indeed faced very different international and domestic circumstances and was an embattled empire troubled by political infighting and foreign foes from various frontiers since its early days.\textsuperscript{6} The Later Han finally ended with its territory divided up into warlord domains, which marked the beginning of a long era of political disunion.\textsuperscript{7}

Prior to the end of the Later Han the political, cultural and economic centres of the early Chinese empires were all located in the north and particularly along the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, whereas southern China had been seen as a remote and barbarous country since the Archaic period. But the disintegration of the empire gave the south an opportunity to become another centre of gravity. Several of the warlords who tried to succeed the Later Han based themselves in the south along the Yangtze River, and two of them finally divided the south and established their own kingdoms, facing a rival regime which managed to control the whole north. The stalemate between these three states lasted for half a century, and the era was well known as the Period of Three Kingdoms (220–65 CE). This period inspired much fascinating popular literature and folk stories of violence in China, as well as in Japan and Korea.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., pp. 71–88.
\textsuperscript{7} Besides Tse, Collapse of Later Han Dynasty, Rafe de Crespigny, Fire over Luoyang: A History of the Later Han Dynasty (Leiden: Brill, 2017) also provides the latest and thorough analysis of the failure of the Later Han empire.
The Three Kingdoms period was ended by a latecomer – the Western Jin dynasty (265–317 CE). The unification achieved by the Western Jin, however, was ephemeral. A civil war instigated by imperial princes who were also military governors threw northern China into chaos, and mercenaries of foreign origin who were called in took advantage of the chaotic situation to pursue their own interests. A cluster of so-called ‘barbarian kingdoms’ emerged – the period is traditionally known as ‘Five Barbarians and Sixteen Kingdoms’ – while the Jin government-in-exile, now called the Eastern Jin (317–420 CE), found a haven in the south. A series of succeeding dynasties also established themselves in the south until the early seventh century when the north, once again under a strong centralised regime – the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) – was able to conquer the south.

The period between the fourth and the seventh centuries was a turbulent era during which violence seemed to permeate various aspects of the state and society. There was not only protracted warfare between the northern and southern dynasties but also internal military confrontations in every state. Ethnic conflicts also happened, particularly in the north between the foreign conquerors and their native subjects, with a few extreme cases of ethnic massacre recorded. Incessant warfare and ensuing dislocations made violence a part of people’s daily lives right down to the communal level. Different states in this period tried different tactics to reassert their monopoly over the use of violence, but achieved only partial and gradual success. It was not until the early seventh century that sanctioned and non-sanctioned violence was once again under the control of a single imperial state.

Notions of Just War

When he conquered the last rival state in 221 BCE, the First Emperor of Qin issued an edict to justify his military campaigns in which he claimed that the extermination of the six states was incurred by their own misdeeds, such as betraying the alliance with Qin, violating the accords with Qin, severing diplomatic relations with Qin, and even plotting to assassinate him, all of which had left him with no alternative but to resort to violence. The military conquest was, therefore, not offensive but punitive in nature; what the Qin state had done was rectify the wrongdoings of its rivals. In following this argument, his courtiers acclaimed their lord’s raising of ‘righteous

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armies’ (yi bing) to execute the wicked enemies and achieve unprecedented success in unifying the Chinese realm.10

Ground-breaking as the creation of the empire might be, the notion of a righteous army was nothing new.11 Though the establishment of the empire was largely through brute force, the Qin court still sought to justify its conquest. A ‘righteous army’ was, in fact, an old tradition that could be traced back at least to the late eleventh century BCE when the Zhou people were said to have invented the concept of ‘Heaven’s Mandate’ (tian ming) to explain why their benevolent ruler(s) could replace, even by force, the evil last ruler of the Shang as the overlord of the Chinese realm. The essence of the theory was that the righteousness of the ruler would entitle him to the mandate of heaven and the duty to carry out punitive campaigns, and therefore bring peace and order to the realm under heaven. Thereafter this theory constituted the backbone of Chinese political ideology explaining the transference of sovereignty and defining the legitimate use of violence.12 The speeches purportedly made by early Zhou rulers about employing the concept to justify their military campaigns were collected in Chinese classics that were studied by almost all educated men in pre-modern times and were frequently cited throughout Chinese history.13

In the Warring States period, faced with the intensification of war and its disastrous social impact, political philosophers such as Mencius and Xunzi advocated that the appropriateness and righteousness of employing military force should be judged in terms of the people’s welfare, and the ruler who made the well-being of the people a top priority would gain the wide and wholehearted support of the people, which could be translated into invincible military power.14 This might sound impractical for contemporary rulers, but its rhetorical function served as a useful tool of political propaganda.

11 As Mark E. Lewis shows, the yi bing doctrine had gone through a long development phase prior to the Qin conquest: see ‘The Just War in Early China’, in Torkel Brekke (ed.), The Ethics of War in Asian Civilization – A Comparative Perspective (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 185–200.
The First Emperor, though long denounced as a tyrant in Chinese history, made serious efforts to publicise the righteousness of his conquest. Alongside the aforementioned edict, he left stele inscriptions that plainly reveal such an intention. During a series of imperial tours to the newly conquered east he and his entourage had stelae erected and inscribed to praise his remarkable achievements. Three themes are clear and consistent from these monuments: that the Qin rulers upheld the righteous principle and exterminated the six misbehaving states; that through the conquest the emperor used a war to end all wars, and his subjects would enjoy everlasting peace and order; and that the emperor had attained the unprecedented achievement of unifying all under heaven and would grant his subjects stability and prosperity. Although the First Emperor and his courtiers did not realise the rosy picture they painted, the rhetorical power of the words inscribed on stone outlasted the Qin dynasty. The Qin rulers not only promoted the principle of the righteous army passed down from the preceding age but also theoretically strengthened it by realising the ideal of a unified empire. Thereafter, ‘in the name of the empire’ gave the ruler – the emperor in particular – a perfect pretext for launching just war.

Unlike the short-lived Qin, the Former Han lasted for over two centuries; together with the Later Han, which claimed itself as a continuation of the Former and ruled for another two centuries, the two Han dynasties lasted for four hundred years, and this long reign indisputably encouraged and fostered the ideal of unified empire. The pursuit of maintaining and restoring, after rupture, a unified empire hereupon became not only a dream of most, if not all, rulers, but also a legitimate cause of military campaigns.

In the years following the abdication of the Later Han’s last sovereign in 220 CE, two of the Three Kingdoms publicly proclaimed their regimes to be the only legitimate successor of the Han and vowed to reunify the empire. The ripe fruit of the struggle of the Three Kingdoms, however, was picked by the late-coming Western Jin, which also claimed reunification as the righteous cause of its conquest and its success as evidence of its entitlement to the

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15 For a detailed analysis of the history and contents of these stele inscriptions, see Martin Kern, The Stele Inscriptions of Ch’in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 2000).

16 Ibid., pp. 10–49.

17 Lewis emphasises the link between the idea of just war and the command of a semi-divine ruler: ‘Just War in Early China’, pp. 185–92.

mandate of heaven. The Western Jin’s reunification proved to be ephemeral, but the ideal did not fade. Both the so-called barbarian kingdoms in the north and the Eastern Jin, with its successive regimes in the south, frequently used reunification as a legitimate cause for waging war. The southern dynasties launched northern expeditions in the name of recovering the north, whereas the foreign rulers of the northern states embraced the ideal of a unified empire and made attempts to conquer the south. One salient example in the north was the renowned Battle of Fei River in 383 CE, in which a foreign dynast who had recently put the north under his single rule launched the largest military campaign ever seen by contemporaries against the Eastern Jin, aiming to realise reunification. Although he met with a fiasco of a battle, it did not deter other northern rulers from pursuing the same ideal and waging wars of reunification.\(^\text{19}\)

Two other notions for justifying war were also derived from the precedent set by the Han. Given the long reign of this empire, the continuation and restoration of its rule became a strong cause for the legitimate use of military violence. Liu Xiu, as mentioned above, made use of his distant imperial kinship and claimed his founding of a new dynasty – the Later Han – as a restoration of the Han empire. He was not alone, as his contemporaneous contenders also exploited direct or indirect relationships with the Former Han and accordingly made their claims to legitimacy. With the end of the Later Han, Liu Bei (161–223 CE) also promoted his distant kinship with the Han imperial house and thus established the Shu-Han kingdom – one of the Three Kingdoms. The restoration of the Han provided not only a slogan for political propaganda but also an underpinning for the legitimacy of the Shu-Han. As a result, the regime launched successive, though failed, northern expeditions in the name of restoring the Han empire. Even foreign ruling elites made use of the name of the Han empire for their own political agenda. When the Western Jin was troubled by civil war the tribal leaders of the Xiongnu – the former steppe people and an enduring rival of the two Han dynasties, who now lived along the northern frontiers of the Chinese empire – cited their long-term filial ties via marriage with the Han imperial house since the second century BCE to claim a legitimate cause for restoring the Han empire. The Xiongnu were making good use of the moral principle of filial piety that the Han dynasties honoured. The Former Han encouraged and rewarded the behaviour of fulfilling filial duty, including vengeance, which

\(^{19}\) In conventional Chinese history foreign rulers’ pursuit of the ideal of a unified empire is always taken as evidence of their wholesale acceptance and assimilation of Chinese culture, namely Sinicisation.
was reinforced by the Later Han. Although there was a tendency in early imperial China for the state to become intolerant of private vengeance and to introduce stringent measures to control it, revenge for the dynasty or the monarch was a just cause for war. A famous example was Emperor Wu of the Former Han, who launched expeditions against the Xiongnu in the 140s to 80s BCE with a publicly manifested reason, among others, of avenging the humiliating defeat the Xiongnu had inflicted on Liu Bang, the dynastic founder and his great-grandfather.20

The Han empire as an imperial paradigm also greatly strengthened the identity of Han culture. During the long political disunion from the third to the seventh centuries CE, preserving Han culture provided another just cause of war for the Eastern Jin and the succeeding southern dynasties, which claimed themselves the inheritors and protectors of Han culture, against the barbarian regimes occupying north China. Such a claim was always intertwined with the ideal of unified empire and gradually transcended ethnic boundaries. As a consequence, some foreign rulers in the north publicly embraced the ideal of a unified empire and the cultural identity of the Han. The oft-cited example is Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei (r. 471–99 CE), who tried to justify himself as the legitimate ruler of China by introducing reforms that championed Han culture and launching southern campaigns for reunification. Regardless of Emperor Xiaowen’s failure in conquering the south, fighting for a unified empire based on Han culture still assumed a core position in pre-modern Chinese notions of just war.

Warfare and Military Service

Warfare in early imperial China underwent certain profound changes over the course of the period of unified empires followed by the period without empires, changes which reflected the practices of preceding eras while also developing in their own right. The military practices of the Warring States period played an important role in shaping the practices of the early empires, as the Qin and early Former Han rulers, who had been deeply involved in the warfare in those years, applied the experiences and lessons they had learned.21

20 SJ, p. 2917.
The most salient feature of Warring States warfare was the frequent and widespread mobilisation for full-scale campaigns. Aiming for territorial expansion or merely for survival, the warring states, and the warmongering Qin in particular, carried out reforms to strengthen their military power. Universal military conscription was introduced to meet the increasing demand for manpower in the escalating warfare. Under this system almost all able-bodied men (minimum age varied from 17 to 23 in different reigns), mainly farmers, would receive basic military training and then take part in various military activities; military experience was thus widespread. The period witnessed intensive inter-state warfare in which every state launched full-scale mobilisation and put as many men as possible on the battlefield or to siege warfare.

Having been used to forging war in such a manner, the Qin emperor did not hesitate to continue the practice. Besides, unification provided a larger pool of conscripts at the disposal of the new empire. The Qin state had mobilised hundreds of thousands of men for its conquest campaigns, and purportedly 600,000 people were used to conquer the southern kingdom of Chu. Offering his people no respite after the unification, the emperor launched a northern expedition – to repel the Xiongnu and build defensive works along the frontiers – and a southern expedition – to conquer the remote south and construct a canal for transportation and communication purposes. Eight hundred thousand people in total, according to historical records, were dispatched.

The empire sent not only soldiers but also their dependants, other civilians and convicts to set up settlements in the newly conquered regions. However, the burdensome large-scale mobilisation finally triggered popular unrest and uprisings that significantly contributed to the Qin’s rapid downfall.

The early Former Han rulers followed the practice of mass deployment of manpower in military operations; campaigns mobilising hundreds of thousands of men were therefore commonly seen. In addition, warfare in the early decades of the dynasty was mainly between the central government and the kingdoms enfeoffed to imperial princes, who divided up the eastern half of the empire with each having his own army. Such domestic warfare was in fact a continuation of the east versus west military confrontation between the Qin and its rivals, and was conducted within the Chinese realm, in which the topography suited infantry warfare. Infantrymen had assumed a dominant role since the Warring States period, not only because of the topography but

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also because it was the type of military force that required the least time for training – compared with charioteers, cavalrymen and the navy – and thus would produce as many soldiers as possible within a fixed time frame. Universal military service provided the empire with a sufficient supply of conscripts who could be easily trained as infantrymen, which was compatible with the fashion for full-scale campaigns. Such full-scale warfare was associated with heavy casualties. In addition to those who died in battle, the killing of captives also contributed to high death tolls. Having to frequently fight enemies with full-scale mobilisation in various directions meant exterminating one’s rival forces as directly and quickly as possible was the preferred option. This explains the recurrent phenomenon of the massacre of war captives in the Warring States and early imperial ages. The Qin military was notorious for frequently slaughtering prisoners of war; for example, in 260 BCE a Qin general was said to have executed 400,000 surrendered soldiers of the Zhao kingdom – though the number is very likely an exaggeration. Another infamous case happened during the civil war following the breakdown of the Qin, in which the rebel leader Xiang Yu first accepted the surrender of a large Qin army but then changed his mind and ordered the massacre of 200,000 men. Massive killings after capturing besieged cities with tough resistance were also commonly seen. Xiang Yu was especially notorious in this respect, and an example in the early Han can be found in a decree issued in 154 BCE by an emperor that encouraged the massive slaughtering of insurgents who joined the rebellious enfeoffed kingdoms as the most effective and expeditious means of suppression.

After nearly a century of consolidation and development, during Emperor Wu’s reign (r. 140–87 BCE) the Han Empire’s military landscape changed significantly and the practice of warfare had to alter and adapt to the new strategic conditions. The problem of rebellious kingdoms had been solved, and the most pressing military threat to the empire now was the Xiongnu steppe confederation. The Xiongnu usually preferred to launch sporadic cavalry raids rather than engage in pitched battles with the Chinese empire. The Chinese fashion of conducting full-scale mobilisation and campaigns for domestic warfare thus no longer met the needs arising from these new circumstances. What the Han Empire needed was a force that was capable of rapidly responding to the Xiongnu’s raids, which meant professional

cavalry. Cavalry was not a new type of force for the Han Empire, but to have professional cavalry units required a lot of training in archery and horsemanship and supplementary support – such as the breeding and training of horses. Furthermore, in order to safeguard its expanding territories, the Han Empire now needed to deploy garrison troops along the frontiers and even launch occasional expeditions beyond its borders. All these required the professionalisation of military forces and the extension of military service in both temporal and spatial terms, which the existing system could not support. Under the system of universal military conscription, the army was in fact a militia: part-time soldier-farmers served in the army at one time or another, usually for a short period or a campaign, before returning to civilian life. But the new warfare required the Han army to fight further afield and for longer periods, which overburdened the militia and caused social and economic disruption to the lives of the conscripts and their families.

The time of Emperor Wu was thus a transitional period in terms of the practice of warfare and the constitution of the Han military. On the one hand, the Han army still mobilised and launched operations in a full-scale manner and tried to achieve a total and decisive victory against the Xiongnu and other foreign foes; on the other hand, as such a manner was not compatible with foreign warfare, the Han army adapted to the change, and volunteers, convicts and mercenaries gradually replaced conscripts as the mainstay of the army, while cavalry units played an increasingly important role in military expeditions.25 Emperor Wu relied on the new army and launched a series of costly expeditions. Although his campaigns against the Xiongnu were not so successful as to bring them to heel, his military efforts did undermine the military might of the Xiongnu and destabilise the fragile balance of power within the steppe confederation, triggering internal conflicts.26 It was during the early Later Han that the Chinese empire finally drove the hostile Xiongnu away, while those Xiongnu who claimed loyalty to the Han emperor were permitted to settle along the northern frontiers of the empire. It was also in the early Later Han that the military transformation was formally

25 For an overview of the Former Han military system, see Michael Loewe, ‘The Western Han Army: Organization, Leadership, and Operation’, in Di Cosmo (ed.), Military Culture, pp. 65–89.
completed with the official abolition of universal military conscription, ending a system that had underpinned military practices for centuries.\textsuperscript{27}

The Later Han maintained a standing army. Once enlisted, men would stay in the military and become professional soldiers. Thereafter the civilian and military men officially split; the division would become even sharper in the post-Han era. While in terms of numbers the army continued to be dominated by infantry, cavalry recruited from native or foreign horsemen increasingly played a vital role in a wide variety of military operations, especially those against foreign adversaries harrying the northern frontiers.\textsuperscript{28}

With the paralysis of Later Han administrations in the late second century CE, the state monopoly of violence broke down. Although waging war remained the largest task undertaken by the state in the following four centuries, the use of force moved out of unified state control and became devolved to regional warlords and local military strongmen. Incessant warfare and the weakening of officially sanctioned military power made violence widespread and a regular occurrence at various levels of society. To protect themselves, people led by local elites and magnates were usually organised into armed communities; some even formed mutual defence leagues. Fortified settlements placed in highly defensible positions became common, particularly in northern China, where the grave turmoil following the collapse of the Western Jin and violent conflicts between the so-called barbarian kingdoms provided a hotbed for their flourishing. Local elites in the south also had armed forces at their disposal to enforce their will when needed, though their settlements were generally not as highly fortified as those of their northern counterparts. Refugees dislocated by war also swore allegiance to their leaders and transformed into armed bands, roaming around to seek safe havens. The widespread availability of various local military forces made it almost impossible for the state(s) to get rid of those forces militarily, and pacification was an alternative when necessary. Certain ambitious local elites chose to collaborate with alien rulers, vowing allegiance in exchange for personal political career advancement and,

\textsuperscript{27} Lewis, ‘Han Abolition’, pp. 33–75.
\textsuperscript{28} On the conflicts between the Later Han and its neighbouring peoples along the northern frontiers, see Rafe de Crespigny, Northern Frontier: The Policies and Strategy of the Later Han Empire (Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1984); for an overview of Later Han military institutions and related matters, see Rafe de Crespigny, ‘The Military Culture of Later Han’, in Di Cosmo (ed.), Military Culture pp. 90–111.
most importantly, state recognition of their de facto control of local affairs and command of private forces.\textsuperscript{29} In granting official recognition to the local leadership of private armies, state(s) also expected to divert these forces from private violence to sanctioned military services.

The prevalence of private military forces not only encouraged centrifugal energy against the state but also further aggravated the state’s difficulty in maintaining a stable supply of troops. Shortage of manpower was a common problem facing different regimes, both south and north, between the third and sixth centuries. Since its abolition of universal military service, the Later Han had to rely upon professional standing troops rather than armies of conscripts that were temporary and disbanded after a campaign. The state might want to gather a large army, but the constraints imposed by a diminished martial population would not allow it. Conscription was no longer easy to carry out due to a drastic decrease in the registered population resulting from widespread dislocations and people’s failing to register for fear of being drafted for war. To seek protection, some people turned to local magnates and served as private retainers.

The state had to compete with local powers for a supply of troops on the one hand, while also having to establish firm control over its existing forces on the other. As a result, hereditary soldiery was widely introduced. Once a man enrolled in the military, he would serve for a lifetime and be succeeded by another male family member after his death or in the case that he was unable to fulfil his duties. The soldier’s family would be listed on the military instead of the civilian register. Military status was thus placed on a hereditary basis to ensure a constant supply of soldiers.

Various limitations were also imposed upon hereditary military households so as to separate them from commoners. Soldiery was not only an occupation but also a social caste with inferior legal status. Given their plight and unfavourable treatment, hereditary armies were seldom of high morale, and the state therefore needed to provide them with various incentives for fighting, including awarding the status of commoner after victory. But these measures did little to improve the difficult situations of most hereditary soldiers and mutinies were not

rare; several cases even triggered large-scale uprisings which toppled the existing regimes.\textsuperscript{30}

Another common and effective way of acquiring manpower was to incorporate defeated enemies into one’s military institutions. Hence, the massacre of war captives was rare compared with the Warring States and early Han periods. The belligerent parties widely recruited the defeated into their armies. Forcible migration was also taken as a supplementary measure to ensure a stable source of manpower. Once the state captured defeated armies or surrendered civilians, it would forcibly move and resettle them in the political centres or other strategic areas so that they would be at the state’s disposal. This policy was particularly common in the north, given the nature of the barbarian regimes.

The barbarian ruling elites, whatever their ethnic origins, formed a powerful but small military minority within a much larger Han population. At first the distinction between the two groups was sharp, and the barbarian states relied primarily on their own compatriots to fight for regional hegemony.\textsuperscript{31} But as the wars went on, so rulers were under constant pressure to refill and enlarge their own forces, and thus had to recruit beyond their own ethnic group. In the Battle of the Fei River, for instance, the barbarian dynast who tried to conquer the south had incorporated myriad ethnic groups into his expeditionary force. Considering the comparatively limited number of warriors in every barbarian regime, other ethnic groups were welcome to join, and gradually even the Han majority was included – at first for ancillary duties and later in combat.

Since the martial population usually settled in fortified settlements or in political capitals, warfare in this period of disunity commonly centred on periodic sieges of massively defended fortifications and heavily fortified urban centres rather than on campaigns of manoeuvre. Historical records provide certain detailed accounts of siege warfare. For the southern dynasties, they were good at not only siege warfare – as a tradition of sedentary people – but also naval warfare. Given the networks of waterways in the south, naval warfare was frequent among the southern contenders. It also provided the south with a crucial strategic advantage over the northern invaders. Northern horseback warriors, especially the armoured heavy

\textsuperscript{30} On hereditary soldiery in the period, see Chittick and Tse, ‘Period of Disunion’.

\textsuperscript{31} It was common in this period for barbarian rulers to take part personally in the combat, and this was perhaps a tradition of the steppe peoples, who required constant military successes to confirm their authority and right to rule. The death of a leader, however, could lead to the rapid disappearance of a regime.
cavalry – the cataphracts – that were introduced and prevailed in this period, dominated the northern battlefield, but the southern waterways always imposed an insurmountable natural barrier.

Military Rituals and Religiously Motivated Warfare

Pre-imperial warfare had long been closely associated with rituals and religious beliefs, and historical writings of the period provide more detailed accounts of the rituals and religious practices before and after the fighting than they do of the combat itself. Those practices were still prevailing in the early empires. Historical records document the exercises of prognostication, divination and other occult techniques that served military purposes, as well as titles and excerpts of treatises on the subject handed down from preceding ages or written by contemporary writers. Military rites and religious beliefs were always mixed and intermingled. In the Warring States period there was a myth about the warfare between the Yellow Emperor, the creator of Chinese civilisation, and Chi You, a beastlike figure who created weapons. Chi You was defeated and killed, but because of his invention of weapons he became a deity of war in popular culture. When Liu Bang, the would-be founding emperor of the Former Han, first rose up as a rebel leader, he made sacrificial offerings to both the Yellow Emperor and Chi You for their auspices in his military campaigns. The status of Chi You as a warrior god was officially acknowledged by the Han emperors. Emperor Wu of the Former Han, for example, paid visits and worshipped at the shrine of Chi You, recognising him as the Lord of Weaponry. Several centuries later, the Eastern Jin armies still gave offerings to Chi You before they went into battle.

While the practices of popular beliefs and cults permeated various aspects of pre- and early imperial warfare, it was only after the late second century CE that organised religious communities, the Daoists first and the Buddhists later, emerged, flourished, and took part in war. The Daoist religion became popular and developed rapidly in the last years of the Later Han. One large

33 For myths of the Yellow Emperor and Chi You, see Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, pp. 174–205.
34 SJ, p. 350.
A sect called the Way of Great Peace initiated an empire-wide Yellow Turban Rebellion in 184 CE that nearly toppled the dynasty. Largely seeded by the corrupt politics and economic hardships of the last years of the Later Han, the Way of Great Peace preached the promise of a new world that would bring peace and prosperity. Although a canon attributed to the sect named the *Scripture on Great Peace* (*Taiping Jing*) counted war, disease, flood and fire as the four evils in the world, the sect still adopted violence as a necessary evil in trying to overthrow the reigning dynasty and realizing their pursuit of an ideal world. This was a sacred violence for believers, to rescue them from sufferings in this world. The Yellow Turbans finally failed, but the ethos of replacing the corrupted present world by violent means was preserved among certain Daoist sects; it also provided a notion for justifying war. Two regimes underpinned by Daoist cults even emerged in the south-west during the late second and fourth centuries, while other Daoist sects earned widespread influence in the south-east, where the political, cultural and economic core of the southern dynasties was located. In 399 CE a Daoist preacher named Sun En initiated a vigorous rebellion against the Eastern Jin regime. His followers were called the Immortals. Although Sun killed himself in 402 after military setbacks, his brother-in-law Lu Xun took the lead and reinvigorated the followers. The revolt was finally suppressed in 411 with the devastation of the core economic regions of the Eastern Jin, which gravely undermined the dynasty. A feature of this rebellion worth mentioning is that the insurgents moved with their families and when the tide of battle turned against them, they drowned their children, saying, ‘We congratulate you on first ascending to the palace of the immortals! We shall follow you shortly.’ This gave the act of infanticide a religious meaning.

Buddhism, a foreign religion that arrived in China in Later Han times, also developed rapidly and assumed increasing social and political influence in the turbulent period after the collapse of the Later Han. Buddhist monasteries,

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36 For an introduction to the canon and selected translations, see Barbara Hendrischke, *The Scripture on Great Peace: The Taiping Jing and the Beginning of Daoism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
38 On this and other religious rebellions of the period, see Chi-tim Lai, ‘Daoism and Political Rebellion during the Eastern Jin Dynasty’, in Frederick Hok-ming Cheung and Ming-chiu Lai (eds.), *Politics and Religion in Ancient and Medieval Europe and China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999), pp. 77–100.
39 Ibid., p. 90.
especially in the north, became great landholders under the auspices of royal courts or aristocrats. Furthermore, they owned their own troops of retainers, tenants and serfs, which could be transformed into private military forces in times of emergency. These Buddhist monasteries certainly competed with the state for the acquisition of manpower and also threatened the state monopoly of violence. Thus, while the armies of monasteries might serve the political authorities on certain occasions, they were also potential adversaries. Large-scale conflicts between state authorities and Buddhist monasteries broke out twice in the northern dynasties, once in 446 CE and again in 574 CE, in which Buddhist communities were disciplined, monks and nuns forced to return to secular life, monasteries destroyed and their property confiscated for the state coffers.

On the other hand, certain Buddhist sects challenged the status quo in the most violent way. The incessant warfare of the secular world helped the propagation of millenarianism. Some Buddhist sects, like their Daoist counterparts, promoted belief in the coming of a perfect world by resorting to military means. Buddhist-initiated uprisings were recorded, for example, in 473, 481 and 514 CE. The largest such uprising broke out in 515 CE, in which a monk named Faqing called himself ‘Mahayana’, claiming that a new Buddha, supposedly himself, had descended and would purify the world and establish a new world order for believers. Faqing quickly gathered over 50,000 insurgents, and his campaign spread over a wide area and lasted for two years.

Although there were no wars between religions in early imperial China, insurrections with religious elements still played an important part in warfare during the third and sixth centuries CE. Such sacred violence revealed the widespread nature of violence in this age of turmoil.

Bibliographic Essay

Modern researchers studying violence and warfare in early imperial China are at the mercy of fragments and summaries presented by historians and compilers who usually lacked first-hand experience of combat and reported the topics in stereotypical and schematic ways. Much of the recorded warfare might be coloured with rhetoric, and many actual wars left no details in the record. Although the field is still under-studied, certain works lay a solid foundation for future research.

The fundamental and pioneering study of different kinds of sanctioned violence in ancient China down to the first century CE is Mark Edward Lewis, Sanctioned Violence in Early China (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989). Also useful as an overview of warfare in both the Warring States and Qin-Han periods is Robin D. S. Yates, ‘Early China’, in
Kurt Raaflaub and Nathan Rosenstein (eds.), War and Society in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds: Asia, the Mediterranean, Europe, and Mesoamerica (Cambridge, MA: Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University, 1999), pp. 7–46. For the Period of Disunion, David A. Graff’s Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300–900 (London: Routledge, 2002) is the first comprehensive study and a must-read. The anthology Military Culture in Imperial China, edited by Nicola Di Cosmo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), contains several chapters related to the period under study, while the first volume of B. Meissner et al. (eds.), The Cambridge History of War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) provides new summaries of the topic.

PART III

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INTIMATE AND COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE
Early Massacres: Mass Violence in Neolithic Europe

CHRISTIAN MEYER

As the archaeological record shows, mass violence with lethal intent has been a part of human history for at least several thousand years. Most telling in this regard are the rare prehistoric massacre sites, where the skeletal remains of numerous victims of lethal collective violence are found in archaeological contexts that do not conform to the recognised and often quite diverse burial practices of the respective time and region. These deviant depositional contexts, which are mainly characterised by the lack of recognisable post-mortem care, usually are either disorganised mass graves or sites of conflict where the victims’ bodies have not been collected in one place but were just left unburied where they had fallen. Examples of both types of massacre site are known from the European Neolithic and it can be assumed that in these cases not enough of the victims’ kinfolk in the widest sense survived who could have arranged and carried out a ‘proper’ burial. Sites like these thereby indicate the likely more or less complete destruction of the targeted community.

In those few currently known Neolithic cases where apparent mass violence victims were indeed buried with recognisable care, usually in neatly arranged multiple burials (as opposed to the often more disorganised mass graves), it is quite likely that a larger part of the respective group did survive and that the attack, if such took place, therefore either (partly) failed or was never intended as an all-out massacre of the complete community in the first place. Such cases are also difficult to differentiate from ritual practices, which might also have included actions that physically traumatised the human

This overview of Early Neolithic sites of collective violence is partly based on research that the author conducted with various colleagues over the years. Although the summary views expressed here are those of the author, the earlier input of all previous collaborators to the individual site studies is very gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks are extended to Kurt W. Alt, Detlef Gronenborn, Veit Dresely and Harald Meller for their kind support.

body. It is therefore important to keep in mind that, although skeletal injuries might clearly indicate a violent death for one or more individuals in a deviant burial feature, a reliable and lasting interpretation has to be firmly based upon a detailed analysis of the respective archaeological context at hand and more generally upon a comparative approach that incorporates related phenomena. And even then, interpretations need to be re-evaluated on a regular basis, especially if significant new methodological advances are made or new relevant sites are uncovered and analysed.

The earliest massacres currently known from Europe, with a massacre defined here as the violent killing of multiple victims by numerous assailants within a very short time and – importantly – followed by a careless treatment of the dead, date to the Early Neolithic period. People’s lifeways at this time generally included more or less permanent settlements, systematic crop cultivation, livestock management, and everyday wood, stone, bone, leather, textile and pottery technology. The mainly settled lifestyle of the Neolithic also resulted in the establishment of permanent cemeteries and farming plots, which apparently were often utilised for several generations, indicating long-term investment of various resources. This in turn implies that inheritance of the physical means for successful agricultural subsistence became ever more important during the Neolithic, thereby furthering social inequality over time. This is in stark contrast to most pre-Neolithic societies, whose impact on the archaeological landscape was much more ephemeral, usually lacking permanent settlement and larger cemetery sites. The very mobile Palaeolithic and Mesolithic communities ranged over huge areas, not being held in one place by the more localised constraints of a Neolithic farming way of life, which meant investing in fixed places over long periods of time, long-term storage of seeds and supplies and – following from that – the necessary demarcation of the group’s sphere of influence where basic cooperative subsistence activities took place.

Along with such cooperative behaviour, violent conflict is one of the basic types of human social interaction and has been called ‘a part of the fabric of humanness’. It may be divided into the differing concepts of intra- and inter-community conflict. While intra-community conflict usually involves only a few individuals and is therefore restricted in overall scale, inter-community conflict may involve a lot more individuals and therefore will usually take place on a larger scale. As human societies have to be characterised as cooperative by their very nature of internal coexisting, co-working and co-husbanding, many

communities developed efficient ways to settle arising disputes without causing too much overall harm.\textsuperscript{3} For the highly mobile pre-Neolithic groups within Europe, unburdened by the necessities of a sedentary agricultural lifestyle, one of the ways to settle inter-group conflicts would very likely have been avoidance,\textsuperscript{4} basically moving away from the sources of disputes for a while and carrying on as before with life in some other, equally suited accessible place. For settled farmers, this same basic and effective behaviour was not as easily continued, especially on rather short notice, as it would entail abandoning the very means of subsistence, thereby losing much of the resources that had gone into the establishment and care of settlements, farming plots and socio-economic networks of varying extent. Of course the planned migration of groups had to be an integral part of the successful spread of Neolithic lifeways throughout Europe,\textsuperscript{5} and individuals likely changed their places of residence over their lifetime, possibly thereby becoming ‘members’ of different communities. In any case, both were different types of movement done for different reasons other than the typical avoidance behaviour practised by mobile groups in times of inter-community conflict.

However, we can surmise according to ethnographic parallels that when serious disagreements arose in prehistoric times between independent groups, and all previous ‘diplomatic’ efforts had failed, the ultimate level of escalation was sometimes reached where one group might have considered the destruction of the opposing ‘others’ as the only feasible option for settling the ongoing conflict. Such a targeted annihilation of one group by another within a short period of time,\textsuperscript{6} might have been preserved in the bioarchaeological record as a massacre, which is the ‘most dramatic evidence of destruction’ available in prehistoric archaeology.\textsuperscript{7} Several examples of such massacres are indeed known from the Neolithic and even somewhat earlier periods. Recently, for example, the site of Nataruk, in Kenya, has been described as a massacre location, where at least a dozen individuals were


\textsuperscript{7}Debra L. Martin and Ryan P. Harrod, ‘Bioarchaeological Contributions to the Study of Violence’, \textit{Yearbook of Physical Anthropology} 156 (2015), 129.
possibly violently killed. As the bodies had apparently not been collected in the aftermath, it is thought that they were sedimented where death occurred within a lagoon environment, although this view and interpretation have not gone unchallenged.\textsuperscript{8} The age of the Nataruk site is given as c. 10,000 years, which predates a fully established Neolithic lifestyle in the region. Nevertheless, some characteristics of Neolithic societies were already in place in the area and it can be assumed that people in this time and place competed over limited resources that were fixed in the landscape. This is generally considered as one of the main underlying reasons for initiating warfare in prehistoric times, especially if the survival of the community was perceived to be threatened, for example by serious climatic changes making subsistence unsettlingly unpredictable.\textsuperscript{9}

Focusing on the European Neolithic, several well-analysed sites (see below) now vividly show that massacres were chosen repeatedly as a last resort during times of warfare, which likely entailed the indiscriminate destruction of whole communities by various violent means, including outright killing and selective capturing. As has been indicated by comparative research, such mass violence events usually do not happen spontaneously but need an extended time of ‘previous build-up of the right atmosphere’,\textsuperscript{10} for example, of perceived dominance of one group by another. Furthermore, the dominant group will usually feel capable of wiping out the other without critically endangering themselves and very likely will take steps to dehumanise the victims in the eyes of their own community, easing the stress of actually meting out lethal mass violence. This is especially relevant when considering who was actively involved in the massacres, as during most of the European Neolithic, in contrast to later periods, there do not seem to have been professional warriors or even numerous weapons specifically made to harm or kill other people. In consequence, the perpetrators of the early massacres will necessarily have been ‘ordinary’ people,\textsuperscript{11} using the available tools at hand that were suitable also for warfare. Although bows


\textsuperscript{11} Dwyer and Ryan, ‘Massacre and History’, p. xvi.
and arrows were dedicated weapons of the time, they were used only sparingly in the known massacres, at least as far as the hard evidence suggests. In addition, Early Neolithic bows are usually not primarily considered as weapons of war but rather, or equally, as implements for hunting.¹²

This changes for later Neolithic periods as numerous arrow injuries in the form of projectile points embedded in human skeletal remains are known from various European sites, especially from the western part of the continent.¹³ But in the earlier massacre sites located in central Europe examined in this chapter, most injuries found in the victim’s skeletons were apparently caused by heavy hand-held wood and stone implements such as adzes and clubs. As has been recently shown for the *Linearbandkeramik* (LBK), the first full farming culture in central Europe, their adzes were not only tools and lethal weapons, but also embodied information related to social status, kinship, origin, and therefore social inequality, which was already present in the Early Neolithic.¹⁴

Because of these ambiguities in the interpretation of the often multifunctional Neolithic weapons and tools, as well as in the interpretation of possible defensive structures in the landscape, these archaeological finds and features should only be considered as possible indicators for actual conflict on an inter-community scale. The most reliable indicators and only direct evidence for serious prehistoric warfare, of which the massacres can be considered the rare and dramatic extremes, are the skeletal remains of the actual victims.¹⁵ These, if analysed in detail, may show who was killed and who was possibly spared, how the killing was done, and what happened to the victims prior, during, and after the actual massacre events. The dedicated bioarchaeological analysis of multiple human skeletal remains recovered from non-standard burials, as well as other depositional features, allows us to shine targeted spotlights onto Neolithic collective violence and its specific contexts.

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Recognising Massacres in the Neolithic ‘Burial’ Record

The main characteristic of massacres is the violent death of many people at the same time, actively caused by another group, which defined the victims as unwanted others. To actually recognise a prehistoric massacre in the archaeological record it is therefore necessary to find the physical remains of the victims, as only these represent direct evidence for it. The bioarchaeological indicators are then usually twofold: the skeletal remains show clear signs of perimortem injuries; and they were embedded into the archaeological record roughly contemporaneously and within a well-defined area, which might have been a single feature of deviant deposition (such as a mass grave), a few different features of a similar kind (such as neighbouring pits or ditches), or the actual massacre location itself (if simply left on the ground). If the victims were recognisably buried in a regular manner instead, which in the European Neolithic usually would have been individual inhumation within an attritional cemetery, or inclusion in a collective grave, they would have been disassociated from the context of the massacre and each other, which in turn might have obscured the massacre event itself. Attritional burial sites are characterised by their long duration of use and it is usually impossible to reconstruct a burial chronology detailed enough to confidently state that some burials were actually contemporaneous within a timespan of just a few days. This is necessary to securely identify a massacre, which by definition is limited to a very short duration of time. Only if the burial context is somewhat unusual, including several individuals with clear signs of perimortem injury buried in the same grave, that is, a multiple burial, can a massacre actually be identified from a regular cemetery site. If direct biological kinship can additionally be proven among the victims, and their demography fits a related part of a living community, this is a further strong argument for their contemporaneity.

If the deceased were placed in a larger collective grave instead, where intermixing of skeletal elements happened on a frequent basis with almost each successive burial, it becomes even more difficult to identify

16 Dwyer and Ryan, ‘Massacre and History’, p. xvii.
contemporaneous massacre victims. After a period of ongoing funerary use, even a simultaneously deposited cluster of bodies will have been ‘diluted’ by the intrusion of skeletal remains of earlier and possibly later burials just by taphonomical factors alone. The recognition of prehistoric massacres is also made more difficult or is even precluded if the skeletal remains of the suspected victims have undergone extended ritualistic treatment, which again means that the bodies have been disassociated from the immediate massacre context and have entered into a new and likely highly complex one. Within this new context, post-mortem practices, possibly including defleshing, dismemberment and mutilation, might have been superimposed upon the traces of collective violence, possibly even obliterating them completely.  

Even if these slightly more recent traces might be very similar to those of a massacre, their ultimate purpose might have been radically different, for example including ancestor veneration or complex funeral rites. For the time frame and region relevant here, the enigmatic depositions of human remains at the Ofnet Cave and at the enclosure site of Herxheim, both located within southern Germany, are examples of this dilemma. At Ofnet, numerous detached heads have been arranged with deliberation and care in two clusters, accompanied by some artefacts. Dated to the Late Mesolithic, these cranial remains and associated cervical vertebrae might stem from a massacre, as perimortem injuries are evident on the skulls, but their careful manner of deposition indicates something more and possibly even completely different. The Early Neolithic site of Herxheim has also been discussed as the scene of a massacre initially by some authors, but more recently also as evidence for complex secondary burial rites, cannibalism and/or human sacrifice. Some perimortem injuries found in the skeletal remains might indicate a violent death for some or even most of the individuals encountered there, but the decidedly patterned dismemberment and meticulous processing of a very large number of bodies suggest that

highly complex ritual activities were practised there for quite some time, and also repeatedly, that cannot easily be reduced to a conceptually more simple, single and rather short-lived massacre event.\textsuperscript{21}

Following this general outline, the remainder of this chapter will mostly focus on the Early Neolithic of central Europe and the aforementioned \textit{Linearbandkeramik}, as this archaeologically well-defined ‘culture’ has not only produced ambiguous sites like Herxheim, but also the earliest well-identified massacres and mass killings in this region. Although the scars of interpersonal violence are sometimes, but rather rarely, seen in individuals from regular LBK burials, by far the most evidence for lethal violence known from the time of these early farmers comes in collective form, mainly as massive perimortem blunt force cranial injuries in simultaneously killed groups of people. In these samples arrow wounds are documented as well, along with possible torture and/or mutilation of the victims, which fits the expectations derived from comparative massacre research already touched upon.

\textbf{LBK Burials and Examples of Early Neolithic Massacres and Mass Killings}

The LBK was one of the major cultural phenomena of Neolithic Europe and is dated to c. 5500–4900 BCE.\textsuperscript{22} It ultimately stretched almost from the Black Sea to the French Atlantic coast and was mostly the result of a large-scale immigration of farmers descended from Near Eastern populations.\textsuperscript{23} These people first brought the settled farming lifestyle to central Europe and thereby drastically changed the overall landscape. Setting out from the area of modern-day Hungary and mainly following the major watercourses, these newcomers settled large tracts of the fertile soil areas of central Europe, founding numerous interlinked settlements and far-flung trading networks, likely connected by kinship ties.

The entirety of the currently known LBK burial sites shows that individual burial as inhumation or cremation in dedicated cemeteries or within


settlements was commonly practised. Without going into too much detail, it can be stated that most recognisable graves of the LBK are characterised by evident care for the individual deceased and that bodies have been arranged and oriented according to regionally differing patterns. Overall, the typical LBK inhumation can be described as a left-crouched body oriented roughly east–west and accompanied by grave goods more often than not. Nevertheless, a large variety existed in the funerary rites of the LBK, and it can be safely assumed that a large part of it is actually invisible to archaeology because of limited preservation. This leaves much room for speculation about how representative the known graves actually are; a sizeable proportion of the overall LBK populace may not have been buried in a way still detectable by archaeology today. Nevertheless, numerous studies have already examined the available burials of the LBK from various viewpoints, and especially the sites showing evidence of mass violence in human skeletal remains, which are the focus here, and those showing various types of non-standard deposition of human bodies and body parts have seen considerable attention.

Because of this rich and readily available literature already in existence, I will only outline the most important characteristics of each of the mass violence sites listed below. More in-depth information and discussion on each site can be found in the respective original publications, which are referenced below.

**Talheim: The Archetypal Massacre Mass Grave?**

The first LBK mass grave was discovered in 1983 at Talheim in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, and has since been aptly described as a ‘pivotal find’. The detailed analysis of the human skeletal remains revealed at least thirty-four mostly articulated individuals, sixteen of which were biological sub-adults (47 per cent). Of the eighteen adults (53 per cent), nine were determined as male and seven as female, while two could not be reliably sexed. The bodies were deposited simultaneously in the mass grave pit in

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a disorganised way, which indicates a more or less simultaneous death for all the individuals. This is corroborated by numerous perimortem injuries, most of which consist of blunt force cranial trauma that was predominantly received from behind. Roughly 56 per cent of the skeletons display such perimortem injuries. Even if not all individuals show unequivocal signs of lethal violence, it is highly likely that those without any visible lesions are violence victims as well. Grave goods were not recovered and it appears that the mass grave was located near an LBK settlement and was not part of a cemetery. It is generally assumed that most, if not all, of the members of this community were killed during the massacre, as the demographic profile of the sample is compatible with that of a living population. Additionally, there is evidence that at least some of the individuals found in the mass grave were probably biologically related, which is further support for the view that a settled LBK community was likely completely destroyed at Talheim. Since its original publication in 1987, the Talheim mass grave has become the most often cited and widely known Neolithic massacre site from central Europe.

Asparn-Schletz: The Scattered Remains of the Massacred?

Since 1983 the skeletal remains of several dozen partly disarticulated individuals have been discovered within the outer trenches of an enclosed LBK settlement at Asparn-Schletz, in Lower Austria. Several publications have so far provided data on sixty-seven individuals, but these represent only a part of the human remains from this site. The analyses revealed twenty-six (38 per cent) sub-adults and forty-one (62 per cent) adults, twenty-six of the latter were determined as male, thirteen as female and one could not be reliably sexed. Noteworthy is the obvious under-representation of younger women so far, as only five adult female individuals below age 40 were found in the sample as opposed to seventeen men of the same age range. This


discrepancy is usually interpreted as an indicator for a targeted capture of women of reproductive age. In stark contrast to the closely packed mass grave at Talheim, the skeletal remains at Asparn were found scattered over a large area in the trench and showed clear signs of carnivore gnawing, which indicates a longer interval of exposure after death. All of the thirty-three recovered skulls show evidence of perimortem violence, which again is dominated by lethal blunt force injuries. These are distributed all over the skulls. Like at Talheim, the victims were found in a settlement context but were not collectively deposited into a single mass grave at Asparn. The wide scattering of skeletal elements with carnivore gnawing marks rather indicates that no immediate attempt at ‘burial’ was made after the massacre event, and that the local community was therefore likely destroyed by violent killing, selective capturing and scattering of possible survivors.

Schöneck-Kilianstädten: The Mutilated Village Population?

In 2006 another LBK mass grave was discovered and excavated near Schöneck-Kilianstädten in Hessen, Germany. Like at Talheim, the dead were deposited into a likely pre-existing feature within a settlement area without any noticeable care for the arrangement of the bodies. Grave goods were absent, and the artefacts recovered from within the mass grave are considered to be settlement refuse that was accidentally included in the infill. The exception to this are two bone arrowheads, which were found in close contact with the skeletal remains and very likely represent projectile points which were embedded in the bodies when these were deposited. In addition to these likely arrow wounds, there were multiple cranial injuries affecting all areas of the skull, indicating a lethal mass violence event roughly similar to those at Talheim and Asparn. Another similarity to these sites is the lack of younger adult females. The only two women identified in the sample were determined as older than 40 years. In contrast, the nine individuals determined as male all appear to have been younger than 40 years of age at death. Two further adult individuals could not be reliably sexed. Therefore, thirteen adult individuals were included in the mass grave (50 per cent), as well as thirteen biological sub-adults (50 per cent). There is an apparent gap between

the ages of c. 9 and 16 years among the victims, which might indicate that teenagers were abducted along with the younger women, to a fate unknown.

The one feature that sets this sample clearly apart from the previously described ones is the high number of perimortem fractures encountered in the limb bones of the skeletons. About half of all tibia and fibula fragments show clear evidence of perimortem breakage, which indicates a targeted destruction of the lower leg bones, either just before or just after death occurred. In any case, the mutilation of the victims’ bodies seems to have been a part of the massacre event itself, which was followed by the disorganised deposition of the bodies in the mass grave.

Halberstadt: The Executed Captives?

Another LBK mass grave was discovered in 2013 at Halberstadt in Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany, not far from a known and likely contemporaneous settlement that also contained numerous burials. The mass grave contained the irregularly deposited remains of nine individuals, seven of them determined as male, one as likely male, one as likely female. All were between 16 and 40 years of age at death. As in the other mass graves, no dedicated grave goods were found, only small pottery fragments interpreted as settlement refuse. As the feature had been disturbed in the past, likely already in prehistoric times, some of the still articulated skeletons were incomplete. In addition, carnivore gnawing was observed in some bones of the extremities, the distal parts of which were absent. Cranial remains of seven individuals were present, all of which showed perimortem blunt force injuries. These displayed a pattern clearly different from the ones determined for the massacre victims at Talheim, Asparn and Kilianstädten, where all areas of the skull were injured multiple times. At Halberstadt, traumata were identified almost exclusively at the back of the head in a tightly circumscribed area, and only one injury is located in a frontal bone. Strontium, carbon and nitrogen isotope analyses revealed that the individuals from the mass grave were non-local, as they clearly differed in diet and origin from the population carefully buried within the settlement. Combining all the available information for this mass grave results in a most likely interpretation that is different from those put forward

for the three massacre sites previously listed. It seems that at Halberstadt the victims were not inhabitants of the local settlement and were not killed during a chaotic melee, but were rather executed in a controlled manner, possibly for being aggressors themselves who had been captured previously. Therefore, although the Halberstadt mass grave is a site of LBK mass killing, it is most likely not the result of the same kind of massacre as those presumed for Talheim, Asparn and Kilianstädten.

Patterns and Peculiarities

As indicated by the question marks in the above subheadings, for each of the LBK mass violence sites listed, bioarchaeological interpretation can never claim to be absolute and final. In all cases, the validity of current interpretations rests upon the original analyses of the skeletal remains within their specific depositional contexts as well as on a comparative approach that needs to incorporate not only the massacres and other deviant depositions of human remains, but also the more regular burial sites of the LBK. As I have already partly examined elsewhere, the massacre and mass grave sites of the LBK do show some objectively recognisable patterns which interconnect the respective (osteo)archaeological features, but they also show certain peculiarities which make each site known so far truly unique. With the recently available detailed analyses of the mass graves of Kilianstädten and Halberstadt, it seems sensible to re-evaluate these patterns and peculiarities in brief and to possibly extend them.

The first mass violence site discovered – Talheim – still remains the archetypal mass grave, where the victims have been gathered and disposed of collectively in a seemingly pragmatic fashion within a settlement context, lacking all indications for a ritual and careful burial. This way of deposition marks all the known LBK mass graves as deviant burials, even within the wide array of diverse funerary treatments known for this culture. The main difference between the mass graves and most other LBK funerary features is the absence of recognisable post-mortem attention awarded to the deceased. This in turn signifies that their individual cultural identity, which would usually have been incorporated into their funeral rites by careful arrangement, orientation and often provisioning, has been ostentatiously disregarded. One interpretation might be that those identities were not

32 Meyer et al., ‘Mass graves of the LBK’.
known or of no consequence to the persons responsible for the final deposition of the bodies because the victims’ community might have been violently destroyed by them or by others. Alternatively, the sheer number of victims to be buried simultaneously might have overtaxed the resources of the remaining people and the funerary systems usually in place, assuming that part of the respective community survived the mass fatality event. Dying under such circumstances might even have been reason enough to be denied a careful individual burial, if such a death would have been regarded as a ‘bad’ and potentially dangerous one.\textsuperscript{34} The observed rarity of individuals with lethal perimortem injuries laid to rest in regular cemetery or settlement burials might be another manifestation of such a custom.

The demographic profiles of the massacre sites show that everyone could become a victim of collective lethal violence, regardless of age or sex. In contrast, it can be assumed also for the LBK that the perpetrators of lethal violence will have been mostly men. Especially so, as the known LBK weaponry evidently used for mass killing is clearly associated with the male sex and possibly also charged with symbolic meaning.\textsuperscript{35} This also fits the observation that younger adult women of reproductive age were possibly spared during the massacres to some degree. It seems likely that they were captured by the predominantly male aggressors if an attack on a settled community was successful, leaving everyone else either dead or scattered.

As far as the skeletal remains indicate, the killing itself was largely accomplished by targeting the head with blunt force trauma delivered by heavy close-quarter shock weapons. The massacre sites show injuries distributed all over the skull, with a slight dominance of trauma occurring in the rear of the head. This corresponds well with the expectation of comparative massacre research for the attacking group to usually be a superior force more or less able to overrun a far lesser one that should then have been prone to flight rather than fight back.\textsuperscript{36} In contrast to that, the mass grave of Halberstadt shows a combination of a skewed demographic profile towards younger men as victims and a much more tightly circumscribed pattern of cranial injuries than at all other LBK sites known so far. Both traits set this mass fatality site clearly apart, indicating a different context, which has been suggested as


\textsuperscript{35} Bentley et al., ‘Community differentiation’, 9329.

\textsuperscript{36} Klusemann, ‘Massacres as Process’, 473.
a targeted execution of prisoners from another community, not a massacre of
the local village community. As male victims do not appear to be missing
from the massacre sites in general, it might be argued that the individuals in
the Halberstadt mass grave were more likely a captured part of an attacking
force or a raiding party rather than prisoners taken afar and brought in to the
Halberstadt settlement. As their isotope signatures are clearly different from
the population carefully buried at the same site in settlement burials, their
outside origin is established without doubt.

In addition to the frequent cranial perimortem blunt force injuries, sharp
force trauma occurs at the mass violence sites, probably mostly caused by
arrowheads. Although this type of injury is rather rarely diagnosed in the
skeletal remains from these Early Neolithic mass fatality sites, it is highly
likely that sharp force will actually have been used frequently during the
massacres. Comparative research has shown that arrows for example hit
bone rather rarely when shot at human targets, only leaving soft tissue
injuries in most cases. If projectiles are later removed from the bodies
before deposition, these injuries, even if critical or lethal, will often become
invisible with skeletonisation. It follows that the actual amount of arrow or
other sharp force injuries cannot be reliably assessed and even if no evidence
remains of them this cannot be used as evidence of their absence. This is
different for the blunt force injuries. These will have routinely broken bone if
applied with enough force to be effective and the ubiquitous presence of
blunt force cranial injuries in all the mass violence sites shows this apparently
was the preferred method of permanently dispatching opponents. At
Kilianstädten blunt force was additionally used to specifically destroy the
long bones of the lower legs of many individuals. Perimortem post-cranial
fractures are found at the other sites as well, but only in far lesser numbers
and without clear patterning. Overall, blunt force can therefore be considered
to be the most typical type of trauma in the Early Neolithic, which is, of
course, closely correlated with the available level of technology of that era. If
no cranial trauma can be observed at all at a mass fatality site, mass violence is
a highly unlikely cause of death for Neolithic individuals, even if the deceased
were deposited in a disordered mass grave. But even at the most clear-cut
mass violence sites, not every individual victim of a massacre will necessarily
show evidence of injuries, as skeletal assemblages are often incompletely
preserved for various reasons. Additionally, not every wound will have

37 George R. Milner, ‘Nineteenth-Century Arrow Wounds and Perceptions of Prehistoric
Warfare’, American Antiquity 70.1 (2005), 147.
affected bone and even if they did, traces of violence may have been removed from bone surfaces by taphonomical processes. Individual causes of death during the mass violence events will also have differed – if no such tightly circumscribed injury pattern as that at Halberstadt has been identified.

One important reason for incomplete and damaged skeletons is animal activity. While burrowing animals may chance upon burials at any time between deposition and recovery, often displacing or removing smaller bones, it is perimortem carnivore activity which – if identified – has to be an integral part of the interpretation. Regarding the Early Neolithic mass violence sites, the human remains discovered at Aspam and Halberstadt show such carnivore alteration, which indicates that the bodies were accessible for carnivores for at least some time. This significantly adds to the previously identified post-mortem neglect that the victims apparently suffered, which in turn demonstrates that these sites and/or features likely do not represent ritual burials, but rather pragmatic depositions. Although excarnation was apparently practised by some later Neolithic groups, the obvious co-occurrence of numerous lethal injuries, deviant deposition and carnivore damage does not currently support a similar scenario for the Early Neolithic LBK. But as the example of Herxheim intriguingly shows, at least some part of the LBK populace did certainly have very complex ways to disassemble the human body at times, for reasons that have to remain speculative so far.

Influenced by the results of the research conducted at Herxheim, it has recently been suggested that several of the other LBK mass fatality sites might actually be of a ritualistic nature as well. While it has to be acknowledged that a differentiation between more ritualistic and more pragmatic practices can certainly be challenging or sometimes even impossible, especially in the light of incompletely preserved burial assemblages from an extinct archaeological culture several thousand years in the past, the LBK mass violence sites are in fact mainly characterised by the noticeable lack of recognisable (burial) ritual, as far as this can be determined by archaeological means. Again it is Herxheim that most clearly shows how much time, effort and meticulous attention could be invested into the post-mortem treatment and alteration of the bodies, whose remains were embedded along with other kinds of highly selected artefactual remains at a clearly special deposition site.

39 Zeeb-Lanz and Haack, ‘Diversity in Ritual Practice’.
40 Meyer et al., ‘Mass Graves of the LBK’, 318, fig. 16.4.
In stark contrast to that, the lack of selected accompanying artefacts and of any kind of recognisable attention given to the deceased at the sites of Talheim, Kiliansstädtten and Halberstadt, their collective, anonymous and apparently utterly careless deposition in some likely pre-existing pit in or near a possibly random settlement all point to the assumption that these people were more likely the victims of mundane warfare than the centre-pieces of extended ritualistic practices. Certainly they did not receive an individualised standard burial like the overwhelming majority of their known contemporaries.

So far, each newly discovered Early Neolithic mass fatality site has added further and previously unknown data to the overall funerary picture of the LBK, so it is quite likely that future discoveries will enable even more detailed assessments of the patterns and peculiarities of LBK burial, ritual, mass violence, warfare and post-mortem treatment of human bodies.

Conclusions

Violent injuries diagnosed in human skeletal remains, sometimes tightly patterned, and several mass graves and other mass fatality sites reveal that collective lethal violence was already a significant part of Early Neolithic life in central Europe. Apparently massacres of settled communities were part of the options available during times of serious conflict and were indeed repeatedly chosen by various groups just before and around c. 5000 cal BCE, near the end of the LBK sequence. Based on comparative research, it is likely that these massacres can be interpreted as concerted reaction to perceived threats to the aggressive group’s own well-being and prosperity. It seems that near the end of the LBK several interlocking conditions conducive to collective violence were met for the first time on a larger geographical scale within Europe, very likely including comparatively high population density and adverse climatic conditions among the more important factors.

For human societies past and present, all changes of the natural environment are necessarily routed through individual cultural filters, so even if the currently known outbreaks of violence within the late LBK may have been ultimately triggered by natural phenomena, like a period of dramatic climatic instability for example, the overall picture is

certainly far more complex than any monocausal theory can explain. Many unknown factors will have influenced the actions of the people affected by societal unrest during the Early Neolithic at different places and spread out over several decades at least, so it is of course impossible to explain every deviant and violent action with the same causes, even if the mass violence sites do seem to cluster in time very near the end of the LBK as a cultural entity. But, if sound and reliable patterns do emerge from dedicated comparative research, like those drawn together here for the mass violence sites of the LBK, it is quite likely that events occurring during a rather short period of time may in fact be caused by the same or at least closely interrelated factors. As most LBK populations were not isolated from each other but were probably linked over significant distances by kinship ties, news of destructive events like massacres will have travelled along established routes throughout the LBK and beyond, possibly supporting similar flares of lethal collective violence at other places.

It seems that already in the Early Neolithic, history was usually ‘written’ by the victors, in this case mainly by ‘disappearing’ the murdered and defeated victims of mass violence from the physical and spiritual landscape of the LBK, effectively silencing them almost forever. This silencing was mainly accomplished by the conscious non-employment of the common ‘vocabulary of burial practices’ of the LBK, thereby denying the violence victims a careful burial geared towards individual commemoration. But with the advent of refined bioarchaeological techniques, the tables may sometimes be turned and the skeletal remains of the dead, if rediscovered by chance, may actually become the main and largely only source of information about past mass violence events. The meticulous analysis of these remains may then illuminate the victims’ side of events, how they were possibly interrelated among each other, which injuries they suffered and how mass violence and its context may have changed throughout the Neolithic and later periods. A number of later Neolithic mass and multiple graves are known from several different cultures and these show yet another set of unique characteristics, like for example a careful arrangement of a high number of bodies with skeletal signs of lethal violence within one grave, a combination that is so

far unknown for the LBK. Moving into the Bronze Age, more orderly graves containing multiple individuals continue to be used, but now whole battlefields are also emerging,⁴⁵ that furthermore suggest the establishment of a dedicated warrior class that is distinct from the all-round farming and fighting man of the Early Neolithic.

Again, the interpretation of complex mass violence-related funerary sites in the widest sense may change with new discoveries and can always only reflect the current state of research. For the Early Neolithic massacre and other mass violence sites in central Europe the following can currently be stated: (a) mass violence victims as a group are mainly characterised by the presence of perimortem cranial injuries and to a lesser degree by post-cranial injuries; (b) mass violence victims are found in deviant depositional contexts without careful arrangement of the bodies, mostly located within a settlement area, not a cemetery; and (c) we lack recognisable evidence for extended post-mortem ritual treatment. Finally, (d) a victim’s previously existing individual identity, which, under different circumstances, might have been expressed in a neatly prepared single burial, is violently suppressed and culturally negated.

Bibliographic Essay


Mass Violence in Neolithic Europe


Monographs on the general origin and prehistory of warfare are available from different authors, who naturally have slightly differing views. An influential work is Lawrence H. Keeley, War before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Another example is Steven A. LeBlanc and Katherine E. Register, Constant Battles: Why We Fight (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2003).
Gendered Violence in Iron Age and Roman Britain

REBECCA REDFERN

This chapter examines the diverse communities of Britain from the ninth century BCE to the early fifth century CE, and uses a Web of Violence model to examine the archaeological and primary source evidence for violence in both periods. This model was chosen because it recognises that all forms of violence within a community are interrelated and share many causative factors, such as rates of intimate partner violence increasing during periods of social and political unrest. The majority of the evidence discussed is bioarchaeological data derived from the analysis of human remains. Studying the skeletal remains of ancient individuals provides a unique and independent perspective on past communities, as throughout the life course, from embryogenesis to death, the skeleton captures information about diet, age and sex, activity patterns, health and mobility. When these data are interpreted within the environmental, socio-cultural, political and economic structures of a community, it is possible to make inferences about gender roles, social hierarchies and the impact of large-scale events, such as environmental catastrophes or periods of colonisation. Each individual studied provides their own perspective, and the remains of children are particularly

I would like to thank the editors for the opportunity to revisit the evidence anew. I am most grateful to the following people for their help locating and sharing archived information and for answering many questions about their research: Ian Armit, Bettina Arnold, Andrew Birley, Sally Brooks, Anwen Caffell, Sally Croft, Jessica Dowdell, Rebekah Hart, Malin Holst, and Niall Sharples. Special thanks are given to Jo Buckberry and former students of the BARC for their work on the Wetwang material and for kindly sharing their research.

important because their health and treatment are directed by socio-cultural values, their bodies are sensitive to the state of the living environment, and as their age at death can often be more precise than adults, their health provides a ‘window’ on a specific period of time within their community. In this chapter age is not simply a person’s age at death, it follows a life course approach recognising the discrepancy between biological and social ages, whereby a person can be biologically still a sub-adult but in their society are considered an adult. A sub-adult refers to individuals who are not biologically adult, typically from 0 to 18 years old. The chapter also distinguishes between sex and gender, with the latter being a social construction of the roles, occupations, activities and responsibilities of men and women.

Using the Web of Violence model, the chapter focuses on the ‘mindful body’ approach that advocates for no separation or opposition between the mind and body; recognising that bioarchaeological evidence can reveal important insights into the ‘social body’ and ‘body politic’ of both periods by examining inequality, whether of age, gender or status, because these frequently result in health disparities.

The Iron Age and Roman phases of British archaeology stand in sharp contrast to one another. The Iron Age (IA) is characterised by small farming communities organised into heterogeneous tribal confederacies, which display strong regional identities. The archaeological evidence from these communities shows intense variation in terms of funerary practice, monumental architecture and trade connections within Britain and Europe, and with the Roman Empire through the creation of client kingdoms in south-east England following Caesar’s invasions in 55 and 54 BCE.

The evidence for social organisation is derived from two sources: the funerary record and Roman primary sources. Both attest to ranked communities, with status created and maintained by the management of and access

4 The analysis of sub-adults is key to understanding the health of the wider community, because their skeletons provide a ‘barometer’ of the population: see Mary E. Lewis, The Bioarchaeology of Children: Perspectives from Biological and Forensic Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 19.
to resources, people and specialist knowledge, with groups including priests (Druids), warriors, farmers and the enslaved. Status appears to have been defined more by stages of the life course than by gender, and inter-regional comparison of funerary practices shows that this varied between different communities. Funerary practices directly influence our bioarchaeological knowledge about these communities, because until the Late Iron Age (LIA) (first century BCE to first century CE) the majority of individuals across Britain were afforded a non-recoverable burial rite. In broad-brush terms, younger children, especially infants, did not have recoverable grave goods. Adolescents were often buried with ‘adult’ goods, and adults of both sexes have comparable items (e.g. pottery and animal inclusions), with many burials organised in cemeteries close to settlements. Across Britain there is the trend for elite individuals to be buried with (among other items) martial equipment, mirrors and Roman feasting equipment. At the regional level, according to community identity, people of a lesser status are distinguished by the presence of material culture and animal inclusions, which show variation within the grave according to sex and age at death. Many other burials are unaccompanied and some individuals received a secondary burial rite. Such burials are often found in

non-cemetery contexts, and it is proposed that these are lower status people or those regarded as ‘other’ by their community.9

The Claudian conquest in 43 CE resulted in tumultuous change for the communities of Britain. Urban centres were created, and new technologies for industry, building and farming were introduced. Communities were reorganised and governed under imperial administration, whose authority was reinforced by a military presence. This fundamentally changed the organisation of these communities, introducing new concepts of life course, gender roles and status. However, funerary evidence from Dorset suggests that although a patriarchal social and legal hierarchy was imposed on Britain, the attributions of male and female identities often maintained strong LIA connections. Free and forced migration not only increased the population but resulted in tremendous diversity with respect to material culture and funerary practices, as evidenced by mobility isotope studies and inscriptions.10

This period saw the establishment of cemeteries outside settlement sites, and because of redevelopment, particularly in south-east England, this has meant that many thousands of burials have been encountered by archaeologists, the majority dating to the third and fourth centuries CE, meaning that available data sets are biased towards late Roman urban cemeteries. Bioarchaeology has demonstrated that there are significant health differences within a region, as well as between urban centres, supporting the impact of migrants on population health.11 Therefore, as with the LIA, caution has to be used when discussing the evidence for a particular population, as it may not be entirely applicable to the province as a whole.

The life course in the Roman world was subject to temporal and spatial variation. Britain is broadly similar to other north-west provinces: there were clear sex and age differences in funerary treatment which also display strong regional patterns, and grave-good provision is considered to be an indicator


of status. The majority of older children and adults are accompanied by an item of (among others) pottery or animal inclusions and are buried in formal cemeteries. There is also evidence for the display of body parts in military contexts, and the purposeful disposal of disarticulated remains in liminal contexts and clandestine burial in domestic contexts.

Iron Age Britain

Across Britain, the evidence for status inequalities is not clear cut due to variations in the funerary record. In East Yorkshire, the Arras cemeteries allow for the division of burials between non-elite and elite individuals. Joshua Peck’s examination of health suggests that non-elites may have experienced greater stress during childhood and participated in labour-intensive activities, but failed to identify marked health differences between these two groups. This result suggests either that hierarchies did not negatively impact health or else they are masked by the funerary rite. Dietary stable isotope analyses of these populations also failed to find status differences between burial types.

Sex inequalities in health appear to be absent, as a male–female data comparison from East Yorkshire for indicators of stress failed to reveal marked differences, supported by a statistical analysis of data from Dorset that did not find a sex difference in mortality risk. However, for intentional trauma, particularly those caused by sharp force weapon injuries, statistically significant sex differences have been reported by S. S. King in her study of the Wetwang Slack population (East Yorkshire), where a number of individuals have healed fractures associated with assault or intentional blows, such as a healed scapula body fracture in

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one male and the nasal bones of another male.\textsuperscript{15} Nationally, IA data show that both sexes sustained injuries caused by interpersonal violence, such as depressed cranial fractures, potentially from sling stones, and sharp force weapon injuries, such as a young adult male with a perimortem stabbing injury to the inner surface of the left ilium and multiple sharp force weapon injuries to the cranium; there are also canid gnawing marks suggesting that his body had not been immediately buried after death.\textsuperscript{16} Human remains are often encountered at hill forts, revealing evidence for episodes of inter-community warfare. Excavations at the main inner gateway at the entrance of the Kemerton Camp hillfort (Bredon Hill) revealed a massacre layer of human remains which have been AMS C\textsubscript{14} dated to the mid second to mid first century BCE, and are believed to reflect an episode of inter-tribal conflict. Analysis of the material has shown that the majority are from young adult males aged between 18 and 34 years old but adult females and sub-adults are also present, many of whom have evidence for sharp-force weapon and blunt-force injuries. There is also evidence for dismemberment and disfigurement to the skull and limbs, with taphonomic evidence for animal scavenging showing that the bodies were left in the open.\textsuperscript{17} The data show that there are significant differences at the intra- and inter-cemetery level in the frequency and patterning of trauma, leading to the suggestion that our perspective is biased by the minority inhumation burial rite, and because many hill forts have not been excavated at all or in their entirety.

Based on available data, there is an absence of evidence for injuries associated with child and elder abuse, and intimate partner violence (IPV). The latter may be difficult to reliably discern because there is no


\textsuperscript{17} A. Gaynor Western and J. Derek Hurst, ‘“Soft Heads” Evidence for Sexualised Warfare during the Later Iron Age from Kemerton Camp, Bredon Hill’, in Knüsel and Smith (eds.), Routledge Handbook, pp. 161–84.
difference in patterning between assault and IPV injuries. Females have
evidence for rib, scapula and nasal bone fractures but there are only a
handful of such females throughout this period. Taken in context, the
lack of wider evidence for gender inequality in this period suggests
that many of the social factors which contribute to this violence are
not present, or at least have yet to be identified in the archaeological
record. This does not mean that individuals of both sexes with healed
assault injuries were not victims of IPV rather than other types of
interpersonal assault.

Overall, analyses show that males, particularly young adults, provide
the majority of the evidence for violence; but there is also evidence for
female engagement. The trauma suffered reflects the use of a variety of
blunt and sharp force weapons, which were particularly aimed at the
head and torso areas, emphasising their lethal intent; there is also
evidence for ‘overkill’ – violence exceeding that necessary to kill some-
one – and mutilation. The range and patterning of injuries observed in
these individuals reflect violence operating at many scales, between
individuals but also communities. Many are buried with weaponry,
but it is not the case that everyone buried with weaponry has skeletal
evidence for violence; often these weapons are broken or bent, leading
to the suggestion that funerals were used as performances to create
‘martial capital’ for the community (Figure 15.1). The majority of these
individuals are aged between 17 and 35 years, and their formal burial
often away from their place of death strongly suggests that these are the
remains of the warrior class.

In contrast, articulated skeletons and disarticulated bones of sub-adults
and adults from non-cemetery locations have evidence for perimortem
injuries that tell of overkill, dismemberment and decapitation, as well as
evidence for their limbs being restrained that strongly suggests their

18 Sally Engle Merry, Gender Violence: A Cultural Perspective (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell,
2009); Roberts and Cox, Health and Disease in Britain; Rebecca C. Redfern, ‘Violence as
an Aspect of the Durotrigie Female Life Course’, in S. Ralph (ed.), The Archaeology of
C. Redfern, ‘Identifying and Interpreting Domestic Violence in Archaeological Human
Violence in the Late Iron Age Human Remains from Maiden Castle Hillfort, Dorset,
England’, Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society 77 (2011), 111–38; Roberts and Cox, Health
and Disease in Britain.
20 Giles, Forged Glamour; Melanie Giles, ‘Performing Pain, Performing Beauty: Dealing
involvement in performative violence. At Wandlebury hill fort, in Cambridgeshire, one pit contained the upper half of a sub-adult skeleton which was buried in a sack, chest down, with their head turned to the left, indicating that the torso and head were still in articulation. There is evidence for perimortem weapon injuries to the pelvic girdle, suggesting that the lower half of the body had been removed by force. The people whose bodies were chosen to be manipulated in these ways have been rarely considered and when they have, are proposed to be ‘others’, of lower status and victims of ritual violence.\(^{21}\)

Another form of ritual violence which is believed to have taken place is human sacrifice. This practice is recorded in the Roman primary sources during the Roman invasion of Britain, and for other communities in Iron Age Europe, as for example, when the Roman army fought a battle at the Isle of Mona (Anglesey), an island off the Welsh coast sacred to the Druids.\(^{22}\) In Britain, the most compelling evidence comes from the bog bodies that, like

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others found in Ireland and northern Europe, appear to be remains of people who were purposefully killed in a highly performative manner. Examination of the stomach contents of several of these bodies suggest that they had consumed a ritual meal before death, most notably, Grauballe Man from Denmark. The most famous example from Britain is Lindow Man, who was buried in a peat bog between the third century BCE and the first century CE. Analysis showed that he had been garrotted, sustained multiple blows to his head, his neck had been broken, and he may have also been stabbed in the neck.

These damaged and manipulated bodies could also represent the captured and enslaved, and it has been suggested that any status group could be captured or enslaved in Iron Age Britain, which was renowned for this trade pre-Conquest. There are numerous finds of shackles and gang chains in ritual deposits in liminal locations, elite burials and at hill forts, often close to the Channel coastline. No data are available for Britain but in first-century BCE Gaul it is estimated that 300,000 slaves had been transported to Rome and a further 15,000 would be required every year. This trade and the taking of captives in Iron Age Britain also served a purpose for indigenous communities, allowing them to import luxuries from the Continent but also to fulfil their own social and religious obligations, as described in the Roman primary sources, a trend also identified on the Continent. Anthropological research offers alternative paradigms, including their value in gift exchange and as knowledge holders of different languages, locations and cultural practices. Only at Llyn Cerrig Bach, in Wales, in the 1940s were human remains believed to have been found in direct association with slaving equipment, but these appear to have been lost.


Bioarchaeological studies of the enslaved and captured from the pre- and post-contact Americas highlight general health inequalities, stable isotope evidence for dietary stress, and the presence of healed and unhealed injuries produced by assault and punishments.\(^{27}\) As skeletal changes generally reflect long-term health outcomes, these indicators are tentatively examined. Comparing the individuals from Danebury hill fort and formal cemetery populations from Britain, it can be seen that there are differences in stature, age at death and other health indicators (Table 15.2), but none of these are distinctive enough to differentiate between the two burial types – as observed in the New World studies. The same is also true of the dietary stable isotope analysis of bone collagen from cemetery populations versus partially articulated or disarticulated deposits of human bone, where no differences between the two groups were found.\(^ {28}\) As outlined above, at present the only discernible differences are the injuries sustained shortly before death and how the body was subsequently treated. This suggests that ‘difference’ resided in how individuals’ bodies contributed to acts of performative violence, particularly in times of social upheaval such as that evocatively described in the Roman sources after the Island of Anglesea, in Wales, had been captured by the Roman army in 61 CE: ‘The next step was … to demolish the groves consecrated to their savage cults: for they considered it a duty to consult their deities by means of human entrails.’\(^ {29}\)

Roman Britain

The colonisation of Britain in terms of the military is frequently discussed but other forms of violence remain under-explored, although the lengthy process of establishing and maintaining a stable, economically productive province would have utilised violence. Many communities had existing, strong relationships with Rome before the Claudian conquest, and the impact of the Caesarean invasions would have remained powerful in southern England. However, such relationships are quite different from subjugation and colonisation.

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<tr>
<th>Site or region</th>
<th>Demography N = total number of individuals</th>
<th>Health variable (* indicators of stress)</th>
<th>Result (% are the crude prevalence rate)</th>
<th>Citation</th>
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<td>Sub-adult N = 26</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Enamel hypoplastic defects</td>
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<td>Dental carious lesions</td>
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<td>7.2%</td>
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<th>Female N</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sub-adults</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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Violence against indigenous communities was both powerful and subtle. New urban centres were created whose architectural structures, organisation and decoration would have changed the way people moved around, and community structures created new age and gender restrictions on movement and access to resources, both reinforcing Rome’s imperial power. The experience of invasion, combined with the fragmentation of communities, because of military conscription and relocation to new settlements, enslavement and colonisation, would have created psychological and physical trauma, which research has demonstrated can resonate down the generations. The imperial perspective on the gaining of this province is captured by a carved marble panel from a temple in Asia Minor (Figure 15.2), where Claudius is depicted as a semi-nude hero, clenched fist upraised, who is subjugating a female Amazon figure representing Britain – Britannia – who is being pulled up by her hair. Such a depiction has multiple layers of imagery. The province is shown as a woman, and in the Roman world women’s bodies were considered to be less valuable. The partially nude Britannia, whose body is carved in a submissive position and manipulated by the conquering hero, has overtones of sexual violence and beatings (we should also remember that these images would have been painted, which may have exaggerated the fear on Britannia’s face, and potentially added soft-tissue injuries).

The evidence for military activity is twofold: distinctive architecture and the creation of physical boundaries (e.g. Hadrian’s Wall), and military behaviours designed to impose imperial will on the province. In life, the distinctive dress of soldiers marked them out in civilian contexts, with their military insignia and wearing of swords. In death, their enacting of imperial might was depicted on their tombstones, with soldiers from auxiliary units shown holding trophy heads. Letters from the fort of Vindolanda (Northumberland) reveal their contempt for indigenous people and the creation of ‘Roman’ microcosms in contested, often liminal spaces. The bioarchaeological evidence for military

Figure 15.2 Relief depicting the conquest of Britannia by the Emperor Claudius from Sebasteion at Aphrodisias in Turkey.
activity falls into three groups: potential victims of the Claudian invasion, the Boudican rebellion, and trophy body parts. In comparison to the archaeological evidence for weaponry and burnt settlements, there is sparse evidence in the bioarchaeological record for the invasions and rebellion.

Human remains associated with the 43 CE Claudian invasion have been uncovered at a few of Britain’s hill forts, one of the most famous being from Maiden Castle hill fort. The burials in the eastern entrance are likely to reflect episodes of conflict in the LIA and the conquest period. The majority of the individuals buried in the so-called ‘Belgic War Cemetery’ are young adult males, a result which is known as a catastrophic demographic profile, and the highest perimortem evidence is for sharp and blunt force weapon injuries. These include disfiguring bladed injuries to the face and head, injuring people to prevent them running away, and some males had injuries reflecting their attempts to protect themselves from their attacker before succumbing to multiple lethal blows suggestive of overkill.

Evidence for the Boudican rebellion (61 CE) from Camulodunum (Colchester) and Londinium (London) are scarce. The primary sources tell of the rebels mutilating the bodies of indigenous women who had married Roman men, and giving no quarter to women or children. It is worth noting that on the Continent the Roman army committed acts of genocide, and routinely killed the women and children who waited on the sidelines of battles. Destruction layers excavated at Camulodunum contained burnt human remains, and a mandible with a sharp force weapon injury has been recovered from a post-Boudican clearance layer, remains most likely to be inhabitants who were unable to escape the massacre.

The majority of evidence for post-conquest military activity is the display and/or disposal of trophy body parts in military settlements. These consist of disarticulated crania or limbs, usually recovered from pits within the settlement or in external defensive ditches. Examination of the remains from the legionary ditch at Camulodunum suggests the display of heads and other body parts in the fort. At Vindolanda, a young adult male cranium excavated


34 Dio Cass. 62.1–12; Tac. Agr. 1.16.31.
from a ditch has multiple fractures, a sharp force weapon injury and evidence of being mounted on a pole for display.³⁶

Urban centres have evidence for group or isolated killings during the Roman period, with body parts deposited in pits, ditches or wells, often located in liminal spaces. The context for these events is not always clear, as often they do not date to periods of instability. Regardless of this, they show that in contrast to rural areas, local people and people not local to Britain were routinely killed, often in large groups, perhaps reflecting judicial executions or as victims of the arena.³⁷

Indigenous voices in the primary source material emphasise enslavement, violent oppression and sexual violence, and these actions most likely represent the tip of the iceberg in terms of people’s suffering. This is captured by Roman bodies, with bioarchaeology providing evidence for abuse. In this period there are many more females with healed assault and sharp force weapon injuries, whose distribution and patterning conform to assault and IPV; injuries which reflect the lower status of many women and their subjugation. For example, at Corinium Dobunnorum (Cirencester) females with multiple rib fractures and a healed weapon injury to the cranium were found.³⁸

Rebecca Gowland’s research has identified several cases of elder abuse in older females, including one individual who had sustained multiple perimortem blows to her face.³⁹ A. Rohnbogner’s detailed analysis of many hundreds of sub-adults, although identifying many examples of accidental injuries, only found one potential case of child abuse – a rib fracture in a young child (today, such fractures are considered to be the ‘gold standard’ of identifying child abuse). Rohnbogner also observed a healed humeral shaft fracture in an 11-year-old child, judged to be accidental. However, such fractures are also produced by physical abuse. Absence of evidence is not evidence for absence, particularly as the primary literature records the beating of children and


³⁸ Alan McWhirr, Linda Viner and Calvin Wells, Romano-British Cemeteries at Cirencester. Cirencester Excavations II (Cirencester: Cirencester Excavation Committee, 1982); Roberts and Cox, Health and Disease.

slaves, and because no fracture is pathognomic of child abuse, we should expand our criteria to include neglect that may be evidenced in other ways, such as health inequalities and the presence of metabolic diseases.

As normative funerary practices are recorded in the primary sources, it is easier to identify non-normative burials than it is for the preceding period. There are many instances from a variety of site types which conform to the forensic definition of clandestine burial, but potential ritual behaviour should not be discounted. For example, an individual was buried in a trench associated with the construction of a bridge in Northamptonshire, and human remains have also been recovered from well deposits, such as at Brading villa, on the Isle of Wight, where an adolescent recovered from a well has evidence for canid gnawing, indicating that their body had not been immediately disposed of. There is also evidence for the ritual manipulation of human remains, such as the adolescent cranium from a religious site in Hertfordshire, which shows evidence for their murder, the removal of soft-tissue and mounting.

In this period decapitation is a frequently encountered burial type most typically for adults, with rates varying between different cemeteries. At Dunstable (Bedfordshire) an infant aged 3–6 months was decapitated, with their head placed on their legs, and an adult female was also decapitated but unusually their lower legs had also been severed and placed by the upper arms. A recent review of the evidence has found that many cases were more like executions, with many poorly placed multiple blows delivered to severely the head. Defensive injuries to the hands have been identified, suggesting that in many cases these were not judicially sanctioned killings or a normative funerary practice. This seems to be the case with the burial ground excavated from 3–6 Driffield Terrace (York), where the majority of the sample is dominated by the burials of decapitated young males: examination of the human remains also identified evidence of healed assault injuries to the face


and hands, and a carnivore bite mark to the pelvis of one adult male – the first in Britain.43

Evidence for the enslaved remains nebulous in this period, despite the greater archaeological visibility for this practice. Mobility isotopes of an early Roman mass grave from Gloucestershire reveal the presence of continental migrants, who could perhaps reflect the forced movement of workers to expand the rural economy. When the bioarchaeological criterion outlined in the IA section to identify such people is applied, more individuals are present with evidence for injuries produced by assaults (which increase post-conquest), as many scapulae and rib bone fractures are observed, which some authors posit as indicative of beatings. However, in terms of health inequalities this is far from clear cut, as shown in the comparison of the Gloucestershire mass grave with the normative cemetery population from the same burial area, where no health disparities were observed. This is likely to reflect the fluid and rapidly changing social statuses of this period, whereby people could experience many contrasting social statuses over a lifetime, and also the huge variation within the enslaved with respect to occupation.44

Dietary deficiency diseases increase and, although many cases can be explained by the use of elite Mediterranean childcare practices such as swaddling, they may also potentially reflect child neglect – withholding of foodstuffs, and failure to provide sufficient care. Stable isotope analyses of diet have failed to identify a clear relationship between diet and status (as evidenced through burial type). However, regardless of burial type, individuals with increased nitrogen values have an increased mortality rate, suggesting that they experienced greater levels of stress compared to their peers, from which no amount of cultural buffering could sufficiently protect them. This result may also provide evidence for fluid status identities in this period, whereby acquired socio-economic buffering in adulthood was unable to protect against the consequences of earlier hardships.45

45 The role of culturally defined childcare practices is discussed by Rebecca L. Gowland and Rebecca C. Redfern, ‘Childhood Health in the Roman World: Perspectives from the Centre and Margin of the Empire’, Childhood in the Past: An International Journal 3 (2010), 15–42.
In the Roman life course, infancy and childhood were distinct periods accompanied by social and legal rules, the experience of which was strongly governed by an individual’s gender, with women living and learning a domestic world in contrast to men who had more socio-economic and political freedoms and education. Post-conquest, it is hypothesised that women’s status declined, making them (whether married or not) reliant on family, particularly the men, for access to resources and security; but the archaeological and bioarchaeological evidence varies regionally and between rural and urban settings. Evidence from Dorset shows that contrary to expectations, males had a higher mortality risk, there were significant sex differences in health profiles, and there were significant differences in rural versus urban health patterns. The evidence of sub-adults reveals that compared to the LIA, they had an elevated risk of death and of suffering from metabolic and infectious diseases, with urban sub-adults having the highest risk. This evidence reflects key changes in child-rearing, especially changes in the duration of breastfeeding and weaning practices, which decrease and involved the use of specific diets, changes which would increase morbidity and mortality risks.

However, health, demography and mortality evidence for adults is not clear cut, reflecting the mixing of indigenous and migrant health experiences, as many of the indicators relied on by bioarchaeologists are formed in childhood, and for many individuals their childhoods were spent outside of Britain. This is supported by studies of urban cemeteries in southern Britain, which have identified differences between large and small towns, revealing that life-ways in Britain were more complex and diverse than often proposed by scholars, and that the post-conquest impact of mass migration to Britannia, the creation of urban centres and expansion of the rural economy led to health inequalities that were reinforced by systems of structural violence such as poverty, enslavement and a reduction in status for many people.


Conclusions

The periods examined here represent a shift from prehistory to history in the British archaeological record, and this upheaval and transformation is captured in the human remains. The bioarchaeological evidence from the Iron Age represents just a small proportion of the population and from certain regions of Britain only, highly complex funerary rites having been practised by these heterogeneous communities. Analysis of their bodies reveals only limited evidence for inequalities, but because of funerary rites we are able to identify ritual violence and use of the body for social means. Some of these activities are described in the primary Roman sources, but the bioarchaeological evidence reveals their complexity and diversity. Their remains also provide evidence for inter-tribal violence and the devastation of communities during the conquest period.

In the Roman period we have greater numbers of individuals from urban, rural and military cemeteries, reflecting the introduction of new settlement patterns and social structures. This is also a period of migration and more visible social hierarchies, and bioarchaeological research has been able to identify and show how these factors directly impacted on people’s health and funerary rites. During this period there is a greater number of primary source materials, but these focus on historical events and exclude lower social groups, especially children and the elderly. Analysis of human remains allows us to establish an independent and unique data set which can be used to see how life in Roman Britain impacted on the ‘silent majority’.

The use of a Web of Violence approach reveals that in these contrasting periods, similar types of violence took place in communities (e.g. ritual), reflecting its power as an important social tool. In both periods the evidence is often obfuscated by funerary rituals and our limited understanding of the socio-cultural context in which these events occurred, such as the disposal of body parts and people in liminal places. By focusing on the theme of inequality, it is hoped that the bioarchaeological evidence presented here shows that violence is not limited to injuries but also impacts health and mortality risks, often throughout the life course, because no violent action happens in isolation.

Bibliographic Essay

The most comprehensive overview of the archaeology of Iron Age Britain has been written by Sir Barry Cunliffe: *Iron Age Communities in Britain: An Account of England,*
Scotland and Wales from the Seventh Century BC until the Roman Conquest (London: Routledge, 2009). This volume has gone through several editions, reflecting the increase in archaeological evidence because of the expansion of contractor archaeology and the introduction of the Portable Antiquities Scheme. These developments have provided a wealth of data, and because scientific dating and other techniques are now routinely employed by contractors, our understanding of this period has fundamentally changed over the last decade, particularly with respect to funerary practices, population mobility and the distribution of material culture. For example, new data from Kent has revealed the first evidence for long-distance migrants in Iron Age Britain: see Jacqueline I. McKinley et al., Cliffs End Farm, Isle of Thanet, Kent. A Mortuary and Ritual Site of the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon Period with Evidence for Long-Distance Maritime Mobility (Salisbury: Wessex Archaeology, 2015). Within the literature there is also a recognition that the evidence should be placed within a wider European context, with the work by C. C. Haselgrove and R. E. Pope, The Earlier Iron Age in Britain and the Near Continent (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007) and C. C. Haselgrove and T. Moore, The Later Iron Age in Britain and Beyond (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007) exemplifying this.


The period has been characterised as having a non-recoverable burial rite, but the new data sets, scientific dating and other techniques are challenging this concept, most recently by T. J. Booth and colleagues: ‘New Evidence for Diverse Secondary Burial Practices in Iron Age Britain: A Histological Case Study’, Journal of Archaeological Science 67 (2016), 14–24. A new overview, Death and Burial in Iron Age Britain, by D. W. Harding (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) reveals that complex social identities were expressed in the funerary treatment of humans and animals in this period.

In contrast, the Romano-British period has extensive and well-phased data sets that have been used to construct the life course, gender and status hierarchies and other aspects of identity, with Pearce’s ‘Status and Burial’ chapter in M. Millett, L. Revell and A. Moore (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) providing an overview of these works. The military has been a focus of study since antiquarian times, particularly weaponry and equipment, an overview of which is found in Bishop’s ‘Weapon and Military Equipment’ chapter in L. Allason-Jones (ed.), Artefacts in
Roman Britain: Their Purpose and Use (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). However, only a minority of work has focused on the military use of violence against indigenous communities, with S. James exploring this theme extensively in his publications, for example in Rome and the Sword: How Warriors and Weapons Shaped Roman History (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011).

Greater acknowledgement that the military community was not solely composed of soldiers has been brought to the fore by Greene in her chapter ‘Female Networks in the Military Communities of the Roman West: A View from the Vindolanda Tablets’ in E. A. Hemelrijk and G. Woolf (eds.), Women and Roman City in the Latin West (Leiden: Brill, 2013), which built on the earlier work of A. Goldsworthy and I. Haynes, The Roman Army as Community, Including Papers of a Conference Held at Birkbeck College, University of London on 11–12 January, 1997, Journal of Roman Archaeology, supplementary series 34 (1999).
Violence in Ancient Egyptian Society

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In the sphere of controlled violence and state-sponsored ‘terrorism’ (in its literal sense), ancient Egypt is a prime example and object lesson among the complex societies of the Near East. During the period of the rapid evolution of the nation state in the Nile Valley, c. 3200–3000 BCE, an atmosphere of bellicosity and violent expansion hangs over the incipient society of ‘Big-man’, the pharaonic system. Measures to keep Egyptian society productive and efficient, with no one dropping out through choice, led to the application of coercive force, often involving cruel and unusual punishments. Violent acts, on the other hand, in private society, did not so much concern the authorities if they failed to impair the smooth running of the state. When Egypt won an empire, it carried its mechanisms of violence into the conquered territories without modification, as might be expected. But quite unexpected is the way in which prescribed and institutionalised violence informed the very belief system of the country, in the creation of the concept of hell.

The Violence of State Creation

The rock art of the Eastern Desert descends to us from remote prehistoric times. Inherent already in the thematic content are the overtones of coercion and violence: men corral a variety of animals using some sort of netting; hunters spear or lasso an oryx; a falcon hovers menacingly; pairs of men seem to be engaging in combat. In many cases these petroglyphs have a practical intent, not a commemorative one. A direct message underlies the signs. They

signal where the game is to be found, or where the transit corridor lies. Only
in the hand-to-hand combat do we touch upon a theme with deeper roots and
a longer history. The motif of two men squaring off against each other, with
weapons or bare hands, recalls similar scenes in the archaic art of the Nile
Valley\(^3\) eventually to enter the hieroglyphic script. From the arrangement of
two men fighting on equal ground the scene finds a parallel in which one of
the combatants proceeds to dominate the other in size and position, and
prepares to deal the death blow.\(^4\)

The violence described above is pictographic, but a rather obvious sym-
bolism is also employed.\(^5\) As the Predynastic era draws to a close so the minor
arts adopt motifs of a chastening, if not intimidating, nature, many drawn
from Mesopotamian glyptic. A bull gores a prostrate human being or
demolishes a fort;\(^6\) a falcon, scorpion and lion, each armed with a hoe,
break down fortified enclosures;\(^7\) lions tear apart passive prey; fantastic long-
necked beasts snarl at each other and have to be restrained.\(^8\) These creatures,
at the moment we catch sight of them in the contexts listed above, have
become ‘power symbols’ in the process of coalescing into the character of
a leader. This all attests to a single event in the history of the Nile Valley:
violent competition at a local level for control of resources, as Egypt was
drawn inexorably within the Uruk world economic system.\(^9\)

In the turmoil of the last two centuries of the fourth millennium B.C.E we
are witnessing the creation of a new office, namely kingship. This function,
without antecedent in the ancient world, does not derive legitimacy through
a terrestrial, ancestral line, and contemporary and Old Kingdom documents
rarely mention father, siblings or extended family. The king of Egypt is
presented as a larger-than-life colossus, dawning like a terrifying star. When
his ancestry has to be mentioned, we are taken into the celestial realm: his
father is ‘Atum’, the all-inclusive; or Geb, the earth; the yellow-faced king of
the baboons; or just about any other supernatural power. For the king is not

\(^3\) A. J. Spencer, Early Egypt: The Rise of Civilization in the Nile Valley (London: British
Museum Press, 1993), fig. 33; G. Dreyer, Umm el-Qaаб I. Königsgrab U-j und seine frühen
Schriftzeugnisse (Cairo, 1998), abb. 82.
\(^5\) E. C. Köhler, ‘History or Ideology? New Reflections on the Narmer Palette and the
Nature of Foreign Relations in Pre- and Early Dynastic Egypt’, in E. C. M. van den Brink
(ed.), Egypt and the Levant: Interrelations from the 4th through the Early 3rd Millennium B.C.E.
\(^6\) K. Lange and M. Hirmer, Egypt: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting in Three Thousand Years
(New York, 1956), no. 4.
\(^7\) Ibid., no. 3.  
\(^8\) W. M. F. Petrie, Ceremonial Slate Palettes (London, 1953).
\(^9\) G. Algaze, The Uruk World System: The Dynamics of Expansionism of Early Mesopotamian
a transmogrified chief, he is not at the moment of his appearance considered a member of a dynasty. He is a divine ‘Big-man’ who comes out of eternity and eventually will go back to eternity. He acts alone, stands by himself, makes his own alliances and his own laws, extends universal sway. The rise of ‘Big-man’ (wr in Egyptian), or ‘Pharaoh’ is best seen in the light of circumscription theory, as a response to the Uruk world system. Important knock-on effects included the creation of a royal ideology, the political and cultural union of the country and the appearance of the nation state. Unheralded and without precedent, a new collegium, a ‘civil service’, had to be created and with it such bureaucratic mechanisms as a calendar, taxation, weights and measures and a writing system. 

Benign and peaceful as these innovations sound, force and punishment were concomitants of the process. During the period of the rapid evolution of the nation state in the Nile Valley, an atmosphere of belligerence and violent expansion hangs over the incipient society. The very names adopted by the kings of the First Dynasty (c. 3100–2900 BCE), as avatars of the falcon Horus, speak of violent retribution meted out to any who dare to oppose them: ‘Horus is a fighter’, ‘Horus is a scalper’, ‘Horus is a cobra’, ‘Horus is one who decapitates’, ‘Horus is an extractor of the heart’, ‘Horus with raised arm’. One of the longest-lived scenes in world art – the earliest examples date to the fourth millennium BCE, the latest to Roman times – the ‘head-smithing’ scene, graphically indicates what happens to those who contravene the king’s will. 

Intended primarily as a tableau for public consumption, this scene shows a dominant figure (in historic times the king) about to crush the skull of a grovelling enemy sprawled at his feet. The sharp contrasts which characterised the ideology of life in the Nile Valley have had a pejorative affect: the executioner is trim, athletic, clean-shaven and well-dressed; the enemy naked, dishevelled and thoroughly disreputable. The enemy may be native or foreign: contravention of Pharaoh’s laws brings the same punishment.

The Egyptians do not hesitate to indicate their thorough contempt for such people. Senwosret III (mid nineteenth century BCE) is

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12 E. S. Hall, *Pharaoh Smites his Enemies* (Munich: Deutscher Kunst Verlag, 1986); Köhler, ‘History or Ideology?’
one who shows no mercy to the enemy who have attacked him; attacking when he is attacked, desisting when one ought to desist . . . the Nubian has but to hear a sound, and he falls at a voice; it is (merely) answering him that makes him retreat, if one is aggressive against him, he turns tail. Retreat and he becomes more aggressive. They are certainly not people to be respected, they are craven wretches. My Majesty has seen them! It is not a lie!\textsuperscript{13}

Akhtoy III (twenty-first century BCE) tells us how northerners struck him:

Speak now of the Bow-people! Lo, the vile Asiatic! It goes ill with the place where he is, lacking in water and covered in brushwood, the paths thereof tortuous because of the mountains. He never dwells in one place, but has been forced to wander through want, traversing the lands on foot. He has been fighting since the time of Horus, never conquering nor yet being conquered.\textsuperscript{14}

Such people are sub-human, fit only for servitude: care and mercy need not characterise their treatment.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{The Sphere of Influence}

As the Egyptian state settled into the course it was to traverse for the third millennium BCE, Pharaoh began to give conscious expression to the vital interests he was becoming increasingly aware of in the country’s immediate environs. Although endowed by nature with secure and impenetrable borders, as well as food stocks and minerals a-plenty, Egypt found certain key items lacking, especially those demanded by the elite. To acquire them one would be obliged to travel into foreign parts, and hope the natives would voluntarily hand over whatever Pharaoh craved. And since the doctrine of Horus the falcon king assigned him universal sway, Nubians, Libyans and Asiatics ought willingly, as loyal subjects on a par with native Egyptians, to comply with Pharaoh’s wish.\textsuperscript{16}

There came into being, then, the notion of loyalty and compliance born of one’s obligations towards a god on earth. A compliant headman of a town in Canaan could be said to be ‘on the water of Pharaoh’,\textsuperscript{17} a term drawn from

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} K. Sethe, \textit{Ägyptische Lesestücke für akademischen Gebrauch} (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1928), pp. 83–4.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} C. Booth, \textit{The Role of Foreigners in Ancient Egypt} (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005).
  \item \textsuperscript{17} T. Holm-Rasmussen, ‘The Original Meaning of \textit{hr mw}’, \textit{Göttinger Miszellen} 148 (1995), 53–62.
\end{itemize}
the cooperation required in the smooth running of the irrigation system in Egypt. If he acquiesced in handing over what Pharaoh required of him, he would be rewarded. He might even be invited to Egypt, ‘to behold the beauty of Pharaoh’. It is important to note that the Egyptian government in the Old Kingdom had no permanent infrastructure, no resident governors, to ensure the dispatch of the items required. If, however, for whatever reason, the foreign headmen proved dilatory and truculent, Egypt had cost-effective and efficient ways of enforcing its will. A contingent of troops would be dispatched to the town of the reluctant mayor to collect the commodities demanded, and possibly to demolish the settlement as an object lesson to others. The Egyptians brooked no opposition. If the natives would not voluntarily give up what the Egyptians wanted, they would be forced to do so. Prospectors, requisitioning native labour, penetrated distant wadys (a valley, gully, or stream-bed that remains dry except during the rainy season) looking for copper, turquoise and gemstones. In the annals of Amenemhet II (nineteenth century BCE) ten transport ships, packed with troops, range up the Levantine coast and over to Cyprus, taking vast quantities of material back to Egypt.

On issues considered of vital importance to the state, Egyptians were in the habit of conjuring up, and countering, a worst-case scenario. If a chief within Egypt’s sphere of influence persisted in his recalcitrance, and if immediate punishment could not for some reason be resorted to, the state had recourse to the power of magic. On red bowls or terracotta figurines were written the names of chiefs, their territories, wives, families, armies and herds, followed by a precatory subjunctive, willing the annihilation of the aforesaid. Bowls or figurines were then ritually smashed. Although one might have expected a species of tokenism in this pejorative exercise, the attention to comprehensive detail of an onomastic and geographic nature makes the ‘Execration Texts’ of prime historical importance.

21 Redford, Egypt, Canaan and Israel, pp. 80–2.
22 H. Altenmüller, Zwei Annalenfragmente aus dem frühen Mittleren Reich (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 2015).
One item in our putative list of requisitions forced on loyal chiefs, which we often overlook, is manpower, a strange desideratum in the light of the size of the native Egyptian population. And yet the acquisition of foreign labour dominated their thinking to an inordinate degree. Expeditions we might consider designed to promote peaceful trade, clearly turn out to be slave raids, uprooting native settlements, especially in Nubia, and transporting thousands to Egypt. Resistance brought lethal, fanatical reprisals: fields and grain stocks were fired, and captives sometimes impaled. Such violent methods for a time cowed the natives into voluntarily surrendering to their new Egyptian owners, although as time wore on the obvious advantage of working for good rations in Egypt far outweighed the prospect of dying of hunger in the desert as a ‘free man’. Vilified and demonised by the Egyptians in their own native habitat, foreigners forcibly transplanted to Egypt and acclimated to Egyptian ways were accepted and interwoven into Egyptian society. \(^{24}\) Those who came to terms – such as Nhsyw htpw, ‘treaty Nubians’ – were settled in towns with tasks to perform, both civil and military. \(^{25}\) The practice, commonplace in New Kingdom times, of assigning resident foreigners work in the fields or on construction sites had begun already in the Old Kingdom.

**Apotropaic Commemoration**

The extent of the Egyptian sphere of influence, during the time we can speak of one, remained fairly constant. Palestine, the southern Levant, Byblos and the Lebanon encompassed an area Egypt always felt comfortable with. \(^{26}\) In the south, Lower Nubia beyond the 2nd Cataract lay within Egypt’s control and caravans extended her reach. \(^{27}\) To the west, the oases and north African coast lay within her grasp, and even Greece could be counted as an Egyptian possession. \(^{28}\) In the high Old Kingdom, when Egypt enjoyed to the fullest the fruits of her sphere of influence, commemorative and pre-emptive measures against

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non-compliance with Pharaoh’s dictate gave rise to the resuscitation of an old and chastening display, the head-bashing scene. In prominent places along transit corridors or on the external face of temple walls, where all passers-by could see, large tableaux or relief scenes announced what would happen – and had happened? – to those who resisted the will of Pharaoh. The king in regalia strides over the usual sprawling foreign chiefs with weapon raised, about to deal the coup de grâce. The addition of specific names and captured booty from the defeated are added to the scene, removing it from the generic register to historical time. ‘Do not mess with Pharaoh!’ seems the obvious message. He has triumphed before and he can do it again!

Organised Military Force

Egypt, with a substantially larger population than its surrounding communities, could operate so as to effect its will simply on threat of force. Without the need to specialise, the pharaohs had created a masse de manoeuvre which, once called into play, could utterly overwhelm the undersized and unprofessional enemy forces of Palestine and Nubia. Even with rudimentary equipment a pharaoh’s forces were bound to win, simply by brute size.

The earliest manifestation of the power inherent in size is the range of numina attending Horus, the king, known as the smsw-Hr, the ‘Followers of Horus’. In triumphant procession they go before the sovereign, raised aloft on standards. They constitute the raw power – scorpion, lion, falcon, Seth-animal, jackal, bull – of the irresistible force contained within the physical presence of ‘Big-man’. They are present at the coronation of the king and at the sed festival, that thirty-year anniversary of the royal accession. Even when not in use the smsw-Hr standards lean against the royal dais in close proximity to the king. While later, in the formulation of the King-list, the smsw-Hr were included and treated as hypostasised kings of yore, the social setting out of which the concept arose was a real one. The ‘manor lord’, the premier member of the local gentry, is often depicted in tomb art
standing erect in a dignified pose which custom demanded. Look behind him, however, and one will see rows of smsw, ‘followers’, sometimes armed with sticks. The manor lord has aptly been dubbed the ‘padrone’; the smsw are his ‘enforcers’.

With few technical skills required, the Old Kingdom expeditionary force strikes us moderns as basic. Sheer mass was what counted: ‘when His Majesty used force in the matter of the Asiatics who are beyond the sand, His Majesty made an army of many tens of thousands, from all of Upper Egypt, from Elephantine to Atfih and in Lower Egypt in the two administrative districts, in the “Fort” and in the environs of the fortresses’. Then follow five Sudanese tribal districts from which recruits were raised, and the land of Temehu (Libya). Each contingent was commanded by the office holders of the districts in question: mayors, courtiers, provincial headmen, plantation managers, overseers of resident aliens, priests and district accountants. The ease with which the same force could be mustered on five separate occasions for punitive activity in Palestine bespeaks a highly efficient organisation for recruitment. But it was considerations of manpower en masse that dominated the planning, for any purpose for which large numbers were required, civil construction or warfare: the word for ‘army’, msc, was derived from a root meaning simply ‘to march’. As time went on, however, concentration on size did not exclude training for specific tasks, and we begin to hear of a variety of troops: for example hy-troops (meaning unknown), mnfjt (elite troops?). Scribes went along with expeditions to keep records of activity and a tally of booty.

In addition to punishing a recalcitrant foreign community by confiscating its property, resources and people, in the case of strategic opponents Egyptian raids sought to undercut the very economic life of the town. Fields were hacked up and destroyed, food stocks committed to the flames, fortresses demolished, orchards uprooted, houses torched (Urk. I, 103). Survivors were either executed or brought off as prisoners of war (literally, ‘living smitten ones’). Those destined for execution sometimes, but for unknown reasons, were ‘put on the stake’, that is, impaled.

While sieges and investment methods are often depicted in military art, we know little of battlefield tactics. Weapons such as maces, battle-axes and

bows suggest a combination of physical grappling with bombardment at a distance. If later representations are a reliable guide, the foot soldiers may have been arranged in a phalanx of sorts. During most of their history the Egyptians did not have viable siege machinery. Archers peppered the defenders on the walls and sappers attacked the gates. Men protected by ‘blinds’ manipulated long, spear-like probes to dislodge people on the walls; and eventually siege ladders went up. But beyond this, an attacking force could only face the prospect of starving the enemy out.

In anticipation of retaliatory violence perpetrated by foreigners along the frontiers, the Egyptians extended their frontier mentality to the boundaries of the nation. The same massive architecture used to provide camps for workers, menials, soldiers and so on in the period when the state was taking shape, was turned to providing fortresses along transit corridors and strategic entries. In cases such as Nubia and the eastern frontier of the Delta, many miles of wilderness with sparse foreign populations to guard against, made fortress architecture with berms, glacis, moats and towers wholly unnecessary. Such elaborate defences were designed to counter siege towers and battering rams, not weak attempts by Nubian or Canaanite bedu. In fact, the motivation which produced such ‘unnecessary’ monumentality was the same as that which produced the Fourth Dynasty pyramids: conspicuous waste.

Here is what we are capable of; here is our cosmic statement!

State Terrorism and Punishment

At the dawn of Egypt’s existence as a complex society, whoever was in charge had realised the advantage to the state of population size. Manpower meant power. Everyone backs a winner in the hope of future personal aggrandisement, and there is little incentive needed to cluster around the ‘Big-man’. This ‘bandwagon’ effect inevitably produced a population density in the environs of where the leader had settled, characterised by isolation of professional expertise and skills. To keep this new engine of production, that is the state, running effectively required a new-fangled organisation, a civil service, which promoted know-how, cooperation and, if that were not

38 A. Schulman, ‘Siege Warfare in Ancient Egypt’, *Natural History* 73.3 (1964), 13ff.
forthcoming, coercion. A pyramid of interlocking activity, maximising food stocks and guided by the civil service, thus took shape, maintained by threats and intimidation, balanced by rewards.

The success of this first great experiment in nation building at a practical, mundane level gave rise at the theoretical level to a pregnant philosophical concept. Ma’at, a peculiarly Egyptian notion, conveys the composite idea of cosmic order, societal efficiency, justice and stability. Priority in thinking and practice throws whatever is workable and viable into high profile. That which detracts from right dealing, effectiveness and ease of accomplishment represents the antithesis of ma’at. The gods were said to ‘live’ on ma’at; the king offered up ma’at every day in the temples. The absence of ma’at at any given time could not be tolerated, as it threatened the very existence of ordered society. By a fictional conceit the passage from one reign to another was painted in vivid colours as the time when ma’at settled back into its proper place after the chaos and disorder attendant upon the death of the old king.

Be at ease, O entire land (for) good times have come! The Lord has arisen over all lands, and right dealing has settled in place. (There is) a king of Upper and Lower Egypt, possessed of millions of years, with a great kingship like Horus! . . . the son of Re, abler than any (former) king . . . Come and see! Ma’at has subdued evil and wrong-doing has fallen flat . . . the waters rise, they do not dwindle, and the Nile brings prosperity!

Since adherence to ma’at meant the survival of the state, anyone whose actions were disjunctive and uncooperative was criminalised. His actions were considered rebellion against Pharaoh and the gods. Everyone in Egyptian society had an occupational niche and was under obligation to shoulder the responsibilities and tasks of his or her job. Flight from one’s assigned task and place of residence brought pursuit by police and reprisals taken against families in the form of incarceration and hard labour. Malfeasance, unauthorised intervention and corruption by officials could bring 100 lashes and five open wounds. In fact, the threat ‘one hundred lashes’ is found elsewhere in Egyptian law, for example in the case of the

42 A. H. Gardiner, Late Egyptian Miscellanies (Brussels: Fondation Egyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1937), pp. 86–7 (hereafter LEM).
retraction of an oath in court. Government officials found guilty of unauthorised taxation or tax gouging ran the risk of the penalty of mutilation and exile. Although such draconian measures may well have been largely mooted for their deterrent effect, and rarely applied, certainly toponymic details suggest a degree of reality. Misusing temple property and chattels for one’s private use could bring the punishment of impalement: ‘let the law be done to him in throwing him down and impaling him beside the temple from which he took any property or any personnel’. Whether impalement was often the punishment, it was certainly the fate of tomb robbers, and presumably of those found guilty of treason. In general cruel and unusual punishments could be authorised only by the king. Other forms of capital punishment included beheading on a block, a very ancient mode of execution known already in Predynastic times. Throwing to the crocodiles is attested to, both in a court setting and also as a literary motif. Death by fire was reserved for those plotting against the king, or guilty of sedition. The condemned were either bound and thrown into the flames, or they would be thrust into a fiery furnace, built at the palace gate, where all could see.

Violence among the Gods

The recourse to violence, attested to in many aspects of life in ancient Egypt, is rooted in a mindset as old as the state itself. The world of the supernatural provides archetypal violence, prefiguring the actions of the Egyptian community and administration in the twilight zone of mimesis. Whatever the

47 P. Figueras, From Gaza to Pelusium (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2000), pp. 234–44.
state felt justified in doing had been underpinned by a hypostasis in the timeless ‘beyond’.

Egypt and north-east Africa show, as other ancient cultures do not, in their geography and ecology, a classic tension inviting interpretation in terms of combat. On a yearly basis in the flood plain of the Nile and the desert through which it cuts, the wilderness does battle with the sown: the forces of chaos and anti-life contend with fertility and life. The contest can never be won by either side, but that ambivalence opens the door for a productive interpretation in the form of myth.54 The falcon, with ‘variegated plumage’, the ‘lord of the sky’, hovers over the alluvium, enlivening and defending it; while just beyond the flood plain and delta lurks the grotesque Seth-animal, ruddy wild pig(?), champion of chaos, disorder and death.55 As the river reaches its lowest point, the desert seems to encroach upon the fertile land; but as the waters rise weeks later the forces of fertility throw back the invader. Horus and Seth are locked in never-ending combat. Seth is instrumental in the untimely passing of Horus (qua the king), striking him down and hurling his body into the Nile. There the effluxes of his flesh mingle with the waters, imbuing them with fertility. It is this myth that informs the ideology of the new and unprecedented phenomenon of monarchy. The king not only is the falcon, but ineffably he also embodies Seth, the two hostile gods being seen in the person of the monarch in equilibrium.

Throughout the coastal communities of the Levant, from Asia Minor to the Nile Delta, a common myth motif fastens upon the story of monster-sea and the hero-god.56 The former constantly attempts to invade the land and seize the goddess; but his attempts are always thwarted by the hero. Ba’al (the ‘lord’) takes on Yam (the ‘sea’), and the goddess (Anat or Astarte) becomes the prize. The plot is certainly known in the origins discourse of north-east Africa; but here more attention is paid to the hero as a defenceless baby, forced to flee with his mother to the north where he is protected by the divine denizens of the inner marshes. Grown to manhood, he emerges with his young followers from the swamps, confronts Seth and subdues him, taking his rightful place as heir to his murdered father.

The Horus-Seth myth is not only basic to the understanding of the pharaonic monarchy; it also insinuates itself into the discourse whenever Egypt’s role in the cosmos is under discussion.\(^5\)

In the great work, currently dubbed the ‘Triumph of Horus’,\(^5\) Seth and his minions have been reduced to the very embodiment of evil, to be worsted and pushed out of Egypt northwards, into Asia where all badness is at home. There they become one with the ‘Asiatics’, peoples who are up to no good at all times and deserve to be trounced whenever they attempt once more to invade the sacred soil of Egypt. The plot pattern lends itself to the rationalisation of several cardinal events in Egyptian history, including the Exodos.\(^5\)

But the violence characterising the behaviour of Seth sometimes works for good: ‘As for me, I am Seth, the one with great strength among the Ennead (the assembly of gods). I am in the habit of slaying the enemy of the sun on a daily basis at the prow of the barque of millions (the sun-boat) – no other god is able to do it!’\(^6\) The enemy alluded to is the monster serpent Apophis, lurking in the celestial Nile, in wait for the sun. Elsewhere the motif of the hero-god locked in combat with the monster, a creation format in the cultures of western Asia, is used only peripherally in Egypt, often in a myth of inauguration involving a tree (Pyramid Texts 229, 663–4).\(^6\)

The classic example of heavenly violence perpetrated by the gods is known far and wide in the ancient world in the form of a flood story. God tires of his creation for a variety of reasons, and determines to wipe it out. Of course, in Egypt floods are beneficial to society, and no such plot motif would make any sense. There is, however, a story of the destruction of humankind, brought on by conspiracy against the sun-god. Again, refusal to toe the line is construed as rebellion. Becoming privy to the plot, Re decides to annihilate his creation. He summons ‘Eye’, that is the fiery, solar heat personified in the form of a lioness, and sends her down to earth to slay all humanity. The slaughter, however, proves too efficient, and a repentant Re has to stop it. He does so by tricking the lioness into imbibing a particularly potent beverage which renders her drunk and unable to continue her marauding.\(^6\) In spite of the picaresque nature of the treatment, the story is of great antiquity.

\(^5\) Redford, *King-Lists*.
Violence in the Afterlife

The state, as it emerged in the early third millennium BCE, seems clearly committed to a detailed belief in a colourful afterlife. In stark contrast to belief systems in western Asia and south-eastern Europe in which the deceased dwelled in an uninviting, morbid twilight, Egypt conjured up from the beginning a ‘beyond’, which in its minutiae is both attractive and repellent. A clone of the mundane state and complex society, the ‘West’ (the Egyptian term for the realm of the dead) was a replica of life on earth, translated into a mortuary register. The ‘King in Death’, later to appear under the guise of Osiris, presided over an otherworldly court, made up of brother deities, divine courtiers and messengers. As in this life, the court of the next world was intended also for litigation. The spirits of the dead carried on much as they had in life: ploughing their plots, harvesting, fishing, fowling, relaxing by the pool. When wronged, they would take each other to court before the heavenly magistrate(s). In this regard the present life slipped easily into the next: malefactors in this life could be threatened with court in the beyond.

On earth, regular audits were undertaken by the central pharaonic administration, in which farm and plantation managers from all over Egypt were brought to offices in the capital to undergo examination. In the mastabas there are scenes in which police force managers to their knees in the presence of a high-ranking civil servant, and in some cases administer beatings. This kind of investigation was called the ‘Reckoning of the Great Ones’. Translated into the next life the practice becomes ‘the reckoning of crime in the presence of the Eternal Lord’ (the sun-god: Coffin Texts III 314a; IV, 300n; VI, 324g). And thus the final judgement of the dead, as a moral assessment after death, takes shape: ‘the magistrates who judge the (morally) deficient, you know they are not lenient on that day of judging the wretch, that hour of performing duty. It is difficult when the prosecutor is a wise man ... As for him that reaches [the West] without having committed sin, like a god will he exist over there, striding about like the lords of Eternity!’

No one believes the magistrates described will actually find them morally deficient; but the trial motif demands the addition of a description of punishment. On earth the guilty are often subjected to violent punishment, and so they are in the beyond. The concept of the fierce messenger of god who tears

64 Helck, Merikare, p. 31.
the dying from their earthly existence, the βαίνχοος, ‘the soul of darkness’, begins to colour the details of the afterlife. Osiris describes the underworld over which he presides: ‘Look at the way things stand! The land where I am is filled with fierce-eyed messengers who fear neither god nor goddess. I send them out and they bring back the hearts of all those who have committed sin, and they (the sinners) stay here with me!’ (LES 58). The divine messenger, black and strong, develops into Death itself (BM 147): ‘Death, whose name is “Come!”, everyone whom he summons, they go to him with hearts terrified through fear of him, though neither gods nor humankind can see him. Great as well as small are in his power!’ The underworld, apportioned into twelve fortified zones, corresponding to the hours of the night through which the sun must pass, becomes the place of punishment, a veritable hell:65 ‘[God] judges the sinner and puts him into the furnace, (but) the righteous into the West’ (LEM, 2: 15–16). The damned are shown suffering burning in fiery pits, decapitation and sundry other forms of punishment.66

The Violence of Failed States

The Egyptian state about 2200 BCE suffered a shock the nature and course of which are still not clearly understood. Was it interference by forces outside the bounds of the Egyptian heartland? But if so, what foreign elements were powerful enough to take on the land of the pharaohs? Was it a species of systems collapse? But, then, what brought it on? Art and architecture, significant markers both in assessing the economic health of the state, show signs of sudden decline. A loss of revenue and a decline of real wealth cannot be denied. Evidence has long since been accumulating for an environmental crisis which overtook the northern hemisphere and undoubtedly hit Egypt hard. But this has drawn forth howls of dissent in some quarters. Until certain scholars realise that they are in denial, no rational debate can be hoped for.

In the three centuries following the end of the Old Kingdom a type of oral discourse developed, some reflecting a truly oral creation, and some written parlando, which describe a situation of anarchy and violence in the land. Whether it reflects contemporary socio-political conditions is not being debated here; rather, the question these pieces may answer is: how do Egyptians describe the aftermath of the withdrawal of divine blessing and the dissolution of the state? What happens when ma’at is removed from the

66 E. Hornung, Altägyptische Höllevorstellungen (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1968).
social equation? Three texts in particular describe a state thus handicapped: the ‘Admonitions of Ipuwer’,67 the ‘Dialogue of a Man with his Soul’68 and the ‘Prophecy of Neferti’.69 The first describes, inter alia, what results from the removal of policy making and executive branches of government with the power to impose sanctions:

Behold! The councillors of the land are forcibly removed throughout the country, and there is a general expulsion from the royal departments . . . Really! Offices are open, and their accounts are taken away . . . the laws (i.e. in documentary form) of the castle are thrown outside; indeed, they are walked upon in public, and poor men tear them up in the streets! . . . The castle of the prince is a thoroughfare – poor men come and go in the Great Mansion . . . The rich are in mourning, while the poor rejoice; every city says: ’let us drive out the influential from among us!"

The organs of government, formerly held in esteem because they worked, were now condemned and bypassed because they no longer worked. ‘The bosses of the land run away, they cannot govern because of want; every office is not functioning properly.’ The elite, occupying the corridors of power, lose respect through their inability to affect the situation: ‘princes’ offspring are dashed against walls . . . princes’ children are thrown into the streets! . . . the magnates of the land are not reported to’. Neferty describes plague and the onset of civil war:

I give you the land in sickness: what has never (before) happened, has happened. People are taking up weapons of war and the land lives in uproar! Men will make weapons of bronze, and rations will be issued in the bread of blood. Men will laugh with the laughter of sickness, and no one will weep over death! . . . A man sits in his corner, his back <turned> while people slay each other. I give you a son as enemy, a brother as foe, a man slaying his father . . . One will produce hateful things in order to silence the eloquent mouth. A statement is answered with the blow of a stick, and a discourse with ’Kill him’!

Nothing could shake the Egyptians’ belief that their state was god-given and, at the outset, the best that could be structured. If it collapsed, this was the fault of foreigners, a negligent creator or criminals. Violence and the threat of violence, which initially were considered part of an

essential mechanism for creating and sustaining the state, became the concomitants of state dissolution. Humankind now perpetrates acts of violence, not in accordance with justice according to ma’at, but rather as a fundamental violation of it. Such a society, riven by chaos and crime, had no place in the divine cosmos. Ma’at must be brought back: it was a moral duty.

And thus, out of ideological necessity, was born the figure of the Restorer, the saviour-king, sanctioned by the gods. Only he it is that has been selected to put matters right, only he should be trusted. Loyalty and trust are the watchwords. Mindless adherence to prescribed thought is counted as righteousness; independent thinking is deemed dissent and terrorism. There is no middle ground.

Bibliographic Essay


Finally, violence was also a crucial part of Egyptian belief systems and the world of myth. Thus, several works focus on the role of the god Seth, who challenged the order of both the divine and human spheres, including H. Te Velde’s Seth, God of Confusion (Leiden: Brill, 1967), and E. Cruz-Uribe’s ‘Seth’, in Orlin (ed.), Encyclopaedia of Ancient Mediterranean Religions. For an overview of the Egyptian afterlife and violence see E. Hornung, The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).
Violence and the Mutilated Body in Achaemenid Iran

LLOYD LLEWELLYN-JONES

It is well recognised by scholars that in the ancient Greek mind the theme of the revengeful woman was as pervasive as it was persuasive. Fiona McHardy, for instance, has noted that the idea of the foreign or barbarian woman enacting gross acts of vengeance is pretty much routinely presented in Greek literature, and that barbarian women are depicted using specific ‘womanly’ tactics of persuasion, deception and patience in order to ensure that their revenge is both effective and devastating.¹ Robert Rollinger’s recent investigation into human violence in Herodotus has noted that throughout the Histories, in which no fewer than ninety-two acts of violence are to be found, forty-two are perpetrated by Greece’s natural enemies, the Medes and Persians. Of these forty-two incidents, five are enacted by women of the royal house of Persia and of those five, four can be assigned as being specifically vendetta-motivated.² The connection between the barbarian milieu and violence seems to be essential to the Herodotean view of history, but of all barbarian peoples, it is the Persians who stand out as the perpetrators of the acts of particularly violent despotism. And of all the Persian brutalities, those instigated by women tend to be the most violent, motivated as they are by purely the desire for revenge.³

¹ F. McHardy, ‘Women’s Influence on Revenge in Ancient Greece’ in F. McHardy and E. Marshall (eds.), Women’s Influence on Classical Civilization (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 92–114. For examples of barbarian women and vengeance see Gobryas’ daughter – Xen. Cyrop. 5.2.7; Pheretime – Hdt. 4.200; Nitocris – Hdt. 2.100; and Candaules’ wife – Hdt. 1.10.
In this chapter I will consider how Greek authors construct the image of powerful barbarian women and their devotion to the idea of revenge by examining texts which focus on the Persian court. I want to present evidence for the Greek vision of female cruelty, but I want to go further than this by suggesting that what is recorded of Persian royal women are not orientalist fantasies on the part of Greek writers, as might easily be supposed, but accurate reflections of the politicking practices within the royal harem. The accounts reflect genuine Persian (and wider Near Eastern) practices wherein violent punishments were a standard norm of legitimate rulership, even for women.

Royal Women and Female Agency

Greek fixation with the cruelty of Persian royal women might be read as a literary trope, and these stories no doubt served an important moralistic purpose in the Greek-speaking world, but it is crucial to set the Greek tales of harem-based rivalries, intrigues, double-dealings, murders and executions within the context of bone fide Achaemenid dynastic politics (550–330 B.C.E.). Persia was controlled by an absolute ruler—that is not orientalist cliché, it is a fact—and absolute monarchies are open to a particular form of political tension which usually focuses on the royal family and on the noble families which surround the king, and within such institutions the women of the ruling family often rise to positions of political agency not through any formal route to power but by other, less recognised means. Greek authors (some more consciously than others) explore (and exploit) that vital facet of the reality of ancient court life. Michael Fowler and John Marincola have stressed that it is wrong to see Persian royal women completely and solely as literary ‘types’ created by Greek authors, suggesting that many modern scholars have been ‘too critical of Greek depictions of Persian women’.

Drawing comparisons to the influential royal wives and mothers of the Hausa women of dynastic Kano in Nigeria, they support the idea that Achaemenid women had 'considerable political influence . . . at times even influencing the succession'.\(^5\) This view, without doubt, is true.

What we need to acknowledge is that women’s political acumen at (any) court arose from the close access they had to the king through intimate contacts. As Jeroen Dunidam puts it: 'Between the sheets, crown and sceptre lost their spell. And no one could get closer to the royal ear. Wives and mistresses (and for different reasons mothers and sisters) were therefore influential . . . the confidante served as a broker of the king’s [power].'\(^6\)

Why, for instance, does Herodotus (Hdt. 7:3) call Darius I’s wife Atossa ‘all powerful’? Herodotus provides the answer in an earlier scene (Hdt. 3:134) in which the queen, lying in bed next to her husband, persuades the king to launch an expedition against Greece. The story is fictitious, of course (how would a Greek know about the bedroom secrets of monarchs?), but it shows that Herodotus was capable of understanding the ways in which royal women could (and did) influence policy and that pillow-talk could have significant consequences.

While a connection between the barbarian milieu and violence seems to be essential to the Herodotean view of the world of the Persian court, another Greek author, Ctesias of Cnidus, who as a royal physician resided at the court of Artaxerxes II in the opening decades of the fourth century B.C.E, sees things very differently and, given his agenda for recording Persian dynastic history ‘from the inside’, is more than likely to have recorded the real actions of court women.\(^7\) The political machinations of Achaemenid court women are, in fact, reflected in other court chronicles and histories of the same, or adjacent, periods: in the Hebrew Bible, for instance, the Davidic court history’s depiction of Bathsheba, a principal wife of King David of Israel and the mother of King Solomon, shows her to be a powerful guardian of the throne and a skilled game-player in dynastic succession policies.\(^8\) The Neo-Assyrian royal annals record how Zakutu (Naqia) held onto the reins of

\(^5\) M. A. Fowler and J. Marincola, *Herodotus: Histories Book IX* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 292. Atossa manoeuvred her son Xerxes onto Darius’ throne because she had the power and ability to do so, or at least this was how Herodotus (7:3–4) interpreted Xerxes’ relatively smooth accession to kingship.


\(^7\) Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and Robson, *Ctesias*, pp. 84–5.

power and established a sense of concord at an otherwise politically divided and dangerous court as her grandson Assurbanipal ascended the throne.⁹

Leslie Pierce’s important study of harem politics at the Ottoman Turkish court has illuminated a world in which domestic rivalries among the harem women had a direct impact upon Ottoman imperial policy; her work helps cement our understanding of the longue durée of the harem’s existence as the nexus of dynastic power.¹⁰ Across time and space, harem women of countless court societies went head to head with one another to secure their own status (and even their lives) but primarily to solidify the status and ambitions of their sons in a series of amphimetrically propelled clashes and struggles. To facilitate these power plays, revenge killings, torture and violent punishments were commonplace. As we will see, the royal harem of Persia felt the tensions of the disputes as keenly as any other court society, and the women of the Achaemenid court utilised methods of gaining or securing power (for themselves or for their offspring) as ruthlessly as the women of any other royal dynasty.¹¹

Amestris’ Revenge (I): Violence among Xerxes’ Women

Occupying pride of place in Robert Rollinger’s list of acts of violence perpetrated by royal women is Herodotus’ story, which occupies the closing episodes of his History of the Persian Wars (9.109–11). It sees the hubristic King Xerxes, overcome by a passionate sexual desire, making a blatant advance upon the wife of his brother Masistes, and subsequently, after her rejection of him, on Maisistes’ daughter, a young woman named Artaÿnte (simultaneously, therefore, Xerxes’ niece and daughter-in-law, she being married to Xerxes’ son, the Crown Prince Darius). Particularly intense in both narrative and its detail is Herodotus’ interwoven story of Xerxes’ wife

A Woman’s Place is in the House: Royal Women of Judah and Their Involvement in the House of David (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).
Amestris and her bitter struggle with Artaýnte, the rival mistress. The exciting, almost breathless, narrative runs thus:

Amestris, Xerxes’ wife, gave him a long robe of well-woven colours; it was very beautiful and she had created it with her own hands. Very pleased with it, he put it on and, still wearing it, went to visit Artaýnte – who pleased him no less, with the result that he told her to ask for anything she desire as a reward for her favours, and he promised to grant it. Doomed to come to a bad end (with the rest of her family), Artaýnte asked if His Majesty really meant what he said and that she could ask for whatever she wished and Xerxes, never suspecting what her request would be, pledged his word to do so. Thereupon she boldly demanded the robe. Xerxes did all he could to get out of his promise because he was afraid of Amestris, who had already guessed what was going on, and would not, he feared, have all her suspicions confirmed. He offered her cities, unlimited gold, an army of her own (a very Persian gift) – but all to no effect. Nothing would do for her but the robe. So he gave it to her and she, delighted, wore it, and gloried in wearing it. Soon afterwards Amestris discovered that Artaýnte had the robe, but her anger was not directed against her. On the contrary, Amestris thought that the girl’s mother, Masistes’ wife, was the person responsible for all the trouble and therefore she plotted her destruction. Amestris waited for the day when her husband gave his Royal Supper – a once-a-year occasion, held on the king’s birthday. It is the one time of the year when the king anoints his head and bestows gifts on the Persians. When, then, the day of the supper arrived, she asked Xerxes for a present: Masistes’ wife. Fully understanding the reason for her request, Xerxes was horrified, not just at the prospect of handing over his brother’s wife, but also because he knew that she was completely innocent. But Amestris persisted – moreover, the law of the Royal Supper stated that on that day no one should be refused a request. So, at last, and much against his will, Xerxes was forced to consent. Then, having told his wife to do with the woman as she pleased, he sent for his brother . . .

Amestris sent for soldiers from the royal bodyguard and had Masistes’ wife dreadfully mutilated: her breasts, nose, ears, and lips were cut off and thrown to the dogs; then her tongue was torn out and, in this dire state, she was sent home. Masistes, who as yet knew nothing of this, suspected mischief of some sort and quickly returned home; when he saw his wife’s gruesome mutilations, he took immediate council with his sons and they all, with certain other friends, set off for Bactria, with the aim of stirring up rebellion and of bringing great harm to the king.

Hazewindus, When Women Interfere, p. 102 is wrong to call Artaýnte Xerxes’ ‘concubine’, she is clearly his unofficial – and unorthodox – lover; she is the king’s mistress.
This masterful Herodotean novella is probably based on a Persian oral tradition (after all, Herodotus certainly did not provide an eyewitness account) but it must have had a historical background insofar as we know that some kind of dispute between Xerxes and his brother ended in the downfall of Masistes and his family. Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg argued that the tale was based on an indigenous Persian tradition in which Masistes tried to usurp his brother’s throne, and it is certainly true that elements of Herodotus’ account have a special meaning when read in a specifically Iranian context. She is clearly right, given that the story is packed with Persiocentric themes: for instance, Artaýnte’s desire to possess the beautiful garment made by Amestris is best interpreted when we acknowledge that it was the king’s own robe which she cherished. The royal robe was a powerful symbol of legitimate Achaemenid kingship and by demanding this symbolic vestment Artaýnte laid claim to sovereignty, not for herself, of course, for it was impossible in the Persian tradition for a woman to reign in her own name, but for her already powerful family (and it is possible that the name of her father, Masistes, derives from the Old Persian maθišta – ‘the greatest’ – giving an added historical dimension to the Herodotean tale of court intrigue).

In the story, when Amestris hears of Artaýnte’s request she bides her time (for a year, Herodotus says) until the occasion is right for revenge. But then she acts swiftly – and with a bloody and chilling finality. Amestris is intent on securing the succession of her son Darius and she reads Artaýnte’s request for the robe as the treacherous act that it surely is, yet her wrath does not focus on Artaýnte herself (because she is Prince Darius’ wife and therefore the possible mother of a future Achaemenid heir), but on Artaýnte’s (unnamed) mother – Amestris’ equal in dynastic terms.

Ancient Iranians would have understood the details of this grisly story well, for there was a long tradition of treating the bodies of vanquished foes with acts of demonstrative cruelty. Images of a ‘Persian peace’ propagated by the Achaemenid kings on the reliefs at Persepolis belie the fact that as the

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13 E. Bridges, *Imagining Xerxes: Ancient Perspectives on a Persian King* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 70–1, does not acknowledge any Persian tradition sitting behind Herodotus’ story. She suggests that his concentration is on creating the image of Xerxes as ‘the epitome of the decadent playboy prince’, but her analysis of the story of Masistes’ wife and daughter as a ‘chain of domestic mishaps’ certainly underestimates the importance of politically driven violence within the episode.

14 Sancisi-Weerdenburg, ‘Exit Atossa’.

15 On the royal robe and its association with rulership see Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court*, pp. 61–6.
heirs of the great Neo-Assyrian Empire, the Persians readily inherited many kinds of savage punishment techniques documented in Assyrian and later neo-Babylonian chronicles, such as impaling, decapitation, burning, whipping, strangling, stoning, castration, blinding, cutting of a living body in two, cutting off nose, ears, hands, arms, snipping out the tongue, branding, flaying, crucifixion and skinning alive.

When the city of Tela was attacked by Ashurnasirpal II, the king recorded its destruction and the violence which followed thus.

I approached the city of Têla. The city was well fortified; it was surrounded by three walls. The people put their trust in their strong walls and their large number of troops and did not come down to me (i 115). They did not submit to me. In strife and conflict I besieged (and) conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword. I carried off prisoners, possessions, oxen, (and) cattle from them. I burnt many captives from them. I captured many troops alive: from some I cut off their arms (and) hands; from others I cut off their noses, ears, (and) extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living (and) one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city, (ii i) I burnt their adolescent boys and girls. I razed, destroyed, burnt, (and) consumed the city. (A.0.101.1 i 113–ii 1) 16

In his monumental Bisitun Inscription, Darius the Great boasts of how the Median pretender Fravartish ‘was captured and brought to me. I cut off his nose, his ears, and his tongue, and I tore out one eye, and he was kept in fetters at my palace entrance, and all the people beheld him’ (Darius Bisitun Inscription, Column II, § 32). The same fate is reserved for the traitor Cicantakhma the Sagartian (§ 33). The purpose of Darius’ punishment was clearly to inflict maximum pain on the traitors, but also to ensure that the victims remained alive long enough to experience the pain and suffer the aftermath.

Female victims, we can be certain, did not escape lightly. The Hebrew prophecies of Amos record that in revenge for the city holding out against the Assyrians, the deported women of Samaria were speared with fishhooks through their noses and their breasts were mutilated (Amos 4:2–3); the same prophet recalls how the Ammonites cut off the breasts and ripped open the stomachs of pregnant women in the city of Gilead (Amos 1:13). The same act is recorded by Hosea (13:16):

16 A. K. Grayson, Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (to 1135 BC), Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia Assyrian Periods 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
The people of Samaria must bear their guilt . . .
They will fall by the sword;
their little ones will be dashed to the ground,
their pregnant women ripped open.

The image is employed by the chroniclers of 2 Kings (8.11) and, as Mordechai Cogan has demonstrated, it was used in an Assyrian poem, probably dated to the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076 BCE), in which a court poet praises the actions of the victorious king:

He slits the wombs of pregnant women
He blinds the infants
He cuts the throats of their strong ones.

Cogan notes that, ‘Out of the entire catalogue of the horrors of war, [the poet] singled out the attack upon the defenceless women and children; and this in order to impress upon all that the cruellest of punishments awaits those who sin against Assyria’s god’. The military monarchs of the ancient Near East made frequent reference to the captive women they had taken as booty and to the girls put to death, tortured, or sent to Assyria as slaves. The Hebrew prophet Ezekiel tells the story of the woman Oholah who encountered a troop of marauding Assyrian soldiers: ‘They stripped her naked,’ he tells us, ‘took away her sons and daughters and killed her with the sword’ (Eze. 23:10). This violent subjugation to the enemy was immortalised in palace reliefs and one unparalleled scene shows an Assyrian attack on an Arab encampment; as the tents burn, women are corralled together and killed. One detail portrays soldiers in the act of raping and disembowelling a woman.

The punishment Masistes’ wife experienced was consistent with that doled out to other victims in the Near East; the sex of the victim did not act as an

The difference in the story, however, is that the violence against Maisistes’ wife was not the result of the consequences of the brutalities of war, but was perpetrated on the order of the vengeful Amestris. The imperial matriarch turns on a rival dynastic matron, and Amestris puts a halt to Maisistes’ family ambitions in a demonstrably emblematic way: his wife’s breasts – symbolising her motherhood and dynastic fecundity – are mutilated, cut off, and thrown to the dogs.

Since dogs were thought of as dirty scavengers and eaters of refuse and corpses, their presence at the dénouement of Herodotus’ story is particularly telling and can be compared to an episode in the Hebrew Bible where palace dogs are left to eat the corpse of the hated queen Jezebel (2 Kgs 9:36–7):

When they went out to bury her, they found nothing except her skull, her feet and the palms of her hands. They went back and told Jehu, who said, ‘This is the word of the Lord that he spoke through his servant Elijah the Tishbite: On the plot of ground at Jezreel dogs will devour Jezebel’s flesh. Jezebel’s body will be like dung on the ground in the plot at Jezreel, so that no one will be able to say, ‘This is Jezebel’.

The image of scavenger dogs feeding on corpses or mutilated body parts is a feature of ancient Near Eastern prayer and curses. Thus Esarhaddon pleads that ‘the valley be filled by [enemy] bodies and the dogs eat them’, while Ashurbanipal hopes that ‘[enemy] corpses will be eaten by dogs’. An anti-witchcraft ritual envisages the following torment for a deceased individual: ‘May eagle and vulture prey on your corpse, may silence and shivering fall upon you, may dog and bitch tear you apart, may a dog and a bitch tear apart your flesh’. An Akkadian curse reads, ‘may a dog and a bitch tear you apart, may a dog and a bitch tear your flesh apart’. In a classic of Egyptian literature, The Tale of the Two Brothers, the wife of the elder brother is killed and then thrown to the dogs.

What makes Amestris’ act specifically an act of revenge? After all, Herodotus does not employ any specific revenge terminology (Greek timôria) within his text; he has no need to, perhaps, given that the revenge pattern in the story is plain to see. Robert Nozick’s theory of ‘revenge’ certainly helps to explain the Herodotean narrative. Nozick suggests that revenge may be enacted to serve an injury, harm or slight although it need not be perpetrated in order to right a wrong. Revenge sets no limit to what is inflicted and is

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usually personal. Most importantly, it involves a particular emotive tone: pleasure is to be had in the suffering of another. Often the individual who thirsts after revenge will want to experience (to see, or to be present at) the situation in which the victim suffers.22

The concept of revenge can be problematic, however, because of the way it intersects with notions of justice, retribution and punishment – terms which in themselves have connotations of impersonality, freedom from guilt and detachment on the part of the inflictor, especially when exacted on behalf of an institution or the state (and Amestris’ vendetta against Masistes’ wife can be said to serve the state in that it is ultimately aimed at securing the continuity of Xerxes’ reign and the succession of Prince Darius). Strictly speaking, the drive for revenge stems from the receipt of an unprovoked injury where instant retaliation is impossible, but in any act of aggression it is often difficult to be certain that it is not part of a cycle of blow and counter-blow where the primal provocation has been lost and where incidents more serious than the immediate pretext have occurred. Here, therefore, Amestris bides her time, waiting patiently for Xerxes’ birthday feast, and throughout this period her sense of resentment simmers and boils until she judges the time is ripe for her plan to be put into action on an occasion when she knows that her request for Masistes’ wife cannot be refused. The result of this lingering anticipation is a swift act of revenge, horrific in its extreme.

Amestris’ revenge thereby follows Nozick’s classification: the queen does not suffer a personal wrong by the actions of either Maisistes’ wife or daughter, but her honour and standing at court is slighted by Artaýnte’s ambition. Amestris acts for herself and her revenge has no limits. The king does not intervene in the punishment of Masistes’ wife, although, man to man, he attempts to persuade his brother to repudiate his spouse and thereby save his honour and divert further trouble.

But does Amestris’ revenge fulfil Nozick’s suggestion that the avenger wants to experience the suffering of the victim? Herodotus does not say as much, but he leaves us with enough implications to suggest that Amestris at least had the possibility of witnessing the act. She uses as her instruments of torture Xerxes’ own bodyguards, who, hypothetically, would be expected to remain close to the king’s person within the inner court and not be sent away from him on any kind of mission. So a location for the punishment of Maisistes’ wife is suggested within the royal palace, and this is later confirmed by Herodotus, who notes that after the mutilation Maisistes’ wife was ‘sent

home’. It is within the confines of his own house that Masistes therefore comes across the bloody spectacle of his wife’s disfigurement. We are to presume therefore that Masistes’ wife met her fate in the presence of her rival, Amestris.

Amestris’ Revenge (II): Avenging Sons and Daughters

Amestris also plays a major role in Ctesias’ court history of the reign of Xerxes, but she becomes especially significant in her role as the mother of Artaxerxes I. In his reign she is discovered to be involved in imperial policy as she manoeuvres events from within the harem thanks to her close relationship with her son. Ctesias recalls, for instance, that after Inarus of Lybia failed to free Egypt from Persian rule, the rebel leader and many Greek mercenaries who had aided him were brought to Persia as prisoners, but were granted amnesty and safety by the king and by his uncle, Megabyzus. But Amestris was embittered because another of her sons, Achaemenides, had died in battle against Inarus: ‘she was vexed because she had not had vengeance on Inarus and the Greeks’. Ctesias depicts her pleading with both Artaxerxes and Megabyzus to be granted the head of the rebel traitor but her appeals fell on deaf ears. However, says Ctesias, ‘because she kept bothering her son about it, she got her way’. It took Amestris five years to get her request granted and her wait, it seems, only served to increase her ardour for revenge. Consequently her treatment of the prisoners was bloodthirsty and severe: ‘She impaled [Inarus] on three stakes; and she beheaded as many Greeks as she was able to get hold of – fifty in all’ (Ctesias, Fragment 14, § 39).

Ctesias emphatically states that Amestris carried out this action in revenge for the death of her son, and employs the term timôrēsato (from timoria) to make this clear, since the word has connotations of a political or legal action. From a Greek perspective, when a person was killed he was thought to have suffered a wrong which therefore required timoria; it was the duty of his family to obtain it for him.23 But this notion did not apply when the deceased was killed in battle. Therefore Amestris’ personal vendetta towards the killers of her son should be regarded as unjust, given that Achaemenides died in battle. This explains why Artaxerxes and Megabyzus take no action to revenge Achaemenes’ death, since it occurred under the rules of war. It is

only Amestris’ five-year-long harassment campaign which resulted in revenge and the restoration of what she perceived to be family honour. Grief was a powerful catalyst for retribution.24

Ctesias relates another revenge story in which Amestris figures prominently, although this time in a very different context.

When [princess] Amytis was ill – albeit only mildly and not seriously – Apollonides, the doctor from Cos, who was in love with her, told her that she would recover her health if she consorted with men because she had a disease of the womb. When his plan succeeded and he started sleeping with her, the woman began to waste away and he put an end to their sexual relations. So since she was dying she told her mother [Amestris] to take revenge on Apollonides. And her mother told King Artaxerxes everything: how Apollonides had been sleeping with her, how he then stopped after he had abused her and how her daughter had asked her to take revenge on him. And he let her mother deal with the situation herself. And she took Apollonides, bound him and punished him for two months. She then buried him alive and at this time Amytis died too. (Fragment 14, § 44)

Amestris’ daughter, Princess Amytis, tricked into a sexual relationship by Apollonides of Cos, begins to waste away with illness and, as she lays on her deathbed, she tells her mother to take revenge – amunesthai – on the doctor. This word has connotations of defending honour (personal honour or family honour) and of retaliation. It is this which drives Amestris to imprison, torture (over a two-month period) and execute the doctor; his burial alive may have been intended as a sacrifice to her dead daughter (we should remember, after all, that according to Herodotus (7.114), the aged Amestris was responsible for the sacrifice of fourteen children to the gods of the underworld before her own death).

The punishment of burial alive is encountered several times in the sources. It is possible that Apollonides suffered a particularly hideous end known as the ‘Trough’ or the ‘Boats’:

Taking two troughs [or boats] that are made to fit together, they laid [the victim] on his back inside one of them. Then they fit the other on top so the man’s head, hands, and feet stuck out while it covered the rest of his body. They gave him food, pricking his eyes to force him when he resisted. They

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24 Later in the dynasty’s history, Parysatis, the mother of Artaxerxes II and Cyrus the Younger, systematically hunted down the individuals connected to the death of Cyrus. She routinely tortured and executed them in revenge for her son’s death, despite the fact that he too died in battle. See Ctesias, Fragment 17, § 66; L. Llewellyn-Jones and J. Robson, Ctesias’ History of Persia: Tales of the Orient (London: Routledge, 2009).
also poured milk and honey into his mouth and they poured it over his face. Then they turned his eyes continually to the sun and a multitude of flies settled down, covering his face. Meanwhile, inside, the man did what it is necessary for people to do when they have drunk and eaten. Worms and maggots boiled up from the decay and putrefaction of his excrement, and these ate away his body, boring into the interior. (Plut. Art. 16.2–4)

This bizarre, lingering, death, taking over two weeks to complete, can be explained through the ancient Zoroastrian notion of purity and impurity – in this case, the contrast between the purity of the milk and the revulsion of the excrement, a substance which was, according to one Zoroastrian text, a product of demons: ‘The more one’s body is inhabited by demons, the more filth there is.’ Therefore, as Bruce Lincoln perceptively interprets the torture, ‘[the victim’s] reeking, vermin-laden excrement thus bore graphic witness to the corruption (moral and physical) of his body and the demons resident therein, chief of them all, the Lie. What was squeezed from his body . . . thus provided the means to convict him on all charges.’

Flaying, Blinding and Impaling: Royal Women and Court Eunuchs

In spite of these scenes of high drama, it is important to realise that the powerful court women of Herodotus and Ctesias do not dominate men in order to deceive them, nor do they subdue them for their own access to power. In fact, in the Greek sources no royal woman is ever recorded conspiring to treason but instead they work within the confines of the court system to vigilantly protect the dynastic bloodline. So it was, for instance, that Parysatis became implicated in the death of the pretender Sogdianus, who threatened Darius II’s accession to the throne (Ctesias, Fragment 15, § 50), and any treasonable activities from court eunuchs could lead to their torture or death – which was always ordered at the express command of the king’s women (the king rarely doled out their fates).

Castrati could achieve positions of high authority at the Persian court. Ctesias (probably using authentic Iranian sources for his history) begins his examination of each successive Great King’s reign with a kind of litany that

lists the key eunuchs at court and implies that their names and deeds were remembered for generations after their deaths alongside the monarchs they served.

If we follow the fourth-century Greek sources then we are alerted to the preconception that from the end of the reign of Xerxes, eunuchs began to acquire increasing power at court and that they routinely entered into plots and even became involved in regicide. But it is noticeable in the sources that royal women often take responsibility for curbing the power of eunuchs or for putting an end to their careers completely. Artoxares the Paphlagonian ‘king-maker’, the most powerful of Darius II’s eunuchs, for instance, met his end on the direct orders of Queen Parysatis (Ctesias, Fragment 15, § 54) and similarly the powerful eunuch Petasakes was blinded, flayed alive and crucified on the express commands of Amytis, the wife of Cyrus the Great (Fragment 9, § 6). The ability to take the life of powerful court eunuchs demonstrates the personal and political clout of some Achaemenid queens.

In Ctesias’ *Persica* the gouging out of eyes is not infrequently cited as the punishment for treason: the rebellious eunuch Petisacas, for instance, has his eyes gouged out prior to his crucifixion (Fragment 9, § 6; Fragment 9a) and Ctesias recounts the cruel practice of pricking the eyeballs of tortured prisoners (Fragment 26, § 4 = Plut. *Art.* 14–17); Xenophon too recalls that, as he marched through the Persian Empire, he often saw along the roads people who had their lost eyes because of some crime against the Great King’s law (*An.* 1.9.11–12).

The Greek authors are correct to identify this particular form of punishment, for there is good evidence for this practice of blinding rebellious traitors from Persian sources too. In fact, successive Near Eastern monarchs regarded blindness as the lowest type of degradation that could be inflicted upon an individual, and the gouging out of the eyes of an enemy prisoner was a form of national retribution in warfare. Assyrian policy promoted the blinding or partial blinding of vassal kings, together with their troops, who had broken treaties. Thus, a text by Ashurnasirpal II recounts: ‘I captured many troops alive: I cut off some of their arms and hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears and extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops’.27 From the Hebrew Bible, too, there is evidence for the routine practice of destroying the sight of enemies: the Philistines famously bored out the eyes of Samson (Judg. 16:21), King Nebuchadnezzar blinded the captive Hebrew monarch Zedekiah (2 Kgs 25:7) and Nahash the Ammonite demanded as

27 A.D.I01.1 i 113-ii 1.
a condition of surrender that he should thrust out the right eye of every man of Jabesh-Gilead as a reproach to his Israelite enemies (2 Sam. 9:2). Of particular interest is the aforementioned Bisitun Inscription in which Darius reports that the mutilated and blinded rebellious prisoners were placed on public display. This was a standard practice, since the public display of rebels – either as mutilated corpses or as living prisoners still awaiting the final torture – signified the serious nature of rebellion and acted as a warning to other subject peoples.

It is clear that the cases of mutilation are built around the shifting discourse of power and status. Power, in fact, lies at the heart of mutilation’s efficacy (as we have seen in the case of Maisistes’ wife). The mutilation of eunuchs at the hands of royal women served to shame the victim and his community and it did this in two ways: by ensuring a change of status in the victim, and by transferring him to an increased state of ‘blemishment’. After all, castrati were already imperfect individuals and eunuchs were seen as a sub-status group, a third sex or even animalistic in nature. The blinding of eunuchs signalled an increase in the subject status of the victim and/or his community. When, on the orders of Parysatis, the braggart eunuch Mithridates of Caria was deprived of his eyes, a more exquisite form of punishment was doled out in order to kill him: molten lead was poured into his ears (Ctesias, Fragment 26, § 7). This punishment has its origins perhaps in ancient Zoroastrian practice, since a series of texts point to the use of molten lead in judicial ordeals to determine a person’s guilt or innocence.28

Some eunuchs, despite loyally obeying royal commands, also become the victims of torture and death. Thus, when the eunuch Bagapates was sent by Artaxerxes II to decapitate the corpse of his younger, traitorous, brother, Cyrus, after his defeat on the battlefield, the Queen Mother, Parysatis, flew into a rage and conspired to have the eunuch killed because Prince Cyrus had been her favourite son. Ctesias (Fragment 44a) recounts the story: ‘[Bagapates] at the order of the king cut the head from Cyrus [the Younger’s] body . . . his mother played dice with the king and on winning [she] took Bagapates according to an agreement . . . he was flayed alive by Parysatis’. The same story is expanded by Plutarch (Vit. Artax. 17), who renames the eunuch Mastabates:

The king’s eunuch, who had cut off the head and hand of Cyrus, remained alive as a mark of Parysatis’s vengeance. But he was so circumspect that he gave no advantage against him, so she framed a trap for him. She was a very

clever woman in other ways and was an excellent player of dice, and, before the war, had often played dice with the king. After the war, she also readily joined in all games with him, played at dice with him, was his confidant in love matters . . . And so once when Artaxerxes was at leisure, and inclined to divert himself, she challenged him to play dice with her for a thousand darics, and let him win on purpose . . . She pressed him to begin a new game for a eunuch, to which he consented. But first they agreed that each of them might except five of their most trusty eunuchs, and that out of the rest of them the loser should yield up any one of them the winner might choose. Upon these conditions they played . . . When she had got the game, she demanded Mastabates, who was not in the number of the five expected. Before the king could suspect anything, having delivered [the eunuch] to his tormentors, she ordered them to flay him alive, to put his body on three stakes, and to stretch his skin over the stakes.

Sancisi-Weerdenburg has seen this grotesque tale as having its origins in Indian epic tradition, where human sacrificial victims are selected by the throw of a dice, but the story stresses the point that the position of the eunuch was maintained purely on the goodwill of the king and his women.29 The story of Mastabates/Bagapates illustrates that the petty squabbles and wrangles within the royal family played out in the royal harem could have wider, and often cruel, consequences. When Artaxerxes II learned that his mother had executed his favourite eunuch, he became angry and threatened Parysatis with exile, but according to Plutarch, ‘she with . . . laughter told him, “You are a comfortable and happy man indeed, if you are so much disturbed for the sake of an old and rascally eunuch.”’ Plutarch continues with his tale, however, and points out that Mastabates, even after death, continued to be the cause of domestic discontent: ‘[Artaxerxes’ wife] Stateira opposed [Parysatis] . . . and was angry, for against all law and humanity, she had sacrificed to Cyrus’s memory the king’s faithful friend and eunuch’.

Poison, Pain and Death

Ctesias makes it clear that an intense rivalry existed between two queens at Artaxerxes II’s court – his mother Parysatis and his wife Stateira – and the hostility was fuelled by each woman’s desire to hold the place of honour in Artaxerxes II’s affections, or at least to influence his decisions. Parysatis detested Stateira ‘because she wished to have no one as powerful as herself’ (Plut. Vit. Artax. 17.4) and Ctesias (Fragment 15, § 56) relates the injuries that

29 Sancisi-Weerdenburg, ‘Exit Atossa’.
the royal family had inflicted upon Stateira’s natal family, all of whom had been executed by Darius II for treason. As for Stateira, her influence as a genuine power at court can be recognised by the fact that the Egyptian pharaoh sent as a ‘diplomatic gift’ a beautiful young courtesan named Timosa to be her slave (Ath. 13.609). Being the mother of three of the king’s sons afforded Stateira even greater prestige at court and she influenced Artaxerxes noticeably so that the king often gave in to the repeated importuning of his wife and it was at her behest that Clearchus of Sparta was executed. This brought Stateira into direct conflict with Parysatis, who championed Clearchus’ position at court (Ctesias, Fragment 29b/Deinon, Fragment 15b = Plut. Vit. Artax. 19):

And so Parysatis, who had felt hatred and jealousy towards Stateira from the very beginning . . . She had a trusted servant called Gigis who held great influence with her . . . she helped in the poisoning. After their former suspicion of each other and their differences, although they had begun to frequent the same places again and to dine together, their mutual fear and caution nevertheless led them to eat the same food as each other served on the same dishes.

The Persians have a small bird, every part of which can be eaten since it is entirely full of fat . . . Ctesias says that Parysatis cut a bird of this kind in two with a small knife smeared with poison on one side, thus wiping the poison off on just one part of the bird. And she put the undefiled, clean part in her mouth and ate it, but gave the poisoned half to Stateira . . .

And so this woman died in convulsions and in considerable agony. And she was herself conscious of the evil that had befallen her and made her suspicions about his mother known to the King, who was aware of his mother’s brutal nature and implacability.

Arguably, the story of Stateira’s poisoning is too complex to be made up (see also Ctesias, Fragment 27, § 70), and, after all, poisonings were common at the Persian court – Xenophon (Cyr. 8.8.14) openly states that courtiers regularly died in court intrigues at the hands of skilled poisoners, and Parysatis certainly had a reputation for being a crafty exponent of this most deadly of courtly arts (Ctesias, Fragment 16, § 61). So it is significant that we know that the office of royal food taster functioned prominently at the Persian court. The royal cupbearer was also a prestigious office held by only the monarch’s most trusted courtiers – like Nehemiah, who performed that duty for Artaxerxes I (Neh. 1:11), or the son of the high-ranking Prexaspes, who served at Cambyses’ court (Hdt. 3. 34) – for the cupbearer was charged with managing all the court’s wine pourers and tasters although he alone
poured the king’s wine into his egg-shaped cup and tasted the monarch’s drink to check that it was poison-free. Fear of poison might be a reason the Great King drank a wine unique to him – the Syrian Chalybonian wine (Ath. 2.28d) – and water from Susa contained in special pots. Ctesias also reports that the Great King and his mother not only had exclusive access to a special Indian poison kept within the palace for the purpose of causing a swift death for its victims, but that they also hoarded precious antidotes against even the deadliest poisons (Ctesias, Fragment 45m = Ael. NA 4.41). There was even a specific death sentence reserved for individuals charged with poisoning: ‘there is a broad stone on which they place the poisoners’ heads and with another stone they pound and crush until their face and head are mashed to a pulp’ (Ctesias, Fragment 29b, § 9). The existence of this torture implies that the threat of poison was taken seriously.

Conclusion

On the surface of things, we can identify two strands to the way in which Achaemenid royal women utilised their agency to gain revenge: one was to satisfy a personal slight, the other to meet a political affront – although of course these two characteristics were often inherently intertwined. However, a third reason can be suggested for why some royal women were drawn to murder or mutilation: simple jealousy and a clash of personalities could also overwhelm dynastic politics. Harem politicking at the Achaemenid court was such that intense domestic rivalries among the royal women had a direct impact upon imperial policy as wives and mothers went head to head with one another out of jealously over rank and status, or to secure their own status, or, predominantly, to solidify the status of their sons. As such, revenge killings, punishments and mutilations were commonplace.

The works of Herodotus and Ctesias may contain literary clichés that reflect the misogynistic tone of Greek literature in which powerful women were perceived as a threat to the political world of men. But there is truth in their accounts of harem politics if we read these stories in the light of what Josef Wiesehöfer has recognised as ‘a society of tribal origins [where] political marriages contracted in order to ensure loyalty were particularly important, especially since the question of the succession to the throne in the polygamous Persian royal house was liable to assume vital significance’.30 Revenge

murders and vendetta maiming must be seen as significant and bona fide instruments in the politicking of absolute monarchies, especially in the dynastic power plays of the harem.

I am disposed to take seriously stories of the irrational caprice and wanton cruelty of rulers. The ancient Persian court will have been subject to the same kind of pressures and insecurities that have afflicted the courts of absolute rulers down to the time of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi – and beyond. Revenge torture and vendetta killings must be seen as a significant and bona fide instrument in the politicking of absolute monarchies, especially in the dynastic politics among the women of inner court.

Bibliographic Essay


An investigation into ancient queenship and the role of royal women in the courts of the ancient Near East quickly reveals the opportunities taken by palace women to secure power and position. See, for instance, Hennie J. Marsman, Women in Ugarit and Israel (Leiden: Brill, 2003) and Elna Solvang, A Woman’s Place is in the House. Royal Women of Judah and their Involvement in the House of David (London: Bloomsbury, 2003). Sarah Melville’s The Role of Naqiya/Zakutu in Sargonid Politics (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1999) investigates the role of the king’s mother in Assyrian society. On royal women and succession issues see especially the following: Ronald de Vaux, Ancient


Violence and the Mutilated Body in Achaemenid Iran
'Knocking Her Teeth out with a Stone':
Violence against Women in Ancient Greece

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones

'There is no point trying to make the Greeks nice', one scholar has recently stated.¹ A small Attic red-figure chous (wine jug) (Figure 18.1) supports that stance. It gives interesting access to the difficult and often disturbing subject of domestic violence in ancient Greek society – unsurprisingly, a long-neglected area of research.² The jug depicts a cross section of a building where a solid door demarcates the inside–outside/female–male space. In the outdoors, a naked man lifts up his staff and beats it against the door, ignoring the doorknocker. His déshabille, the garland he wears on his head, and the musical instrument he holds all suggest he has recently left a party. He is drunk. His belligerent banging on the door reminds us of a line from Aristophanes’ Wasps (1254–5): ‘from wine come broken doors, beatings, [and] throwing stones’. Inside the female/domestic space, a woman approaches the door from the other side while holding an oil lamp (thereby confirming that the scene occurs in the hours of darkness) and her body language suggests timidity, fear and clear apprehension.

Who are the protagonists of the scene? The master of the oikos (‘house’, ‘household’, ‘family’) for sure, and whom? His slave? His wife? His daughter? How do we feel when we view this image? Disturbed, challenged or

affronted? Amused? That may well have been the intention of the artist, for after all, the image is painted on a small wine jug, the kind of pot used in all-male drinking parties. We cannot be certain of the scenario, but I tend to think it depicts a drunken husband coming home from a lively party to find the door bolted; he takes out his frustration by raising a hullabaloo. The woman (whomever she is) approaches with palpable unease because she knows that when she unlocks the bolt the likelihood is that she will be on the receiving end of that walking stick too.

The image on the chous is provoking in many ways. If this is indeed a humorous image, then how can we justify it? It might be regarded as ‘a

reversal of the modern comic cliché of the drunk sneaking home in fear of reprisals. But how did the ancients justify it? Did they even attempt to do so? The image of the drunk at the door is an amusing but matter-of-fact representation of domestic violence. It hints at an aggressive strain within Greek society and suggests that men could be aggressive and that women might suffer as a consequence of that aggression. But is it evidence for what we can term ‘domestic abuse’?

Machismo and Violence: Athens and beyond

In a 1998 article Nick Fisher explored the nature of overt masculine aggression in Athenian society; he showed ancient Athens to have been a violent city, suffering from the strains of a machismo ideology. In fact, to get this reading Fisher utilised David Gilmore’s anthropological model of violence, which focused on Andalusian society and adjacent Mediterranean communities, for defining what constitutes a masculine culture. It was noted by Gilmore that for the creation of a machismo culture, certain elements are fundamentally necessary: there must be, for instance, a clear view of the differences between male and female natures and abilities. Men in ‘machismo societies’ are under constant pressure to perform adequately, and therefore publicly, as fathers (especially of worthy sons) and as husbands who provide for their wives and guard them vigilantly. To do this, they need to ‘play’ the ‘role’ of the macho male. Especially important in this regard is their ability to play sexually dominant roles within society and to rigorously avoid any slur of effeminacy. This role-playing scenario is further endorsed by the need for men to engage in competitions of masculinity as well as elaborate rites of passage.

Furthermore, macho men are obliged both to maintain an independence of occupation and to sustain the position of the close family group. They must display continual pride in honour and, most importantly, respond adequately to insults directed against their masculine image, against their family and, especially, against the reputations of their female relatives. By extension, this vigilance over personal and familial honour requires the

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4 Keuls, Reign of the Phallus, p. 67.
display of masculine virility in public acts, including bawling and fighting and, sometimes, killing.

Fisher explored each of the categories that Gilmore highlighted and carefully utilised them to show how Athenian males responded to the same social pressures and requirements. Athens, he stated, was a 'seriously violent society . . . Despite the persistence of a strong ideological commitment that citizens should prove their manhood, maintain their honour and avoid shame . . . much low-level fighting occurred'.

Fisher ascertained that 'it should be emphasised that casual violence against dependents and slaves, and the beating of children, were all likely to have been common'. While this in itself is uncontroversial, Fisher went further: 'Rather less is heard explicitly of wife beating as a regular practice but it seems unlikely that it did not occur pretty routinely.' This is a bold statement, and Fisher follows it up with yet another: 'There seems less evidence, not surprisingly, for sexual abuse within the family, in contrast to the sexual abuse of young slaves; in part the ready availability of such sex-objects may have diminished the levels of abuse of free children, but this is surely unlikely to have made, for example, father–daughter abuse a fairly infrequent problem.' These ideas are thought-provoking and, although it was beyond his remit to locate the evidence, Fisher nevertheless compels us to acknowledge that some of the most repellent aspects of human nature were daily realities in the lives of the Greeks, spilling out onto the streets or permeating the rooms of the oikos.

However, in a stimulating article of 2003, Danielle Allen has argued that violence within Athens arose from the concept of anger as a necessity: law court oratory prized anger as an admirable state of mind since 'hot-blooded anger' contributed to justice and good politics. Of course, a political order

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8 Robert Garland’s work on this remains the standard; see his The Greek Way of Life (London: Duckworth, 1990), pp. 127–33, but much remains to be done. See also Mark Golden, ‘Childhood in Ancient Greece’, in J. Neils and J. Oakley (eds.), Coming of Age in Ancient Greece (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 12–29. In fact scholars are content to use neutral terms when assessing the impact of violence, sexual or other, on Greek children: they are punished, chastised and corrected, but not, it seems abused. In this Fisher, ‘Violence, Masculinity’, p. 94, n. 32 bucks the trend.
10 Fisher, ‘Violence, Masculinity’, p. 94, n. 32. For the violent sexual abuse of a slave see Lys. 1.12.
which requires and relies on anger and, by extension, violence, runs many
risks, and therefore the scope of anger, Allen argues, was limited and
regulated. Anger was not for the home, nor was it an emotion appropriate
to women.

Does this mean that the violence identified by Fisher as a central facet of
Athenian society was not extended into the family unit or did not affect
women? I will argue in this chapter, given the evidence contained in the
sources, that it is difficult to accept Allen’s supposition that anger and
violence were ideally restricted to a public arena. Male violence operating
around the adjuncts of honour and shame clearly entered into domestic life,
as I will demonstrate.

Social Convention, Conformity and Violence

The violent realities of Greek life are supported by scholarship on the
honour–shame nexus in Hellenic society, particularly as it relates to female
members of the oikos. Attitudes towards female honour and shame,
reflected in, for instance, strict and codified veiling practices, are therefore
an integral part of the ancient Greek social order. Womanly feelings of
shame, and the subsequent acts of veiling, adhered to unwritten prescriptions
and rules of behaviour that transcend any legal codes: custom, after all, is a
weave that helps create and strengthen the fabric of social order; it is stronger
than the law which it frequently exceeds and surpasses, and people who
fervently adhere to social convention often choose to ignore the limits of
the law.

Ancient Greek judge-made laws were very important and custom may
have played only a minor role as a legitimate source of law, but this does not
rule out the possibility that social convention and even ‘family law’, or what
we can term ‘oikos traditions,’ occasionally bypassed the formal city laws in
what has been termed by David Cohen ‘extra-legal forms of sanctions and
controls’. It is known, for example, that in Athens adulterous women were

12 Fisher, ‘Violence, Masculinity’ has shown that violent situations born out of anger
were far more volatile than Allen, ‘Angry Bees’ suggests.
13 Douglas Cairns, Aidos: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek
Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Douglas Cairns, ‘The Meaning of the
Veil in Ancient Greek Culture’, in L. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), Women’s Dress in the Ancient
Greek World (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002), pp. 73–94; Llewellyn-Jones, Aphrodite’s Tortoise.
14 David Cohen, Law, Sexuality and Society: The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens
severely dealt with by the law: an adulteress was to be divorced from her husband and ostracised from public life (that is to say, she was deprived of her religious duties because of her self-imposed pollution), and could be beaten by anyone (any man, probably) who took it upon himself to perform the deed.\textsuperscript{15} The severity of the punishment was intended to instil a sense of fear within women and encourage them to be chaste,\textsuperscript{16} although it is interesting to note that some men preferred not to make public the sexual scandal of their private lives, perhaps, it has been suggested, out of a desire for financial gain, or love for their wives, or to preserve their and their family’s honour.\textsuperscript{17} Nonetheless, as Cohen notes, ‘in any society with arranged marriages, restricted courtship, and a double standard, adultery is a likely outlet for the emotional and social frustrations which such arrangements often produce.’\textsuperscript{18} Therefore, as has been recognised, both an informal method of social control and a particular kind of legislation were required to keep the threat of adultery in check. Yet while punishments for adulterers have been widely discussed by scholars,\textsuperscript{19} it has only occasionally been proposed that male members of a household might take the law into their own hands and punish – physically – a transgressing female according to a family-based set of nomoi which operated outwith the laws of the polis. Given that a heightened awareness of family honour is a central tenet of macho society, as Fisher has shown, we may assume a strict policing of the behaviour of oikos members: transgressive family members, especially any females, considered to have compromised the wider community’s view of family honour were likely to be punished by the most authoritative members of the oikos, particularly the eldest male on whose shoulders the family reputation rested.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[15] Dem. 59.87; Aesch. 1.183–4; see Cohen, Law, Sexuality, p. 99. Plut. Vit. Sol. 23.2 suggests that adulterous girls could be sold into slavery by their fathers.
\item[17] See e.g. Aeschin. In Tim. 107; Arist. Rh. 1373a35.\textsuperscript{18} Cohen, Law, Sexuality, p. 169.
\end{footnotes}
The Greek fixation with careful guardianship of the chastity of wives and daughters has been well explored, but did the ideology of women as the inferior, volatile sex invoke male violence to keep them under guard and under control? A recent Jordanian newspaper column (male-authored, of course) has propounded the familiar Arab (but not Koranic) nomos that ‘It is permissible to beat a woman if she disobeys her husband’s instructions. Beating does not hurt a woman’s dignity. That is impossible, because woman is born without dignity.’ Do we find the endorsement of a similar code of violence towards women expounded in the Greek sources? In today’s West there is broad social disapproval of both wife beating and wife battering (although alarming figures highlight its routineness). In some non-Western, or in what are often termed ‘traditional’, societies, however, the picture can be different. Violence against women is not always condemned by society and can, in fact, be championed as an expression of ‘patriarchal values’. In some ‘traditional’ societies, community values positively sanction the use of violence in the domestic setting, and aggressive behaviour and violence are actually used as a ‘problem-solving’ technique within families. When this ideology is connected with issues of personal and familial honour and shame, then the scope for violence is widened; ‘what people will say’ about the conduct of a family’s womenfolk has the potential for a man to ‘lose face’ and therefore he acts with violence out of both an aggressive pursuit of egocentric self-interest and fear that inaction will be perceived as weakness and engender more shame.

A series of penetrating studies of ‘traditional’ patriarchal communities in rural Iran, Bangladesh and northern India have revealed those societies to be highly violent cultures (which can be modelled, in fact, along the lines of Gilmore’s Andalusian or Fisher’s Athenian communities). In

21 Cited in Llewellyn-Jones, Aphrodite’s Tortoise, p. 264.
these communities there are high levels of wife beating and battery which accompany an extreme general use of violence and warfare within the paralleled masculine zone of society. There is no community intervention in violence against wives, and definitions of masculinity positively promote aggressive behaviour and dominance over women. Moreover, a number of socio-cultural factors make a wife subservient to her husband. Young women are carefully guarded and can be segregated or secluded from the rest of society depending on the cultural norms of the group (often they are compelled to stay at home as much as possible under the close watch of female guardians). They tend to be married off at a very young age and then subbed as new wives. Women are economically and socially dependent on their fathers, brothers or husbands, and the failure to control a wife is tantamount to a loss of face for the husband and is seen as shameful for the whole family.

Many, if not all, of the issues identified by contemporary social anthropologists for classifying the subservient role of women within traditional masculine violent cultures can be, and have been, readily identified in the low social status of women in the ancient Greek world too. There are very few overt allusions to violence against women in the ancient Greek corpus, but those few that do exist need to be unpacked carefully for the information they contain.

Greek Literary Sources

Texts dating from the Homeric age through to the Roman imperial period will be considered here, and I offer short commentaries on some key issues arising within the sources.

**Homer, Iliad 1.560–89**

And Zeus who marshals the thunderheads returned, 'Maddening one . . . you and your eternal suspicions – I can never escape you. Ah but tell me, Hera, just what can you do about this? Nothing. Only estrange...
yourself from me a little more — and all the worse for you . . . Now go sit down. Be quiet now. Obey my orders, for fear the gods, however many Olympus holds, are powerless to protect you when I come to throttle you with my irresistible hands.’ He subsided but Hera the Queen, her eyes wider, was terrified. She sat in silence. She matched her will to his. And throughout all the halls of Zeus the gods of heaven quaked with fear. Hephaestus . . . rose up . . . trying now to bring his loving mother a little comfort: ’ . . . It will be unbearable if the two of you come to blows this way . . . I urge you, mother, . . . work your way back into his good graces . . .’

(trans. Janko)

According to Homer, even goddesses can suffer maltreatment at the hands of their husbands, as his description of Zeus’ threat of ‘unpreventable physical violence’ towards his wife Hera makes clear. 24 Willcock interprets this scene as one of several incidents early on in the Iliad that are needed to stress the supremacy of Zeus as the kyrios (lord) of the heavenly oikos; on these occasions he becomes a bully and threatens the other gods with violence, and always comes out on top. 25 However, his bona fide anger is reserved for his wife — his antagonism towards Hera has a special, marital, quality, and their matrimony increases the significance of the violence. Words such as epipetheo¯ (‘obedient’; 1.565) and epidaineton (‘to quarrel’; 1.574) serve to give emphasis to the marital nature of the quarrel, as Zeus sets up the ideal behaviour required of a wife, which Hera routinely shatters. Indeed, by book 8.407–8 Zeus is able to declare that Hera infuriates him simply out of habit, regardless of how much he rants. 26

Nonetheless, here Hera is terrified. The goddess understands too well the danger that faces her, which no doubt serves to remind her of the violence she has suffered in the past, and immediately acquiesces in Zeus’ command for silence. Hephaestus then quietly beseeches his mother to mollify Zeus with soft words and to play, in effect, the role (at the very least) of the submissive and complacent housewife.

26 The sentiment is shared by mortal husbands too, if we follow the old man in the Chorus of Aristophanes’ Lysistrata (1039): Wives, ‘you can’t live with them, you can’t live without them!’ Naoko Yamagata, Homeric Morality (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 100 suggests that Zeus no longer feels anger towards Hera’s disobedience and that they have ‘grown out of dish fighting’. But this is to make light of Zeus’ temper and his all too real use of violence.
Homer, *Iliad* 15.12–23

At the sight of Hector the father of men and gods, filled with pity now and shooting a terrible dark glance down at Hera, burst out at her, ‘What a disaster you create! Uncontrollable Hera... I’ll whip you stroke on stroke. Don’t you recall the time I strung you mid-air and slung those two massive anvils down from your feet and lashed both hands with a golden chain you could not break? There, in the clouds... you dangled. And the mighty gods on steep Olympus raged away, impotent – what could they do to set you free? Standing there, helpless.’

(trans. Janko)

The dialogue of book 15 is the climax of a series of references to violence against Hera, and this section is commonly referred to as the ‘Punishment of Hera’ (*kolasis tēs Hēras*). Janko certainly reads the passage as humour: ‘Homer’s audience will have been most amused by this tale’s domestic appeals’.27 Whitman too suggests that ‘probably Homer thought this episode slightly comic... [it was] simply the *kolasis Hēras* – a piece of rather grim domestic discipline, but well deserved’.28 We could, however, read the scene on another level altogether; as an ugly reminder that Zeus’ loss of face and sense of self-worth has aroused his anger and that Hera is in danger of severe punishment, on a par with the chastisement she received in the past when she was suspended from the sky in chains and weights.

**Semonides fr. 7 (On Women), 12–20**

Another [the god] made from a bitch... She peers everywhere and strays everywhere, always yapping, even if she sees no human being. A man cannot stop her with threatening, nor by losing his temper and knocking her teeth out with a stone... but ceaselessly she keeps up a barking (*leléken*)...

(trans. Lloyd-Jones)

Semonides’ On Women is the longest surviving piece of non-hexameter verse from before the Classical period, as well as being the first text in Western literature to have women as its sole subject, and therefore it is tempting to interpret it as literal historical data about Greek attitudes towards women who are shown to be inferior beings, without mind and lacking in self-control. According to Semonides, the ‘bitch-woman’ drives men to physical anger (cf. Od. 18.25–9).

Semonides’ main purpose was to entertain – and if this fragmentary poem is indeed a comedy, a social satire or a series of jokes on the theme that women are a curse to men, then we laugh through the common cultural idioms, in this particular case, the image of the over-talkative and, thus, deservedly beaten wife. That Semonides’ poem is entertaining does not negate its value for serious reflection on women’s role in society. The word *lelekēn*, for instance, is invariably translated in this passage as the bark or yelp of a dog, and while verbs of sustained sound do have their canine connotations, it is interesting to note that when used in respect to men, *lelekēn* can simply mean ‘speaking loudly’ or ‘speaking too loudly’; the dual application should not be missed in the context of Semonides’ poem. The bitch-woman, with her constant gossiping, speaks too much and too loudly.

**Euripides fr. 497 (Melanippe Wise/Melanippe Captive)**

Punish her (*teisasthe tēnde*)! ... Some men do not get rid of a woman when they find she is bad ... then her wrongdoing overflows to many others and progresses, so their virtue completely vanishes.

A series of Euripidean fragments from his two lost plays on the Melanippe myth, which evidently centred on the theme of adultery and retribution, provide some insights, perhaps, into commonly held views.29 Thus, on the general nature of women an unknown (male?) character states: ‘The hatred women incur is very hurtful. Those who have fallen bring disgrace to those who have not and the bad ones share their censure with the good; where marriage is concerned, men think women are entirely corrupt’ (fr. 493). Male fear of female sexual misconduct, adultery and unchastity underlies this text.30 According to fragment 497, the antidote to a woman’s wantonness is simple: punishment, and death.31

**Aristophanes, Lysistrata 160–6**

**Calonice:** And what if they drag us into the bedroom by force (*bia*)?

**Lysistrata:** Hold onto the door.

**Calonice:** And what if they beat us? (*ean de tuptōsin;*)

**Lysistrata:** Then submit, but disagreeably: men get no pleasure in sex when they have to force you (*biān*). Don’t worry, they’ll soon

30 Following ibid., p. 272. 31 See further Lys. 1.31, 12. 37, 82f.; Eur. *Heracl.* 999.
give in. No husband can have a happy life if his wife doesn’t want him to.

(trans. Henderson)

In this passage the husband’s authority over his wife is stressed through an escalation of violence. At line 160, *bia* denotes the general force by which husbands take their wives into the bedroom, but just two lines later the violence becomes more specific (*tuptōsin*, ‘strike’, ‘blow’), the intensity of the action demonstrated in the etymology of *tupos*, meaning ‘mark of a blow’ or ‘impression’.

**Aristophanes, Lysistrata 507–20**

*Lysistrata*: Before now, and for quite some time, we maintained our decorum and suffered [in silence] whatever you men did, because you wouldn’t let us make a sound. But you weren’t exactly all we could ask for. No, we knew only too well what you were up to, and many a time we’d hear in our homes about a bad decision you’d made on some great issue of state. Then, masking the pain in our hearts, we’d put on a smile and ask you, ‘How did the Assembly go today . . .?’ And my husband would say, ‘What’s that to you? Shut up!’ And I’d shut up.

*Old Woman*: I wouldn’t have shut up!

*Magistrate*: If you hadn’t have shut up you’d have got a beating.

*Lysistrata*: Well, that’s why I did shut up – then. But later on we began to hear about even worse decisions you’d made, and then we would ask, ‘Husband, how come you’re handling this so stupidly?’ And right away he’d glare at me and tell me to get back to my sewing if I didn’t want major damage to my head.

(trans. Henderson)

According to Lysistrata, an over-talkative wife might be threatened with brutality by her husband following a bad day at the Assembly and so, to avoid a beating, she should be wise and keep quiet. Aristophanes stresses that the violence comes only after a wife presses her husband on the matter of the Assembly business for a second time (while criticising him to boot). She has not learned her place and does not know when to offer her husband ‘a silent tongue and a calm appearance’.

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Aristophanes, *Clouds* 1443–6

**Pheidippides**: I’ll beat mother, as I beat you.

**Strepsiades**: What’s that? What did you say? That’s different, a far greater crime!

**Pheidippides**: And what if I use the Worse Argument to defeat you on the resolution, it’s right to beat one’s mother?

(trans. Henderson)

While wife abuse is passed over with, it seems, little or no comment, the beating of parents is never condoned; mother-beating is particularly odious.

Here, Aristophanes is certainly creating a fantastical situation by demonstrating the topsy-turvy nature of his imagined Athens (his is a city where children beat parents, whereas in reality parents punish children), nevertheless to claim, as Barry Strauss has done, that parent abuse is only comic fantasy is naive. References to father-beating and mother-beating are not unknown in the Greek sources, although usually the *mētraloias* and the *patraloias* are spoken of together, and nowhere in law or rhetoric is it stated that violence against a mother is any more heinous than that against a father. In *Clouds*, however, Pheidippides is completely mistaken in believing that his father would be glad to know that he was proposing to beat his mother—not that Pheidippides seems to bear a grudge against her; he plans to hit his mother only to gratify the hen-pecked Strepsiades. The outrage felt by Strepsiades at his son’s suggestion might be explained by the Athenian *nomos* that the bond between mother and son was closer than that shared by son and father. Of particular interest here, however, is the fact that while mother-abusers are condemned in Athenian society, wife-beaters receive no such censure.

**Plutarch, Life of Alcibiades 8.4**

Alcibiades came up and seized [Hipparete] and dragged her off home with him through the market place, no man daring to oppose him or take her from him.

(trans. Perrin with amendments)

According to Plutarch, Alcibiades was a bully. Nevertheless, his rough public treatment of his wife, Hipparete, who was trying to reach the Archon to

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34 Ar. Ran. 149, Lys. 10.8, Pl. Phd. 114A.
petition for divorce, passed without public comment: ‘such violence (bia)’, states Plutarch, ‘was not thought lawless or cruel at all. Indeed, the law prescribes that the wife who would separate from her husband shall go to court in person, to the end, it would seem, that the husband may meet her on the way and thus regain possession of her.’

The Hipparete incident recounted in the Life of Alcibiades might be explained by Plutarch’s desire to spin around the figure of Alcibiades stories of moral worthlessness and excess; it is no coincidence that the Hipparete story is followed immediately by Plutarch’s account of Alcibiades’ dog:

Possessing a dog of wonderful size and beauty, which had cost him seventy minas, he had its tail cut off, and a beautiful tail it was, too. His friends criticised him for this, and declared that everybody was furious about the dog and abusive of its owner. But Alcibiades burst out laughing and said: ‘That’s just what I want; I want Athens to talk about this, so that it may say nothing worse about me.’

The anecdote about Alcibiades’ maltreatment of the dog is on a par with the rough treatment of his wife, but while the punishment of Hipparete goes without public comment, the clipping of the dog’s tail (albeit done for aesthetic concerns) engenders public consternation. Pseudo-Andokides seems to have regarded Alcibiades’ treatment of Hipparete as egregious hubris, but he stands alone in this regard. This compels us to wonder if violence against a woman could ever be hubristic. Women are certainly regarded as catalysts of male hubris, but following Fisher’s suggestion that hubris gives the assailant a sense of superiority while simultaneously breaking the laws of state or challenging the norms of the community, it could be proposed that a woman’s refusal to acknowledge her inferiority or subordination to the wishes of a man are acts of hubris in themselves. A fragment of Plato Comicus suggests just this: ‘If you are always punishing your wife, she’s the best of all possessions; if you relax too much, she’s a hybristic thing and uncontrolled.’ Hipparete was of an aristocratic family; the ideology of violence over women therefore applied to the aristoi too. We should not assume that violence towards wives was the preserve of the lower social orders; in fact, we might argue that as the honour–shame

40 Plato, Comicus fr. 105 K-A.
ideologies of the upper classes permeated the lower classes, so did their methods of control.\textsuperscript{41}

**Chariton, \textit{Callirhoe} 1.4.12–1.5.1**

[Chaereas] could find no voice with which to reproach [Callirhoe]; but overcome by anger, he kicked at her as she ran forward. His foot struck the girl squarely in the diaphragm and stopped her breath. She collapsed, and her maidservants, picking her up, laid her on the bed. Thus Callirhoe lay without speech or breath, presenting to all an appearance of death.

(trans. Reardon)

The most blatant portrayal of domestic violence occurs in the first extant Greek novel, \textit{Callirhoe}, dated to the late Hellenistic or early imperial Roman period. The novel’s hero, Chaereas, beats his young wife with such jealous ferocity that he thinks he has killed her; she is battered into a coma but miraculously escapes with her life.\textsuperscript{42} The attack is instigated by a rumour about Callirhoe’s fidelity; there is no gradual escalation of violence here and the beating is not prefixed by any threat or warning. Chaereas simply lashes out in blind anger in a frenzy of jealousy, humiliation and hurt. Callirhoe is left for dead, while Chaereas next takes out his rage on the maids: ‘it was while they were undergoing fire and torture that he learned the truth’ (1.5.2).

**Back to Honour: Levels of Abuse**

It appears from the fleeting glimpses we have into this side of intensely private lives, that women may have taken beatings of various degrees of severity at the hands of their male kin, and that women were punished for offences that compromised male honour or upset the ideology of male domination over female inferiority. Physical chastisement was seen as necessary if the wife refused to kowtow or learn her lesson. The \textit{Oeconomicus} of Xenophon, therefore, contains nothing at all about the chastisement of women since the work’s philosopher-author privileges his central character, Ischomachos, with a very young and pliant wife.\textsuperscript{43} It would be interesting to revisit the home of Ischomachos twenty years later.

In many ‘traditional’ societies the ideal of masculinity is underpinned by a notion of ‘honour’ and is fundamentally connected to policing female behaviour and sexuality. Honour is generally seen as residing in the bodies of

\textsuperscript{41} Fisher, ‘Violence, Masculinity’, p. 74.  \textsuperscript{42} Charit. \textit{Call.} 1.4.12.  
women. Moreover, a woman’s honour depends upon the reputation that the community is willing to concede, not upon evidence of facts. While norms and *nomoi* about women’s social comportment vary according to period and place, they are perceived to have a direct effect upon men’s honour. Violent acts (including murder) are perpetrated on the slimmest suspicion of shameful conduct on the part of the woman. She must foster an intense awareness of her own sense of shame if the men of her family are not to be dishonoured; moreover, if a female violates an honour norm, the whole family experiences the shame. A man must therefore respond appropriately because by not acting in the expected masculine manner he would add to the shame. As Irfan Husain emphasises,

In all relationships the most powerful weapon that men wield over women is the notion of ‘honour’; prior to her marriage a woman, as a daughter, represents the ‘honour’ of her father, as sister the ‘honour’ of her brother, as the beloved the ‘honour’ of her betrothed. After marriage, as a wife, she symbolizes the ‘honour’ of her husband, as a daughter-in-law, the ‘honour’ of her father-in-law and as a mother she symbolizes the ‘honour’ of her sons . . . Ultimately she comes to signify the ‘honour’ of her race, her tribe, the land, the nation. Thus when these male collectives fight against each other, she is the one who must be sacrificed at the altar of male ‘honour’. When it comes to sacrifice, no religion, no sect, no group is different from another. The concept of women as a symbol of ‘honour’ makes them into mere signs in which the actual flesh and blood woman disappears.44

Ironically, it is through flesh and blood that male honour is best defended. In northern India a commonly heard maxim is ‘Beat up the shameless hussy’, and it is often used as good advice for a husband who is having trouble with a non-conforming wife. Beating of women is very much part of Indian culture and is accepted by women as a matter of course. To understand this ideology, another proverb is useful: ‘A quarrel between a married couple is of no consequence.’ Therefore neighbours rarely (if ever) interfere with domestic violence and, in fact, the wife herself resents outside intervention, a situation familiar in the modern West as well.45 Abu-Lughod puts an interesting spin on the situation and reveals that among the Awlad Ali, male toughness is admired and to a certain degree, women like the concept of ‘real men’ and

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45 See Chowdhry, *Veiled Women*, p. 278.
generally share male idealisation of domestic power (again, this is not necessarily an alien concept in the modern West).46

The ancient Greek evidence suggests that violence or the threat of violence was used if a woman challenged male authority and that physical violence was secondary to threats and verbal abuse. Several key triggers for violence can be identified: wife speaking out of turn (Hera, bitch-woman, Lysistrata); wife’s actions contradict the husband’s will (Hipparete, bitch-woman, Lysistrata); wife’s refusal to have sex (Calonice and Lysistrata); suspicion of a wife’s infidelity or her role as the focus of gossip (Callirhoe); and alcohol consumption (the Metropolitan Museum chous). The types of physical violence against women vary widely in our texts, ranging from (presumably) slapping and punching to dragging and carrying, hitting with stones and kicking. The scale of violence can vary from threats of punishment to beatings and battering: wives participating in gossip or backchat (the bitch-woman, Hera and Lysistrata) could be chastised with impunity because of the annoyance it caused to husbands, but wives who were the subject of gossip (like Callirhoe) are open to severe forms of physical punishment since the dishonour caused by the rumour was detrimental to the oikos.

The men in the texts, and those who created them (with the exception perhaps of Plutarch), seem to regard violence as a necessary tool that served to ‘teach’ and ultimately discipline their wives. Given that the texts are written by men, it is not surprising that the wives (not even Lysistrata) do not speak out against the punishments or the overarching ideology that perpetuates such abuse; it is possible that women did not think in those terms, but accepted violence unconditionally. As one young wife in an Indian community has put it: ‘Whatever the husband does is okay and is acceptable in the community . . . And if the wife questions the husband there are going to be lots of problems . . . This is what the elders during our days have taught us to do and we all feel that we should live up to that.’47

Did Domestic Abuse Occur in Ancient Greek Society?

To that question I answer yes. But I need to qualify this by offering a few propositions.

Domestic violence happened, but infrequently; it was regarded as abnormal. This is the (perhaps over-) optimistic opinion of Leslie Dossey, who argues that ideas of male comportment meant that they were ashamed to beat their wives and that wife-beating was hubris against the wife because it treated her as a slave. Real men, she suggests, fought their equals, thus to fight a woman brought humiliation. This, she thinks, is why, more often than not, husbands went after adulterous lovers but left the wife alone. But there is nothing in the sources that suggests this, and how do we know the wives were left alone? Transgressive wives simply fall off the public radar.

Henderson too has argued that wife-beaters were frowned upon. It was illegal (and undemocratic) to strike a male citizen, and therefore, he argues, physical violence against women was disapproved of as well. He suggests that in the sources only drunks and scoundrels beat their wives. I do not see this in the evidence presented here.

Domestic violence happened frequently but was considered a private affair and therefore has not reached the sources. This is a possible scenario, at least if we believe that domestic abuse was so shameful, humiliating and distasteful to Greek society that it was not spoken of in the community at large; this sits awkwardly with the ancient evidence and the anthropological ‘norm’.

Domestic violence was so routine that it did not warrant mention in the sources. This is the most probable answer to the question posed above. Domestic violence was part of Greek society’s norms. There was no shame attached to the act because it was a cultural construct by which gender roles and expectations were measured. Domestic abuse does not reach the sources.

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48 Dossey, ‘Wife-Beating’.
because, as an Indian proverb has it, ‘a quarrel between a married couple is of no consequence’.51

In all societies particular institutions are recognised as having the authority to name and define what constitutes a crime or what constitutes justifiable punishment. The word, I suppose, is ‘power’; he who names it owns it. If the concept of ‘domestic abuse’ or ‘domestic violence’ or even ‘abuse of women’ is absent from the Greek sources, it is simply because the Greeks had no need for the concept. Violence was endemic in Greek society, and violence within the oikos was a component of the same violence that displayed itself in public situations. It is logical to regard the honour-driven code of male life permeating the walls and social fabric of the oikos, for in Greek life the private could often be very public: an intimate awareness of what was happening within the community at all levels, public and private, was maintained through multiple levels of social networking. The private lives of the Greeks was very public business too.

**Bibliographic Essay**


The violent world of ancient Athens has been explored in two excellent studies by Danielle Allen: ‘Angry Bees, Wasps and Jurors: The Symbolic Politics of Orgé in Athens’, in S. Braund and G. Most (eds.), *Ancient Anger. Perspectives from Homer to Galen* (Cambridge:

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51 Chowdhry, *Veiled Women*, p. 279.
Violence against Women in Ancient Greece


It is important to frame work on ancient concepts of domestic violence within current methodologies for exploring and understanding abuse, and to that end the following studies are invaluable: Rebecca Dobash and Russell P. Dobash, Rethinking Violence against Women (London: SAGE, 1998); Jeff Hearn, The Violences of Men (London: SAGE, 1998); June Keeling and Tom Masoon, Domestic Violence: A Multi-Professional Approach for Healthcare Practitioners (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008).


Gang Violence in the Late Roman Republic

JEFFREY TATUM

In republican Rome the deployment of violence by private individuals was often necessary and was routinely regarded as respectable – so long as its frequency and intensity remained within socially manageable proportions. This was not because Romans were unusually aggressive by nature or remarkably sharp-elbowed, but rather because the use of force in Roman society was deemed a matter of individual prerogative and, sometimes, an individual’s duty. *Vim vi repellere licet* (‘it is permitted to repulse force with force’) was a fundamental right belonging to all free men and so constituent in Roman notions of *libertas* (‘freedom’).

This sensibility was, in practice, crucial to the maintenance of public order and the preservation of justice. Devoid of anything like a modern police force, Romans relied on self-help for their personal safety, the security of their property and the enforcement of their rights. This reality is reflected in Roman legal language: taking a man to court, for instance, might require physical compulsion through seizing him by the hand (*manus inectio*). And, in practical terms, especially among the lower classes, who appear to have viewed official intrusions into local justice with some apprehension, the application of local – and traditional – remedies to criminal behaviour constituted the natural state of affairs. Which meant that lawbreakers might be confronted by their neighbours with menacing and shaming ridicule or physical violence such as stoning. A thief could receive summary punishment on the spot. Victims cried out for aid, not to any state apparatus

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but to their community. And their fellow citizens had a moral obligation to come to their rescue.

Neighbourhoods were the basic and essential environments of daily life for most Romans. Consequently, neighbourliness (vicinitas) was central to Roman sensibilities and an important motive for mutual support and cooperation. An urban neighbourhood shared a local identity and possessed its own internal organisation, including local, if unofficial, dignitaries. The urban landscape of Rome was also articulated by collegia, voluntary associations of men sharing the same trade, the same neighbourhood and the same cult. It is this community that, in the first instance, offered modest Romans aid and assistance when endangered or, what was surely preferable, a venue for sorting out local disputes when individual assertions of personal rights clashed. This was possible because local dignity, the trust and respect of one’s neighbours was, for ordinary Romans, an important and often decisive factor in all their behaviour. Still, neighbourhood administration remained informal in its nature and an elaborate manifestation of self-help.

The institution of clientela – the relationship between a patron and his clients – provided another unofficial venue for resolving disputes, by submitting them to a patron’s arbitration, or for securing, through a patron’s influence, representation at law. Clientela was central to daily life in republican Rome: in a world wanting any form of public welfare, the assistance of the aristocracy was very often indispensable for the poor, and, for their part, patrons competed with one another in amassing clients, whose sheer bulk


was deemed an indication of a grandee’s social and political clout. By helping his clients to cope with their difficulties, a patron accumulated gratia (‘gratitude’), an inerasible debt which Romans took deeply seriously. No aristocrat could take the support of his clients for granted, however, and our sources make it clear that clientela was anything but a static institution. Still, by offering his clients a degree of protection, a patron could hope to secure for himself loyal supporters who might aid him when he asked. Even for members of the elite, personal security very often depended on self-help. Which is why, in order to keep themselves safe, members of the aristocracy did not rely solely or even principally on clients, who most of the time were busy with their own lives: they employed private guards.

The strong-armed contingents in elite retinues are rarely mentioned in our sources, perhaps because the presence of bodyguards was too ordinary a feature of daily life to call forth comment. Notices tend to cluster in accounts of predicaments fraught with personal peril, contexts that hardly lend themselves to dispassionate reporting. Cicero, for instance, when during 58 BCE there were concerns over his personal safety, informed his anxious brother that ‘everyone promises me that I can count on him, on his sons, his clients, his freedmen, his slaves – even his money’ (Cic. QFr. 1.2.16). The hyperbole obscures. Still, it is interesting how here, at least, Cicero mentions money: references to one’s personal retainers, such as they are, favour a vocabulary stressing personal ties over explicit disclosures that one’s protection must be paid for. In the midst of the Catilinarian Conspiracy of 63 BCE, to adduce a further Ciceronian example, the orator speaks openly of his reliance on ‘a good number of brave men’ whom he describes as ‘a detachment of young men from Reate, armed with swords, whom I have constantly kept at my disposal for the protection of the republic’ (Cic. Cat. 3.5). Now Reate was a community that lay under Cicero’s patronage, and it is clear how Cicero takes pains to depict his Reatine band in language evoking patriotic urges. Elsewhere Cicero speaks of the safety he enjoyed in 63 BCE owing to the ‘stout protection offered by my friends’ (Sull. 51), men who can only have

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included the same Reatines. But it is far likelier, as Andrew Lintott concluded, that these men were ‘little more than hired thugs’. 8

Gladiators, too, played a part in personal protection – for those who could afford to buy them. When Titus Annius Milo clashed with Publius Clodius Pulcher on the Appian Way, Milo’s entourage, in addition to his wife and friends, included ‘a large train of slaves, some of whom were gladiators’ (Asc. 32C). For his part, Clodius, also accompanied by friends, had an escort of thirty slaves, all of them armed with swords (Asc. 31C). Milo’s forces, in the event, prevailed. But his retinue may have been more than usually large. Travel was always dangerous and Clodius was a very rich man: Asconius tells us that his entourage ‘conformed to the custom of those travelling in those days’ (Asc. 31C), and so presumably his bodyguard was of a size and quality deemed more than satisfactory. Even in the city, as we have seen, aristocrats kept themselves safe with personal guards, sometimes, even there, with gladiators. 9 But outside emergencies, an aristocrat’s guards will have remained unarmed, and their numbers will have been swelled only under extraordinary circumstances. Nonetheless, their presence reflected the Romans’ expectation that violence was always a possibility as well as the Romans’ insistence that they possessed the right to meet force with force in a legitimate cause.

Violence and Political Self-Help

The employment of private guards in the disruption of public business obviously lay beyond the legitimate confines of self-help. Such perturbation was plainly deemed an outrage, a sensibility made clear by the people’s condemnation of the equestrian Marcus Postumius (Liv. 25.3.8–4.11). This man was a publicanus (a wealthy agent to whom the Republic entrusted contracts for conducting public business) who, during the Hannibalic War, undertook to supply Rome’s armies in Spain but instead cheated the Republic by way of various ruses, dishonest profiteering so extreme he was prosecuted before the people by tribunes of the plebs. When it became obvious that Postumius was likely to be condemned, a number of publicani, protective of one of their own, thrust themselves into the assembly, throwing matters into confusion and menacing all in attendance with threats. The assembly was

thus broken up, but later Postumius and several of his supporters were punished with exile.\textsuperscript{10} Now in telling this story, Livy’s concentration is focused principally on the shocking corruption of these publicani. Consequently, his narrative is less than fulsome in describing the personnel who disrupted Postumius’ hearing, but it is obvious that turmoil so serious that it resulted in such extreme penalties cannot have owed itself simply to Postumius and his equestrian associates: clearly they mobilised bands of men, doubtless their retainers, who provided the muscle required to disrupt a popular assembly. Livy speaks of sedition and riot and, notwithstanding his emphasis on graft, makes it plain in his account that neither the public nor its leadership were willing to countenance violence on this scale when applied against the enforcement of public administration.

Legitimate self-interest, especially self-interest animated by compelling ideological justifications, was a very different matter. Political leaders who could arouse the right convictions in the people, or at least in a significant slice of the people, could summon adherents from outside their personal retinues in order to pursue objectives deemed suitable and fair – even in the teeth of official resistance. Justice, for men of all classes, mattered, even when men of all classes differed on that matter of justice in any particular controversy. Tradition had it that the Conflict of the Orders, although mostly a revolution characterised by non-violence and grudging compromises, was nonetheless marked at times by righteous sedition on the part of the aggrieved plebs.\textsuperscript{11} A similar sense of right and wrong permitted the brute force applied in securing the passage, much desired by the commons, of Gaius Flaminius’ agrarian law in 232 B.C.E., if the violent aspect of this event is not a fiction fashioned from late Republican disturbances stimulated by controversial agrarian legislation.\textsuperscript{12}

The notion that an individual could organise popular violence blamelessly and put it to good use on behalf of the Republic, even against the grain of constitutional proprieties, received a sensational and influential formulation at the trial of Gaius Norbanus, which took place around 95 B.C.E.\textsuperscript{13} As tribune


\textsuperscript{12} Cic. Inv. 2.52; Val. Max. 5.4.5; cf. T. R. S. Broughton, The Magistrates of the Roman Republic (New York: American Philological Association, 1951), vol. 1, p. 225.

\textsuperscript{13} M. C. Alexander, Trials in the Late Roman Republic, 149 BC to 50 BC (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp. 44–5.
of the plebs in 103 BCE, Norbanus prosecuted Quintus Servilius Caepio, whose ineptitude while proconsul in 105 BCE had led to the Romans’ crushing defeat at Arausio. The tribunes Lucius Aurelius Cotta and Titus Didius attempted to interpose their vetoes on Caepio’s behalf, but they were driven off by force, in the turbulence of which Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, a highly distinguished member of the Senate, was injured by a pelting of stones.¹⁴ Caepio was convicted, but years later Norbanus was hauled into court on a charge of maiestas (treason), an accusation predicated on the violence which prevented two tribunes from exercising their constitutional prerogative. Norbanus’ actions were indisputable, but his advocate, Marcus Antonius, argued, on the basis of Rome’s political history, that popular violence was often just and often necessary in order to secure the people’s rights (Cic. De or. 2.124; 199). In his deployment of force, Antonius insisted, Norbanus had acted as the agent of the citizenry of Rome (Cic. De or. 2.167). Cicero later described the articulation of Antonius’ argument as novel and marvellous (Cic. De or. 125). But its sentiment, as Antonius had apparently appreciated when devising his successful defence, suffused Roman sensibilities.¹⁵

Norbanus’ agitators were not limited to his clients or retainers. Cicero makes it clear that the violence at Caepio’s trial, even if it was roused and directed by the tribune, originated in the people’s grief at the loss of life at Arausio and the people’s loathing of the man they held responsible (Cic. De or. 2.124). Public outrage served Norbanus’ purposes, to be sure, but, from the people’s perspective, there was more to their actions than gratifying a political figure. At the same time, Norbanus’ following was not an extensive one: the popular disturbance at Caepio’s trial should not be confused with an uprising on the part of the urban populace as a whole. It was routinely the practice in Rome to describe the crowd on the scene as ‘the people’, or, from an antagonistic perspective, to denounce the same group as some form of mob.¹⁶ In other words, Norbanus, by stirring popular passions, was able to attract gangs from outside his own circle and put them to work in pressing his political attack on Caepio. These gangs, viewed with disapproval by Norbanus’ prosecutors, were successfully accorded the status of the Roman

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 34.
people in Antonius’ defence, and it was Antonius’ defence that carried the day.

This same combination of ideology and opportunism recurred throughout the late Republic. When in 133 BCE Tiberius Gracchus began to disclose the likely terms of his agrarian legislation, he found himself attended each day by thousands of adherents, presumably men who were attracted by the entitlements Tiberius’ law would create (Asellio, fr. 7FRHist.; Plut. Ti. Gracch. 20.2). This law also excited opposition from powerful quarters, but after much controversy it was passed without violence. Tiberius then chose to stand for re-election, a decision that provoked vigorous resistance, so much so that violence appeared probable. Still, Tiberius’s supporters, incited by his exhortations, showed themselves willing to fight, if the need arose, for the tribune’s re-election, a profound gesture of political gratitude but one that was certainly animated by an appeal to the right of the people to choose as tribunes the men they preferred. This robust posture on the part of Tiberius and his backers helped to spawn a rumour, which circulated among all classes, that he was aiming at regnum, sole rule, a state of affairs that opened the door to violent opposition on the part of Tiberius’s enemies, who could also draw on reserves of popular reinforcements. A leading senator, Scipio Nasica, called upon all citizens to join him in saving the republic from Tiberius’ alleged designs: to Nasica and his supporters, it is obvious, Tiberius’ backers were not the Roman people championing their rights but rather a seditious mob. Nasica and the senators who joined him succeeded in gathering a large crowd, some of whom will have been clients but others of whom were doubtless men overawed by the authority of senatorial grandees – or truly motivated by the fear stirred by Nasica that Tiberius was a threat to their freedom. When Nasica descended on Tiberius and his followers, a bloody mêlée ensued during which Tiberius was lynched.

Several factors, practical and ideological, enabled Tiberius and Nasica to rally their violent followings. It is clear that, on each side, there were participants motivated by what they perceived to be the justice of their cause. Others, of course, were opportunists of some ilk. But none, it appears, were, in the immediate sense, profiteers. In the case of Tiberius we can be certain that he did not offer his supporters any form of payment. When the tribune appealed to the public for aid, he discovered that many of the men

18 Even among Tiberius’ supporters there were men who were overawed by the senators when they appeared: App. B Civ. 1.16; Rhet. Her. 5.68.
who had previously acted as his attendants were unavailable: they had left the city in order to make money labouring in the countryside (App. B Civ. 1.14). Whatever the depth of a poor man’s gratitude to Tiberius, and however fierce his passion for popular rights, he simply could not afford to sacrifice a few days of gainful employment for the sake of politics. This economic reality was always an impediment even to ordinary political participation on the part of modest citizens. Which is why, when canvassing for office, candidates often paid poor men to crowd round them at public events, thereby staging for voters a manifestation of their popularity (Cic. Mur. 67–71). Economic concerns also operated in circumstances in which violence was a possibility. Perhaps even more so. The financial consequences for a man and his family, should he sustain a serious injury, could be ruinous. For Tiberius and his cause, the availability of jobs in the countryside depleted the ranks of his supporters to a conspicuous degree. Our sources saw it as an important reason for Tiberius’ inability to rebuff Nasica and his forces.

Subsequent deployments of popular violence became increasingly complex – and exhibited enhanced levels of preparation. In the political turbulence of 121 BCE, when reactionary politicians were endeavouring to undo central and very popular aspects of his legislative reforms, Gaius Gracchus surrounded himself with bodyguards illegally equipped with daggers, and his followers were illegally armed when they occupied the Aventine Hill. Doubtless they were convinced that, as Antonius would later argue, circumstances demanded boldness and that questions of strict legality were trumped by popular rights. In reaction, the Senate for the first time passed its so-called final decree (senatus consultum ultimum) entrusting the republic’s security to the consul, Lucius Opimius. Opimius mustered senators and equestrians, each of whom he urged to arm two servants. He also called out auxiliary archers. For all Gaius’ obvious preparations, his forces simply could not defend themselves against adversaries of this kind. Hence the deployment of military veterans by Lucius Appuleius Saturninus, when he was tribune of the

19 Mouritsen, Plebs and Politics, pp. 18–37.
21 Steel, End of the Roman Republic, pp. 22–6.
plebs for the second time in 100 BCE and attempting to carry agrarian legislation: these were men who would benefit materially from Saturninus’ legislation and who could also claim both to come to the aid of the people’s tribune and to rally support for a measure that would enhance the reputation of their former general, Gaius Marius, who was consul in the same year.23 Veterans were good at fighting, and with their backing Saturninus prevailed.

Later in the same year, however, Saturninus turned to more extreme measures: he murdered a political competitor, and he and his accomplices seized possession of the Capitoline Hill. To his supporters, Saturninus remained a champion of popular rights. But he was seen differently by his senatorial peers. Again, the final decree was passed, and Marius, as consul, became responsible for the suppression of his former ally. Like Opimius before him, Marius summoned senators and equestrians – and their retinues: gangs of men were even imported from the countryside. Few of Marius’ veterans were any longer available, nor were soldiers introduced to the city, but the consul supplied the urban population with weapons from the armoury and under his command they joined in laying siege to the Capitoline. In the end, Saturninus surrendered. Despite guarantees for their security, he and many of his associates were lynched.24

The complexities of popular violence, including the deployment of gangs, receive clear illustration in the tactics of Publius Sulpicius, tribune of the plebs in 88 BCE.25 After the Social War (90–89 BCE), Rome’s former Italian allies became new citizens. But their enrolment into Rome’s tribal structure, the voting units that were fundamental in Roman electoral and legislative assemblies, put them at a disadvantage over against the old citizens. Sulpicius introduced a controversial bill that would distribute the new citizens fairly throughout the tribes. He also promulgated a separate bill that would rectify the disadvantages of Rome’s freedmen, whose votes were confined to the city’s four urban tribes. Thus he could claim to be a champion of the Roman people in their new, freshly expanded version.

Sulpicius’ distribution bill was strongly opposed by leading members of the senatorial order, including the two consuls of the year, almost certainly because they feared that such a radical extension of the franchise, however just in principle, would disrupt what they regarded as tried and true

23 Steel, End of the Roman Republic, pp. 31–3.
techniques for winning offices. These anxieties, events would later show, were misplaced. At the time, however, they saw in Sulpicius’ proposal a threat to their political supremacy. In addition, many will have envied Sulpicius the *gratia* which his measure, if successful, must surely earn him on the part of Rome’s new citizens.

Sulpicius’ bill also provoked intense hostility on the part of Rome’s urban population. Doubtless Sulpicius had hoped that his other proposal, designed to improve the constitutional situation of freedmen, who were a dominating presence in the city of Rome, would bring along lower-class voters among the old citizens. But whatever goodwill that measure generated, it was not enough to compensate for old voters’ fears that their role in Roman politics would be eclipsed by the new citizens. Again, this fear would later prove groundless. Still, in 88 B.C.E xenophobia on the part of the city’s masses was a potent force in the public reaction to Sulpicius’ plans.

Confronted by the opposition of the consuls, the resistance of many leading figures in the Senate and the hostility of the urban masses, Sulpicius turned to other resources. He formed an alliance with Gaius Marius, for whom he promised to secure a prestigious military command if his distribution bill were carried; Sulpicius would deprive a sitting consul, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, of his military assignment and award it instead to Marius. On this basis, Marius exerted his influence on the publicani and others in the equestrian order, with the result that many of these men became advocates of Sulpicius’ cause, not least because they were able to see advantages for themselves if the membership of their order should be expanded by the addition of rich Italians.\(^\text{26}\) Soon Sulpicius was supplied with a formidable equestrian following, one so extensive and devoted that the tribune dubbed it (perhaps using Greek) his ‘anti-Senate’. Their reliable attendance, a spectacle exhibiting the intensity of their commitment to his measure, naturally appealed to others, especially their dependants and associates, who joined in following their patrons. Sulpicius’ retinue soon included a crowd said by our sources to have numbered in the thousands (Plut. *Mar.* 35.2; *Sull.* 8.3–5). Still, the Senate and many urban citizens persisted in their opposition.

Sulpicius, and his wealthy supporters, also paid poor men to provide additional muscle to the effort of pushing through the distribution bill. We are told that Sulpicius seated himself in the Forum, where he counted out money to his hirelings (Plut. *Sull.* 8.2), a valuable reference to the reality of

Sulpicius’ payments even if the scene conjured by Plutarch derives from hostile caricature. Some of the men taking his payments and fighting for Sulpicius’ bill will have originated in the city, either as old residents won over by equestrian generosity or immigrants already inclined to play an extra-legal role in securing the passage of the distribution law; others will have been imported from the countryside by men rich enough to pay the costs. Indeed, we should not assume that wealthy Italians failed to make their contributions to the expenses incurred by putting into the street men who were willing to fight for their voting rights.

Sulpicius’ recourse to gangs created an environment so tumultuous that it stimulated legitimate fears that voters would be bullied into yielding to the tribune. Consequently, the consuls declared a temporary suspension of legislation, a legal delaying tactic that revealed their desperation. In reaction, Sulpicius chose to escalate the level of his intimidation. He and his followers, illegally armed with daggers, burst into an assembly that had been summoned by both consuls. Sulpicius demanded an end to the suspension. The consuls refused and turmoil ensued, in which Sulpician might prove superior: both consuls fled, and a nobleman, a kinsman of both consuls, was murdered. In the aftermath of such lethal violence, Sulpicius’ measure was soon passed. Sulpicius went on, as he promised, to strip Sulla of his command on Marius’ behalf. Sulla responded, not with gangs but with a Roman army; he marched on the city, seized control, and drove Marius into exile. Sulpicius was captured and put to death. His legislation was annulled.

Popular violence, and the use of gangs, persisted throughout the republic. Nor was the deployment of gangs a practice exclusive to tribunes. During his consulship in 59 BCE, Julius Caesar pushed through an agrarian measure by way of popular agitation and only with the rough support of veterans supplied by Pompey the Great. During the same year, Pompey himself, a private citizen, when he was denounced in a public speech as ‘a usurping dictator’ by a tribune of the plebs, had the man thrashed within an inch of his life (Cic. QFr. 1.2.15). Cicero described Pompey’s action as an enormity, doubtless because, unlike violence in pursuit of a controversial political goal, it was a savage act against a fellow senator the motivation of which lay solely in the preservation of the great man’s personal prestige. Self-help, possibly, but as a political act

28 Cic. Var. 21–3; Red. pop. 14; Suet. Jul. 20; Dio Cass. 38.5–6; Plut. Cat. Min. 32–3; Pomp. 48; Caes. 14.
Pompey’s recourse to thuggish tactics, which could hardly be dressed up as an expression of any aspect of republican political ideology, was simply another expression of the kind of self-interested violence that characterised the disruptive behaviour of Marcus Postumius and his supporters (see above). Even amid frequent outbursts of political violence, sometimes lethal and sometimes on a disturbingly large scale, putting a gang to work in settling personal scores between aristocrats could offend public sensibilities, as Pompey did. Popular violence, in Cicero’s opinion at least, though far from a rarity in Rome, had not yet become routine or conventional – or commonplace.

Publius Clodius Pulcher

Gang violence in Rome reached its climax during the fifties, and the principal figure in this development was Publius Clodius Pulcher, tribune of the plebs in 58 BCE. Clodius’ ambitious legislative programme included two measures that were instrumental in animating popular enthusiasm in often violent support of the tribune’s further political designs. He carried a law that supplied every head of a Roman household with a modest quantity of free grain each month, the most generous public entitlement in the history of the republic: this measure alone secured him unexcelled gratitude from the urban masses. But Clodius also brought in a law restoring the status and stability of neighbourhood collegia. Some of these associations had, during the sixties, become implicated in instances of public violence and were deemed, by the senatorial authorities, to be subversive. As a consequence, a senatorial decree of 64 BCE abolished many collegia and limited the activities of the rest. This, however, was a source of significant public unhappiness: for ordinary Romans, collegia offered precious opportunities for local display, for local honour and for local prestige. They also helped to articulate the fundamental virtue of neighbourliness, and played an important role in providing a modest degree of social security, for instance, by aiding humble Romans with the cost of burials. The Senate’s decree, exhibiting as it did that body’s suspicious and condescending attitude towards the common people and their susceptibilities, was deeply offensive at the popular level. Consequently, Clodius’ law rehabilitating collegia was received with profound appreciation. Furthermore, Clodius put the collegia to work in the execution of his new grain distributions, a policy that enhanced
the local prestige of the officers in every collegia and reinforced in popular sensibilities the benefits of both of Clodius’ measures.\textsuperscript{29}

Clodius, by satisfying the public’s hunger for bread and dignity, won their constant and unwavering loyalty. How, from the point of view of the masses, could such a politician ever be anything other than a champion of the people? All Roman politicians cultivated contacts with collegia (Cicero, \textit{Comment. pet.} 29–30), and it is apparent from the 64 BCE decree that a least a few figures had managed to utilise the collegia for political ends. But no Roman senator before Clodius, it appears, had fully grasped the importance for ordinary Romans of local prestige: Clodius’ law regulating collegia touched the people profoundly, as their exertions on his behalf soon showed. The vehemence of Clodius’ popular backing was revealed at the trial of Publius Vatinius, early in 58 BCE. Clodius had announced that he would appear at this trial and would, on the basis of his tribunician authority, intervene on Vatinius’ behalf. Gaius Memmius, the praetor supervising the trial, indicated that he would resist Clodius’ interference. And so the tribune appealed to the public. On the day of the trial a forceful crowd descended on the tribunal, scattering the benches and overturning the equipment of the court.\textsuperscript{30}

Thereafter, whenever Clodius sought popular support for his policies or even for his personal political purposes, throngs of violent supporters turned out. Clodius employed violence to drive his enemy Cicero into exile, destroy his house on the Palatine Hill, attack the properties of his brother and allies, and to intimidate Pompey the Great, who withdrew from public life for much of the year. Clodius boasted that, at a word from him, the city’s artisans and shopkeepers would abandon their work and join him in demonstrating the public’s will, for Clodius always suffused his political designs with the rhetoric of popular rights and popular liberty. He went so far as to confiscate Cicero’s house in Rome and build on its premises a shrine to the goddess Libertas. During the year of his tribunate he was very nearly master of the streets of Rome. This was gang violence on an unprecedented scale.\textsuperscript{31}

Even after he left office, Clodius preserved the loyalty of the commons. But he soon faced competition for control of the streets. Two tribunes of 57 BCE, Titus Annius Milo and Publius Sestius, also recruited bands of men, who confronted Clodius’ supporters. Neither man enjoyed Clodius’ popularity. Instead, each resorted to paying for his followers, who included gladiators. Milo and Sestius combined with Pompey in striving to restore Cicero to Rome, matching violence with violence and by way of attempting to

\textsuperscript{29} Tatum, \textit{Patrician Tribune}, pp. 117–25. \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., pp. 140–9. \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., pp. 150–75.
prosecute Clodius in the courts. Clodius could not stop Cicero’s recall from exile, nor could his gangs, ordinary citizens motivated by loyalty to Clodius and by Clodius’ appeals to popular rights, match the brute force of the hirelings of Sestius and Milo, who were better equipped and more proficient at brawling. Clodius’ enemies, naturally enough, praised Milo and Sestius as defenders of the republic.

Nevertheless, Clodius’ gangs did not go away. The year 57 BCE was a bloody one in Rome, as Clodius’ gangs continued to menace his enemies and their property. Soon Clodius, too, was obliged to make payments to his men, for whom loss of employment as well as potential injuries became very real impediments to their participation in political violence. Clodius’ tactics remained a constant in domestic politics, even after 56 BCE when he changed his political allegiance in order to become an ally of Pompey. He met his death in 52 BCE, when he was murdered outside the city during a clash between himself and Milo. In reaction, the urban masses rioted, cremating Clodius’ corpse in the forum by using the Senate house as his pyre. This emergency persisted until Pompey, appointed sole consul of Rome, introduced legions into the city to restore order.32

It is frequently asserted, on the basis of Cicero’s descriptions of Clodius’ gangs, that these were paramilitary units, disciplined and armed. And that is certainly the impression given by Cicero’s terminology. But Clodius’ followers were shopkeepers, craftsmen and unskilled labourers. Few if any would have had any training in fighting or seen active military service. It is true that collegia were organised into centuries and divisions (centuriae and decuriae), but collegia were not martial associations. Their members were untrained and unarmed, which is why they were often at a disadvantage when confronted by the ruffians hired by Sestius and Milo. Cicero’s rhetoric – his deployment of military imagery in his depiction of Clodius’ supporters – was devised to conjure fear of an army of have-nots waging war against the respectable classes: it was not an objective analysis, and, owing to its hostile purpose, remains misleading. In any case, the traditional organisation of collegia was quite enough for Clodius’ purposes: they facilitated his communications with the urban population, supplied an internal organisation that was sufficient for encouraging members’ participation in Clodian politics, and provided an environment in which Clodius’ popular ideology resonated. That was a degree of organisation which surpassed any previous mobilisation of popular force.33 Hence its lasting efficacy.

Methods

Doubtless, gangs were put to work in the violent punctuation of personal feuds more often than we can any longer detect. Our sources, however, focus primarily on political events, and so we most often spy the operations of gangs at public assemblies, including public orations (contiones), at public tribunals, and in the harassment of public figures or the intimidation of senatorial meetings. The work of gangs then very often consisted in pushing a measure through an assembly or in sheer obstruction, the latter being an activity that could take place at electoral assemblies as well as legislative ones, or at trials. Breaking up an assembly was a fairly straightforward matter: eruptive force was applied until it could no longer function. Success often depended on bulk and sheer ferocity. A common tactic was to occupy the site of the assembly early in order to forestall any action whatsoever. By contrast, gangs who were summoned to back a bill faced a greater challenge: they must overcome any resistance but without creating such havoc that the assembly had to be dissolved. For this reason, they also endeavoured to seize early possession of the site of an assembly and, if possible, to erect a barricade against any opponents. As for intimidation, this was sometimes a matter of coordinated jeering, sometimes a matter of sustaining a posture of physical menace. In either case, a degree of discipline was demanded. Whatever the application of gangs, the danger of excessive, even lethal violence persisted: it was always possible for gangs to become mobs.34

It is obvious that aristocratic figures like Tiberius Gracchus or Clodius Pulcher, however intimate their connections with large segments of the populace, could not, on their own, arrange and manage public demonstrations. They needed intermediaries, some of whom were perhaps members of their households, others connections from various quarters. Clodius’ operatives, for instance, included men like Gnaeus Gellius, an equestrian, and Sextus Cloelius, a public scribe and therefore a man of some standing, but also men well down the social scale who were apparently leaders of their collegia.35 Although his range of intermediaries may have been more extensive than his rivals’, all members of the senatorial order, in their roles as patrons and candidates for office,

35 Tatum, Patrician Tribune, pp. 140–7 and 115–16.
maintained contacts with the lower orders. It was by way of such networks that political figures inclined to mustering demonstrations will have found the intermediaries whose services were so indispensable.

Gang Violence in the Empire

Gangs did not evaporate from the Roman scene with the death of Clodius or the imposition of order by Pompey. Their operations emerge into our view even during the circumstances of civil war. In 47 BCE, while Caesar was delayed in Egypt, the tribune Publius Cornelius Dolabella, who ostentatiously embraced Clodius as his model for winning public favour, introduced legislation for abolishing debt. When he met with resistance from his tribunician colleagues, he turned to popular violence, a move that required the intervention of Mark Antony, Caesar’s master of the horse and the man responsible for administering Italy. But Antony was unable to suppress Dolabella – both men were favourites of Caesar’s – and the strife between them persisted until Caesar returned to the city and carried more moderate measures addressing Rome’s debt crisis. Dolabella’s tribunate, however, is a rare glimpse of gangs in action at this time: our sources for civil wars are, unsurprisingly, more interested in combat in the provinces than in civilian struggles at home.

But not even Augustus could be heedless of the potential danger of organised gangs, as the episode of Egnatius Rufus demonstrates. This man was a senator who, as aedile, garnered popular favour by establishing a fire service. Aedile in 22 BCE, he was immediately and irregularly elected praetor for 21 BCE. In 19 BCE he sought to stand for a consulship, but when his application was rejected by the presiding magistrate, the consul Gaius Sentius Saturninus, Egnatius incited an uprising on the part of the urban masses. It is clear that, by way of his fire service, he had acquired not simply popularity but a mechanism for managing popular violence. Augustus was at this time in

36 Tatum, ‘Practice of Politics’ and C. Rollinger, Amicitia sanctissime colenda: Freundschaft und soziale Netzerweke in der späten Republik (Trier: Verlag Antike, 2014), each with further references.
39 Nippel, Public Order, pp. 78–84.
the east, and so the insurrection was a serious one. The Senate, however, passed its final decree, in obedience to which the consul arrested Egnatius. He was condemned for treason and executed.

It was not in response to this particular crisis, but rather to the larger issue of popular loyalty that Augustus installed himself as a central figure in the ritual life of every urban neighbourhood. Like Clodius before him, Augustus recognised how collegia and other associations were crucial to the sensibilities of modest citizens, for whom local prestige remained a vital concern. He carefully and diligently cultivated these associations, and in so doing insinuated aspects of his own identity into their practices. Neighbourhood associations were reorganised by him, and he added to their rituals the worship of the Genius Augusti (the divine spirit that watched over Augustus: every man had his genius) as well as a cult of Lares Augusti, helpful deities linked to the imperial house. Although he did not monopolise all opportunities for patronising collegia, Augustus became their most important benefactor and the unmistakable focus of their political loyalty. These exertions were matched and enhanced by his successors. By way of sustaining a close ideological relationship with Roman’s neighbourhoods, the emperors managed to remove a serious threat of gang violence in pursuit of political objectives. Private retainers remained a feature of imperial Rome, but gangs were no longer a factor in Roman politics. The emperor had no rivals for political influence and he, officially and often unofficially, commanded the affections of the populace.

Bibliographic Essay

A. Lintott, Violence in Ancient Rome, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), originally published in 1968 and only slightly revised in its second edition, remains fundamental. Lintott’s exploration of the realities of Roman gangs is part of a larger study of the nature of violence in the city of Rome which examines Roman habits of mind as well as the recurring practice of violence in Roman society. W. Nippel, Public Order in Republican Rome (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) reconsiders many of the same issues. The regulation and repression of violence is often his focus, and his study covers both the republic and the empire. To readers possessing German, Nippel’s more detailed Aufruhr und Polizei in der römischen Republik (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1988) can be recommended. On the creation, organisation, deployment and historical ramifications of Clodius’ gangs, the most extensive account is to be found in W. J. Tatum, The Patrician Tribune: Publius Clodius Pulcher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999),

41 Tarpin, Vici et Pagi; Lott, Neighborhoods of Augustan Rome.
42 Nippel, Public Order, pp. 85–112; Courrier, Plèbe de Rome, pp. 697–735.
Violence in Early Chinese History

Charles Sanft

Violence is a part of every society’s history, and China is no exception. This chapter treats the period of Chinese prehistory and history that stretches from the Neolithic period to the beginnings of imperial rule (c. tenth to second centuries BCE), and considers violence in the broad sense of a person or group’s action or actions of force that deliberately cause physical harm to one or more other human beings. Much of the discussion centres on violence in forms concerned with government. This is in large part the result of traditional historiography in China, which looked at the past primarily as a succession of rulers and dynasties. Historians were usually government officials writing to instruct other officials, and their works reflect this. My discussion incorporates the results of archaeological research, but its primary sources come from texts that have been transmitted over the centuries. These received texts reflect the transmitters’ interests in intellectual history and government. Early Chinese history depends on a very limited number of sources, which precludes the sort of comparison and verification that modern historians would like. Thus, inevitably, much of what follows concerns not violence but rather its presentation in the texts available to us.

The discussion here excludes animals. This is obviously not because they cannot be subject to force, but in the intellectual world of early China the treatment of animals would, as a rule, be ethically and philosophically distinct from acts towards human beings. Due to the limitations of space, I also will avoid discussing violence as part of a formal legal process.

The position of violence in early Chinese history is equivocal. There is ample evidence of it in the area we now call China since remotest antiquity. At the same time, classical Chinese culture celebrated neither battle nor warrior heroism. Fighting was not the stuff of high literature, which tended

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to pass over the actual bloodletting in favour of discussing the preparations, the aftermath and the collateral damage. The literary scholar C. H. Wang called this tendency the ‘ellipsis of battle’. For Wang, China’s culture heroes were peaceful agriculturalists, not the warriors of European epic poetry. David Keightley discussed the same tendency, concentrating on historical portrayals of heroism, especially in war.² War is, of course, not the sole form of violence. But its ambiguous place in early Chinese intellectual life in many ways encapsulates the place of violence overall and it receives historiographical attention that far outweighs that given to other forms of violence as I define it.

Violence in China before the Zhou

The area of China during the Neolithic period (c. 10000 BCE–c. 2000 BCE) was home to a variety of geographically dispersed and culturally distinct groups, yet some generalisations about violence are possible. The absence of reliable written records from these times means that all evidence is archaeological, and even some of that evidence is inferential. The existence of rammed-earth walls around settlements implies the threat of warfare, for instance. Weapons and replica weapons were intrinsic to ritual practices, suggesting the great importance of those objects. Axes are tools with peaceful purposes, to be sure, but the evidence of their use in burials and other rituals suggests greater significance. Similarly, archery was a means to take game, but archaeologists have also recovered arrowheads at sites in numbers that they suggest indicate mass killing in battle rather than hunting. The presence of sculptures with weapons in hand further amplifies this impression. Other evidence of violence is more direct. There are, for instance, numerous archaeological discoveries that reflect human sacrifice, including piled and mutilated corpses interred at building sites and within elite tombs.³


The earliest extant texts from China are short entries on ‘oracle bones’. These prognostication texts on bovine scapulae and turtle plastrons date to the Shang dynasty (c. 1600 to mid eleventh century BCE). Archaeologists have recovered thousands of oracle bones from excavations of the final Shang capital, Anyang (Henan). These short texts make the Shang the earliest dynasty attested to and confirm the presence of violence in that society. Military activity is prominent among the oracle bone inscriptions, yet the inscriptions do not describe actual bloodshed. They record only general military matters: battles, attacks and prisoners captured. And they sometimes include appeals to the Shang deity, Di, for help in battle. One such example reads, ‘We will attack the Gongfang, for Di will confer assistance on us.’

The variety of weapons recovered from grave assemblages and elsewhere further reflects the prominent position of warfare in Shang society and the resources invested in preparing for it. The Shang produced arrowheads, halberds, axes, knives and spearheads of bronze in large numbers. Both oracle bone inscriptions and archaeology reflect that the Shang continued the practice of human sacrifice they inherited from their Neolithic predecessors. Many elite graves contain multiple skeletons, including both the decedent and human sacrifices that accompanied him or her into the afterlife. While some of these victims were beheaded before interment, scholars argue there is also evidence reflecting that some were buried alive. The killing of human sacrifices to accompany deceased members of the elite classes and others persisted into the subsequent Zhou dynasty, then faded out before unification in the third century. Whatever precise form they took, these practices were related to but distinct from the sacrifice of prisoners of war to the ancestors, which followed a similar trajectory.

4 David N. Keightley, Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 177.
The Zhou Dynasty and the Early Textual Traditions

The received textual tradition in China dates, at least putatively, to the Western Zhou period (eleventh to eighth centuries BCE). Violence is present already in that layer of text. Wang is not mistaken in arguing that depictions of violence are not prominent in early Chinese literature, particularly if one defines literature in the classical manner as mainly poetry. Even if one includes also other text genres, violence is usually passed over. This does not mean that it is absent from these writings; rather, texts refer to it in passing, or use implication and allusion to evoke it. The details are missing. That is the ellipsis Wang – very correctly – refers to.

The earliest literature we have from China comes in the form of the Book of Songs, which is conventionally viewed as a collection of hymns and folk songs from the Western Zhou period. While its textual history is a matter of debate, the Book of Songs has an inarguably formative position in the Chinese canon and historians still sometimes draw upon it today. A number of its poems refer to violence in the form of warfare. The poem ‘Sixth Month’ describes the course of war, from preparations to eventual celebration after victory. It begins with anticipation:

> In the sixth month all is bustle,  
> We put our war-chariots in order,  
> Our four steeds are in good fettle,  
> We load our bow-cases and quivers.  

The subsequent stanzas follow this pattern to relate the course of events leading up to battle: the completion of farm work beforehand, obtaining the battlefield, the approach of forces. In typical fashion, however, the actual battle receives almost no attention, and it is passed over in just a few words: ‘We smote the Xian-yu / As far as the great plain’ (p. 150).

There are many mentions of battle in the Book of Songs. But nowhere is there any delight in the shedding of blood or in heroic death. Instead, there is a general focus on worry; the dominant wartime mood is most often melancholy, not celebratory. In ‘Climb the Wooded Hill’, for example, a soldier’s thoughts turn to his family members at home, and he imagines their worry about the possibility of his death:

> We smote the Xian-yu / As far as the great plain’ (p. 150).

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My father is saying, ‘Alas my son is on service;  
Day and night he knows no rest.  
Grant that he is being careful of himself,  
So that he may come back and not be left behind’.  

( p. 86)

‘They Beat Their Drums’ expresses the grief of losing a beloved commander in battle:

We were led by Sun Zi-zhong  
To subdue Chen and Song.  
He does not bring us home;  
My heart is sad within.  

( p. 28)

Not all is lamentation and dirge in the Book of Songs. ‘No Wraps’ treats preparations for military mobilisation in a more personal tone, combining an expressed willingness to face war with the avowal of solidarity with a comrade:

The king is raising an army,  
I have made ready both spear and axe;  
You shall share them with me as my comrade.  

( p. 105)

Another poem, ‘Waves of the Pan’, exults in its description of victory:

Our horn bows were springy,  
Our sheaves of arrows whizzed;  
Our war chariots were very steady,  
Foot soldiers and riders were untiring.  
We have quite conquered the tribes of Huai;  
They are very quiet, they have ceased to exist.  

( p. 312)

Even here, violence remains implicit. The enemy have ‘ceased to exist’; that this cessation came about through force of arms is not significant in the context of the poem.

In ways like this, the Book of Songs eschews depicting violence, and it set the tone for high literature in later times. It is however only one part of the canon. The Book of Documents, another text putatively representing the earliest strata of the canon, also avoids the gore of the sword-storm. It contains prose writing and as such is primarily considered historical rather than literary, in the way the Book of Songs has been. The Book of Documents was nevertheless extremely influential in the development of fine writing.

The Zhou dynasty’s overthrow of the Shang in the mid eleventh century BCE is a primary topic of the collection, and many references to violence in the Book of Documents relate to it. Its contents are speeches and exhortations,
including some that generals purportedly delivered to their troops before fighting. In addition to amorphous threats and oblique references to fighting, mentions of violence most often work to justify Zhou actions by painting the Shang as violent and abusive. One speech puts the following words into the mouth of the future King Wu, who is conventionally identified as leading the Zhou conquest of Shang:

[T]he king of Shang, with strength pursues his lawless way. He has cast away the time-worn sires, and cultivates intimacies with wicked men. Dissolute, intemperate, reckless, oppressive, his ministers have become assimilated to him; and they form parties, and contract animosities, and depend on the emperor’s power to exterminate one another. The innocent cry to Heaven.7

Here, as in the Book of Songs, violence is present by implication; details are absent. Later in the same speech, King Wu offers the most graphic description of violence to be found in the writings of the period. Speaking still of the Shang king, King Wu says, ‘He cut through the leg-bones of those who were wading in the morning; he cut out the heart of the worthy man. By the use of his power killing and murdering, he has poisoned and sickened all within the four seas’.8 Violence is present, to be sure, but details are few, and the actor responsible is the opposite of heroic.

The speeches in the Book of Documents portray the Zhou revolt as carrying out the will of heaven to punish Shang for its criminal acts. Despite this justification, the taking of life in the course of the rebellion is generally only alluded to and not depicted at length. This reticence for at least one source extended to the exclusion of all possibility of armed combat. The reality of the Zhou takeover was, however, certainly different from this. Some 45,000 soldiers carried out the conquest, and the process must have entailed significant loss of life.9

The large-scale aspect and political importance of warfare did not lead to the valorisation of military action for its own sake, even after the eleventh century BCE. Bronze vessels from the Zhou period bear inscriptions that record honours of various sorts, including bestowals of land, privileges and material goods. References to battle waged to defend and extend Zhou territory appear on many of them. Archaeologist and historian Li Feng offers the following ninth century BCE example, juxtaposing it with the poem ‘Sixth

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8 Ibid., p. 295.
Month’ that I quoted previously: ‘It was the fifth year, third month . . . the king for the first time approached and attacked . . . Xi Jia followed the king, cutting off heads and taking prisoners. Well done, no harm. The king awarded Xi Jia four horses and a colt chariot . . .’\(^{10}\) This dispassionate presentation records violent actions without elaboration. For the creators of this inscription, the facts of loyalty and success were praiseworthy, not the skill in combat or bravery for its own sake.

In the eighth century BCE some Zhou subjects allied with culturally distinct tribes to attack the Zhou. They destroyed the Zhou capital and killed the Zhou king, ending the Western Zhou period. The Zhou moved their capital east, giving the second half of their reign its name, the Eastern Zhou (eighth to third centuries BCE). Historians divide the time from the end of the Western Zhou in the eighth century BCE to the unification of the realm in 221 BCE into three partly overlapping periods: the Eastern Zhou, which lasts until the end of the Zhou house in 256 BCE; the Spring and Autumn period of 722–481 BCE, named after a famous chronicle of the same name; and the Warring States period, which is variously dated but begins in the fifth century BCE and ends in 221 BCE.

The time from the eighth to the third century BCE was one of great and growing violence. Political divisions, ambitions and annexations as part of the slow drift towards unification in the region meant that causes for war were numerous. The expansion of armies and the development of military technology heralded killing on a larger scale than had existed previously. Infantry forces ranged up to as many as 100,000 troops around the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. In the third century they expanded further, and later reports speak of 240,000 troops who supposedly died at one battle, 150,000 at another, and 400,000 at a third. These numbers of course do not merit credence as exact counts; but they reflect the absolute impression of rapidly growing armed violence and violent death on a great scale.\(^{11}\) At the same time, the period saw an amazing intellectual fluorescence, even as centuries of war dragged on, giving rise to the greatest philosophers in Chinese history. Their teachings bear the mark of the continuing violence that was their historical backdrop.


Sunzi

*The Art of War* provides an entry point into the question of violence in intellectual history. It is the most important text ostensibly devoted to it. But as an example it is also complicated, and taken in its entirety it reflects the ambivalence of classical Chinese culture towards violence. Its putative author, Sun Wu or Sunzi (Master Sun, c. sixth to fifth centuries BCE), is little known except for a brief narrative in the *Grand Scribe’s Records*, from around 100 BCE. This account relates how Sunzi demonstrated for the king his ability to create an army out of any group. The king challenged Sunzi to make a fighting force out of ladies in the royal harem and the general did so. The cost was the lives of two of the king’s favourites, who giggled upon receiving commands rather than obeying: Sunzi had them executed to demonstrate the seriousness of obedience to the commander’s order. The other ladies subsequently took the training more seriously. This account belongs to a period much later than the text for which Sunzi is famous, *The Art of War*. And while there is much in *The Art of War* about killing, there, too, violence is attenuated and deprecated.

Sunzi’s work enjoins the reader repeatedly and explicitly to avoid violence. It stresses the costs and the risks of war, and says, ‘to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting’. In the *Art of War*, the best general achieves his goals without battle: ‘the skilful leader subdues the enemy’s troops without any fighting’ (pp. 15, 17). Presented is a military theorist’s version of the same calculus the poems from the *Book of Odes* display: violence brings with it costs. It is considering the costs, rather than any glory that might accrue through fighting, that *The Art of War* recommends when deciding upon a course of action that might lead to war.

Most of the discussion in *The Art of War* is in abstract terms, including things like strategies and tactics, preparations for war, and the necessary frame of mind. Content that might otherwise be directly violent generally comes in the form of metaphor. Thus, when describing the force that an army should exhibit, *The Art of War* says, ‘the impact of your army [should] be like the grindstone dashed against an egg’ (p. 27). The text repeatedly employs imagery from nature to make its point, forgoing the opportunity

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13 Ibid., pp. 37–8.
to delight in blood. It recommends, for instance: ‘The onset of troops is like the rush of a torrent which will even roll stones along its course. The quality of decision is like the well-timed swoop of a falcon which enables it to strike and destroy its victim’ (p. 29). *The Art of War* in this way manages to talk at length about the topic of war without giving it an ounce of glory.

**Confucius**

Confucius (551 BCE–479 BCE) was a teacher and never held any military position. Given the historical context of his life, however, it is unsurprising that violence is prominent in the best-known collection of his sayings, the *Analects*. The *Analects* contains many references to violence at the level of the state, particularly in the form of war.15 Indeed, it portrays Confucius himself as becoming caught up in military action and as sometimes demonstrating a willingness to align himself with those violently resisting their overlords. The *Analects* depicts a society in which military preparations are standard and the martial skill of archery represents one’s personal attainments. More than once Confucius employs imagery from the violence of war in reflecting upon positive personal qualities. Barend ter Haar has noted: ‘Confucius ... was not at all against violence, albeit within the context of proper behaviour’.16 Yet, for Confucius, only the truly moral ruler could properly initiate the violence that would serve to suppress disorder.

Confucius once imagined himself as a general, describing the troops he would select as a way to describe the qualities he valued. Yet he also disclaimed any actual knowledge of command. And while he listed arms among the conditions for quality governance, he also named them as the one that could most easily be done without. Perhaps most tellingly, violence would have no place in Confucius’ ideal political order: ‘How true is the saying that after a state has been ruled for a hundred years by good men it is possible to get the better of cruelty and to do away with killing’.17 The sum impression is that he was a man with a pragmatic understanding of violence as a part of society, especially his society, but also as something humanity would be better off without.

Intellectual Heirs of Confucius

The most famous follower of Confucius is Mencius (c. fourth century BCE), who was born around a century after the Master died. Mencius lived during a period of political division and conflict, and the eponymous text Mencius reflects its times. Like Confucius, Mencius employed war as an illustration and allowed that it was excusable in certain conditions. Yet his basic position was that war is always bad; it was just that in some situations it was less bad than in others.

Mencius stressed the inferiority of force as a means for achieving political goals even more than Confucius did, portraying war as a demonstration of a ruler’s shortcomings, not leadership abilities. The ideal ruler would dislike all bloodshed and govern through moral power rather than violence. Mencius spoke strongly against offensive warfare that would subject the population to violence in order to expand their ruler’s territory, saying, ‘A benevolent man would not even take from one man to give to another, let alone seek territory at the cost of human lives.’ 18

He is most famous as a proponent of humane governance, and he presents compassion as an intrinsic human trait. The king’s duties included showing compassion to those he governed. Mencius views this responsibility as so serious that he presents mistreating the common population or permitting them to starve through misrule as ethically equal to violence. Actual violence on the part of a ruler was the antithesis of proper government. In the case of misrule – if a king should fail in his duty to care for the people – Mencius even threatened the possibility of direct violence in the form of popular rebellion culminating in regicide: ‘Take heed! What you mete out will be paid back to you’ (pp. 70–1).

The other great early intellectual adherent of Confucius was Xunzi (c. third century BCE), who is best known for his contention that human beings are by nature selfish and disorderly. According to him, if left uncorrected, those flaws would lead to contention and violence. Xunzi advocated self-improvement, which was to bring one to a state of propriety and moral correctness. Violence appears repeatedly in the text Xunzi as the functional opposite of that propriety. Xunzi differentiates between ‘arrogance or violent temper’ and the firm resolution that results from legitimate moral certainty. 19 It

similarly distinguishes between the courage of a cultivated person and the thoughtless daring of a low person or an animal. Devotion to right action might lead a gentleman into danger, but never heedlessly. That same adherence to proper behaviour means that, ‘Even if they could obtain the whole world by . . . killing a single innocent person, they would not do it’ (pp. 54–5).

_Xunzi_ is primarily occupied with political and social matters and expresses a now familiar focus on moral correctness and an aversion to improper violence in those realms as well. For while a good ruler will not wilfully do violence to others, nor will he permit harm to come to those in his care. The commission of violence in order to defend others or to preserve order in society might sometimes be unavoidable. But the text is clear that even the defensive use of force is inferior to proper political rule, which would of itself prevent disorder and violence, obviating the need for all violence. That governance could only come about through the exercise of the ruler’s moral power, and the presence of any violence in a state thus signals the absence of that potency.

_Xunzi_ presents a similar conception of moral power working at the level of inter-state relations. Its ideal situation is one in which the exercise of military force would be unnecessary. It portrays even the annexation of another state as something better accomplished through rectitude than fighting. The ability to obtain victory without actual violence is the mark of a superior ruler. At the same time, though, _Xunzi_ offers a number of guidelines for the behaviour of a general during war, most of which set out situations in which lives are to be spared.

_Mozi_

Many figures in the intellectual history of China are hazy, but Mozi (c. fifth century BCE) is particularly so. Basically nothing is reliably known about him, although he offered what is often seen as the most important alternative to Confucius’ ideas among the early thinkers. The text _Mozi_ was influential and violence is prominent in its presentation. As part of its fundamental interest in universal caring as a philosophical principle, it argues at length against military aggression because of the harm it does to the common people who do the actual fighting and because of its costs to the state.

The _Mozi_ likens unnecessary war to murder. In a fashion typical of the text, it makes its argument in the form of a ponderous logical chain. It begins by listing acts of theft, each more serious than the previous, then caps the list by bringing in murder, which is more grave than even the worst theft. Thus, it
says, ‘If someone kills a man, he is condemned as unrighteous and must pay for his crime with his own life’. The argument proceeds step by step, condemning one who murders ten or a hundred, and asserting that everyone would support the punishment of execution to punish such a crime. The contrast with war follows:

Now all the gentlemen in the world know enough to condemn such crimes and brand them as unrighteous. And yet when it comes to the even greater unrighteousness of offensive warfare against other states, they do not know enough to condemn it. On the contrary, they praise it and call it righteous.

(ibid.)

The Mozi thus puts harm done to others on a continuum. Violence lies on this continuum, of course, but is not qualitatively distinct from stealing, only of a greater gravity. Mozi criticises furthermore the steps rulers take to inspire or compel their troops to fight. Yet not all warfare is unacceptable in his presentation. It is sometimes necessary to punish a state that has done wrong.

Shang Yang

While violence plays an important but relatively small part in the texts already discussed, it stands at the very centre of another work, The Book of Lord Shang. Shang Yang was a high official in the state of Qin before unification, where he won fame for many changes to government. The book bearing his name makes clear the connection between external warfare and violence within a society, something other texts seem to accept but leave implicit. The title of one chapter, ‘Agriculture and War’, summarises the central themes of the text. In essence it treats martial violence and agriculture, which Wang places in opposition, as sides of a single coin. If a state does not pursue both, according to The Book of Lord Shang, it will weaken itself and face conquest.

The Book of Lord Shang makes concrete suggestions for policies to add incentives for actions a ruler wishes to encourage, which should be waging war and growing crops. It suggests, for instance, making it so that beheading an enemy releases a soldier from paying taxes. The goal is to turn warfare from something that the common population understandably feared into something they relished as a route to privilege. This is the sort of military that

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the ruler would be able to make into an effective force for preserving, strengthening and enriching his state.

*The Book of Lord Shang* posits an unexpected corollary to this. This text argues that when a state successfully develops its military strength, it is then more or less obliged to turn to external warfare. If not, the same strength that enables the state’s army to be victorious will reverse to become internal weakness. The text thus presents an economy of violence, in which ferocity that is not spent turns to work against the state that nurtured it; external violence substitutes for internal disorder. Legal punishments, also violent, are the way for the ruler to enforce the laws. Stability – in form of the absence of violence within a state – would result from proper governance. The combination of military activity, agricultural production and an effective legal system would eventually bring lasting peace and a society characterised by humaneness and concern, without killing. Indeed, Shang Yang’s ideas can be understood as ultimately encouraging cooperation. Yet the ideal of a humane society was, as *The Book of Lord Shang* presents it, far removed from the reality of its time. That transformation would not happen without violence; hence, the text argues, ‘Kindness has its origin in force’.

**Han Feizi**

The final important pre-imperial philosopher is Han Feizi (d. 233 BCE), famous as ‘the synthesiser of legalism’ and credited with strongly influencing the policies of the Qin dynasty. The text *Han Feizi* concentrates on addressing the ruler, hence its appeals are often to politics. One of the main notions of the text, which has a chapter devoted to it, is the ‘two handles’ that form the basis of rule: punishment and reward. But violence appears not only in that legal context but also in political situations as part of the relations between states. Perhaps most relevant here is the space it gives to homicide as a tool of political intrigue: ‘secret poisonings, stranglings, and knifings’ (p. 86). It even cites another, no longer extant text that presents a startling statistic: ‘Less than half of all rulers die from illness’ (p. 87). To get a better understanding of

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how that extreme picture – even discounted for hyperbole – could have existed, we need to look to more distinctly historical sources.

**Annals**

The historiographical tradition in China emerged alongside these philosophical texts. The most important extant historiographical text dating to this period is called simply *Annals*, a title sometimes translated literally as *Spring and Autumn*. The *Annals* is a compressed record of historical events in the pre-unification state of Lu in 772 BCE–481 BCE. Its succinctness is alleviated in the received version by the *Zuo Commentary*, which accompanies it in all transmitted versions. Despite its name, the *Zuo Commentary* is itself historical; it is not primarily a set of explanations of or glosses on the *Annals*, although it contains some of those things.

Violence features largely in both the *Annals* and the *Zuo Commentary*. Military violence must inevitably form part of any account of such a turbulent period, including these two. But while war is there, its narratives are undorned. In the first year of the *Annals*, for instance, comes this record: ‘Summer, fifth month, Zhengbo defeated Duan in Yan’. The record could not be more cursory. Records of political killings are impressively common in the *Annals* and the *Zuo Commentary*, which doubtless reflects the violence of the period. The presentation of those acts, too, lacks all detail. This is in keeping with the attitude towards violence in transmitted culture, which acknowledges it but limits its presence in textual accounts.

According to early hermeneutics, Confucius edited the *Annals* and the extremely brief descriptions of events contain in compressed form his judgments about them. Things like individual word choices and the presence or absence of personal names become, in this reading, indications of whether Confucius approved or disapproved of an action. While Confucius is unlikely actually to be responsible, the *Annals* does convey information through word choice, including in its accounts of violence.

In some situations it uses the verb ‘to kill’, such as in reference to the killing of nobles from outside Lu. Thus, at one place it records: ‘Someone from Chen killed their nobleman, Gongzi Guo’. This term contrasts with that used when, for instance, the *Annals* records the murder of a lord, which is

27 Ibid., 4.
referred to as assassination: ‘Xia Zhengshu of Chen assassinated his ruler, Pingguo’. The choice of terminology could then reflect a judgement about, for instance, the legitimacy of someone who claimed a position and was killed. In this understanding, the reluctance to depict violence turns identifying and evaluating those responsible for it into a hermeneutic exercise.

The era that followed the years covered by the Annals was the Warring States period. Its historical records are of a distinctly different character. In the present forms, the sources date to the early imperial period. They, particularly the most important one, the Historian’s Records (Shiji), reflect a new historiographical development in the willingness to depict violence. This willingness, I argue, grew out of events of the early imperial period. To understand these records, I will first shift to the early imperial context.

The Imperial Transition

The first house to rule a politically unified China was the Qin dynasty. In 221 BCE, during the reign of man who became the First Emperor of Qin, the Qin overcame the states with whom they had long contended and ended the Warring States period. The Qin dynasty, its achievements and its reception embody the equivocal position of violence in Chinese history and thought. The Qin themselves portrayed their dynasty as arising out of and then ending the time of violent conflict that was the Warring States. But the dynasty ended quickly and immediately thereafter became the subject of a critical historiography that has dominated perceptions of it ever since.

The Qin went to great pains to make their success in unifying the realm known across their new empire. One of the first changes to the laws that they made was to replace varying local systems with a new set of standard weights and measures. The following claim prefaced the command ordering the implementation of the system: ‘In the twenty-sixth year of his reign (221 BCE), the emperor unified the lords of the realm, [and] the common people had great peace’. This presents the two sides of the unification from the perspective of the Qin, both of which were linked to violence: on the one hand is the pacification of the different states; on the other, the peace the common population was to enjoy.

A series of steles put up in prominent places throughout the realm gives clear voice to these tendencies. An inscription on one proclaims: ‘Warfare

28 Ibid., 5.
will not arise again! / Disaster and harm are exterminated and erased.\textsuperscript{30} Another describes the Qin achievement as ‘having pacified all under heaven’.\textsuperscript{31} Still another claims, ‘Rebellion and banditry are wiped out and gone’.\textsuperscript{32} Thus, as the Qin presented it, their political unification ended violence both in terms of military conflict between the states they had subsumed and in terms of criminality within the territory that constituted the new empire.

The advantages of peace for the realm’s populace cannot be doubted. Yet a profound discomfort about the process of unification emerges in the steles’ repeated justifications for the act. One says of the First Emperor, the ‘August Thearch’, who stands \textit{pars pro toto} for Qin rule,

\begin{quote}
The six kingdoms had been restive and perverse,
Greedy and criminal, insatiable –
Atrociously slaughtering endlessly.
The August Thearch felt pity for the multitudes,
And consequently sent out His punitive troops,
Vehemently displaying His martial power.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

Another stele says the goal was ‘To punish and behead the lawless’.\textsuperscript{34} The results of these actions and subsequent enlightened rule, the steles claim, brought benefits that penetrated all of society. One inscription says the following of the commoners, whom it refers to as ‘black-haired people’:

\begin{quote}
The black-haired people are peaceful and tranquil,
And do not use weapons and armour.
Within the six kin relations, they protect each other,
So that ultimately there are no bandits and robbers.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Even if we grant that the Qin felt concern for the common population of the realm, to characterise the unification as done on their behalf is of course disingenuous. That said, the peace of the realm and the highly effective Qin government systems surely brought with them a decrease in violence for the ordinary populace compared to the years of the Warring States period. It is reasonable both to doubt some Qin claims and yet to give credence to others.

When the Qin dynasty fell, in 207 BCE, it did so due to a variety of factors, many internal. The years that followed saw civil war that lasted until the Han dynasty established itself in 202 BCE. The governmental system the Han put in place was essentially a reconstitution of the Qin structure. Although

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 21.  \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 47.  \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 36.  \textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 41.  \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 32.
changes and developments began almost immediately, the Han faced a problem of legitimacy. They were subjects of the Qin dynasty, and the condign course of actions would have been to restore the Qin. That, however, would have meant giving up power. The Han responded to this incongruity with a highly critical portrayal of their predecessors that turned many of what the Qin dynasty had portrayed as its virtues into criticisms. This reversed the Qin dynasty’s portrayal of itself as bringing peace to the realm, turning it into a narrative of violent tyranny.36

Han historical records neither elide violence nor present it in the flat forms familiar from earlier texts. This is not limited to depictions of the Qin, but I suggest that the problematisation of violence among the philosophers, followed by the Qin claims of pacification, and Han period revisionism led to a shift in presentation. Violence was criticised, to be sure, implicitly or directly; but we find in the Han sources narratives filled with gore that are without precedent in the earlier texts.

A startling example of the violence the Historian’s Records presents comes in its portrayal of the widow of the Han dynasty’s founder. She never held formal political power, but is known as Empress Lü because she in fact ruled after her husband’s death. The Historian’s Records, dating to around 100 BCE, has the following account of how she dealt with the mother of a potential rival to her son: ‘Empress Lü later cut off Lady Ch’i’s hands and feet, plucked out her eyes, burned her ears, gave her a potion to drink which made her dumb, and had her thrown into the privy’.37 The brutality of this narrative suggests exaggeration rather than historical accuracy. The events themselves date to the time before Sima Qian was alive, indicating that he was probably not alone in his willingness to write violence in a new way. Yet the fact of its representation is something not seen in any extant pre-Han text.

Revenge

The discussion here so far has treated violence mainly in terms of government-sanctioned actions. But there is one individual-level locus for much violence in early China: revenge. While revenge is not entirely outside the broader developments in portrayals of violence, the attitudes

36 Sanft, Communication and Cooperation.
expressed toward it are different. For it is the one type of violence that receives moral approbation in early sources.\textsuperscript{38}

As I have shown, early texts generally exhibit negative attitudes about violence as a tool of governance. But things get complicated when it comes to revenge. The canonical \textit{Ritual Record}, for instance, is a compendium of proper behaviour of all sorts. It expresses, with varying degrees of stridency, the duty of vengeance that falls upon one when a father, a brother or a friend has been killed. Another classic, the \textit{Zhou Rituals}, expresses its version of ritual ideals through the depiction of a theoretical government bureaucracy. One of its many officials is supposed to assist the common population with difficulties, including ritually proper revenge. It furthermore explicitly allows for cases of homicide that are morally proper and thus not subject to revenge. The strongest canonical expressions in favour of violent retribution for wrongs come in the \textit{Gongyang Commentary}, another exegesis on the \textit{Annals}. It declares absolutely the duty of a vassal to violently avenge the killing of his lord.\textsuperscript{39}

The trend toward increasing willingness to depict violence in Han sources is visible in tales of vengeance. The story of one famous example illustrates these developments. The man Yu Rang supposedly lived in the time around the fifth century BCE. His lord was killed by an enemy whose enmity was so extreme that he made the lord’s skull into a cup. Yu Rang was determined to obtain vengeance and the narrative of his attempts, including repeated attacks, the harm he did to himself by way of disguise, and his final capture and death are worthy of Dumas. What is most indicative in terms of the moral perspective on revenge is that Yu Rang is praised for rectitude by none other than the man he seeks to kill.\textsuperscript{40}

While these events are supposed to date to the Warring States period, records of them come to us in forms achieved centuries later, primarily in the \textit{Historian’s Records} from around 100 BCE and still later compilations. There was surely original source material of some sort, but it is impossible to separate later additions from any original account. The bare bones accounts of killings in the \textit{Annals} and \textit{Zuo Commentary} suggest that embellishment seems likely. Indeed, even the canonical sources that speak favourably about revenge are late. How late exactly is a matter of discussion among specialists,


\textsuperscript{40} Nienhauser et al., \textit{Grand Scribe’s Records}, pp. 321–3.
but the general trend of developing attitudes toward violence and its depiction is, based on present evidence, clear; there was a shift in how violence was presented in early Chinese sources from before imperial unification and after.

Conclusion
This overview has sketched a history of violence in early China as seen in the sources available today. The fact of violence was, by all appearances, constant, varying only in the disuse of certain forms—such as human sacrifice—and the expansion of others—such as large-scale battles. Expressed attitudes about violence remained always equivocal. There is nevertheless a discernible arc of development leading from a textual sublimation of violent imagery to the ready depiction of even extreme cruelty. I suggest that the Qin dynasty made violence and its overcoming a topic of its self depiction. In their bid for legitimacy, their Han successors took this up and turned it around, to present the Qin as violent oppressors. Around the same time we see authors, especially the historian Sima Qian, presenting more detailed narratives of violence. Like any development, this one surely had numerous causes. Qin rhetoric and the legitimating Han historiography were the most visible and determinative aspects of this shift.

Bibliographic Essay
Violence as an independent topic has received relatively infrequent attention in the context of early China, although there have been quite a few studies on it in later times. By far the most useful reference for locating Western-language research on violence in all periods of Chinese history is Barend ter Haar’s ‘Violence in Chinese Culture’, https://bjterhaa.home.xs4all.nl/violence.htm, accessed 3 July 2019. The best study is Mark Edward Lewis’s Sanctioned Violence in Early China (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999). Here Lewis employs a broad conception of violence and draws on an array of sources to examine social development during the Warring States period in terms of violence. Barend ter Haar has published articles on violence in various periods, including ‘Rethinking “Violence” in Chinese Culture’, in Göran Aijmer and Jon Abbink (eds.), Meanings of Violence: A Cross Cultural Perspective (Oxford: Berg, 2000). A notable article on the hermeneutics of the Annals and its commentaries is Newell Ann Van Auken, ‘Killings and Assassinations in the Spring and Autumn as Records of Judgment’, Asia Major n.s. 27.1 (2014), 1–31.

Due to the paucity of secondary studies, the best way to examine the role of violence often remains direct engagement with the texts. Many scholars have translated the Analects, a text whose brevity belies its complexity. D. C. Lau’s translation, often

The Art of War has been the subject of innumerable books, many of which are aimed at popular audiences. For a notable translation which makes use of an excavated manuscript version of the text, see Roger T. Ames (trans.), Sun-tzu: The Art of Warfare. The First English Translation Incorporating the Recently Discovered Yin-ch’üeh-shan Texts (New York: Ballantine, 1993). For a recent scholarly study, see Derek M. C. Yuen, Deciphering Sun Tzu: How to Read ‘The Art of War’ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). One issue related to violence that has received attention concerns the philosophical questions around the acceptability of military force in various periods; see, for example, the articles in Peter A. Lorge (ed.), Debating War in Chinese History (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

PART IV

* RELIGION, RITUAL AND VIOLENCE
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Ritual Violence and Headhunting in Iron Age Europe

IAN ARMIT

Violence in prehistory took many forms and was perpetrated in a wide range of social contexts from the small-scale domestic sphere to all-out warfare involving thousands of participants.¹ The societies of the European Iron Age varied widely in their scale and complexity across both time and space. In many regions, communities had relatively flat social hierarchies and limited specialisation of individuals. This was most probably the case, for example, across much of Britain and Ireland during the Early and Middle Iron Age.² Elsewhere, however, we see signs of considerable social complexity and the presence of large political centres: recent work at the Early Iron Age centre of the Heuneburg in southern Germany has generated population estimates of around 5,000 for the sixth century BCE,³ while Late Iron Age oppida in central and western Europe may have housed up to around 10,000 in the first century BCE. To find linking themes across the period is thus challenging, yet there are sufficient similarities, for example in language, art styles, material objects and forms of votive deposition, to suggest certain underlying commonalities in cosmology and religious belief.

Traditionally, these cultural commonalities were encompassed within the concept of a pan-European Celtic culture. While this ethnically tinged concept has been comprehensively deconstructed in recent years,⁴ there remains

general agreement that ‘barbarian’ societies across much of central, western and northern Europe shared a cultural background that can be meaningfully distinguished from their contemporaries around the Mediterranean. This chapter focuses on the ritualisation of violence among these societies, including those particularly interesting examples located at the interface between the ‘civilised’ Mediterranean and the barbarian world of the north and west.

Although the ritualisation of violence in Iron Age Europe has long been recognised, the archaeological evidence has often been considered through the distorting lens of classical literary sources. The first century CE poet Lucan, for example, describes a hidden forest glade near Massalia in southern France, where gory human remains were offered up before rough carved images of fearsome Celtic gods. Such passages, usually taken out of context, have been used to interpret archaeological remains from widely disparate times and places across Iron Age Europe. In fact, Lucan’s work is peppered with episodes of extreme violence, whether describing Romans, Celts or anyone else, and this particular passage has little claim to reliability. Nonetheless, signs of violent, perimortem trauma and the complex processing of human remains have typically been seen as evidence for Druidic sacrifice or the ‘Celtic cult of the head’. What has been lacking has been a more anthropological perspective on ritual violence, drawing analogies with societies documented through the ethnographic literature rather than relying on the biased and fragmentary accounts of the classical authors.

This chapter follows Richard Bradley in suggesting that ritualisation exists where ‘certain parts of life are selected and provided with an added emphasis’. This ‘added emphasis’ can be seen as an element of formalisation accompanying the performance of certain actions. Ritualised activity might comprise small, private acts intended to elaborate on routine activities, or else it might be larger-scale group performances. Archaeologically, ritualised performances can be recognised in a number of ways, from the frequent occurrence of structured deposits (in which consciously selected objects have been deposited in particular ways) in houses, enclosures, hill forts and the wider landscape, to the construction of formal sanctuaries or temples. As we shall see, they can also be recognised through the specific nature of violent injuries inflicted on individuals, particularly those found preserved as ‘bog bodies’. In small-scale societies, lacking institutionalised hierarchies, we would characteristically expect a good deal of creative innovation in such

practices, perhaps influenced by the personalities of charismatic individuals such as shamans, while more complex societies might be expected to build up bodies of formal religious knowledge that generate more standardised ritual performances and the emergence of organised priesthoods.

Although archaeologists have long tended to distinguish between ritual and functional actions, this is a false dichotomy. Ritualised acts were far from being empty gestures dictated by tradition: through their intercession with the supernatural world, for example, through the appeasement or engagement of spirits, gods or ancestors, they were intended to have direct practical outcomes. These outcomes might include the good health of the individual or his/her family, success in war, personal wealth, or the fertility of crops and animals. What appears from the outside as irrational, for example, headhunting or the deposition of human bodies in peat bogs, may thus be profoundly practical in its intentions.

An erroneous distinction has also frequently been drawn between violence and ritual, with evidence for symbolism in weaponry and fortifications (notably Iron Age hill forts) being taken to suggest that they were not intended for actual use. As is clear from the ethnographic record, however, ritual acts can often be very bloody, and warfare is never free of a symbolic dimension. The following review thus takes the position that ritualised acts were instrumental in their intent, and that symbolism and violence were as intimately intertwined in past societies as they are today.

Hill Forts and the Ritualisation of War

In many parts of Europe the monuments that most characterise the Iron Age are hill forts. The nomenclature reflects the traditional assumption that these large, strongly built enclosures, usually set on hilltops, promontories or other prominent locations, were fortifications, reflecting unstable and violent societies. While Continental scholarship has largely continued to see them in this light, debate has raged in the anglophone literature about the degree to which Iron Age hill forts reflect symbolic rather than actual warfare. Much of this debate has centred on the well-studied hill fort landscapes of Wessex, in central southern England, where key sites such as Danebury and Maiden Castle have dominated much of the discussion. These large multivallate hill forts...
forts (that is, with multiple close-spaced ramparts and ditches), like others in the region, were transformed over the course of the Iron Age from relatively simple beginnings, through the progressive addition of extra circuits, heightened banks, deeper ditches and huge, maze-like entrance outworks.

Traditionally, these great Wessex hill forts were seen as evolving in response to developments in sling-based warfare, each innovation intended to enhance the advantage of the defenders over the attackers. The vision which emerged was one of highly organised warfare conducted by armies staffed by suspiciously modern-sounding ‘military engineers’, ‘commissariats’ and ‘battalions’. This position, however, came under attack from the 1980s onwards as general interpretations of the nature of Iron Age society shifted with the increasing adoption of post-processual and symbolic perspectives in archaeology. In relation to the Wessex hill forts specifically, a number of apparent shortcomings were highlighted with regards to the defensive capabilities of these sites. First, it was argued that the enormous circuits of sites like Maiden Castle would have required unrealistically large numbers of defenders given the likely population size of the region during the Iron Age. Second, the lack of physical linkage between the various ramparts would appear to isolate defenders on the outer circuits, making it impossible for them to fall back effectively. Third, the high ramparts and deep ditches created ‘dead ground’ where attackers could move unseen, disadvantaging the defenders. Fourth, hill forts often reoccupied sites where much earlier monuments, such as Neolithic causewayed enclosures and chambered tombs, evidenced a history of veneration and religious significance. Fifth, some hill forts were overlooked from higher ground or had their defences positioned in such a way that their interiors were visible, giving onlookers a clear sight of the deployment of defending forces. Perhaps the most critical disadvantage for the defenders, however, was the lack of a secure water source inside almost all Wessex hill forts, a phenomenon that is true of similar sites across much of the Continent and which appears to preclude any

seriously defensive function, since it meant that hill forts could not be held against a prolonged siege.

Given the nature of broader archaeological debate during the 1980s and 1990s, these issues tended to polarise discussion; hill forts were taken to be either defensive or symbolic. In the latter case, their multiple concentric ramparts and ditches were taken to signify social exclusion and exclusivity rather than a concern for defence, while their complex entrances signalled the passage from the day-to-day world of farms, fields and villages to the sacred world within. Their spatial correspondence to earlier funerary and religious monuments implied a similarly spiritual intent on the part of the hill fort builders. Views into the interior were intended to enable onlookers to observe the performance of rituals by religious specialists or elite groups inside the hill forts. Hill forts became seen as essentially sacred spaces, their superficial likeness to defensive enclosures no more than a coincidence.

This symbolic interpretation, however, has itself come under attack in recent years, in part due to the wider recognition of the ubiquity and significance of warfare in non-state societies. An important part has also been played, however, by the analysis of Iron Age human remains, which has revealed strikingly high levels of interpersonal violence, including evidence for repeated episodes of trauma throughout the lives of certain individuals. The undoubted symbolic dimensions of hill fort construction were thus evidently underpinned by the very real existence of inter-communal violence on a significant scale. This interplay of symbolism and violence should come as no surprise. Symbolism does not exist in a vacuum; it must be underpinned by actions and beliefs in the ‘real’ world. Thus a symbolism focused on defensive isolation is unlikely to emerge in a society thoroughly at peace with itself.

The application of lethal violence is of course thoroughly enmeshed with symbolism in most, if not all, societies. Even the most technologically sophisticated modern Western army retains its uniforms, badges, medals and mascots. Conventions that we might regard as symbolic could be

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incorporated in lethal inter-communal conflict even where they appear to be enormously disadvantageous to the participants. The North American Pequot, for example, did not use fire as a weapon of war and their palisaded timber enclosures were thus useless when attacked by seventeenth-century English colonists. The Mohegan and Narragansett allies of these colonists were similarly appalled by the massacre of non-combatants, which was equally alien to indigenous practice.15 The failure of indigenous New England tribes to massacre their enemies and burn their villages does not mean that the internecine warfare they had previously practised was ‘purely symbolic’. It simply reflects different cultural understandings of appropriate and acceptable behaviour. Lest it be assumed that such seemingly ill-adaptive practices are confined to non-state societies, we should remember that officers in colonial militias of the same period were regularly picked off by sniper fire due to their refusal to abandon the bright, colourful and highly visible uniforms that signalled their authority and prestige. Conflict and violence are imbued with culturally and historically specific conventions in all societies, but this should clearly not be taken to suggest that warfare is simply symbolic.

With this recognition, we can start to interpret some of the practices and beliefs that might have underpinned warfare in the Iron Age. In relation to hill forts, for example, we can address some of the objections to the traditional ‘military’ interpretation by framing our understandings of Iron Age warfare in the context of a society where honour and prestige were key social values, and where cosmological factors were woven into all aspects of life. The siting of Iron Age hill forts on locations occupied by earlier monuments may suggest that the gods or ancestors were being invoked to protect the community and add spiritual strength to the physical defences of ramparts and ditches. The frequent burial of animals, humans or objects under hill fort ramparts, and the display of trophies at gateways,16 may have had a similar apotropaic function that accentuates, rather than undermines, the perceived need for security.

The lack of water within hill forts suggests that sieges were not an anticipated element of indigenous warfare during the Iron Age. It is perhaps instructive that Caesar’s description of his siege of the Gaulish stronghold of Uxellodunum describes how the key to success was the ability of the Roman

army to cut the defenders off from the spring which lay outside the walls of the oppidum. As with the encounters between alien ways of war in seventeenth-century North America, the clash of Roman and indigenous values created a fatal asymmetry.

If hill forts were not designed to withstand sieges, then conflict is likely to have been more formally staged. It seems probable that the complex entrances of many hill forts acted as focal points for attack and defence, while the relatively flat areas outside some hill fort entrances (notably the early period defences at Maiden Castle) would have created highly visible venues for formalised acts of aggression, perhaps between nominated champions.

Many of the other objections to the defensive role of hill forts can also be dismissed as ethnocentric and based on modern military misunderstandings of indigenous Iron Age warfare. 'Dead ground', for example, is a meaningless concept when the major weapon is the sling, which can kill an opponent who may be entirely out of sight. The lack of physical connection between the concentric ramparts of multivallate hill forts can easily be overcome by means of moveable ladders or even knotted ropes that could be pulled up behind the retreating defenders. In summary, the lesson from the analysis of hill forts is that warfare was real, deadly, and (judging from the thousands of such monuments built at enormous cost in terms of time, energy and resources) central to Iron Age life. Like all other aspects of the period, however, warfare was also highly ritualised and an arena for social display.

Weapons and People: Depositions in Natural Places

The interplay of symbolism and violence seen in the design and construction of Iron Age hill forts is mirrored in the weaponry of the period. One of the most distinctive components of material culture during the period is La Tène (or Celtic) art. This distinctive style involved the use of abstract, curvilinear motifs (in opposition to the realism of classical figurative art), which was most commonly applied to valuable items of bronze and gold. Specifically it was applied to weaponry, both offensive (including swords, scabbards and spears) and defensive (including helmets and shields). These items were clearly symbolic in that they embodied elements of warrior identity and cosmology, yet they were also highly functional and capable of inflicting

17 Caes. BGall. 8.32–44.
lethal damage. As with hill forts, Iron Age weapons embodied an ethos of ritualised violence.

The design and elaboration of martial gear gives some insights into the ways in which the identities certain of Iron Age individuals (mostly men and mostly of elite status) were bound up with their actual or perceived ability to inflict lethal injury. The ultimate fate of many of these objects also informs us about the ways in which violence was celebrated and commemorated.

Aside from those found in burial contexts, most Iron Age weapons have been recovered, singly or in groups, from votive contexts, often in watery environments such as rivers, bogs and lakes. This is especially the case in Britain, Ireland and northern Europe, but also applies further south, as at the classic type site of La Tène, at Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland. Such finds form part of a broader context of ritual practice in later prehistoric Europe, where natural places, such as rivers, lakes, bogs, caves and hilltops, formed a persistent focus for communications with the supernatural.

Some of the largest and most informative weapon finds come from Scandinavia where they appear to commemorate warfare on a considerable scale. At Hjortspring, Nydam and Ejsby, in Denmark, for example, large wooden boats were transported to peatlands, where they were deposited with substantial quantities of weaponry. The practice continued over many centuries, from Hjortspring in the fourth century BCE to the final deposition at Nydam in the fourth century CE.

In the Illerup Ådal river valley, in Jutland, more than 15,000 deliberately broken weapons were deposited at various locations in a boggy, wetland environment between around 200–500 CE. At Alken Enge, in the lower part of the valley, the remains of several hundred males have been found, whose bodies had apparently been exposed after death. These appear to have been warriors, killed in a large military engagement. At broadly the same period, deposits including large quantities of iron weaponry, and the remains of around fifty men, women and children, were placed in wetlands at Skedemosse, in Sweden, suggestive of a massacre deposit.

The artefactual composition of many of these deposits is quite diverse, suggesting that they represent war booty from defeated outsiders,

19 For more detail on Iron Age weaponry, see Chapter 6 in this volume.
apparently offered to the gods in the aftermath of violent encounters. These sorts of deposits may be reflected to a degree in some of the classical sources. Paulus Orosius, writing in the early fifth century CE, for example, describes the massacre of prisoners and captured horses, and the destruction of captured weaponry, by Cimbric warriors during the late second century BCE: the Cimbri were supposed, by ancient authors such as Strabo and Tacitus, to have originated in Jutland.\footnote{24}

Outside Scandinavia, large quantities of fine Iron Age weaponry have also been recovered alongside human and animal remains at La Tène in Switzerland, seemingly cast into the waters from a timber platform from the third to first centuries BCE. The human remains included numerous crania and decapitated skeletons.\footnote{25} Similar lakeside timber structures associated with Iron Age weaponry can be found at sites like Fiskerton, in eastern England, Lisnacrogher, in Ireland, and Llyn Cerrig Bach, in Wales.\footnote{26} Elaborate metalwork has also been recovered from rivers, with notable concentrations in the Thames, the Bann and the Meuse.\footnote{27}

Gaulish Sanctuaries and the Commemoration of Violence

The sites of ritualised weapon deposition discussed so far focused on natural places of various kinds. This accords with a general perception, drawn largely from the classical authors, that the barbarians of temperate Europe eschewed temples and other formal religious buildings. Work over the past few decades, however, has revealed a quite different picture. Numerous large, formal sanctuaries containing what we might reasonably call temple buildings emerged in certain parts of Europe from the Middle Iron Age.

\footnote{24} Oros. 5.16.
Frequently the activities conducted at such places included a strong element of ritualised violence.

One of the best known of these sanctuaries is at Gournay-sur-Aronde in Picardy, northern France, which had its *floruit* in the third to second centuries BCE. Here a quadrangular enclosure contained a complex sequence of buildings that became the focus for elaborate, large-scale rituals involving the display and, ultimately, deposition of thousands of bent and broken swords, spearheads and shield fittings.\(^{28}\) There was also considerable evidence for animal sacrifice and a relatively small number of human remains that mainly comprised cranial fragments located at the gateway. As with the Scandinavian deposits, the most likely interpretation is that these weapons were obtained from defeated enemies and represent violent encounters of considerable size conducted over a lengthy period. They recall similar depositions in the Mediterranean world, for example at the pan-Hellenic sanctuaries of Delphi and Olympia. These Gaulish sanctuaries may be the sites referred to by Caesar in the first century BCE as *loci consecrati*, where the Gauls dedicated captured weaponry to the gods.\(^{29}\)

More dramatic still is the sanctuary at Ribemont-sur-Ancre, also in Picardy, which comprises a series of linked enclosures.\(^{30}\) In the corners of the northern enclosure, superficially similar to that at Gournay, were constructed at least three ossuaries built of human long bones. Mixed with the human remains (which represented around 300 adult males) were horse bones and fragments of iron weaponry. The best-preserved ossuary enclosed a pit full of cremated human and animal bone. Nearby were dense concentrations of human remains representing hundreds of adult males with significant perimortem trauma, associated with weapons dating to around 260 BCE. All appeared to have been decapitated prior to being displayed as a huge and grotesque human trophy. The heads appear to have been removed to some other location as none have been found on the site.

**Bog Bodies and Violence against the Individual**

The Gaulish sanctuaries provide evidence for the killing, mutilation and display of large numbers of people, most likely in the context of violent

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conflict between communities defined by political or ethnic differences. Violence within communities, however, was also pervasive and is reflected in a number of archaeological finds. Perhaps the most obvious victims are those human bodies found preserved in northern European peat bogs, with evidence for multiple trauma and complex mortuary treatments.\(^{31}\)

Bog bodies are found across a band of northern Europe stretching from northern Germany and southern Scandinavia in the east, to Ireland in the west (cross-cutting the supposed ethnic fault line between Celtic and Germanic societies), where the specific chemical conditions of the sphagnum-rich peat bogs promotes the survival of organic materials. It has become apparent through modern forensic analysis that many bog bodies represent individuals who were deliberately killed and deposited in cold, shallow pools within peat bogs, often in areas where peat was cut for fuel. Several of these bodies also show evidence suggestive of overkill or other forms of ritualised execution, although interpretations are complicated by the occurrence of ‘injuries’ acquired post-mortem due to the pressure and movement of the peat. Despite this caveat, it seems clear that ritualised violence of various kinds caused the deaths and deposition of these individuals.

One recent find is Oldcroghan Man, dating to the fourth or third centuries BCE, whose upper torso and arms were found in an Irish peat bog in 2003.\(^{32}\) The remains belonged to a man in his twenties who, at 1.98 metres tall, would have been an exceptional individual in his day. His height suggests that he was well nourished, which, along with his manicured nails, suggests high status. Like many bog bodies, his remains displayed a series of injuries, including defence wounds on his arms and a deep (fatal) stab wound to his chest. Torture prior to death is suggested by deep cuts to each nipple and a hazel rod strung through the muscles of each arm, to incapacitate him. After death he had been decapitated and had his upper torso deliberately severed from his lower body. The carefully staged and drawn-out nature of his death, incorporating torture and dismemberment, suggests a formal and ritualised process that presumably involved a number of participants.

Like Oldcroghan Man, the best-known British bog body, from Lindow Moss in Cheshire, was also a naked, well-nourished male in his twenties with

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manicured nails and a carefully trimmed beard.\textsuperscript{33} Although he died a few centuries after Oldcroghan Man, most likely during the first century CE, he too suffered a drawn-out death, receiving a series of axe blows to the head, then being garrotted with sufficient force to break his neck before having his throat cut. Any one of these injuries would have been sufficient to kill him. Other injuries to the body may have been caused post-mortem, by the movement of the surrounding peat, but it is possible that some of them too might have been deliberately inflicted.

Grauballe Man, found in Jutland and broadly contemporary with Oldcroghan Man, was also found naked and had had his throat slashed with such force as to almost decapitate him.\textsuperscript{34} Also in Jutland, the well-known Tollund Man\textsuperscript{35} was found with a noose around his neck; he had apparently been hanged elsewhere before being brought to the bog to be deposited in a shallow pool close to other bog bodies. In many cases, individuals had been deliberately pinned down in the water with stakes, sometimes penetrating their bodies, or held down under hurdles, and they had frequently had their heads fully or partially shaved. Occasionally only severed heads are found: one of these, known as Osterby Man, from north Germany, had his hair arranged in elaborate Suebian knots, again suggestive of high status.\textsuperscript{36}

There has been much debate over the motives underlying these killings. Tacitus’ Germania, written in the first century CE, describes how cowards, shirkers and those regarded as sexual deviants were pinned down in peat bogs.\textsuperscript{37} Alternatively some bog bodies might represent prisoners of war, failed leaders, witches or others regarded as socially marginal or undesirable in some way. Whatever the rationale behind victim selection, which may of course have been quite varied, what makes these individuals especially striking is the manner and complexity of their deaths and the desire of their killers to preserve their bodies.

The stripping naked of victims and the shaving of their hair seem designed to dehumanise and humiliate. They would presumably have involved the participation of more than one assailant. The structured sequence of injuries inflicted on several bog bodies (for example, the sequential bludgeoning, garrotting and throat-cutting of Lindow Man) is again suggestive of formalised performances involving multiple attackers.\textsuperscript{38} Through the removal of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{34} P. Asingh and N. Lynnerup (eds.), Grauballe Man: An Iron Age Bog Body Revisited (Moesgård: Jutland Archaeological Society, 2007).
\bibitem{35} Fischer, Tollund Man. \bibitem{36} Ibid., pp. 22–4. \bibitem{37} Tac. Germ. 10.11.
\bibitem{38} Armit, ‘Violence and Society’.
\end{thebibliography}
clothes and hair, victims were turned into something less than human, and symbolically cast out of the group, before being subject to ritualised killing by groups comprising either ritual specialists (Druids perhaps?) or selected members of the community. In such multiple killings, the group assumes responsibility for the death and no one individual can be held accountable.

Violence in the Domestic Sphere

Although bog bodies have attracted a high degree of prominence due to their extraordinary levels of preservation, there is evidence that similar practices were carried out in a range of other contexts. Much of this relates to lethal violence inflicted on individuals whose remains were deposited in settlements, often within pits, houses or communal areas. Although it is far more difficult to extract detailed information on the nature of these killings from skeletal remains than it is from the soft tissues of bog bodies, there are some instances where a comparable level of ritualisation can be recognised.

One such instance comes from Hornish Point, in the Western Isles of Scotland, where the remains of a young boy had been placed into four separate pits under the floor of a small stone roundhouse dating to the first or second centuries BCE. The boy had been fatally stabbed in the back, recalling Strabo’s statement, written in the first century CE, that the Gauls made prophecies by studying the death spasms of sacrificial victims killed in exactly this way. After death, the boy’s body was allowed to decompose sufficiently to enable it to be pulled apart for deposition, yet many of the small bones remained articulated: it thus appears that the body was deliberately preserved in some way, perhaps for months or years. Finally it was deposited along with the remains of young animals that been cooked and eaten, in a feast to mark the foundation of the building.

Other sacrificial killings, though on a rather larger scale, come from the settlement complex at Acy-Romance, in north-eastern France, where around twenty young adult males were buried in an unnatural, seated position in individual pits. Their constricted position suggests that they may have been buried in wooden boxes, perhaps when still alive.

40 Strabo, Geographia 4.1.13.
Many human skeletons, both partial and complete, are also found in the disused grain pits that commonly occur in hill fort interiors in southern England and northern France.\textsuperscript{42} No single explanation can account for the varied state of these bodies, but some exhibit clear evidence for violent injury, including decapitation. They are frequently associated with unusual animal deposits, including an over-representation of dogs, ravens and horses. Some individuals appear to have been bound and may have been buried alive.\textsuperscript{43} It seems likely that these individuals, whether prisoners, witches or social outcasts, were sacrificed to chthonic deities to ensure (or give thanks for) the fertility of the crops.

**Headhunting**

One recurrent theme linking many of the practices discussed so far is a concern with the removal, curation and display of the human head. Severed heads and detached crania are a frequent find on hill forts, where they were sometimes apparently displayed above gateways, and their occurrence as fleshted deposits in peat bogs has already been mentioned. They dominate the human remains assemblages at sites like Gournay, and their complete absence at Ribemont is perhaps even more remarkable, given the hundreds of human bodies present on that site. Classical authors, including Livy and Poseidonius, describe headhunting and veneration among the Celts, while Herodotus mentions similar practices among their Scythian neighbours to the east.\textsuperscript{44} Rather than representing a singular ‘cult of the head’, however, headhunting was a complex and recurrent practice that altered its character and meaning through time.

Perhaps the most striking evidence for headhunting in Iron Age Europe occurs in southern France, where a remarkable constellation of evidence comprises human remains, iconographic representations and classical literary sources. This was the area where Poseidonius describes seeing human heads displayed on the entrances to Gaulish houses in the early first century CE, and where we find a remarkable group of stone monuments, borrowing Greek


\textsuperscript{43} Barry Cunliffe, Iron Age Britain (London: Batsford, 2004), pp. 100–5.

\textsuperscript{44} Armit, Headhunting and the Body.
sculptural techniques, that focus almost obsessively on the practice of headhunting.

Early stone monuments dating to the mid first millennium BCE represent groups of severed heads in a stylised and anonymised form.\(^45\) There is no indication of the identities of specific individuals or their ethnic affiliation. Neither is there any representation of the victorious headhunter. Instead these appear to be monuments to communal success. In some cases, images of heads are associated with images of crops, suggesting that (as in many ethnographic cases) headhunting was motivated by a desire to ensure the fertility of the community and its fields. As the societies of the southern French Iron Age became more hierarchical and urbanised over the succeeding centuries, images of headhunting changed. By the third century BCE, at the religious centre of Entremont, a series of near life-size statues of cross-legged, seated warriors was carved (Figure 21.1). Each warrior, decked in armour and rich jewellery, grasped one or more human heads against its knees. Each warrior was individualised in the depiction of their hair or headgear. Similarly each severed head was carefully carved to show distinctive facial features, hair and headgear, presumably enabling the original audience to identify either individuals or ethnic groups. Headhunting had transformed, within a few centuries, from an essentially cosmological practice intended to bring fertility to the community into a highly politicised activity in which certain elite individuals took it upon themselves to mediate between the community and the supernatual through their ability to inflict lethal violence.

Osteoarchaeological evidence for headhunting in various forms extends far beyond southern France. Indeed, skull remains are found in settlements all across Iron Age Europe. As well as the hill forts, settlements, peat bogs and rivers described earlier in this chapter, they are also found at a range of other natural places. At the Trou de Han cave system, in Belgium, for example, among other finds of human crania and fine bronze metalwork, a group of seven mandibles with cut marks characteristic of decapitation were found in a deliberate deposit below a hearth.\(^46\) Radiocarbon dates ranging from around 200 BCE to 100 CE show that these bones had been curated for some time before their final deposition. A few centuries later at least six people were

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45 Ibid., esp. ch. 4.
Figure 21.1 Reconstruction of one of the third-century BCE warrior statues from Entremont, Provence. The figure is a composite assembled from numerous fragments.
decapitated within the Sculptor’s Cave, in north-eastern Scotland, a site which had been used as a place for excarnation of the dead during the Late Bronze Age.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Archaeological evidence suggests that ritualised violence was core to Iron Age cosmologies. Violence against individuals was instrumental in securing benefits for the group, whether that be through the taking and curating of heads from enemy communities, or the scapegoating of marginal individuals who might be killed and staked down in peat bogs, buried under hill fort ramparts or in house foundations. Violence involving larger corporate groups was also endemic and had direct social, economic and political impacts for Iron Age societies across the Continent.

The celebration and commemoration of violence is a major feature of Iron Age archaeology, whether it be in the elaboration beyond functional necessity of hill fort defences, or the transformation of sword scabbards and shields into entrancing artworks. As in many non-state societies, the capacity to defend one’s community, and potentially to attack others, was highly valued and became a core component of individual and group identities. In the absence of overarching authorities, competition over land and resources would have led inevitably to inter-communal conflict and cycles of tit-for-tat violence. In such societies it becomes important to engage in displays of strength, both to deter potential enemies and to cement intra-group feelings of security and autonomy. The embellishment of personal weaponry in particular hints at what can be called ‘cultures of honour’, ‘where the ability to deal out violence in response to perceived slights, or in defence of one’s economic interests, was essential to success in societies lacking any wider institutions capable of regulating conflict’.⁴⁸

A further persistent and pervasive theme in the archaeology of Iron Age violence is the desire to prevent certain individuals from undergoing normative funerary rites, whether by removing their heads from their bodies, or by placing their bodies in the suspended animation of the peat bog. Since funerary rituals are essentially a means of enabling the souls of the dead to traverse to the next world, however that might be conceived, the deliberate

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interruption of these rites appears to reflect a strategy to trap souls in limbo. These practices are reflected in the locations that so often form the focus for these violent acts. Peat bogs lie at the boundaries between the inhabited lands of the living and the wild world of the supernatural; caves form a physical link between the human world above and the underworld of spirits, gods and ancestors. Many settlement deposits, though less transparently liminal in character, are similarly placed at boundaries, where the domestic meets the outside world.

Strategies of dehumanisation and objectification of the victim appear also frequently to have been employed to make the process of killing more palatable. This is most obvious with bog bodies, where victims could be stripped naked, have their heads shaved and be subjected to protracted torture before their eventual killing, often by multiple individuals. Through such violent performances groups could achieve catharsis, reassert their moral rectitude within their own cosmological understanding of the world and reinforce group solidarity through common action against marginal individuals.

Bibliographic Essay


Violence was an accepted part of life in ancient Mesopotamia. Wars raged across the Near East in the ‘campaign season’ during the hot months that followed the harvest, crime was often penalised by corporal and capital forms of punishment, and rituals and some medical practices included the killing of a scapegoat to restore order and purity to a fouled person or situation. However, the ritualised killing of humans in Mesopotamian society was a rare occurrence and, as far as can be deduced from the evidence, there were only two institutionalised practices of human sacrifice: the killing of the royal retinue at the death of the kings and queens of Ur during the Early Dynastic period; and the substitute king ritual, which was practised sporadically in the second and first millennia BCE. Beyond these cases, there is little evidence for the practice of human sacrifice in ancient Mesopotamia and thus it seems to have been a part of the royal prerogative in only the most extreme circumstances. This chapter will examine the institutionalised practices of human sacrifice in ancient Mesopotamia so as to understand them in their historical and cultural contexts. In so doing it hopes to offer a better understanding of this most extreme form of ritual violence.

Before proceeding a clarification should be made about the term ‘cultures of Mesopotamia’. This chapter concentrates on the period from the mid third millennium down to the last centuries of the first millennium BCE, which saw significant cultural and political changes in ancient Iraq. During the third millennium BCE Sumerian-speaking societies ruled the south of Iraq and societies that spoke the Semitic Akkadian language lived in the region to the north around modern-day Baghdad. During the early second millennium BCE the city of Babylon and other cities of the south came to replace the Sumerian and Akkadian cultures as the dominant power of the region. While this shift saw significant political and, to a lesser extent, linguistic changes

1 See Chapters 10, 18, 30 and 31 in this volume.
(Babylonian is a major dialect of Akkadian), there is clear cultural continuity between the Sumerians and Babylonians to the extent that scholars often refer to ‘Sumero-Babylonian’ culture, particularly in the area of religion and royal ideology. At the same time as the Babylonian culture became dominant in southern Mesopotamia, the Assyrians (also speakers of a major dialect of Akkadian) emerged in the Upper Tigris Valley in northern Iraq. The Assyrian culture was closely related to the Sumero-Babylonian cultures and by the age of empires in the first millennium BCE the two major cultures of Mesopotamia had become intermingled.

The Royal Graves and Death Pits of Ur

We begin at the dawn of the historical era with the only occurrence of mass human sacrifice in ancient Mesopotamian history. The location is the cemetery complex dating to the Early Dynastic period (2600–2450 BCE) at the site of Ur, modern Tell al-Muqayyar in southern Iraq. This cemetery was discovered during the excavation of Sir C. Leonard Woolley in the late 1920s. Woolley uncovered some 1,850 tombs in the cemetery complex, of which 660 date to the Early Dynastic IIIA with sixteen distinguished on account of the multiple burials in the main chamber and in adjacent shafts. Ten of the sixteen Woolley labelled ‘royal tombs’, for they were larger and contained elaborate architectural structures with splendid grave goods interred as conspicuous consumption. Some of the grave goods have become famous – such as the sculpture of the so-called ‘Ram Caught in the Thicket’, the bull-headed harps and the gold tiara of Queen Puabi – and often adorn the pages of works on Mesopotamian history. A suspicion that these tombs contained the early rulers of Ur was confirmed by the discovery of a number of cylinder seals bearing the names of previously known rulers. The other six burials did not contain lavish tombs for the interred bodies, and consequently Woolley described them as ‘death pits’. Across the ten royal tombs and six death pits the number of sacrificed victims varied greatly. Some tombs had as few as

2 The site of Kish might also have practised human sacrifice, but the evidence is inconclusive. P. R. S. Moorey, Excavations at Kish 1923–1933 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
two accompanying bodies, while PG 1237 had as many as seventy-three.\textsuperscript{4} Since no literary or narrative texts have been recovered from Ur in this era, the exact relationship between the rulers in the main chamber and the accompanying buried bodies is not entirely understood. However, Woolley drew two conclusions that have been widely accepted: first, that the bodies accompanying the rulers were a part of the royal retinue; and second, that the retinue was sacrificed as part of the royal burial practice and was interred at the same time as the kings and queens.

For Woolley, the striking consistency in the arrangement of the dead in several tombs was important. The bodies appeared to have been neatly arranged in rows with no obvious signs of trauma, and even the women’s fine headdresses were still in order. In Woolley’s later and popular writings, he interpreted the sacrificed as people who willingly went to their death in order to serve their god-king in the afterlife.\textsuperscript{5} It was a theory quite in keeping with the evidence available to him. The lack of any clear struggle and the orderly arrangement of the bodies, together with the corpses of horses and oxen also present, was not insignificant to Woolley. So too the so-called ritual bowls that accompanied several victims, which Woolley thought must have contained poison consumed by the sacrificial victims. In all, Woolley drew the conclusion that a self-convinced retinue knowingly joined their rulers in death. However, recent analyses of some of the human remains from Ur offer more information about how the victims might have met their end.

In 2011 archaeologists at the University of Pennsylvania published the findings of their analysis of two skulls from Woolley’s excavations kept in the Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Using CT scanning, Aubrey Baadsgaard and her colleagues discovered that there was clear evidence of heavy trauma to the skulls from a sharp instrument as well as evidence that the remains had been heated or smoked to hold off putrefaction, possibly to preserve the bodies for the royal funeral. Such findings indicate that the victims did not volunteer for sacrifice, but were violently killed and later placed in the tombs.\textsuperscript{6} They also support the picture drawn from earlier work conducted by Theya Molleson and Dawn Hodgson, who examined some of the skeletal remains Woolley had sent to London and


\textsuperscript{5} See Woolley, Royal Cemetery, pp. 37–42; Dickson, ‘Kingship as Racketeering’, pp. 320–1.

\textsuperscript{6} Aubrey Baadsgaard et al., ‘Human Sacrifice and Intentional Corpse Preservation in the Royal Cemetery of Ur’, Antiquity 85.327 (2011), 27–42.
found that the robust and muscular structures indicate that the victims had been engaged in hard labour most of their lives, a strong indication that the interred were from the lower strata of society. Beyond these inferences there is little information on how individuals were selected to serve as sacrifices for the royal funerary cult.

Since there are virtually no royal inscriptions or literary texts from the time, it is difficult to establish the reasons behind the practice of human sacrifice at Ur. The search for insights in later Sumerian religious literature has not been as fruitful as one would hope. Many decades ago it was suggested that some light might be shed on the matter by two Sumerian compositions from later periods, The Death of Bilgames (who became the Gilgamesh of later Babylonian epic tradition) and The Death of Ur-Namma. These literary compositions detail the journey of the kings to the netherworld and their subsequent orientations in the realm of the dead. Both texts show that the great kings could expect a similar style of existence in the netherworld as they enjoyed during their lifetime. Thus, The Death of Bilgames states:

His beloved wife, his beloved child,
his beloved senior wife and junior wife,
his beloved minstrel, steward and . . .,
his beloved barber, [his beloved] . . .,
[his beloved] attendants and servants,
his beloved goods . . .,
were laid down in their places, as if [attending] a palace-review in the midst of Uruk.

According to Sumerian tradition, Bilgames was only a few generations before Meskalamdug, one of the kings positively identified from a cylinder seal in the royal tombs. Indeed, it was this connection between Bilgames, who was a demi-god, and Meskalamdug and the other rulers recognised from this era that gave strength to Woolley’s theory that human sacrifice was a part of the

rulers of Ur’s god-king status. *The Death of Ur-Namma*, a text about the famous king who founded the Ur III dynasty (c. 2047 BCE), provides a similar picture of the support of a deceased king in the afterlife:

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After the king had presented properly the offerings of the Netherworld, 
After Ur-Namma had presented properly the offerings of the Netherworld, 
The [...]. of the Netherworld, 
The [...]., 
Seated Ur-Namma on a great dais of the Netherworld (and) 
Set up a dwelling place for him in the Netherworld. 
At the command of Ereškigal, 
All the soldiers who had been killed by weapons (and) 
All the men who had been found guilty, 
Were given into the king’s (i.e. Ur-Namma’s) hands. 
Ur-Namma was [...]., 
So with Gilgameš, his beloved brother, 
He will issue the judgments of the Netherworld and render the decisions of the Netherworld.10
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Both literary texts state that the dead kings were to be served by a retinue in death, as they had been in life. These compositions, while Sumerian, come from a much later time, possibly as late as the Old Babylonian period (c. 2004–1595 BCE), and therefore one must be careful in drawing dogmatic conclusions about the light they shed on the distant funerary practices of the early rulers of Ur, appealing as it may be. If they do provide accurate insights into the practice of mass human sacrifice in Early Dynastic Ur, it is unclear why it ceased so early in Mesopotamian history, particularly since the rulers of later dynasties of the Akkadian and Ur III periods, who were divinised during their reigns, did not sacrifice their retinue upon their deaths.

When one looks more broadly across the ancient Near East to Egypt, one finds comparable burials from an equivalent period of statehood in the Nile Valley. The excavations of the royal necropolis dating to the First Dynasty (c. 3200–2900 BCE) at modern Umm el-Qa’ab by Sir W. M. Flinders Petrie revealed a large number of subsidiary burials adjoining the pharaohs’ tombs filled with the victims of human sacrifice. Just as at Ur, scientific analysis of the First Dynasty subsidiary burials at Abydos has revealed that the interred were involuntarily killed (strangulation) and buried at the same

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10 *The Death of Ur-Namma*, 132–44, Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, [http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr2411.htm](http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr2411.htm) and [http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/c2411.htm](http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/c2411.htm).
time as the pharaohs.\textsuperscript{11} Noteworthy too is the point that the Egyptian practice of human sacrifice as a part of the elite burial practice was also limited to a short period of history. However, with Egypt, the later practice of including \textit{shabti} figurines designed to serve the deceased in the afterlife offers some understanding of how the funerary cult developed to fill the void left once human sacrifice ceased to be practised.

While we may never fully understand the ideas and motivations behind human sacrifice at Ur, recent archaeological and scientific investigations of the victims demonstrate that they were coerced and probably came from the lower classes. Such findings validate proposals in recent years that see human sacrifice as a frightening display of royal power that reinforced the inequality of the rulers’ position. One can no longer accept Woolley’s thesis of the kings’ loyal retinue willingly giving up their lives to serve their deceased rulers in the afterlife. Rather, it seems they were arranged ‘like dolls in a sinister doll house or actors in a mortal tableau’.\textsuperscript{12} In this way, the sacrifice of these people was as much a statement of the power and authority of the royal house of Ur as it was a funerary ritual.

**Mythological Contexts for Ritual Killing in Mesopotamia**

During the last centuries of the third millennium BCE the Sumerian and Akkadian societies of Mesopotamia developed into highly literate cultures, and our knowledge of their respective religious thoughts and ideology is much clearer than it is for the Early Dynastic period. Incredibly important was the Old Babylonian period (c. 2004–1595 BCE), which saw the rise to prominence of Babylonian cities in the south of Mesopotamia; a development accompanied by a burst of cultural expression, particularly in terms of literary production. Indeed, the new myths and epics of this period established themselves as the foundational knowledge of Babylonian and Assyrian societies down to the first millennium BCE. What is of importance for us is that there are key episodes in these myths and legends that make it clear that life was expendable in Mesopotamian religious thought. Broadly speaking, conflict, and ritual killing and sacrifice, were often the vehicles of


\textsuperscript{12} Dickson, ‘Kingship as Racketeering’, p. 324.
cosmological change with transformative consequences. A well-known example is the murder of Tiamat, which resulted in the formation of the material substance for building the cosmos, that appears in the creation epic *Enūma eliš.* Since our focus is on human sacrifice, we will concentrate on two episodes that affect humans: the creation of the human species and the great flood.

The tale of the creation of humans in the Babylonian tradition has murder at its heart. According to the myth, *Atram-ḥaṣīš,* humans are created after a rebellion of the lower gods against the upper gods over the burden of their toil. To end the dispute, it is decided by the upper gods that humans should be created to bear the burden of the lower gods. The plan as to how to create humans is revealed in a speech by the god Enki to the divine assembly:

On the first, seventh, and fifteenth of the month,
I will establish a purification, a bath.
Let one god be slaughtered,
Then let the gods be purified in it.
Let (the goddess) Nintu mix clay with his flesh and blood,
Let that same god and man be thoroughly mixed in the clay.
Let us hear the drumbeat for the rest of time,
From the flesh of the god let a spirit remain,
Let it make the living know its sign,
Lest he be forgotten, let the spirit remain.14

It is decided that the ringleader Wē-ila is to be the god murdered for the rebellion, and it is his blood and flesh that are mixed with clay to fashion humans. There are other myths about the creation of humans that have a similar story line. In *Enūma eliš,* Ea creates humanity from the blood of a slaughtered god, Qingu (another rebel), at the hands of Marduk.15 Similarly in the *Unilingual/Bilingual Account of Creation,* humans are said to be created from the blood of the slaughtered Alla deities.16 On the one hand, the rebel gods in these myths are killed to absolve their crimes as part of a purification ritual and to re-establish cosmological order over the chaos they have caused, while on the other hand sacrificial murder is a key element in creation.17

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Humans of course are not killed in this ritual, but ‘living’ divine beings are. In this way, the closing lines of Enki’s plan as revealed in Atram-ḫaṣīs is poignant: the drumbeat of the human pulse is said to be a reminder for all of the sacrificial killing of a god and, in turn, mortality.

The greatest act in Sumero-Babylonian traditions of divine brutality is the great flood that is sent to wipe all living creatures from the earth. Of the Sumerian and Babylonian myths that provide accounts of the great flood, the most detailed are found in Atram-ḫaṣīs and The Epic of Gilgamesh, with the former providing far greater insight into the causes of the deluge. Despite the vital role newly created humans play in the cosmic division of labour, they are considered noisy neighbours – too noisy in fact for Enlil and the other great gods. After a period of sleep deprivation, Enlil, with the support of the other great gods, rather capriciously decides to reduce the human population first through pestilence, then by disease, and later famine. When humans prove too resilient for these attacks, Enlil decides to wash humanity away once and for all with a flood. The human species is saved by the god Enki, who reveals the gods’ plan and instructs a man of Shuruppak, named Ziusudra in Sumerian and either Atram-ḫaṣīs or Ut-napištim in Akkadian, to spurn material possessions and build a boat to save his family and a wide variety of animal species. Similarities with the Noah myth in Genesis 6–9 are clear. However, it has often been noted that there is a key difference between the Hebrew and the Mesopotamian traditions with regards to the reasons for sending the flood. In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh sends the flood in response to humanity’s evil behaviour, and thus it is an act of punishment meted out in accordance with a moral ethic. The decision of Enlil and the Mesopotamian gods, however, appears impulsive and a reflection of their capricious nature. The idea that the end of all life is within the prerogative of the gods is also stated in the Epic of Erra and Ishum, where it is said that one of the chief purposes of the god Erra, who embodies the brutality of war, is to clear out the overpopulating humans and animals who no longer fear armed conflict and Erra himself. Hence, there is a

consistency to be observed across these myths, including the Hebrew Bible, despite its ethical context of the flood: humanity is an irritant that the deities purge to restore order. This is a concept that is also present in medicine and the rituals discussed below.

The Substitute King Ritual

Returning to acts of human sacrifice in the material world, we come to the only other clear example of human sacrifice in ancient Mesopotamia, the substitute king ritual. This ritual was designed to save the king whom the gods had marked out for death by presenting an eclipse in the heavens. To protect the king from such a fate, Mesopotamian scholars devised a strategy to excise the evil portent from the king by replacing him on the throne with a substitute who acted as a scapegoat by taking on the curse. In doing so, the gods’ requirement of the sacrifice of a king was satiated while at the same time the life of the king was spared and his reign could continue. In this way, the records of the substitute king ritual reveal an altogether different relationship between the office of kingship in the Assyrian and Babylonian periods from the early Sumerian dynasty at Ur, in that we find the king was very much at the mercy of the gods and magical rituals and sacrificed humans to spare his own life. This is in contrast to the royal graves at Ur, where it seems the dead king took many to the netherworld with him for his own power and glory. However, it cannot be overlooked that the substitute king ritual demonstrates that the royal persona was the most important human in the land, as was the case in the funerary cult at Ur.

The substitute king ritual has a long history, although it is recorded only sporadically from the second millennium BCE through to the reign of Alexander the Great. The period best attested to is the Neo-Assyrian.²⁰ It is uncertain if the increased practice of the substitute king ritual during the Assyrian Empire is the result of the availability of a greater number of texts, or whether it reflects a shift in Mesopotamian scholarship with a rise in interest in astrology at the royal court equal to the traditional discipline of extispicy. Indeed, by the first millennium BCE astrology was a leading discipline in Mesopotamian scientific thought. Observing the movement of the planets and other astral phenomena had been the focus of generations of

Babylonian scholars, who recognised patterns and, in turn, established a series of predictions that were then interpreted as omens about politics, economics and social relations. A great number of reports to the Assyrian imperial court from astrologers have survived, which demonstrate the kings’ dependence on these reports for all manner of decisions. Particularly fruitful are the reigns of Esarhaddon (r. 681–669 BCE) and Ashurbanipal (r. 660–c. 627 BCE), from which the scholarly correspondence furnish us with the procedural details of the ritual and thus best illustrate its nature and purpose.

As indicated above, the need for the ritual was triggered by a solar, lunar or planetary eclipse. An eclipse visible in the Near East could be observed, of course, by any number of polities, and the interpretation as to which king must die depended on its time and date, the nature of the eclipse, and which part of the heavenly body was obscured. For example, the scholar Mār-Issar, who acted as Esarhaddon’s agent in Babylonia, suggested the following interpretations of an eclipse that designated a king of the ‘Westland’ must die: ‘Perhaps the scholars can tell something about the (concept) of “Westland” to the king, my lord. Westland means the Hittite country (Syria) and the nomad land or, according to another tradition, Chaldea. Someone of the kings of Hatti, Chaldea or Arabia will carry this sign. With the king, my lord, all is well.’ However, if the planets Jupiter or Venus were present at the time of the eclipse, the fate would befall either a senior official in the administration or the land of the king would be attacked by an invading army. In such cases, no substitute was organised. Some letters from the Neo-Assyrian period indicate that when scholars predicted an eclipse they would take precautionary action, such as installing a substitute prior to the eclipse to completely shield the king from any danger.

In the normal course of events, when the ritual was performed after an eclipse was observed, a substitute had to be selected, but who this should be is one of the more inconsistent aspects of the ritual. In the Hittite version and the accounts from the reign of Alexander the Great, a

22 Parpola, Letters from Scholars, p. xxiii.
23 SAA 10 351, ibid., p. 287.
24 Ibid., pp. xxii–iii.
criminal and a prisoner of war were respectively chosen as the substitute. However, this was not the practice of the Assyrians and Babylonians. In the Assyrian sources, the substitute was often referred to as a saklu, a term that has a broad range of meanings and has been interpreted as meaning ‘idiot’ or ‘commoner’. No doubt the interpretation of the Akkadian saklu has been influenced by modern scholarly assumptions about the sort of person who would be credulous enough to participate in the substitute king ritual. It is suggested here that the English pejorative use of the word ‘common’ probably best translates saklu and does not assume the substitute was necessarily mentally impaired. Yet, from the first millennium BCE there is firm evidence that the ritual required the substitute to be of noble stock. A ritual tablet from Ashurbanipal’s reign states that the person should be from the royal family. At least one of the substitutes from the Assyrian era was definitely from a noble family, and a letter from Mār-Issar to the king reports on a substitute who was the son of the prelate of Babylon. On another occasion, it is stated that the saklu had to have the high temple of prelate ordained upon him before taking on the role as substitute to fulfil the criteria of being a substitute worthy of a king of the Near East. Hence, no mere commoner would do. A king needed a worthy substitute and it seems if a commoner were selected, he needed to be appointed to a high position to fulfil the criteria of a substitute for the king. In this way, the substitute king ritual was not designed to fool the gods, but to appease their capricious interests by sacrificing a human of suitable status who could take on the king’s curse.

The process of the ritual saw the king removed from the throne and become a ‘farmer’ while a substitute took the throne having been purified and dressed in the king’s attire. The substitute was appointed a queen and the pair occupied the throne for a period of up to 100 days. During this time the substitute and his queen would undertake a series of apotropaic rites (namburbi) which aimed to excise the evil portent from the body of the king and attach them to the substitute and possibly his queen. This was done through the recitation of incantations, a text of the incantations having been

27 CAD (15) Š, pp. 80–1.
30 Ibid., p. 289; see also Bottéro, Writing, Reasoning, p. 147.
sewn into his garments, and even ingesting copies of the incantations. This process is evidence that the substitute understood the nature of his (and his queen’s) role and duties in the ritual.

During their term in office the substitute played a public ceremonial role but wielded no real political power. The Assyrian letters show that Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal continued to run the empire while they played the role of ‘farmer’ away from court. Hence, the substitute appeared as a king, probably administering the cultic rites and other religious duties during his time in office and, as Jean Bottéro puts it, serving as a ‘lightning rod’ to take upon himself the evil that threatened the real king. Having made this point, there were times when the substitute king did not act as a mere patsy. On one occasion the substitute uncovered a conspiracy among the officialdom and requested that the ‘farmer’ be informed. Further, the earliest account of a substitute king ritual ends quite poorly for the existing king. According to *The Chronicle of Early Kings*, Erra-imitti, installed Ellil-bānī, a gardener, as a substitute. However, while in exile Erra-imitti died after ‘he sipped a hot broth’ and Ellil-bānī remained on the throne! If this is a true account, then one wonders if Ellil-bānī had Erra-imitti poisoned. In all other cases we find that after the allotted time was up the substitute and his queen were put to death. The method of sacrifice is not stated in any surviving text; we are told only that the substitute died. To ensure that the substitute king took the curse with him and his queen to the netherworld, a series of religious rituals and ceremonies were undertaken. Upon completion of the burial and rites of the substitute, the ‘farmer’ would undergo purification rituals and return to the throne freed from the curse to continue his reign.

The rationale behind the substitute king ritual is identifiable in what Jean Bottéro calls the ‘doctrine of substitution’ in broader Mesopotamian practices of religion and medicine. As noted, the ritual was an apotropaic ritual that excised evil from one individual to another, which could be done by contact, by resemblance, or both. Other instances of ritual substitutions attest to ill or

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32 Bottéro, *Writing, Reasoning*, p. 147. 33 Ibid., p. 150.
cursed people transferring their misfortune to a fashioned figurine, which would act as a substitute. These figurines could also be fed to dogs and other animals to transfer the malady to the creature, which would then be killed.\footnote{JoAnn Scurlock, ‘Animals in Mesopotamian Religion’, in B. J. Collins (ed.), \textit{A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East}, Handbook of Oriental Studies 64 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 371–3.}

A particularly relevant example is found in the reigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, where we find they used a ritual associated with the goddess of the netherworld, Eriškigal, to transfer their illness to a goat that would then be killed and buried to rid the kings of their illness.\footnote{Bottéro, \textit{Writing, Reasoning}, pp. 142–3.} There are further instances where it can be observed that animals were used to excise maladies from humans through direct contact in confined spaces, and rituals and rites using the clippings of fur and hair.\footnote{Scurlock, ‘Animals’, pp. 373–87.}

The doctrine of substitution is also found in mythology, particularly in traditions about the goddess Inanna (Ištar in Akkadian). In myths about the goddess’s journey to the netherworld substitution is the climax of the narrative.\footnote{For the myths see Foster, \textit{Before the Muses}, pp. 498–505; Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, \url{http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr141.htm}.} An epithet of the netherworld is ‘The Land of No Return’, and this is the crux. In order to leave the netherworld, as Inanna inevitably wanted to once she reached its depths, a suitable substitute had to be found. For Inanna, the perfect substitute turned out to be her husband, Dumuzi.

Thus, this background of the legitimacy of substitution, of transferring illness of a curse from one person to an object or animal, in Mesopotamian religion shows that the substitute king ritual was not a fabricated scheme but a part of a genuine tradition. It did not aim to cheat the fate set upon the king; rather, rituals of substitution enabled the court to fulfil the divinely appointed destiny as closely as possible to the one they originally had in mind, even if it was materially different.\footnote{Bottéro, \textit{Writing, Reasoning}, p. 143.}

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the two instances of institutionalised human sacrifice in the history of ancient Mesopotamia and has attempted to understand them in the context of elite concepts of kingship and religious thought. There remains much mystery surrounding the interred victims of the royal tombs at Ur. However, the latest scientific investigations suggest there is
commonality between the royal funerary cults at Early Dynastic Ur and First Dynasty Egypt. Such findings indicate that the emergence of the state in Mesopotamia and Egypt saw extreme control over the subject population, which was most brutally expressed in times of royal succession. The substitute king ritual is far better understood and was a part of a wider doctrine of substitution that was present in Mesopotamian religion and medical practices. The ritual was triggered in response to concerns for a ruler’s life at the time of an eclipse and reveals that rulers of the second and first millennia BCE were subject to the will of the gods as much as any human. In all, there are different contexts for these two institutionalised practices of human sacrifice in ancient Mesopotamia, yet in both instances it is clear that the office of kingship held absolute power over subjects who could be disposed of for the sake of the ruler.

Bibliographic Essay


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Violent Sacrifice in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds

F. S. NAIDEN

The Greeks, the most humane men of antiquity, had a cruel trait, a desire for annihilation that made them like tigers . . . (Nietzsche, ‘Homer’s Contest’)\(^1\)

Although Nietzsche was referring to slavery in this early essay of his, and not to animal sacrifice, he might well have included sacrifice as a ‘cruel trait’, for it involved literally tens of millions of animal victims, many of which did not provide any food. In this respect, Greek sacrifice is harder to justify than ancient or modern butchery.\(^2\) The Romans resembled the Greeks. Because the population practising Roman sacrifice was larger, the total number of victims reached hundreds of millions.

This massive slaughter inspired the oldest extensive vegetarian literature, beginning with Pre-Socratic philosophers and extending down to Greek and Latin philosophers and other writers of the early Common Era. The ancient vegetarians’ critique of sacrifice finds an echo in the treatment given to animals in Greek and Roman law, for under the law the status of animals was problematic. Should human beings treat animals justly, and did that mean abandoning animal sacrifice? Since both ancient law and literature take


\(^2\) Tens of millions since the population of the Greek-speaking world in antiquity was at least several millions, and perhaps double or treble that (H. Beloch, *Griechische Geschichte* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1922), vol. 1, pp. 263–313; M. Hansen, *The Shotgun Method: The Demography of the Ancient Greek City-State Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), p. 32), and since the time during which animal sacrifice was widespread begins as early as the Archaic period, judging by Homer, and ends at some point in the third or fourth centuries BCE, in other words, a period of about a millennium. For the number of victims to reach 10 million, the entire Greek population would have needed to sacrifice on average only a few dozen animals a day throughout this period.
the pagan gods for granted, more questions arose. Did the gods require sacrifice? Which gods, how, and when?

Some of these questions anticipate today’s controversies about animal rights. Mary Douglas is perhaps the only writer to warn that ancient vegetarianism and modern advocacy of animal rights arose under very different circumstances, and that we should be sceptical about whether the one sheds light on the other. She is right, and might have added that we should not equate vegetarianism and rejection of animal sacrifice. The two phenomena overlap without being identical.

This chapter begins with remarks about what the concepts of ‘violence’ and ‘sacrifice’ meant to the Greeks and Romans, and then turns to the subject of the suffering of animals during sacrifices and how the ancients understood this suffering in the light of both legal and literary texts.

Modern versus Ancient Concepts

In contemporary English the words ‘violence’ and ‘sacrifice’ form a likely pair, but in ancient Greek and Latin there are no comparable words. The Greek word sometimes translated as ‘violence’, bia, means both ‘violence’ and ‘force’, and so it can refer to harmful, illegitimate aggression or to the necessary, legitimate use of coercion. Bia and the enforcement of the law complement one another in the famous passage in Pindar saying that ‘Law (Nomos) is king over all.’ To illustrate the rule of nomos, the poet says Heracles used βία to overcome injustice. In this passage, translating bia as ‘violence’ is misleading. Instead, this word means ‘force’. The Latin word violentia has

3 For just treatment due to animals see M. Nussbaum, Frontiers of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), writing at length in what to my knowledge is the only such argument made by a classicist. For compassionate treatment see J. Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1971), p. 512. A broad view of the ancient philosophical sources and vegetarianism is F. de Waal, Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). None of these writers touch on the topic of animal sacrifice and violence, for which the most influential treatment remains W. Burkert, Homo Necans: Interpretationen Altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972), but see F. Naiden, Smoke Signals for the Gods: Greek Animal Sacrifice from the Archaic through Roman Periods (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) for a counterview in which animal sacrifice, while violent, is less so than Burkert supposed.


a similar pair of meanings, one of which is ‘violence and aggressiveness’ and the other, ‘overwhelming force’.

The common Greek and Latin words for ‘sacrifice’ also present difficulties. The most common Greek word, thusia, means ‘burnt offering’, and does not necessarily refer to killing animals, even though it is the most common word for a sacrifice followed by a meal of meat taken from the victim. The second most common word, sphagia, refers to slitting the throat of an animal victim, but never refers to a meal. The most common Latin word, sacrificium, designates putting something in the possession of a god, but need not mean killing a victim. Another common word, immolatio, means ‘a sprinkling of meal’, an act that occurred before a sacrificial victim was dispatched. Neither language concentrated on the act of putting an animal to death during an act of worship. As a consequence, Greek sources for sacrifice avoid saying that killing animal victims is an act of bia or violence. These sources also avoid saying that killing victims is an act of hubris, and only some vegetarian sources say that killing victims is an act of murder, or phonos. Latin sources avoid saying that killing animal victims is an act of violentia.

To understand ‘violent sacrifice’ among the Greeks and Romans we must ask how these two societies reconfigured this concept. Two very different sources come to our aid. One is civic regulations (confirmed by vase paintings) that dictate how animal sacrifice occurred. The other source is legal, too. It is the small body of ancient law that treats animals as criminals.

The vegetarian writers are a third source to consider. They offer several accounts of the history of human mistreatment of sacrificial animals, and these accounts include some legal history, in particular, a history of the injustices done to animals along with alleged injustices done by animals to human beings. Without having any notion of speciesism, or of universal rights putting animals on a par with humans, the ancient vegetarians have some notion of justice towards animals. Like its modern counterpart, ancient vegetarianism had legal and moral elements.

Sacrifice and vegetarianism are long-studied subjects, but they have generally been kept separate from one another. Historians of religion have

6 LSG and OLD ss. vv. The root of violentia, vis, has these two meanings also (OLD s.v. 1a, 3 vs. 1b, 6, 7). The German word Gewaltsamkeit has the same pair of meanings, introducing unnoticed ambiguity into Max Weber’s famous formulation about ‘legitimate force’, for which he also uses the word Zwang, or ‘compulsion’, as at Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1925), p. 217.

concentrated on a single kind of *thusia* or *sacrificium*, the violent death of an animal in an act of ‘sacrifice’. The best-known scholar of this kind, Walter Burkert, held that the killing of an animal was the climax of sacrificial ritual, which was the central act in ancient Greek religion, and, by extension, in ancient Roman religion. Burkert also held that worshippers felt guilty about killing animals, and assuaged their guilt by supposing that the animal gave its consent to being slaughtered. The title of one of Burkert’s books, *Homo Necans*, or ‘Man the Killer’, conveys the essence of his view.\(^8\)

Another group of scholars, mostly intellectual historians, have ignored Greek and Roman sacrificial rites in favour of studying the polemics of the ancient vegetarians. Whole schools of ancient philosophy were vegetarian, anti-vegetarian, or divided by this question, and the arguments they advanced drew upon ancient notions of zoology, biology and economic history, especially the development of pastoralism and agriculture.\(^9\) Just as Religionshistoriker like Burkert are sociological and anthropological, with a touch of biology, writers of this second kind are philosophical and analytical. They minimise the ‘what’ of animal sacrifice, just as Burkert and his followers theorise the ‘why’.

For the ‘what’, in other words, for the experience of sacrificial victims, we turn to sacrificial regulations. The regulations, however, are inconvenient to cite, because they take existing law and custom for granted, and so we prefer evidence from vase paintings that represent (even if they do not duplicate) sacrifices performed according to written or unwritten rules. Van Straten addressed this subject in his *Hiera Kala: Images of Animal Sacrifice in Archaic and Classical Greece*. He grouped his selection of some 700 images under three headings: ‘Pre-kill’, meaning pictures of animals being led to altars, or waiting beside altars during preliminary rituals; ‘The Killing’, including pictures of animal slaughter and also a few similar pictures of human sacrifice; and ‘Post-kill’, including not only butchering but two other important topics, first, the inspection of entrails, and second, holocaustic sacrifices in which animals were burnt whole rather than butchered. By far the largest number of pictures are in the pre-kill category. They often show processions in which the animals are adorned with garlands, the same as the worshippers.

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All animals look fit, as temple regulations often required they should. Some even look like what they were, which was the winners of beauty contests to select only the best specimens for sacrifice. Contrary to Van Straten’s own expectations, and also contrary to the views of previous scholars, pictures of animals being killed were few. Burkert’s view that the Greeks felt guilty about killing animals could only be right if this feeling led them to avoid this subject. Post-kill pictures do not even hint at gloom or guilt.

Dozens (twenty-six) of pictures show animals resisting those in charge of them, tossing their heads and tugging at the ropes. Written sources confirm Van Straten’s vivid evidence. The travel writer Pausanias says that if an animal is unused to the halter it dislikes being led, and the poet Propertius says, with the air of retailing a commonplace, that bulls move as desired only when roped.10

Some of these animals would have suspected their fate, but to my knowledge only one Greek or Roman source explores this aspect of sacrifice. The following anonymous Greek couplet describes sacrificial bulls that hail the emperor Marcus Aurelius: ‘We white bulls salute you, Marcus Caesar. Another such victory and we are undone.’11 These verses compare the animals to gladiators, in other words, to slaves. Like gladiators, the animals hail the emperor, but unlike them, they have no hope of surviving. They must perish, and the better the emperor fares in his wars, the sooner they will succumb. The couplet expresses some sympathy for the victims, but only some. The animals are the occasion for a witty joke, not an appeal for mercy. Even gladiators may be granted mercy, but not these animals. Gladiators say, ‘Nos morituri te salutamus’, ‘We who are about to die salute you’, raising their swords, but animals truly can only raise their horns. Only a jeu d’esprit gives them voice.

The notion that animals could communicate, even if they could not speak, informs two aspects of animal sacrifice. The first, the inspection of entrails or other parts of the animal occurred during both thusia and sphagia. In vase painting, the inspection of entrails mostly occurs in some military context – before going on campaign, before battle or before making some important military decision.12 The liver was inspected most often, but other innards were, too. Although the inspection of livers followed Babylonian precedents,

11 Amm. Marc. 15.4.16, cited in Naiden, *Smoke Signals*, p. 95.
12 Van Straten, *Hiera Kala*, pp. 156–7 and n. 139 for further refs.
it is far older than Greek contact with Babylonian hepatoscopy. In addition, the Greeks watched to see whether the tail of a sacrificial animal curled up as parts of the carcass were burned (as it very commonly would, as shown by recent experiments duplicating this procedure). The Romans did not check tails, but they did inspect livers. Like the Greeks, they eventually made use of Babylonian hepatological experts and texts.

To say that the animal communicated in these ways is not to say that, like the oxen in the couplet, it spoke for itself. The Greeks and Romans supposed that the god of the sacrifice spoke through the animal. Rather than be quasi-human, the animal was quasi-divine. This communication with the god might be so important than the victim would be ignored except for the entrails, and end up abandoned. The most startling examples of this outcome appear in warfare. Sacrificing on behalf of his fellow mercenaries, known as the Ten Thousand, Xenophon slew a sheep, examined the liver, and learned to his distress that the gods were hostile to a foraging expedition to relieve the hunger of his starving men. He left the animal for dead, and sacrificed another. After more bad omens, he slew a third animal, and got bad omens again. He stopped only because custom forbade a fourth attempt. There lay the three dead sheep – far too few to feed 10,000, yet enough to feed dozens, or perhaps a hundred. Xenophon did not butcher any of the animals. Did the hungry men later make away with them? The pious Xenophon does not say.

This episode illustrates a striking feature of Greek and Roman animal sacrifice: even though the remains of the victims were commonly eaten, the ostensible purpose of the sacrifice was never to provide food. The victim largely provided honour or pleasure to the god, who delighted in the smoke and savour of the burning flesh, or enjoyed the sight of the handsome victims on parade, or the sight and sound of worshippers celebrating after a feast. It remains true that meat resulting from sacrifice was an important source of protein, and valued for that reason, but it is no less true that sacrifice and meat eating were far from synonymous. In alimentary terms, sacrifice was


14 Roman innards: Serv. A. 8.641.

15 Reckoning some 10 kg of meat per animal, at 250–500 gm per man; see Naiden, Smoke Signals, pp. 258–9.
important but not indispensable.\textsuperscript{16} What was indispensable was communicating with gods, heroes and ghosts through animal sacrifice.

Because animal sacrifice was vital, the Greeks and Romans very seldom exempted from sacrifice any large category of domesticated animals. Even young and pregnant animals could be sacrificed. The broadest-known exemption was for working oxen, and it appears only in late sources, all of them literary. No law or regulation refers to it.\textsuperscript{17}

The importance of the victim as a channel of communication explains another wasteful Greek practice, sacrificial holocausts. Pausanias describes how the Peloponnesian city of Patrae prescribed an annual bonfire to Artemis atop the town’s acropolis. The worshippers threw into the flames not only the usual domesticated victims but also wild pigs, deer and even bears. Pausanias reports that he himself saw a bear trying to escape the flames. The worshippers hauled down the animal and threw it back into the fire. Unwritten law obliged them to. Pausanias insists that fleeing animals never harmed the worshippers.\textsuperscript{18}

As a goddess of hunting, Artemis welcomed the sacrifice of the forest creatures. More important than giving her an appropriate offering, however, was creating a massive fire and stoking it with helpless, desperate animals in a spectacle of destruction worthy of an Olympian. Worshippers, priests and officials who did not do their duty on occasions like this one might be fined or removed from office.\textsuperscript{19} Far from being voluntary or haphazard, Greek violence against animals was lawful and orderly.

In sum, most Greek sources pay little attention to animal slaughter, and they express no guilt about it. They regard animals as an occasionally recalcitrant medium of communication. In the same spirit, Greek law penalised violence by animals rather than violence against them, and Roman law did likewise. Both bodies of law describe crimes of violence committed by animals and they also compare animals and slaves, as in the Greek couplet.


\textsuperscript{18} Paus. 8.18.12–13.

\textsuperscript{19} On impiety or \textit{asebeia}, the general term for misconduct used by worshippers and priests, see H. Bowden, ‘\textit{Asebeia}’, in E. Eidinow and J. Kindt (eds.), \textit{The Oxford Handbook to Greek Religion} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 325–39.
The least important crime committed by animals was damaging agricultural property. The first text on this subject is from Plato’s *Laws*, a work that sets forth a law code for a proposed colony, not an actual code, but which commonly reflects the law of the fourth century BCE, especially the law of Athens. Plato proposes: ‘If some animal – a horse, a dog, or any other – does harm to the property of a neighbour (of the animal’s owner), the owner will pay damages in the same way.’ The last phrase, ‘in the same way’, refers to the preceding sentences, which concern slaves: ‘If a slave or slave woman damages property belonging to someone other than his or her master . . . the owner of the slave at fault will pay compensation’. So far, the slave, and also the animal, is not to blame. Instead the owners are. Next, Plato imputes some blame to the slave and, by extension, the animal: ‘Or the owner may choose to transfer a culpable slave to the injured party. If the owner alleges that the injured party and the slave have connived against him, and brought a false charge, he must complain of being deceived.’

As the legal historian Jospeh Modrzejewski observed, ‘a culpable slave’ is partly responsible for his misdeed, and so a culpable animal would be too. Otherwise it would not make sense for this slave’s or animal’s owner to have the choice of transferring the offending man or beast. By the same token, the slave or animal’s being partly responsible explains why the owner may complain of being deceived. The other party may have offered a bribe or some other inducement to the slave or animal.

The Roman jurist Ulpian, writing in the *Digest*, supplies another example cited by Modrzejewski: ‘If an animal causes damage, there is an action available that comes from the Twelve Tables. This provided that the master had to transfer the offending animal to the injured party unless he preferred to pay the animal’s asking price. This action was called noxia. It applied to all quadrupeds.’

Ulpian’s citing the Twelve Tables of the early Roman Republic shows that Roman law on this subject goes back to the time of Plato, if not before.

The Greeks and Romans agree: domesticated animals, the very species mostly likely to be sacrificed, were capable of wrongdoing, and thus had some notion of justice, or at least were punished as though they did. The law treated them as it did slaves, another kind of animate, mammalian property

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20 Pl. Leg. 9.96d–e.
that was conceded some of the traits of human beings but remained less than fully human.22 The same holds true of an animal that harmed a human. Solon provided the Athenian law on this subject: if a dog did harm by biting, a collar had to be put around its neck before its owner transferred it.23 Plato proposed a law on the subject, too, but went farther, saying that the relatives of any one killed by an animal should put the creature on trial for murder.24 Here, as elsewhere, Plato reflects common practice. Classical Athenian murder law provided for the trial of culpable animals at the Prytaneion, one of the city’s homicide courts.25 Aristotle describes these four-legged defendants as being part of a category of ‘lifeless things and living creatures [other than humans]’. As in previous passages, animals are somewhere between being objects and being persons, but they resemble humans enough to be capable of murder.26

The evidence for routinely killing animals in regulated, civic rituals and the evidence for executing animals after a murder trial seem difficult to reconcile with one another. On the one hand, animals are put to death because they are fit and valuable; on the other hand, they are put to death because they are heedless and aggressive. On the one hand, animals are channels through which gods communicate with humankind; on the other hand, they are capable of the worst crimes. Animals are at men’s disposal, yet they are also at the gods’ disposal, and they are sometimes free agents. Violence against animals does not derive merely from a selfish or obtuse attitude on the part of humans; it derives also from the belief that animals may be especially close to the gods, and from the fear that even domesticated animals may be a threat.

To explain these contradictions, we might guess that the Greeks and Romans, two urban peoples, did not know animals well. They knew them better than we do. In the wild, animals were prey. In husbandry, they were livestock. At home, they were pets. In transport, they were beasts of burden. In shrines, they were victims by the millions. The Greeks wrote the world’s first extensive literature about hunting as well as about vegetarianism, and the Romans contributed the oldest extant literature on animal husbandry.

22 A parallel in the unwritten laws of Greek warfare: a common term for captive, ἄνδραπον, literally ‘footman’, was formed from a word for quadrupeds, τετράπον; see P. Chantraine, Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque, 2nd edn (Paris: Klincksieck, 1999), ss. vv.
23 Plut. Vit. Sol. 24.3 with Xen. Hell. 2.4.41. 24 Pl. Leg. 9.873e.
25 Arist. Ath. Pol. 57.4; see also Dem. Arist. 23.76.
26 Cf. Sorabji, Animal Minds, p. 119, holding that the court of the Prytaneion found animals guilty of causing pollution, but not of committing a wrong.
Justice for Animals

Did Greek and Roman writers and thinkers believe animals had a sense of justice, and thus were owed justice? The first writer known to say yes to this was the fifth century BCE Sicilian Greek Empedocles, who says that, in the beginning, all animals were tame and friendly. Men neither killed nor ate them. That was unnecessary: the earth provided ample food for men and animals alike. As for sacrifice, there was only one kind, consisting of vegetal, not fleshly, offerings, and the substances offered, mainly incense and honey, involved no conceivable harm to any animal except bees. Empedocles explained this strange regime by asserting that none of the familiar gods – Zeus, his father Cronus, or his grandfather, Uranus – ruled the world. The goddess of love did. In this idyllic scheme of things, animals were just, and so was everything else.²⁷

Empedocles went on to argue that humans owed animals justice because the two resembled one another. They were both living creatures that drew breath and they exchanged souls thanks to metempsychoisis. Animals’ souls, Empedocles taught, had once belonged to people, and vice versa. For people to kill animals was thus murder. Empedocles imagined a father sacrificing an animal only to realise that he was sacrificing a being with the soul of his own deceased son: ‘After his son has changed shape, his utter fool of a father slaughters him yet prays . . . Deaf to any protests, the father makes an evil meal of him after slaughtering him . . . In the same way, a son can kill his father and children can kill their mother’.²⁸ To avoid this sort of parricide, Greeks ought to foreswear animal sacrifice. One god, at least, would not complain: Empedocles’ version of Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

This doctrine offers a stunning reversal of Greek law and customs, one achieved at a very high religious price – a world ruled by female Love Incarnate and peopled by interchangeable humans and animals. How did such a world ever come into being, and how did it disappear? How could it be restored? In his extant fragments, Empedocles does not say.²⁹

A religious sect might accept this vision of justice, but a Greek polis scarcely would, unless the sect wrote the laws. And one such sect emerged about the time Empedocles wrote, or emerged somewhat earlier, that of the

²⁹ Instead he predicted eternal strife between the principles of love and strife: Emped. fr. B 17, 26, 35.
Pythagoreans. Although they did not accept Empedocles’ version of early history, and did not worship a supreme love goddess, this sect did believe in metempsychosis and at some early date objected to animal sacrifice for this reason.\textsuperscript{30} They added some qualifications of their own. Although animals have souls, just as people do, plants do not, and so sacrifices may include grain as well as honey and incense. Some Pythagoreans did not regard fish as being akin to human beings in the way that mammals were, and so sacrifices of fish, which took place as a kind of sacrifice of first fruits, were acceptable. Pythagoreans also conceded that some animals were wild and dangerous. They ought to be killed, but not sacrificed; their flesh should not be eaten at sacrificial meals. The Pythagoreans endorsed the custom of protecting working oxen, but for a reason of their own: all productive animals should be cared for.\textsuperscript{31} The value set on productive animals implied abolishing sacrifice of the four main species – cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs – but no Pythagorean is known to say so.

In contrast, one late Pythagorean argued that these four species of victims never had human souls, and thus might be killed in sacrificial rituals. Others said that the meat of sacrifice, and other meat, was permissible to athletes, soldiers and others benefiting from high protein diets.\textsuperscript{32} In these instances, we can glimpse a Greek kind of political realism. A city or community without animal sacrifice was practically inconceivable, even if it was intellectually attractive, and so the Pythagoreans sometimes compromised.

Other philosophical schools compromised, too. The Stoics argued that animals had no reasoning powers and scarcely knew right from wrong, but deserved sympathy because they somewhat resembled human beings. Animal sacrifice was permissible, but not essential. The Epicureans had a better opinion of the reasoning powers of animals than did the Stoics, but most of them did not think animals were capable of making and keeping agreements, and believed that for this reason animals could not participate in acts of justice. Epicurean justice was contractual, not retributive, as justice was in Aristotle and other Greek authors.\textsuperscript{33}

The intellectual drawback to these sundry views was that they did not explain how the mistaken practice of animal sacrifice arose. A philosopher of the fourth century BCE, Theophrastus, provided this missing piece in the vegetarian polemic against sacrifice. This writer, who was Aristotle’s successor as head of the Peripatos school of philosophy and science, agreed with

\textsuperscript{30} Xen. B 7 = D.L. 8.36.  \textsuperscript{31} D.L. 8.28.  \textsuperscript{32} Iambl. VP 18.85, 5.25.  \textsuperscript{33} The fullest discussion of these schools and others is Sorabji, Animal Minds, esp. chs. 9–11.
Empedocles and others that human history began with a golden age lacking animal sacrifice. In Theophrastus, however, the golden age featured gradual improvements in the human diet. Tools improved also, and men learned to use fire, and once men had greater power to wreak destruction, the first wars took place. War led to privation and famine, so humans began hunting, and later they domesticated some species of animals and slaughtered them for food. War within the human species thus led to a kind of war on both wild and domestic animals.  

Theophrastus’ perspective, preserved in the late Pythagorean and Platonist philosopher Porphyry, differed from that of Empedocles by being secular and speculative rather than religious and mythic. It involved hunting, animal husbandry and the development of tools and warfare, but it did not involve any rites or gods, still less a unique goddess such as the Incarnate Love of Empedocles. In this respect, Theophrastus’ explanation showed the influence of his master, Aristotle, and it anticipated other speculation about the development of tools and agriculture.

Faced with the views of Theophrastus, most Greeks would ask whether the gods were not responsible for the practice of meat eating. And what of the role of justice? Greek society attributed some measure of moral responsibility to animals, and philosophers like Theophrastus did not disagree. Porphyry devotes two chapters of his work *Abstaining from Meat* to these questions. Here he presents three aetiological stories for sacrifice in Athens – in other words, in a polis, and thus in a legal and institutional context rather than in some early time and nameless place, as happens in Empedocles and Theophrastus. As it happens, Porphyry does not approve of these three stories, which he condemns as ‘indecent apologies’. His attitude is all too easy to understand. In each story the gods approve of animal sacrifice, and usually they expressly approve. Each time, the language of approval is judicial or legal.

The first case concerns the custom of sacrificing pigs in Attica: ‘The people link the slaughter of pigs to an involuntary wrong done by Clymene. She struck an animal of this species accidentally, and killed it.’ After expressing his own disapproval of this ‘wrong’, Porphyry goes on to report the reaction of

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34 Porph. *Abst.* 2.5–9.
36 Porph. *Abst.* 2.10.
an Olympian god, Apollo: ‘Her father was worried about her, for she had acted lawlessly, and went to Delphi and asked the oracle. The god accepted what had happened. For the future, he determined that the business [of sacrifice] was a matter of indifference.’ As Porphyry admits, the sacrifice of pigs now became normal. Taking the lives of these animals was no longer a moral or legal issue. Unlike the accidental death of a human being, it is a matter of indifference to the god. Animals deserve some justice, and so the Athenians consult Delphi, but animals do not deserve the same justice as human beings.

Porphyry’s next story is somewhat longer:

Episcopus, who was one of the priests called theopropoi, wanted to make the first sacrifice of sheep, and people say that he very discretely accepted the oracle that goes like this: ‘It isn’t lawful for you to kill the perambulatory race of sheep . . . If one of them nods willingly when water is poured, I say it is just to sacrifice it, Episcopus.’

In this version of early Athenian religion, cult once again exists already, and an oracle, no doubt from Apollo at Delphi, pronounces sacrifice acceptable. This time, though, the god imposes a condition: the animal must go willingly to its death. Apollo’s legal reasoning differs somewhat from the previous case. Animals deserve some measure of justice, and so killing them must somehow be excused. The animals themselves will excuse it, by making a gesture of approbation.

The gesture, alas, is a fraud. Any alert sheep will nod when it has water poured over it. The head will move from side to side, a kind of nod that conventionally meant approbation in ancient Greece, just as a nod up and down means approbation today. Other Greek sources show that pouring water over an animal’s head had another purpose, to see whether it was lively and healthy. If it were not, the god would not find the offering satisfactory. Porphyry’s misinterpretation of this custom allowed him to introduce questions of guilt and responsibility that otherwise would not arise.

In the third story, Porphyry gives an account of an Athenian festival, the Bouphonia, meaning ‘murder of cattle’: ‘When he was priest of Zeus Polieus, Diomus was the first to slaughter an ox . . . The ox tasted the sacred cake and he killed the creature, getting everyone nearby to join in.’ The priest now

38 Naiden, Smoke Signals, pp. 87–99.
stood trial, but he presented a novel defence: the knife used to kill the ox was responsible for the crime, and the priest was not. Those who assisted the priest offered the same defence. Here we can discern the origin of the odd Athenian murder court that Aristotle says dealt with guilty objects and animals. Porphyry concludes the story by admitting that the human defendants avoided being convicted. As for the animal, it had eaten an offering, and deserved to die. Zeus gives his tacit approval to the acquittal of the defendants. So began the sacrifice of cattle, the most prestigious species of victim.

This much discussed passage, along with others relating to the same festival, was the main one that led Burkert and others to speculate that the Greeks felt guilty about killing animals. The issue of guilt aside, the elements in the scene are familiar: a cult, an accident, a divine response to the first death of a sacrificial victim. On two counts, the response differs from those reported before. It comes from Zeus, not Apollo, and it takes a new form, the god’s tacit endorsement of a court that fails to act against the killers.

Porphyry no doubt would have preferred to find stories in which the gods disapproved of animal sacrifice. Yet he apparently found none. He did find (and very briefly reported) a fourth story featuring an oracle. This time, Apollo prescribed general, Pan-Hellenic sacrificial rules for domesticated animals, but Porphyry does not say why.

After citing these ‘indecent’ stories, Abstaining from Meat gives philosophical reasons for vegetarian and even vegan diets. As a work about religious law, however, it ends here. The answer to the question of why the Greeks provided little justice to animals is that the gods told them to. And what were the gods’ reasons? Not mainly that animals themselves had done wrong and deserved to die. That holds true only of the third and last story. Mainly, the gods did not explain themselves. They let accidental killing provide a precedent and they let worshippers misinterpret animal behaviour. In essence, the gods did not make the laws about sacrifice; instead, they justified the human wish or impulse to sacrifice animals. For the gods to respond otherwise, they would have had to be very different beings, like the Incarnate Love of Empedocles.

40 Paus. 1.28.10–11. 41 Euseb. Praep. evang. 4.8.4–9.1.
Porphyry himself believes in a vegetarian hierarchy of gods. There are, he declares, four kinds of supernatural beings. Highest is the one true god, who wants only incorporeal offerings that take the form of a spiritual sacrifice or mental exercise. Second comes a rank of gods who are less abstract and want offerings in the form of songs and prayerful thoughts. Third come the Olympian gods and some others, such as gods of heavenly bodies. They want vegetal offerings. Fourth and last come beings that Porphyry terms daimones, or demons; and they alone want sacrificial victims. High gods reject blood sacrifice, and only lesser, wicked creatures desire it. Porphyry cannot resist adding that the demons want animals burned whole, as holocausts, rather than butchered to feed worshippers. Even these debased beings serve the cause of the vegetarians.

In justifying the ways of beasts to men, Porphyry had set himself a difficult task. Hesiod, one of the two chief religious authorities among the Greek authors (Homer being the other), says, 'Heed justice. Completely forget about violence (bia). The son of Cronus assigned the norm of practicing justice to human beings. He let fish and beasts and winged birds eat each other, for there is no justice in them. He gave justice to human beings, and it is the much the best thing.' Hesiod compactly states the case against animals being just or deserving justice. Animals commit cannibalism, not as an occasional crime but as a daily necessity. They deserve punishment, and punished they are, by being hunted, fished and sacrificed. Hesiod’s views prevailed. Massive animal sacrifice continued, not until vegetarianism replaced it but until Christianity replaced ancient paganism.

Conclusion

One widespread, contemporary Western notion of sacrifice is consistent with, even if it has not contributed to, the increasing influence of vegetarianism and veganism. According to this notion, a sacrificial victim should be a willing victim, someone dying for a cause – a patriot or a person of special convictions. An animal does not possess the qualities or faculties that this sort of victim should have. In contrast, it is an unwilling victim. Vegetarianism thus prevents humankind from turning animals into victims of this kind, and veganism prevents less severe coercion against animals.

42 Porph. Abst. 2.34–42. 43 Porph. Abst. 2.44.1.
45 Naiden, Smoke Signals, ch. 7.
From this contemporary notion of animal sacrifice let us return to the ancient one and compare them. For the ancients, animals were unwilling victims who might resist their fate. Rather than lacking certain qualities and faculties, animals possessed many cardinal human traits, especially a sense of right and wrong. They deserved some measure of justice and could commit some kinds of injustice. The Greeks and the Romans, however, did not agree about this measure of justice. Empedocles and the Pythagoreans wanted more justice for animals, and other schools of philosophy wanted less. The generality of worshippers wanted much less.

Neither the critics nor the supporters of animal sacrifice judged this religious ritual by any standard of animal rights. Among the critics, Porphyry comes closest to a notion of rights. He says that animals have reasoning powers, just as the Epicureans did, and he went beyond the Epicureans, and even beyond the Stoics, in asserting that animals and people closely resemble one another.\footnote{46} This kinship between animals and people might lead to giving animals the rights given to human beings, but here another difficulty emerges: Porphyry has no notion of human rights. Modern scholars argue whether any of the ancient philosophers believed in human rights, but scholars agree that Porphyry did not, and that Theophrastus, from whom Porphyry is often borrowing, did not.\footnote{47}

In closing, it should be noted how the rise of Christianity affected not only animal sacrifice but attitudes towards animals. In pagan religion, animals were often victims but they were also divine familiars. Gods could be theriomorphic, and animals’ bodies could be tokens of the gods’ will. Christianity put an end to all of this. A figurative lamb replaced the actual lambs of sacrifice. In short, animals lost their intermittent sacred aura. Amid all the changes in the status and treatment of animals in recent years, this ancient trait bestowed on animals does not seem to have re-emerged. Although all species may be created equal, it seems that none are especially close to god. Whether animals have experienced this change as a loss is an unanswerable question.

**Bibliographic Essay**

The study of violent sacrifice among the Greeks and Romans began once the scholarly subjects of ‘ritual’ and ‘sacrifice’ emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the late twentieth century these two subjects became central to general

\footnote{46}{Porph. Abst. 3.25. 47 For the debate see Sorabji, Animal Minds, pp. 138–55.}

For many centuries the first of these two subjects, ‘ritual’, was not studied as such. The term ‘ritual’ meant only ‘training manual’, as it had in Classical Latin. In the late nineteenth century there was a profound change whereby it became understood as a process of worship that influenced social life, on the one hand, and myth, on the other. This new definition informed the work of Robertson Smith, Durkheim and Hubert and Mauss. These writers all regarded sacrifice as the most important ritual, not only in Greek and Roman religion but in religion in general, and in justifying this opinion built on notions of sacrifice found in Hegel and de Maistre. Bruce Lincoln’s chapter ‘From Bergaigne to Meuli: How Animal Sacrifice became a Hot Topic’, in C. A. Faraone and F. S. Naiden (eds.), Greek and Roman Animal Sacrifice: Ancient Victims, Modern Observers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 13–32 explores this complex history.

It remained to connect the ritual of sacrifice with violence, which was at most a minor theme in a few writers, notably Robertson Smith. The Swiss scholar Karl Meuli forged this link by associating sacrifice with hunting, especially among Neolithic peoples of northern Europe. Next, one of Meuli’s pupils, Walter Burkert, strengthened the link by associating sacrifice with the inborn violent tendencies posited by the ethologist Konrad Lorenz. Thus emerged the view that the Greeks and the Romans felt guilty about animal slaughter, and that the ritual of sacrifice redirected or discharged this guilt in socially beneficial fashion. A contemporary of Burkert’s, René Girard, focused on sacrifice of a peculiar kind, the expulsion and death of a scapegoat, and in works such as La Violence et le sacré (Paris: Grasset, 1972), translated as Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). He made this sort of sacrifice an interpretive model for analysing many social practices. Outside of classics, Girard’s views became well known, but within the discipline Burkert’s views were far more influential, partly because he drew a comparison between Greek attitudes towards sacrifice and ancient vegetarian literature, condemning meat-eating in his Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

A rival theory of sacrifice allowed that this ritual was quintessentially violent, and also allowed that the Greeks felt guilty about slaughtering animals, but differed from Burkert on the question of how the ritual of sacrifice redirected or displaced violence. The two proponents of this theory, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, argued in The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) that the ancient worshipper ignored the violence around him for the sake of achieving social and political unity through communal acts of animal sacrifice. In this view, eating sacrificial meat was the apex of the ritual, not putting innocents to death. For the Teutonic tragedy of guilt imagined by Burkert, this French theory substituted a Gallic comedy of innocence.
Opposition to these two views began with arguments against the proposition that the Greeks commonly believed that sacrificial animals went to their deaths willingly and thus relieved worshippers of feelings of guilt. Next came criticism of the broad assumption that sacrifice was a typically or inherently violent ritual, for example by Kathryn McClymond in Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) and of the related assumption that sacrificial violence was the only, or at least the most important, source of meat (see chapter 6 of Naiden’s Smoke Signals for the Gods). The effect of these criticisms was to reduce Burkert’s fundamental notion of guilty worshippers and victimised animals to its narrow literary and intellectual basis — vegetarian sympathy for victimised animals in Greek and Latin literature from Empedocles to Porphyry. Since this literature is mostly philosophical, ancient feelings of guilt about animal sacrifice proves to be mostly a topic in intellectual history.
Languishing in prison and awaiting her execution ad bestias – by exposure to ravenous wild beasts during spectacular shows in the amphitheatre – the early Christian martyr Perpetua experienced a vision of her impending death. She dreamt that she would indeed be led into the arena in front of an enormous crowd watching in astonishment, but instead of wild beasts coming to maul her, as she expected, a large Egyptian athlete entered the arena opposite and prepared to fight her. Perpetua then dreamt that her clothing was stripped off and that she suddenly became a man. As her Egyptian opponent rolled in the sand in preparation for combat, an enormous, aristocratic man entered the arena, his head reaching higher even than the amphitheatre itself. He wore a tunic with purple stripes and sandals of silver and gold, and he carried a wand like that of a trainer (a lanista) and a large branch with golden apples. The vision continues, remarkably recorded by Perpetua herself:

He asked for silence and said, ‘If this Egyptian defeats her, he will kill her with his sword, but should she defeat him, she will receive this branch.’ Then we came close to one another and let our fists fly. He tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised up into the air and I began to beat him without, as it were, even touching the ground. Then I saw a pause and I joined my hands together linking my fingers and I took him by the head. He fell on his face and I stepped on his head. The people began to shout and my assistants began to sing. I approached the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me, ‘Peace be with you, my daughter.’ I began to go in glory to the Porta Sanavivaria, the Gate of Life. (Martyrdom of Perpetua, 10.10–12)

Shortly after this fantastic victory, Perpetua awoke, determined now to face her fate with renewed conviction. She felt certain that, though she would die by the beasts, her real foe was not the wild animals but the devil himself. At this point the narrative written in Perpetua’s own hand breaks off, and the story of her subsequent execution is told by another.
While it is unsurprising that a Christian martyr should envision her execution as a public spectacle, since Roman executions were often showy exhibitions staged in the amphitheatre, it is remarkable that she should conceive of that execution as a sort of combat sport in which she would fight – and win. Rather than a passive victim of the arena, Perpetua imagines herself to be a famous athlete, a triumphant victor, the star of the show. The combat she briefly describes would probably be recognisable to contemporary Greeks and Romans at the beginning of the third century CE as a pancratium, a no-holds-barred mixture of wrestling and boxing, though there are also elements of gladiatorial combat in her vision too. Like a proper athlete, she is male, naked, and oiled for competition. Her opponent, the Egyptian, rolls in the dust in preparation for the fight. Even the enormous man who enters the arena in her dream to introduce the contest is readily identifiable as either an agonothetes (Greek) or a munerarius (Latin), the person who organised a spectacle for the assembled people. But more than simply a supervising official, he seems to be identified by Perpetua as Christ himself. He stands taller than the amphitheatre when he introduces her to the people, explaining the punishment for defeat and the reward for victory. Though in reality she will die horribly in the arena in games organised for the thrill of the crowd and as a demonstration of Roman power, in her mind she would fight and be victorious in games offered by Christ for the betterment of the world.

That a Christian martyr could adopt the language, imagery, iconography and ideology of combat sports (boxing, wrestling, pancratium and even gladiatorial combats) as a way to conceive of and give meaning to her own very public suffering and death, suggests that these events carried cultural consequence that went far beyond simple performance and entertainment. Important social values – such as perseverance in the face of adversity, individual courage, discipline, skill and personal excellence – could be expressed and celebrated through such violent athletic events. By the time of Perpetua’s death in 203 CE in Carthage, combat sports had been a key part of the cultures of the Mediterranean and Levant for well over a thousand years, maybe more. There is evidence for wrestling in the earliest works of literature: Gilgamesh and Enkidu wrestled one another at Uruk in Mesopotamia and as a

result became fast friends (c. 2700 BCE). But this chapter will examine combat sports in the Greek and Roman worlds. While most cultures know sports of various kinds, including what we should think of as violent combat sports, few other ancient societies institutionalised such sport and gave it so central a role in their ideologies and identities. In the Greek world multiple athletic competitions (agones) were held in every city and town in connection with the worship and celebrations of local and national deities. These innumerable festivals were in addition to the great Pan-Hellenic ‘periodic’ games at Olympia and elsewhere. The games were sacred and victory in one of the great festivals, such as Olympia, marked one as a heironikes, a ‘sacred victor’. Even if the prize was only an olive wreath, victory could be more cherished than one’s life. But as ubiquitous as the games were in Archaic (800–500 BCE) and Classical Greece (500–323 BCE), their number and importance only expanded during the Hellenistic period (323–30 BCE), and especially under the dominion of the Roman Empire (30 BCE–c. 500 CE). Furthermore, Roman society introduced gladiatorial combats, another type of contest held in a sacred context, to the Mediterranean world.

The violence inherent in combat sports, which would not have been tolerated in a normal social context, was a defining feature. Athletes hit, kicked, even stabbed each other, and this was deliberate. They agreed to do it and to have it done to them, and spectators expected it and celebrated it. Any evaluation of violence, however, depends on context. Ancient sporting contests were public spectacles, but although public, the events themselves were deemed to be outside of the normal social rules and conventions. The same act of violence (for example, hitting another person) may be considered ‘unacceptable’ or ‘valuable’ depending on the context. One man striking another in the street, the agora or forum, was ‘unacceptable’ violence and there were laws to control that sort of behaviour. The athletic violence of combat sports was in general ‘valuable’ and could carry with it ideals and values cherished by the very society that might reject the same violent acts in a normal day-to-day context – so long as this athletic violence took place within the bounds of the established rules or standards of behaviour which spectators expected of the athletes. For Christian Perpetua, an imagined

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victory in combat sport was a way to express her immortality and the glory that her martyrdom in the arena would bring to herself and even to Christ, the host of the games.

Origins and Development: The Early Greek World

There is evidence for what we would think of as combat sport as early as the Bronze Age in the Greek world. A fragmentary Minoan fresco from Akrotiri on Thera, an island in the Aegean, depicts two young boys fighting, though each seems to have a padded 'boxing glove' on only one hand (c. 1625 BCE). The so-called 'Boxer Rhyton' from Agia Triada on Crete also seems to depict boxers as well as other combats (c. 1550 BCE). But the evidence for recognisable combat sports is limited. The mainland Mycenaean culture (c. 1600–1100 BCE), from which later Greek society would emerge, has also provided some archaeological evidence for sword fighting in particular, though of course such depictions may instead represent military encounters. Most clearly a terracotta funerary larnax (sarcophagus) from Tanagra, in central Greece, depicts mourning women, a funerary procession and men fighting with swords (c. 1200 BCE). We might see these combats as part of funerary games for the deceased, a tradition possibly preserved in Homer (see below). Since contemporary Mycenaean (Linear B) texts make no mention of such contests, we rely on such scanty archaeological evidence, the significance of which is often inconclusive.

It is tempting, therefore, to read Homer’s descriptions of athletic events, which include combat sports, in the Iliad and Odyssey as evidence for athletics in the Mycenaean world. After all, the epics are set in the later Bronze Age, around the grand narrative of the Trojan War (mid thirteenth century BCE). But we are probably not correct to assign the stories completely to the Bronze Age. Due to multiple problems with interpreting the bardic tradition historically, it is difficult to say with certainty whether Homer’s athletics are to be located in the Bronze Age, the later Archaic Age, somewhere in between, or in no historical era at all. The best we can say is that they seem consistent with later Greek practice. If indeed reflective of the early Archaic period, then Homer’s athletic events would generally parallel the traditional foundation dates for the sanctuary of Olympia in the early eighth

century BCE and the other great agonistic festivals, rather than the earlier Bronze Age world.

The most famous athletic events in the epics take place as part of the funeral of the hero, Patroklos. In book 23 of the Iliad, as the Achaean (Greek) heroes finally begin to return to their ships following the cremation of Patroklos, the great hero Achilles summons them back to assembly. He calls for treasures to be brought from his ships and promises these as prizes for various games to be held in Patroklos’ honour: a chariot race, a foot race, boxing, wrestling, a weight-throw, armed combat, archery and spear throwing. Most of these events would become standard features of the Greek agonistic canon. Though the chariot race receives by far the most attention from Homer, we can see that combat sports are present from the very beginnings of Greek athletics.

When Achilles announces the competition in boxing, two lesser heroes stand up: Epeios and Euryalos. Epeios readily admits that he is a poor warrior but says that he is an unbeatable boxer and boasts that he will smash the bones of any man who comes against him. Euryalos has defeated all his boxing opponents in his native Thebes. The two men wear broad belts and wrapped ox hide leather thongs around their hands. Homer describes their fight:

The two men, girt up, strode into the midst of the circle
And faced each other, and put up their ponderous hands at the same time
And closed, so that their heavy arms were crossing each other,
And there was a fierce grinding of teeth, the sweat began to run
Everywhere from their bodies. Great Epeios came in, and hit him
As he peered out from under his guard, on the cheek, and he could no longer
Keep his feet, but where he stood the glorious limbs gave.
As in the water roughened by the north wind a fish jumps
In the weeds of the beach-break, then the dark water closes above him,
So Euryalos left the ground from the blow, but great-hearted Epeios
Took him in his arms and set him upright, and his true companions
Stood about him, and led him out of the circle, feet dragging
As he spat up the thick blood and rolled his head over to one side. (ll. 23.685–97)

Of central importance to the fight are the spectators who gather around to watch: the two fighters step in to the middle of the circle, and the spectators – or some of them – come to Euryalos’ rescue at the end and lead him off.

Epeios himself participates in this broader camaraderie. In fact, he is the one who rushes to help Euryalos immediately after knocking him out and saves him from the indignity of falling to the ground, unconscious. Euryalos leaves the field on his feet supported by friends, his honour intact. The glory of Epeios’ victory and the dignity afforded Euryalos are only possible because of the presence and interest of the spectators. They are the arbiters of social approval. One suspects that had Epeios continued to beat Euryalos or had vainly let him fall disgraced, that the spectators would have disapproved and Epeios’ honour would have suffered. The other combat events (wrestling and armed combat) similarly involve individual champions competing in front of assembled people. In these other cases, too, the crowd is active, intervening in the case of the armed combat between Aias and Diomedes to stop the fight when Diomedes draws blood (Il. 23.811–25).

Standing at the beginning of a long agonistic tradition, these events are different from later games in some ways. For example, Achilles offers actual, valuable prizes for the competitors, and in fact, usually even the loser is awarded a prize. The prize for the winner will always be important: indeed, the verb athleiō, the root of athlētēs, means ‘to contend for a prize’. But despite the differences, several of the key elements common to later combat sports are already evident. For example, all the athletes are elite: aristoi (‘best men’) compete in order to demonstrate their excellence. Epeios, for example, was a lesser hero and an admittedly poor warrior, but his clear victory in the boxing event and his gracious behaviour after knocking out Euryalos demonstrate his worth to all. Ostentatious victory in competition was a way for an early Greek aristocrat to prove and display his excellence (aretē), and this required witnesses – the spectators – who watched and even marvelled at what they saw, and by watching and marvelling they bestowed status on the victors.

Although the Greeks of later ages continued to admire the heroic single combat in battle (monomachia) celebrated in the Homeric epics, the opportunity for community leaders (the basileis) to distinguish themselves in single combat was greatly diminished on the battlefield, as new, mass formations of heavily armed troops (hoplites) gradually replaced the aristocratic champions of earlier years. The hoplites fought as a unit in a tight formation several ranks deep, and advanced into battle behind a wall of overlapping shields and protruding spears. The military leader was removed from the ostentatious front. In this context a soldier who did break ranks in order to fight in single combat both risked his own life and compromised the integrity of the entire formation, so risking the lives of everyone. For example, the Spartan Aristodemos is said to have acted as a madman at the battle of Plataea in
479 BCE because he left the formation to fight out in front in his eagerness to die before the eyes of his comrades. Although the Spartans agreed that he had demonstrated extreme bravery, they nevertheless voted him no honours: the battlefield was no longer the place for individual acts of martial bravery that had been celebrated in the Homeric tradition. Indeed, such individualistic values were now discouraged in war in favour of the collective discipline and courage demanded by hoplite warfare. No longer as important on the battlefield, the old aristocratic values celebrating individual honour and victory in single combat were removed to the gymnasium and competitive athletic festivals. In contrast with the group solidarity demanded of the contemporary hoplite battlefield, Greek athletics involved entirely individual competitions for personal glory and fame.

Greek Combat Sports

It is perhaps no coincidence then that the earliest agonistic festivals began at this same time. The earliest games at Olympia most famously have been dated to 776 BCE, and the rise of the gymnasium as an athletic training facility first begins to appear in cities soon thereafter. These games were primarily religious festivals for the gods. Olympia, for example, was a festival of Zeus, while the Pythian Games at Delphi were meant to honour Apollo, the Nemean Games near Argos honoured Zeus and the Isthmian Games at Corinth honoured Poseidon. Throughout their long history these agonistic festivals were Pan-Hellenic and jealously restricted to fellow Greeks. In addition, there were thousands of other contests (agones) held in the context of other religious festivals throughout the Greek world for local deities. The prize for victory was a simple crown of olive or celery leaves and often a palm branch to symbolise victory. The athletics started small and with limited events, mostly just running sports, though the history is difficult to reconstruct.

8 Herodotus 9.71.3. Aristodemus the Trembler was the sole survivor of the three hundred who fought at Thermopylae and wished to recover his honour by dying at Plataea.
10 M. B. Poliakoff, Combat Sports in the Ancient World (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), pp.94–115, esp. p. 114: ‘It could be said with greater truth that the rise of the hoplite phalanx gave impetus to organized competitive athletics than that athletics supported the phalanx; the games represent displacement of certain military impulses, not training for them.’
Wrestling (Greek: *pala*ē) was the earliest of the combat sports introduced to Olympia (traditional date 708 BCE). As Homer describes, the two men stood together (*systasis*) gripping each other about the shoulders, their heads touching, and attempted to throw one another to the ground. Victory was won by the first wrestler to throw his opponent to the ground three times, though he would then have to fight again until only two men were left for the final match. As was normal in Greek athletics, each athlete oiled himself and then rubbed in dust (as Perpetua’s Egyptian opponent had done), thus making it more difficult for his opponent to grip him tightly. The gymnasia of various Greek city-states included a palaestra, or wrestling area, which was specifically designed for wrestling and the other combat sports. The palaestra included a dug-out area (*skamma*) filled with sand, which would have provided some protection for athletes as they were slammed to the ground. Surprising to modern readers, perhaps, is the lack of weight categories in ancient sports, including combat sports. Instead, divisions were made by age: boys fought with boys (*paides*) and men with men.11

Boxing (*pyx* or *pugme*) was also found at the great festivals in the early days (traditionally at Olympia from 688 BCE). Depictions of ancient Greek boxers especially on vases invariably show considerable bloodshed. Blows seem especially aimed at the head. Just as Homer describes the leather strips used by Epeios and Euryalos to wrap their hands, so later Greek boxers wrapped their hands too. Initially these strips (*himantes*) were of soft leather, wrapped around the knuckles and hands, then up around the forearm, and were meant to protect one’s hands, not for one’s opponent. These early leather wraps were nicknamed ‘*myrmikes*’ (ants) since they left smaller cuts all over the opponent’s face and body. In the later Classical period thicker strips of leather were wrapped across the knuckles (known as the ‘sharp *himantes*’), which could inflict much more serious damage to an opponent. Centuries later, in the Roman period, metal was added to the leather to create even more dangerous, even lethal, gloves (*the caestus*). As with wrestling competitions, boxers drew lots to compete in rounds: losers were eliminated and victors carried on to fight the next opponent until only two remained. There were no rounds or time limits though there were rules, as the existence of referees (e.g. the *Hellanodikes* at Olympia) to supervise the fighters attests; these rules are difficult to recover now, however. Fights continued until one boxer was either unable or unwilling to continue, and submission was

signalled by holding up a finger, at which point the referee would intervene with his switch (rhabdos) and stop the fight and award the victor.

Pausanias, writing in the later second century CE, describes a famous boxing match, itself ancient history by his day, that makes clear the extreme violence possible in boxing matches, and more importantly, the reaction of the watching officials and spectators.

The Argives gave the crown of victory at the Nemean Games to Kreugas although he was dead because his opponent, Damoxenos of Syracuse, broke the agreement which had been reached between them. While they were boxing evening came on and they agreed in front of witnesses that each would allow the other in turn to land a punch. Now at that time boxers did not yet wear the sharp himantes on their wrists, but boxed with the soft himantes which were bound in the hollow of the hand so that the fingers were left bare. These soft himantes were thin ox hide plaited together in some ancient way. Now Kreugas aimed his punch at Damoxenos’ head. Then Damoxenos told Kreugas to raise his arm and, when Kreugas had done so, Damoxenos struck him under the ribs with his fingers straight out. The combination of the sharp fingernails and the force of the blow drove his hand into Kreugas’ guts. He grabbed Kreugas’ intestines and tore them out and Kreugas died on the spot. The Argives expelled Damoxenos on the grounds that he had broken his agreement by giving his opponent several blows (i.e. each finger) instead of the agreed upon one blow. They gave the victory to dead Kreugas and erected a statue of him in Argos. (Paus. 8.40–5)

This episode highlights the importance of rules to govern the contest, the bravery of the athletes and the appreciation felt for an athlete who gave all, even his life, for victory.

The most violent of the combat sports was the pancratium (Greek pankration, ‘all powerful’). It combined boxing and wrestling, including wrestling on the ground and even kicking, in a form of combat in which virtually no move or hold was barred. It is comparable to modern mixed martial arts. The third century BCE writer Philostratus describes a painting of a famous pancratist, Arrhachion, and explains the nature of the sport as follows.

The pancratists, my boy, practice a dangerous brand of wrestling. They have to endure black eyes which are not safe for the wrestler, and learn holds by which one who has fallen can still win, and they must be skilful in the various ways of strangulation. They bend ankles and twist arms and throw punches and jump on their opponents. All such practices are permitted in the pancratium except for biting and gouging. Indeed, the Spartans permit even this . . . (Philostr. Imag. 2.6)
Like boxing, victory was determined when one fighter was no longer able or willing to continue, and again submission was signalled by holding up a finger. As indicated, however, victory, especially in one of the great games, was all important. The painting of Arrhachion commemorated his third Olympic victory (in the 54th Olympiad; 564 BCE), which became especially famous because of the manner in which it was realised. Speaking as an art historian, Philostratus vividly describes what you see when looking at the painting, bringing the action to life. The passage is long, but worth citing in full.

Now you have come to the Olympic Games and to the best of the contests at Olympia. This is the pancratium for men. Arrhachion is being crowned although he dies at the moment of his victory, and the Hellanodikes (referee) is crowning him . . . Arrhachion seems to have overpowered not only his opponent, but the Greek spectators as well. They are jumping up from their seats and shouting, some waving their hands, some leaping from the ground, and others are slapping one another on the back. His astonishing feat has left the spectators beside themselves. Who is so stolid as not to shriek aloud at this athlete? This present accomplishment surpasses his already great record of two previous victories at Olympia, for this one has cost his life and he departs for the land of the Blessed with the dust still on him. But do not think that this is accidental, for he planned his victory cleverly . . . Arrhachion’s opponent, having already a grip around his waist, thought to kill him and put an arm around his neck and choked off his breath. At the same time he slipped his legs through Arrhachion’s groin and wound his feet inside Arrhachion’s knees, and pulled back until the sleep of death began to creep over Arrhachion’s senses. But Arrhachion was not done yet, for as his opponent began to relax the pressure of his legs, Acchachion kicked away his own right foot and fell heavily to the left, holding his opponent at the groin, with his left knee still holding his opponent’s foot firmly. So violent was the fall that opponent’s left ankle was wrenched from the socket. For Arrhachion’s soul, though it leaves his body feeble, still gives him strength for his purpose. The one who is strangling Arrhachion is painted to look like a corpse as he signals with his hand that he is giving up. But Arrhachion is painted as are all victors. His blood is in full flower, and sweat still glistens, and he smiles like a living man who sees his victory. (Philostr. Imag. 2.6)

It is almost as if we are there at Olympia watching the final moments of the contest. Although caught in a lethal choke hold by his opponent, Arrhachion refuses to submit – all he need do was wiggle a finger at the watching referee – and instead, with the last moments of his strength, he counters his opponent’s hold with a desperate move. The effect on the spectators is
electric: they are overwhelmed with the excitement and intensity of the moment and Arrhachion’s choice. The artist is able to capture what this means: though dead, Arrhachion is victorious and so he is painted as if in the bloom of youth, while his opponent, though alive, has submitted and so is painted as if dead. Nearly 800 years later, Perpetua too would envision her own death as a sort of pancratium, and like Arrhachion find in that struggle a glorious victory that brought eternal life.

Derived from an aristocratic impulse to prove one’s excellence in an ostentatious display of physical prowess, Greek athletics produced individual champions. To come in second place was to lose. The ideology of Greek athletes celebrated victory above all else, even one’s life. For example, the fifth century BCE poet Pindar extols the glory that came to victors and the corresponding disgrace that befell defeated athletes, even those who lost in the great Pythian Games:

You with determination fell on the bodies of four men, for whom a cheerful homecoming – comparable to yours – has not been allotted at the Pythian games, nor when they came to their mothers did pleasant laughter awaken delight; but they cower in the alleyways aloof from their enemies, stung by their misfortune.

(Pind. Pyth. 8.81–7)

This is probably extreme, but it does emphasise the singular importance of the individual in Greek athletics. Masculine and military virtues were emphasised by athletes whose bravado often extended to the boast of ‘victory or death’. Arrhachion, for example, was so celebrated because he chose death rather than defeat at Olympia; we learn from another source that seeing him on the point of surrender, his trainer shouted and urged him to desire death, ‘What a noble epitaph, not to have conceded at Olympia!’ Philostratus states that one contestant was inspired by a message his trainer sent to his mother: ‘Believe it if you hear that your son is dead; do not, if you hear that he has lost.’ Writing in the early first century CE, Philo Judaeus of Alexandria also comments on the ‘victory or death’ ideology of Greek athletes:

I know that wrestlers and pancratiasts out of love of honour and eagerness for victory – although their bodies fail, still continue and struggle on with spirit alone, which they have accustomed to despise terrors – often persevere until the end of their life. . . . It is said that two athletes in a sacred contest possessed of equal strength both suffered and returned the same

13 Philostr. Her. 23.
punishments, they neither yielded until both died... to die for the olive or parsley is a glory to competitors.

(Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber sit*, 17.110–13)

The epitaph of the boxer Agathos Daemon, from the second century CE, indicates that later Greeks were still willing to pay the ultimate price for victory, or at least present themselves as so willing: 'Agathos Daemon, also known as the Camel, from Alexandria, a boxer in the man category, Nemean victor, who died here while fighting in the stadium, having prayed to Zeus for a crown or death. Age 35. Farewell.'

The agonistic spirit of Greek athletics celebrated the individual champion and proclaimed the ostentatious victory to be more important than anything else, including the athlete’s own life. In this, combat sports represented the purest form of the struggle for individual excellence.

**Roman Gladiatorial Combats**

In her dream Perpetua sees herself as a naked male athlete fighting in a sort of pancratium, but this vision also reveals elements of Roman gladiatorial combats: the enormous man appears to her like a *lanista* (a gladiatorial trainer), her opponent has a sword, and after her victory she leaves through the Porta Sanavivaria, the Gate of Life, through which victorious gladiators left the arena. The dream thus reveals the apparent similarities between Greek combat sports and Roman gladiatorial combats.

The first gladiatorial spectacle was reportedly given in Rome in 264 BCE, when three pairs of gladiators fought at the funeral of Decimus Iunius Brutus (Livy, *Epit.* 16). For the next 200 years until the end of the Republic the spectacle continued to be presented in Rome strictly in association with the funerals of great men, the military and political leaders of the city. Such a show became known as a *munus* (a ‘duty’; plural: *munera*). The funerary context is key to interpreting the social significance of the spectacles. The Greek historian Polybius (second century BCE) attributed Rome’s stunning rise to world domination to her political and social institutions, including the aristocratic funeral.

The Roman aristocratic funeral celebrated not only the virtues and accomplishments of the deceased, which were primarily military, but also promoted the martial values that had made Rome great, that would...

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sustain the Romans in the present crisis, and that would maintain them in the future by inspiring the youth in traditional Roman priorities. That the community also came together at a gladiatorial munus presented in connection with the funeral is significant, for gladiators fighting hand to hand in single combat visibly demonstrated martial virtues key to a militaristic society like that of Rome. Writing during the last days of the Roman Republic, Cicero, for example, praises the courage, training and discipline of gladiators, even as he despises them for their low social status.

What blows the gladiators, who are either ruined men or barbarians, endure. How those who are well-trained prefer to take a blow rather than shamefully avoid it. How often is it apparent that they wish nothing more than to satisfy their masters or the spectators. Even when worn down with wounds they send messages to their masters asking what they want: if their masters are satisfied, they themselves are willing to give up. What even mediocre gladiator has ever groaned or changed his expression? Who has ever fought or given up disgracefully? Who, when defeated and ordered to receive the death blow, has ever retracted his neck? Such is the strength of their training, preparation, and habit. (Cic. Tusc. 2.41)

The munus thus united Romans in the presence of exemplary Roman martial virtues; the entire Roman community assembled around and focused on a demonstration of consummate skill in single combat, the extreme courage demanded of that combat, and strict discipline, all traditional values which might have helped to define what it meant to be a Roman.

By the late first century BCE the number of gladiators involved in a typical munus had grown enormously, often reaching the hundreds. Because of the soaring costs and dangerous popularity that could accrue to the host of the show, the first emperor Augustus removed the munus from its strict funerary context and instead placed the games on a regular schedule, often in association with wild beast displays and hunts (venationes) in the morning and spectacular executions at noon, all followed at the end of the day by the gladiators. It is from about this time that the spectacle began to spread to communities all across the Roman Empire, from Britain to North Africa and east to Syria and the Greek world. In most cases, gladiatorial combats (and their related spectacles) were found in connection with the celebration of the imperial cult: the worship of the Roman emperors as gods. For example, the execution of Perpetua, with which we started, took place as part of a munus in the amphitheatre in Carthage in celebration of the emperor Geta’s birthday.
The nature of gladiatorial combat may on the surface seem to have little in common with combat sports. After all, gladiators were from the lowest class, often slaves who fought under compulsion in murderous games for the entertainment of bloodthirsty spectators. But much recent scholarship has found that these traditional beliefs may be misleading, and that gladiatorial combats might have had closer parallels to combat sports than previously thought. We have few descriptions of actual combat, so such generalisations are difficult. The poet Martial celebrated the opening of the Flavian Amphitheatre in Rome (the Colosseum in 80 CE) with a little book of poems dedicated to the emperor, in which he described some of the amazing spectacles the crowd witnessed. One show saw two famous gladiators pitted against each other with an unusual outcome:

While Priscus continued to draw out the contest, and Verus did likewise,
And for a long while the struggle was evenly balanced on both sides,
Discharge (missio) was demanded for the stout fighters with loud and frequent shouting;
But Caesar (the emperor) obeyed his own law: The law was that
Once the palm had been set up, the fight had to proceed until a finger was raised.
He did as he was allowed, making frequent awards of plate.
Still, a resolution was found for the deadlocked contest:
Equal they fought, equal they yielded.
To both Caesar awarded the wooden sword and the palm:
Thus courage and skill received their reward.
This has happened under no emperor but you, Caesar:
Two men fought and two men won. (Martial, Spect. 31)\(^\text{(16)}\)

Though the outcome (two victorious) was unparalleled, the combat itself and its circumstances reflect the general features of most gladiatorial matches. The first thing to note is the vocal, engaged role of the crowd. They are not passive spectators, nor are they even particularly bloodthirsty: they call out repeatedly for the missio (release) of the two gladiators. In fact, since the time of Augustus combats sine missione (‘without release’) had been banned; they did take place, but they were exceptional. Normal gladiatorial combats permitted missio. This particular fight required that one of the gladiators submit, and this was signalled by raising a finger (ad digitum, literally ‘to the finger’), the same action by which a pancratiast could signal submission. What is implied in the poem, but known from numerous other sources, is the

existence of a referee ready to intervene and stop the fight at the point of submission. This official, known as the summa rudis (literally ‘chief stick’), can be seen in numerous depictions of gladiatorial combat, sometimes accompanied by a second official (the secunda rudis). When a gladiator surrendered in this way, the summa rudis stepped in, stopped the fight, and then turned to the munerarius (the supervising official, typically the emperor or the priest of the imperial cult) to decide whether to accept the submission. At this point, the munerarius would in turn seek the will of the people, and usually follow their wishes. Though they could demand the gladiators fight on, it is a modern assumption that the people always called for the death of their heroes.\textsuperscript{17}

In addition to supervising the submissions, these two referees (the summa and secunda rudes) also policed the combats in order to ensure that the gladiators fought according to the rules and expected standards of behaviour. It is difficult to know now what all these rules were, since our ancient literary sources say so little about them, but we know, for example, that forcing an opponent to the ground even by pushing him over was an acceptable way to force submission, whereas an accidental fall would invite intervention of the referee and a temporary stoppage.\textsuperscript{18} Other conventions of the combats involved the distinct armament types into which gladiators were grouped: the heavily armed murmillo\textit{nes}, secuto\textit{res}, Thracians and similar, all wore helmets that restricted their vision to various degrees even as they protected their heads, carried shields of different sizes, wore greaves on their shins (either one or both legs, depending on type) and carried the gladius, a short stabbing sword, though the Thracian had a short, curved sword called a sica. In contrast was the lightly armed reti\textit{arius}, a net man equipped with a trident and a dagger, and a shoulder guard but no helmet. This nimble gladiator typically fought the secutor.\textsuperscript{19} These armament types were recognisable and show remarkable continuity across the Roman Empire in terms of both time and space. It is probable that the referees may have served as technical experts, policing the combat techniques of the various gladiatorial armament types too: secuto\textit{res} were to fight like secuto\textit{res} and reti\textit{arii} like reti\textit{arii}. The spectators knew the differences and expected the gladiators to fight as they were supposed to. Petronius satirises the complaints of one aficionado who

\textsuperscript{19} A good summary can be found in R. Dunkle, \textit{Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome} (New York: Pearson, 2008), pp. 98–118.
complained that a gladiator fought according to his lessons (ad dictata: Petron. Sat. 45), but the Christian author Tertullian, in comparing his advice to martyrs to the dictata shouted by the people to gladiators in the arena, notes that even expert gladiators are aided not only by their instructors but occasionally by the people too (ad Mart. 1.2). The people knew and appreciated the skills gladiators needed in their combat spectacles.

Of course, combats were dangerous and fatality was always a real possibility, but the various rules (combats ad digitum and missio) reduced the chances of a gladiator dying in the arena. In addition to the official rules, however, many gladiators themselves seem to have followed an ‘unwritten code’, to fight bravely and in the hope of victory, but not necessarily in order to kill their opponent. The tombstone of the gladiator with the mythical name Aias from Thasos in northern Greece provides an example.

I am not Locrian Aias whom you behold, nor the son of Telamon, but the one who was pleasing in the stadia in martial contests, who mightily saved many souls out from under necessity, myself expecting that someone would return the same to me. No opponent killed me, but I died on my own, and my revered wife buried me here in the holy plain of Thasos. Kalligenia (erected this) for Aias her husband in remembrance.20

Other examples exist, particularly from the Greek world, where gladiatorial spectacles were part of the imperial cult festivities, as they were in most other parts of the empire. They may point to a high level of professionalism or camaraderie, but they also suggest that homicide was not necessarily the point of the combat, even if the fights were dangerous and death was always a possibility. The combats were certainly bloody and violent, but it was purposive violence. To defeat an opponent, to force him to yield and claim victory for oneself within the boundaries of established rules and expectations, was an expression of extreme skill, martial prowess and discipline. These were values at the heart of Roman martial ideology.

Interestingly, the martial values on display in gladiatorial munera are similar to the ‘victory or death’ ideology celebrated by Greek combat athletes. In fact, gladiators in the Greek world deliberately adopted athletic terminology to describe themselves, as their tombstones repeatedly show. They described their combats as ‘pugmai’, boxing fights, and located their exploits in the stadium, the home of Greek athletics. Moreover, gladiators tended to draw on mythology for their performance names (like Aias above),

strengthening the obvious parallels between their single combat (*monomachia*) and the single combat of Greek heroes. Indeed, the term ‘gladiator’ was not borrowed into Greek, but instead the pre-existing term, *monomachos*, was used to identify the gladiators in Greek. But while Greek athletes express paramilitary, victory-or-death heroic values, gladiators lived it every time they fought. A gladiator epitaph from Gortyn on Crete makes their reality clear: ‘The olive is not the prize, but we fight for our lives.’ The gladiator thus presents himself as a paradigm of the Greek agonistic spirit.

Gladiatorial spectacles across the empire were given by local elites for the entertainment of local people in the context of the celebration of the imperial cult, one of the highlights of the calendar year and perhaps the only religious institution that united the whole empire. An advertisement for such games offered at Odessos in 227 CE was inscribed in stone: it is as much a commemoration of the games as it is an announcement of them, and states for whom the games were offered:

> With good fortune! For the fortune and victory and eternal endurance of the most holy and great and unconquerable emperor Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander, Pius, Felix Augustus and for the fortune of Julia Mamæa the Augusta and their whole house and for the sacred Senate and people of Rome and for the sacred armies and for the illustrious Lucius Mantennius Sabinus the military governor and for the council and people of Odessos . . . the chief priests of the city, Marcus Aurelius Simon, son of Simon, the councillor, and Marcus Aurelius Io— (the stone is damaged) . . . through hunts and gladiatorial combats (. . . a certain number of . . .) days before the Kalends of May (or March – the stone is damaged) in the consulship of Albinus and Maximus. (*IGBulg.* I² no. 70)

The spectacles were presented for benefit of the entire ruling structure of the empire, from the emperor at the top all the way down to the local community of Odessos. They thus helped to incorporate contemporary Greeks within the present reality of the Roman Empire, as local people gathered to watch spectacles of extreme violence. For the most part it is difficult to know what these spectators thought of the shows they were watching. Tertullian, a Christian apologist and contemporary of Perpetua from Roman North Africa,

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despaired over those fellow Christians who went to the games and acclaimed actors and athletes and gladiators with cries of ‘Heis ap’ aionos!’ (‘One for Eternity’, or similar) from the same mouth with which they prayed to God (Tert. De spect. 25.5).\textsuperscript{23} The acclamation of an athlete or gladiator as immortal was probably in reference not to his lifespan but to his memory, his fame and his reputation. In the same way heroes all died but their fame lived forever, so the people expected immortality for their heroes in the stadium or arena. The ideals are very much heroic.

**Conclusion**

Combat sports presented the spectator with extreme acts of violence, potentially even fatal violence. But that violence was controlled and purposive. It took place in ceremonial contexts – funerals or religious festivals primarily – with the athletes wearing special uniforms, nudity in the case of combat athletes and identifiable armaments for gladiators. The fights were not violent mayhem or murderous free-for-alls, but regulated and controlled by rules and expectations, all monitored by referees and the watching people themselves. These games were able to give visible expression to values and ideology at the heart of Greek and Roman societies: courage, skill and discipline, especially in a martial context, perseverance to victory against all adversity and at all costs, even one’s life, and the ostentatious demonstration of personal excellence. The public nature of the performances is critical: it must be seen to be legitimised. Victory in such combat was worthy of immortality. As it was for Homer’s mythical heroes, so it was a fitting way for a terrified young woman languishing in prison to rationalise her own horrifying death. She would fight and win, and earn immortality.

**Bibliographic Essay**

While the athletic competitions of Greece and Rome are no longer seen as unique in the ancient world, since it is now recognised that other cultures also appreciated or made room for competitive events and various other ‘games’, it nevertheless remains the case that such sports were ubiquitous and in many ways even a defining feature of Greek and Roman society. The most important study of Greek combats sports remains Michael Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), though Poliakoff specifically excludes Roman gladiatorial events from his study, arguing that they did not constitute a ‘sport’ but were\textsuperscript{23} T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 96.
instead a form of ‘warfare for spectators’. Greek combat sports could be equally violent. See, for example, Nigel Crowther, ‘Reflections on Greek Athletic Events: Violence and Spectator Attitudes’, Nikephoros 7 (1994), 121–33. At the same time scholars have begun to consider more closely the various rules and expectations by which gladiatorial combats were regulated, as can be seen especially in Michael J. Carter, ‘Gladiatorial Combat: The Rules of Engagement’, Classical Journal 102 (2007), 97–113. Both Greek combat sports and Roman gladiatorial fights were violent contests bound by rules and regulations, with referees present to oversee them, and so the similarities now mean that the two are often studied together. The best example is the recent Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity, edited by Paul Christesen and Donald Kyle (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014), which contains forty-three chapters running chronologically from the Greek Bronze Age to the early Byzantine world in the sixth century C.E. Kyle had earlier studied Greek sport and Roman spectacle as similar institutions in his 2007 Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World (Oxford: Blackwell; 2nd edn 2015), and this approach has been followed by Mark Golden, Greek Sport and Social Status (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008) and David Potter, The Victor’s Crown: A History of Sport from Homer to Byzantium (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Still, despite the rule-bound nature of gladiatorial combats, it is still this spectacle that has attracted most of the attention for its violent nature and the window it potentially offers on Roman society more broadly. Such shows were typically accompanied by spectacular executions (including at times Christian martyrdoms) and displays and hunts of often exotic wild animals. It was a powerful spectacle and one which even the Christian victims of the arena wanted to appropriate for their own uses, as argued by Glen Bowersock, Martyrdom and Rome (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Donald Kyle had in 1998 published Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome (London: Routledge), one of number of studies into the bloody spectacle. But the first and most important attempt to account for the violence of the arena is Garrett Fagan’s The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). As the subtitle indicates, Fagan employs contemporary social psychology to explain human – not simply Roman – willingness to watch the sorts of violent acts found in gladiatorial combats and the other bloody shows in the arena, and indeed other forms of combat sports.
Late Antiquity and Modernity

This chapter is the first in this book to have ‘religious violence’ in its title. Late antiquity, then, seems to mark the introduction of a new type of violence. Such is the conclusion of a leading scholar of late antique violence, Johannes Hahn, who writes: ‘Religious violence as a phenomenon of public life is indeed peculiar to Late Antiquity’. Hahn attributes this development to the conversion of Constantine and the Roman Empire to Christianity.¹ The flow of recent studies on late antique religious violence and its virtual absence in studies of the classical world seem to confirm that judgement.

Yet, is religious violence really a typically late antique and Christian feature? If that were the case, what are we to do with the anti-Christian measures of the Roman state, for example those of Diocletian? What about the anti-Manichaean decrees of this emperor? What about the desecration of the Jewish temple in 168 BCE by the Seleucid King Antiochus IV, and the suppression of the Bacchanalia by the Roman Senate in 186 BCE? The list could be many times longer. Maybe there are, after all, more chapters to be written on religious violence in ancient Greece and Rome.

The seemingly obvious nature of the identification of religious violence and late antiquity is reflected in a general lack of definition of what counts as such. Scholars of late antique violence rarely deal with sacralised violence in cult, like sacrifice, which is generally seen to have been marginalised. Blood sacrifice had been abandoned by the three monotheistic religions of late

antiquity and within paganism it is thought to have been decisively weakened. If the death of Christ lies at the heart of Christian worship, it was considered to have been a final act and was commemorated in a bloodless fashion, as Christian apologists were proud to point out. Scholars do not focus on violence tied to religious occasions and festivals. Religious ceremonies could be flashpoints of conflict, but it is hard to discern cyclical, ritual patterns such as those observed for the Middle Ages by David Nirenberg, who linked violence to particular periods of the liturgical year. Usually, religious violence is understood as violent actions against religious groups and their members by another religious group. The archetypical events of this type are the destruction of temples and synagogues, and attacks on pagans. These are exemplified in a number of well-known cases, such as the destruction of the Serapeion in Alexandria (391 CE), the attack on the synagogue in Callinicum in Syria (388 CE), and the murder of the philosopher Hypatia (c. 415 CE). The focus, then, is on social conflict between religious groups. The net is sometimes cast wider, situating such violence in the context of imperial measures against non-Christian and heretical groups and set against the background of a narrative that emphasises the violent imposition of Christian orthodoxy on the Roman Empire through the twin efforts of church and state. This narrative has, in fact, deep roots in the intellectual history of the West.

If it is questionable that religious violence is typically late antique, the identification is sustained by the attribution of an intrinsically violent nature to monotheistic religions. These are supposed, theologically, to make a strong distinction between truth and falsity, and thus, in sociological terms, to have a strong in/out dimension. The transition from a polytheistic to a monotheistic society must then be inherently violent. Philosophically problematic, such an understanding of religion is historically implausible, as one can find many periods of tolerance in monotheistic religions and of intolerance by polytheistic religions. For late antiquity, this point has been repeatedly made by Harold Drake, who shows that the identification of monotheism with violence and intolerance is an Enlightenment trope that does not suit the evidence. The flipside of this particular trope is the idea that Greek and Roman

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3 The idea is now usually associated with Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).
polytheism was essentially tolerant and non-violent, a view that, as we have seen, is open to question.⁴

Drake rightly points to the historical genesis of the association between monotheism and violence, but the roots of the identification of late antiquity and religious violence go deeper. It started during the Reformation, when Protestants attacked the Catholic Church for having degenerated. In order to do so, they had to construct a historical narrative that identified the moment when the church had lapsed. A widely accepted point in time was the conversion of Constantine, who struck the alliance between state and church. This led to a twofold corruption. On the one hand, one could argue that the church, which previously had had no coercive powers, could now use violence against heretics, pagans and Jews, and started to lobby the state to abandon its previously tolerant attitude towards followers of other religions. On the other, one could blame the state and argue that it started to use the church for its own purposes and turned it into an instrument of oppression. The ‘Constantinian turn’ thus became the moment when violence entered the church. Indeed, the idea of a fundamental contrast between pre-Nicene and post-Nicene Christianity is still deeply rooted in scholarship and popular perception.⁵

The narrative is further sustained by our modern perception of the role of the state and its relationship to religion. Two salient features of the modern state are relevant in this respect. First, the modern, Western state arrogates to itself a monopoly of violence, seen as the guarantee of a peaceful and stable society. Only the state can legitimately use violence and it therefore seeks to limit the use of coercion by other institutions. Second, religious toleration lies at the heart of the modern state and is seen as a quality that was hard-won against religion and the Catholic Church in particular. Through the emphasis on the state as the primary source of identity, religion appears as particularistic and potentially disruptive of a society built around a core of shared values. From a modern perspective, then, late antiquity cannot but appear as the mirror image of our (ideal) self: a state seemingly abandons its monopoly of violence to a church that brings social disruption. This is reflected in the


Towards the Dissolution of Religious Violence in Late Antiquity

The traditional narrative traces an ascendant line of religious violence in late antiquity. The support given to Christianity by Constantine leads to other religions being progressively driven out of society. The process is reflected in an increasingly strict legislation, culminating in the outlawing of pagan acts by Theodosius I (391–2 CE) and accompanied by extrajudicial attacks by Christian groups on cult places. The fractious nature of Christianity, in turn, entails deep conflict between different groups claiming orthodoxy, resulting in numerous clashes, which are exploited by bishops to establish their own authority. The process reaches a climax in the reign of Justinian (527–65 CE), whose legislation seeks to eliminate all dissent. With its double emphasis on legislation and violence, this narrative sees the identification of church and state as a legacy of late antiquity – a knot that only modernity would disentangle.

The sources provide, at first glance, much confirmation of this narrative. One regularly encounters stories of violent destructions and clashes, seemingly backing up the idea of widespread religious violence. Yet, scholars recently have grown sensitive to the limits of the evidence. First, the limited number of instances of religious violence are highlighted. For example, ancient accounts of destructions of temples, such as that of the Serapeion in Alexandria (391 CE), of Marnas in Gaza as reported in the life of Porphyry (possibly early fifth century), or the ones alleged by Libanius in his oration For the Temples (381–92 CE), are not very numerous. Moreover, the archaeological evidence does not bear out a picture of widespread destruction of places of worship. This does not mean that no destruction took place, but the act may be rarer than Libanius’ highly evocative image of monks descending as locusts on the Syrian countryside to destroy temples might suggest. Wolfram Kinzig has made a similar argument for anti-Jewish violence. He

6 The following titles are eloquent: Eberhard Sauer, The Archaeology of Religious Hatred in the Roman and Early Medieval World (Stroud: Tempus, 2003); Polymnia Athanassiadi, Vers la pensée unique: La montée de l’intolérance dans l’antiquité tardive (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2010).
counts twenty violent episodes from the fourth to the sixth centuries C.E., of which fourteen can be reckoned to be certain. Most of these took place in Antioch, Syria and Palestine. He points out that if one adheres to the lachrymose view of Jewish history in late antiquity, this may be sufficient proof of extensive anti-Jewish violence, but one may also understand it in the light of a more complex view of Jewish-Christian relations, marked by fascination and rejection, tension and cohabitation.\(^8\) Depending on the narrative one adheres to, then, the attested instances of violence may be the tip of iceberg or isolated cases of escalation. We should therefore reflect as much on the narrative as on the evidence.

Second, almost all our evidence is of a literary nature and thus shaped by rhetoric and tropes. Pretending to report violence, our sources produce particular representations that conform to particular stereotypes and serve particular purposes. Hagiography, for example, is full of stereotypes about the anti-pagan struggle, of which the destruction of idols and temples is one. These cannot be taken at face value. Indeed, contrary to the impression that his own writings might generate, there is only one certain case of temple destruction by the famously aggressive Egyptian abbot Shenoute (d. 465/466 C.E.).\(^9\) Rhetoric does not occur just in Christian texts. In his discourse *For the Temples*, Libanius consciously creates a picture of widespread destruction of temples by monks, fully knowing that the act was not allowed by law and that monks had a rather dubious reputation, also in Christian circles. As I have argued elsewhere, this text is not the eloquent testimony to pagan concerns about temple destruction for which it has been held, but a clever and subtle defence of elite interests by creating a picture of extensive illegal activity by monks.\(^10\) If we do not contextualise each text carefully, we risk mistaking rhetoric for reality.

Increasingly aware of the limits of the traditional narrative and of the evidence, scholars have been exploring new avenues of research. One way is to embed episodes of violence in a broader social context. Acknowledging the


fact that late antiquity was characterised by the coexistence of a variety of religious groups (both within Christianity and without), scholars seek to understand violence as one possible outcome of a wider social dynamic. Options abound: one can relate religious violence to pre-existing social tensions in cities and understand it as grafted onto different and older conflicts; one can study the formation of new identities in late antiquity and stress the tension between ordinary people with their multiple identities (civic, social, and religious) and the various religious groups that sought to promote membership in their group as the single overriding identity; or one can argue that late antiquity sees the continuation of the religious competition that marked the Roman Empire, but now with different groups dominating. All these approaches still start out from the assumption, seemingly borne out by the literary evidence, that religious identities became dominant in late antiquity. Yet, as a survey of conflict documented in Egyptian papyri from late antiquity has shown, religion is rarely a factor in the kinds of social conflicts that papyri document. This suggests that religion had not yet become a primary identity for many and puts into perspective the numerous literary texts that suggest otherwise. The social landscape of late antiquity is not yet that of the medieval Middle East in which religious and social identity merge.

This brings us to the second approach, namely the contextualisation of religious violence in a wider history of violence. We should start out from the fact that various forms of violence were present in late antique society. Correction of subordinates (slaves, children, women) often included corporal punishment. Equally, children were regularly beaten in school. The threat with, or the effective application of, punishment was part of a strategy of reform and re-education of offenders. The absence of a monopoly of violence on the part of the Roman state and the relatively thin presence of imperial representatives in the provinces also allowed powerful individuals to pursue their own interests: the sources are full of, undoubtedly exaggerated, criticism of rapacious tax collectors, unjust governors and looting soldiers. These


were structural features of life in the later Roman Empire which were often complained about but rarely remedied. If these sorts of violence help to understand why contemporaries had a lower sensitivity for violence than we do, an important parallel for religious violence is the recurrent popular riots. One can cite famous episodes such as the killing of the charioteer in Thessalonica that was the cause for the execution of thousands of citizens on orders of Theodosius I (390 CE), the so-called riot of the statues in Antioch three years earlier, when its inhabitants protested against tax rises, and the long list of popular riots, often taking place in the hippodrome, in Constantinople. The Nika riot (532 CE), which nearly cost Justinian his throne, is the most famous example. If some of these could be religious in motivation, like the anti-pagan riots under Tiberius in 580 CE, they could be triggered equally well by famine or oppressive administrations. If scholarship traditionally considers the elite to be the real instigators of such riots, and in the case of religious violence usually blames bishops, the capacity of the people to be an independent actor should not be underestimated. There is plenty of evidence for popular riots that should be considered spontaneous group actions, like the revolt of the people of Constantinople when the popular bishop John Chrysostom was exiled in 403 CE. Such revolts could be very violent, resulting in lynch justice. Although it has not been exhaustively analysed, there is clear evidence that such popular riots drew on a repertoire of actions, which usually mimicked official public rituals. For example, the parading of heads on spikes, the dragging of a criminal through the streets and his cremation and burial outside the city, and the destruction of pagan or imperial statues can all be paralleled in the official repertoire, for example that of victory celebrations and the damnatio memoriae. Interestingly, as far as I can judge, no typically religious repertoire is found in Late Antiquity as it is later periods of European history: popular riots are not drawing on a repertoire linked to Christian ritual or theology. In this respect, popular ritualised behaviour Christianises at the equally slow pace as official public ritual, which only in the second half of the sixth century acquires an explicitly Christian face.

A third context is that of language. It is often assumed that aggressive language leads to violence. On that premise, a high rate of violence is proven by the often highly polemical, not to say insulting tone in which many late antique texts are couched. Such a relation is never straightforward, and definitely not so for antiquity. One should remember that vituperation is an integral part of ancient rhetoric, as any reader of speeches by Cicero and Demosthenes knows: genre and rhetorical rules may shape creation as well as
reception of speeches. Societies at large but also specific subfields have particular metaphors that seemingly unconsciously dominate language: modern medicine, for example, often draws on the language of warfare to describe the battle against bacteria and viruses. Within Christianity, in turn, agonistic and military language abounds to describe spiritual progress. If it is obviously possible that such language reverts to its original meaning and becomes a trigger for violence, there is no reason to assume it always does and that military metaphor is, in itself, a cause of violence. Indeed, violent language can coexist with other discourses: as we shall see, late ancient Christianity also emphasised peacefulness when it came to actions. Finally, in some circumstances the use of violent language could be a way to de-escalate a real threat of violence, as we shall see below when martyrdom is discussed. Overall, there has been little socio-linguistic research done on violent language in late antiquity which could shed more light on these issues.

These various new avenues in scholarship provide a more profound contextualisation of religious violence and lead, in effect, to a dissolution of that very concept. Once freed of the idea of an all-encompassing religious violence that is born in late antiquity, we may be able to return to the evidence and reassess it with fresh eyes. Indeed, notwithstanding all the nuances we have just added, late antique sources clearly are preoccupied with violence. I do not wish to argue that late antique sources are more or less fascinated by it than classical sources. Rather, I suggest the late antique perception of violence has two specific characteristics. The first is the creation of a number of highly charged categories to describe reality, in particular ‘martyrdom’, ‘persecution’ and ‘sacrifice’. I propose that Christian sources identify these as specifically religious, or more appropriately, sacred forms of violence, which are polemically ascribed to one’s enemies (a proper Christian does not create martyrs, persecute, or sacrifice). Although ‘martyrdom’ and ‘persecution’ are regularly used as objective descriptors in a scholarly vocabulary, we should recognise that they are deeply relational, in that they describe what one’s enemies do. Given the high degree of conflict in late antiquity, it should not surprise us that we see accusations of this type of violence proliferate. Second, these accusations play out against a background of the moral condemnation of violence. Violence was problematic and this can be noticed even in reports that seek to justify it. This does not mean that

Christians did not engage in violence (man does contravene moral injunctions), but their justificatory strategies play out against a background of moral condemnation. I shall discuss these two elements in turn, each time beginning with a famous episode.

Sacrifice, Martyrdom and Persecution

In 391 CE the Serapion of Alexandria was spoiled of its contents and the statue of the pagan god Sarapis destroyed. Already in antiquity the end of the Serapeion was a famous event and it is described prominently by the pagan writer Eunapius and by four fifth-century church historians.14 Famous though it was, the precise course of events is impossible to reconstruct: the sources are contradictory and have filled up lacunae in their information with guesswork. According to the earliest Christian version, that of Rufinus (402/3 CE), the course of events was as follows. During the refurbishment of a derelict basilica into a church, skulls were found in the basement. Taking this as proof of pagan crimes, Christians paraded these in the streets, which led to a violent response from the pagans. Street riots ensued, after which some pagans locked themselves up in the temple of Serapis, taking Christians hostage. After a deadlock of a few days, an imperial order finally declared that they could leave unharmed but that the idols should be destroyed. Published in 402/403, Rufinus’ account is highly stylised and dramatised and occupies nine out of thirty-four chapters in his last book. If such a literary stylisation renders Rufinus a problematic source for historical reconstruction, it underscores the purpose of this episode in his church history. In his account the episode displays paganism in its purest form. Biblical as well as Graeco-Roman sources considered Egypt to be the land of idolatry, where animals were worshipped as deities. Rufinus thus seizes on the event to construct an archetypical image of paganism. This is underscored by the general anonymity of all actors in the episode, except for two pagans. The leader of the pagans locked up in the Serapeion is, significantly, called Olympus – the name of the mountain of the gods in classical mythology. Although a historical person, the fact that Rufinus mentions this name when leaving the others out underscores the link of Egyptian paganism with Hellenism. The second

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14 Eunap. VS 6.21; Socrates, Hist. eccl. 5.16; Sozom. 5.7; Theodoretus, Ecclesiastical history 5.22. The most detailed analysis of the episode is found in Johannes Hahn, Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt: Studien zu den Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Christen, Heiden und Juden im Osten des römischen Reiches (von Konstantin bis Theodosius II) (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), pp. 15–120.
named character is a fraudulent priest of Saturnus called Tyrannus – the tyrant. Tyrants, in antiquity, behave immorally and often violently, and the Egyptian pagans live up to that stereotype.

Indeed, when the pagans are locked up in the Serapeion with Christian prisoners, they commit the ancestral crimes of paganism: they organise a persecution and force their hostages to sacrifice. Christians who refuse are executed by crucifixion, and the dead are thrown into a cave. In that way, the pagans repeat the very acts that were revealed by the skulls in the basement of the basilica. Rufinus explicitly signals to his readers that these are crimes that reflect the very essence of paganism when citing from the official response to the event. The emperor declared that

satisfaction was not to be sought for those whom the blood they had shed before the altars, had made martyrs and the glory of whose merits had overcome the pain of death, but that otherwise the cause of the evils and the roots of the discord which had taken up the defense of the idols should be eliminated, so that once these were done away with, the reason for the conflict might also disappear.¹⁵

Martyrdom and persecution, then, are caused by the very nature of paganism, that is, idolatry. Hence pagans exclude themselves from civilised society.

At the heart of Rufinus’ story lies religious or even sacred violence: pagan altars demand blood sacrifice and they lead to persecution and martyrdom. Such sacred violence, exclusively ascribed to the pagans, is tacitly contrasted with two lesser forms of violence in which Christians participate. First, Rufinus notes that the conflict between pagans and Christians is usually limited to shouts and tension, but that it degenerates into a riot in this case. He clearly blames the pagans for this, yet also notes that Christians do not hold back. The episode thus starts off as an instance of ordinary violence, before degenerating into sacred violence. Second, Rufinus describes the dismemberment of the statue of Serapis in terms that strongly remind one of popular executions in late antique cities.¹⁶ Such acts of lynching were often condoned by the authorities and they expressed the symbolic exclusion of bad bishops, governors and functionaries from the city. One can also understand the destruction as mimicking an official condemnatio memoriae and so inflicting the same punishment on Serapis as on statues of usurpers and bad

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.22–3.
emperors. By describing the destruction of the statue in these terms, Rufinus tacitly underscores the legitimacy of the act.

The narrative of Rufinus is thus subtly structured by a juxtaposition of three forms of violence which receive different moral valuations. Such a structure allows him to underscore the deeply problematic nature of pagan sacred violence. This is usually missed in scholarly readings of the episode, as they start from the assumption that the whole episode is paradigmatic for late antique ‘religious violence’. I concur that it is paradigmatic, but for different reasons. Rufinus illustrates how sacred violence is found with one’s enemies and, in doing so, he combines in a single episode the three concepts that shape late antique Christian understandings of such violence: blood sacrifice, persecution and martyrdom.

In late antiquity blood sacrifice was in need of justification, and also among pagans. Yet the plausibility of Rufinus’ narrative is based on the link Christians perceived between pagan blood sacrifice and human sacrifice (a link that is sometimes also found in pagan sources). This was, in turn, contrasted with the Christian rejection of blood sacrifice and a more general rejection of the shedding of blood. Indeed, a widespread moral discourse held that a proper Christian (and a fortiori a bishop) should not spill blood in times of peace (warfare was perceived to be a different, albeit not always unproblematic, matter). It explains well-attested interventions of bishops and monks to save criminals from execution, as well as the panegyrical accounts of late antique emperors who may condemn someone to death but never actually execute him. The rejection of gladiatorial and hunting games on the part of Christians was rooted in the same rejection of spilling human blood in peacetime. The pagan orator Libanius suggested that Christian governors should have to choose between being Christian or being a governor, for the latter position demanded that one was willing to wield the sword of execution. The link, then, which Rufinus makes between blood sacrifice and the tyrannical nature of paganism sums up how a particular religious practice became in his representation a symbol of general bloodthirstiness.

Second, the pagans in the Serapeion organised a persecution. Late antique Christians lived with a history of three centuries of persecution before Constantine. The Christianisation of the empire did not put end to this. Persecution continued outside the empire, in particular in the Persian

Empire, but it was also perceived as a real possibility within the Christian Empire – notwithstanding our image of a triumphant Christianity.\textsuperscript{18} The persecution under the last pagan emperor Julian (361–3 CE) only confirmed that anxiety. As a highly charged interpretation of reality, the label ‘persecution’ quickly came to be applied by particular Christian groups to legislation that targeted them or to bishops who sought to limit their gatherings. The category allowed the persecuted group to situate itself on the right side of the pagan–Christian divide and to accuse the other of doing what only pagans would do.

Finally, persecution results in martyrdom. In Rufinus’ story, martyrdom appears in a very traditional, pre-Diocletianic form: it is death inflicted by pagans on Christians who refuse to deny their faith. In that sense, it is a form of death that is religious in nature, and results, conversely, in an elevated status within the Christian community. The presentation of Rufinus glosses over the numerous ambiguities and problems that martyrdom posed for Christianity. At once highly praiseworthy and yet not to be coveted, the deaths of martyrs and confessors could generate tensions in communities: it always needed to be established that someone was a true confessor or martyr and then ascertained how his status could be made compatible with existing hierarchies in communities. Such problems came to the fore in intra-Christian conflicts: were the Donatists who died during Constantine’s repression of the schism victims of persecution and hence martyrs, or were they recalcitrant heretics who had been punished by the state? Martyrdom is a status that depends on one’s identification of the true church.

The discourse of martyrdom has been highlighted as an engine of late antique religious violence: martyrdom could be actively sought by attacking other religious groups or could serve as a justificatory ideology after the fact.\textsuperscript{19} The \textit{circumcelliones}, depicted in Catholic sources as the stormtroopers of the North African Donatists, are, for example, alleged to have interrupted pagan celebrations to seek martyrdom – yet this is reported by Catholic sources who sought to discredit the Donatists.\textsuperscript{20} If the martyrdom discourse might arouse enthusiasm for violence, we underestimate its complexity if we only see it as a source of escalation. Indeed, as the Serapeion episode

\textsuperscript{18} August. \textit{De civ. D.} 18.52.
illustrates, it could also serve to de-escalate violence. The edict of Theodosius does not impose any punishment on the pagans, who are clearly murderers. It orders only two things: the victims of the pagans are said to have obtained the status of martyr, and the destruction of idols is ordered. The first measure clearly aims at soothing the Christians while avoiding the infliction of more bloodshed (which would have required a military attack on the Serapeion). Such a pragmatic use of martyrdom language by political bodies can be observed elsewhere too. After Constantine decreed toleration of the Donatists in 321 CE, he stated that no punishment would be meted out to perpetrators of violence against Catholics, for their victims already enjoyed the status of martyr with God. Similarly, in the early fifth century, Marcellus of Apamea was killed when attacking pagan shrines. The provincial council refused to take action against his murderers on the grounds that Marcellus had received sufficient glory as a martyr. Scholars have tended to read these instances as celebrations of martyrdom and post factum justifications of violence. In fact, there can be no doubt that in all these cases the authorities used the discourse to appease tensions by giving honour to the victims and amnesty to the criminals.

In late antiquity accusations of persecution and claims to martyrdom proliferate. I have argued that they connected contemporary events back to the original narrative of Christianity: in martyrdom and persecution the primordial, pagan crimes against Christianity are re-enacted, crimes that are violent and bloody. Designating crimes that are far worse than ordinary murder, these categories are highly morally charged and therefore allow Christian groups to situate themselves on the right side of the Christian–pagan divide. Within a context of enduring conflict within Christianity, accusations of persecution proliferate precisely because they allow narratives to be crafted that situate oneself on the right side of history, religion and morality.

Condemnation of Violence

If accusations of persecution and of the infliction of martyrdom refer back to originally pagan sacred violence, Christianity self-identified with peace and a rejection of violence. For example, shortly after the council of Ephesus (431 CE), Eutherius of Tyana, a follower of Nestorius, opened his apology by complaining that while the church should stand for peace, his opponents had

21 Optatus, Against the Donatists, app. 9; Sozom. Hist. eccl. 7.15.
had recourse to violence to settle the dispute.\textsuperscript{22} One could dismiss this as a mere rhetorical opposition, for Nestorius was no stranger to heavy-handed tactics. Yet, such an interpretation misses the point: the strength of such an opening statement lies in the fact that Eutherius claims to be on the side of what the church should be and pretended to be. Violence, especially when perpetrated by churchmen, was therefore morally problematic. Such a discourse generates a high visibility for violence: the high-handed tactics by bishops in the many conflicts of the period are often criticised – usually by other bishops in order to discredit their opponents. Even the famous letter of Severus on the conversion of the Jews of Minorca, usually read as advertising violence against the Jews, reflects this constellation.

Between 2 and 10 February 418 CE all the Jews of the small Mediterranean island of Minorca converted to Christianity. We are informed about the event through the letter its bishop Severus composed a year later and sent to all bishops of the Mediterranean. Because the letter narrates how the synagogue burned down, it has been judged very severely as the propaganda of Christian hardliners showing how one should deal with Jews.\textsuperscript{23} In fact, the letter is better understood as apologetic in nature, seeking to dis culpate Severus for a series of events that contravened fundamental Christian prescriptions, in particular the voluntary nature of conversion and general peacefulness, as well as imperial law. The text is probably best understood as an attempt to shore up support in the face of a formal complaint lodged with the authorities by a Jew or the Jewish community.

The letter has a clear structure. It opens with a geographical presentation, drawing on traditional stereotypes, whereby the western city of Jamona, dominated by Christians, is depicted favourably and eastern Magona, inhabited by Jews, is described as unfertile and full of dangerous animals. A hostile equilibrium exists between both communities, which is interrupted when the relics of St Stephen arrive on the island. Suddenly, without further explanation, the Christians abandon their usual slackness and start to seek to convert the Jews. To this purpose, they organise a debate between Severus and the leader of the Jews. The Jews try to avoid the debate and when the Christians travel to Jamona, they are attacked by the Jews. Both groups come to blows and the synagogue burns down. We are now halfway through the letter and the rest is taken up by describing how various debates lead to the conversion of all the Jews. Five hundred and forty souls are added to the

\textsuperscript{22} Eutherius of Tyana, Antilogia 1.
church. The narrative is clearly influenced by hagiographical topoi and we should avoid reading it as an exact representation of the events.

Throughout the narrative, Severus seeks to show how he has lived up to the moral demands of the church. First of all, he has sought to convert the Jews by debate. As I have shown elsewhere, persuasion and debate were, for late antique Christians, the appropriate means to deal with religious conflict, and it was considered improper to coerce someone before having tried persuasion. Persuasion would lead one to freely and rationally accept his error and assent to the truth of orthodoxy. Indeed, Severus takes care to prove to the reader that his intention was only debate: he states that he has appended to the letter the document he prepared, containing answers to possible issues the Jews would raise.24 The appendix is lost, but its mention serves the rhetorical function of demonstrating the honesty of Severus’ intentions. Indeed, the rest of the letter records no less than four discussions.

The clash at the synagogue is, however, the moot point in the whole narrative. The destruction of synagogues was illegal in this period and Severus clearly seeks to shift blame away from himself. First, the cause of the violence was the Jews: instead of accepting the debate, they gathered arms and Jewish women started throwing stones at the Christians. Second, the violence that ensued is rendered remarkably harmless. Severus admits that he was unable to restrain his flock and that both sides came to blows. Remarkably, however, nobody was hurt. Severus underlines this by claiming that no Jew has claimed to have been hurt and by narrating the single exception: a Christian slave was hit by a lost stone when stealing from the synagogue. This, then, allows Severus to underline that the Christians did not steal anything of value from the synagogue, although they did confiscate the Jewish holy books. Third, the crucial event, the burning of the synagogue, is dispensed with in a single sentence: ‘A fire consumed all the ornaments of the building, except for the books and the silverware, together with the building itself.’25 Nothing is said of how this came about and, in a striking act of linguistic deviation, the burning of the building is syntactically represented as accessory to the destruction of the decoration. For a text that supposedly glorifies anti-Jewish violence, the letter of Severus remains remarkably coy about the violence: indeed, it is all but made to disappear.

The letter of Severus is doubly apologetic. On the one hand, it seeks to demonstrate to his fellow Christians that nothing immoral had happened. Persuasion was the aim and the riot at the synagogue was a lamentable yet harmless exception, ultimately caused by the Jews themselves. On the other hand, it rejects all legal responsibility for the burning of the synagogue. Given the fact that the letter circulated a year after the actual event, it seems likely that he was seeking support when faced with a court case. At about the same time, an associate of Severus contacted Augustine, probably to seek support in relation to this event. Rather than a glorification of violence, then, the letter seeks to dispel the moral opprobrium and legal challenge with which Severus was faced in the wake of the events of February 418. By denying all wrong-doing, the text reaffirms the prevalent expectations of non-violent conversion, the primacy of debate, and the legal status quo.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the traditional identification of late antiquity with religious violence has obstructed more fine-grained analyses of social and religious change in this period, and, by setting religious violence apart, has hindered its contextualisation within late antique violence in general. Of course there were acts of violence perpetrated by religious individuals and groups, but it is questionable that these should set the tone in what ought to be a complex symphony of cohabitation and tension. If social theory is often called upon to offer a more complex image of late ancient religious interaction, including its violent aspect, I have focused on the categories with which late antique sources represent violence. Indeed, there can be no doubt that there is a high level of reporting of violence of all types in late ancient Christian sources. This is the product, I submit, of a morally charged distinction that the church made between itself and society. Identifying itself with peacefulness, society appeared as the wielder of the sword. The idea had limitations that jar somewhat with modern sensibilities: it excluded warfare and coercion in day-to-day social relations, including corporal punishment of subordinates. The shedding of blood in times of peace was seen as morally proscribed: capital punishment, for example, was called into question. Within these limitations, it generated moral expectations by which one was judged. In a context of intense conflict within the church, it should not surprise that accusations of the violation of such moral boundaries abounded and this is

26 August. Ep. 11* and 12*.
one reason why Christian reports of Christian conflict often highlight their violent nature. The distinction between church and society was, in turn, grafted on an opposition between Christian and pre-Christian, that is pagan, times. Exemplified in blood sacrifice and the persecutions it called forth, paganism was seen as a fundamentally violent religion. Paradigmatically described in Rufinus, paganism committed truly sacred violence, stemming from its very nature as a religion. An obviously highly charged view of paganism, it gave poignancy to later accusations of persecution that Christian groups would trade: acts of persecution were reenactments of originally pagan, criminal sacred violence. This moral grid, projected onto reality and related to specific understandings of religion and history, renders late antique violence visible to us. The justifications of Rufinus and Severus play on these premises. If this is a challenge to modern historians, it was also a challenge to contemporary actors. As we have seen in the case of Severus of Minorca, it also drew attention to how much late antique Christian society still fell short of the ideals it set forth.

Bibliographic Essay

exclusions violentes religieuses au IVe siècle (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014) offers a sample of case studies and views on violence perpetrated by Christians.


Drake, Albu and Latham’s volume is also a good starting point for exploring other types of violence, for which see also Hélène Ménard, Maintenir l’ordre à Rome: IIe–IVe siècles ap. J.-C (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2004), which is focused on public order, and Rene Pflelschifter, Der Kaiser und Konstantinopel. Kommunikation und Konfliktaustrag in einer spätantiken Metropole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), a study of popular riots in Constantinople with a focus on the emperor but with much material on riots in general. Jens-Uwe Krause, Gewalt und Kriminalität in der Spätantike (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2014) is the first synthesis of criminal violence in late antiquity, emphasising the state as the prime cause. Julia Hillner, Prison, Punishment and Penance in Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) studies penance and imprisonment against a background of the Christian adoption of classical ideas about reform. For the role of ordinary people in doctrinal disputes and violence, the crucial work is Michel-Yves Perrin, Civitas confusionis. De la participation des fidèles aux controverses doctrinales dans l’antiquité tardive (IIIe s.–c. 430) (Paris: Éditions Nuvis, 2016), but see also Júlio César Magalhães de Oliveira, Potestas populi: participation populaire et action collective dans les villes de l’Afrique romaine tardive (vers 300 – 430 apr. J.-C) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012). Troels M. Kristensen, Making and Breaking the Gods: Christian Responses to Pagan Sculpture in Late Antiquity (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013) studies from a mainly archaeological perspective the destruction of pagan statuary.
PART V

VIOLENCE, CRIME AND THE STATE
Werner Reiss, author of the most detailed recent discussion on the subject of violence in the Greek world, defined violence as ‘a physical act’, stating further that it is a ‘process in which a human being inflicts harm on another human being via physical strength’.¹ Violence also relates closely to theoretical notions of power and unwanted, unlawful and immoral force both physical and metaphysical. The Greek word for violence, biasmos/biaiotês, synonymous with the violent man (biaios), was closely connected to the early Greek form biê/bia (force or bodily strength), and these words have deep connotations with the life force and indeed with life – bios – itself. Life and violence as ‘etymological neighbours in many languages’, therefore, have close associations. Thus David Kishik notes the connections with other Indo-European languages such as the Latin vita and vis, jivah and jiya in Sanskrit and the Indo-European *guiuos and *guiie.² Spariosu suggested an archaic Greek mentality that not only saw death but also life ‘in terms of power’, and he writes that ‘bios (life) and bia (force, violence) seem to bear a strong family resemblance’.³ Interestingly the verb biaô (epic form biazô) suggests a less aggressively proactive meaning for violence, ‘to constrain’ rather than to attack violently. This is almost the opposite of the violent and aggressive act; indeed it suggests a defence against it. Often closely associated with violence in Greek thought is the idea of arrogance or hubris. Hubris often is translated as an aggressive arrogance and therefore a form of violence. The Odyssey has Eumaeus link hubris and bia in the same clause as he describes the actions of the suitors in the palace, both as acts of violence and acts of

arrogance. The importance of the link to hubris should not be overlooked, for modern scholars note in the sources the connection between hubris and violence, on account of the arrogance and behaviour of the hydrístēs as the violent man. Not only have scholars focused on hubris as an illustration of zero sum relationships between winners and losers or honour and shame in the Greek context, but also and especially in cases of sexual violence. As Cohen notes, Aristotle advises rulers to avoid violence against free citizens and sexual assaults on children. Indeed, sexual violence was especially concerning for Greek men when it came to their own persons and those of their relatives, particularly female relatives, despite the fact that beating one’s wife carried no stigma. The Greeks equated rape itself with any violent act (biasmos) against the household.

Greek ideas concerning violence changed over time, especially as states coalesced and the law played more of a role in Greek society. Violence underpinned much early Greek mythology and literature. In mythology Bia, as the personification of physical violence, was the daughter of Pallas (the Titan god of war) and Styx (the personification of the river boundary to the underworld). She was also the sister of Zelus (Pride, Glory), Nike (Victory) and Cratus (Power). Each of these siblings was closely connected with physical and military achievement. It is interesting that the mythological embodiment of violence is feminine, Bia, while men perpetrated most real-world violence. Homer’s epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, produced between the period after the collapse of the Bronze Age Mycenaeans in c. 1150 and the sixth century BCE, and the earliest Greek literature demonstrate the significance of violence to social order, wealth and political power. The Iliad is the story of the violent quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles set amid the war against Troy. The Odyssey concludes with cycles of violence, the deaths of all the suitors in the palace that require violent retribution from their relatives (not to mention the slave women who had slept with them).


Violence begets violence as deaths brought vendettas in endless cycles of enmity. Only the intervention of Athena at the end of the *Odyssey* prevents further violence. Gregory Nagy argues that words such as *menos* (rage), *sthenos* (strength), *bia* (force), *is* (strength, force), *kratos* (divine-physical power) and *dunamis* (power) each denoted physical abilities in the early Greek mind, but by later times and especially in Plato are more abstractly used than simply to describe bodily force. We might note that Thucydides could describe Cleon as the most violent (*biaiotatos*) of citizens with reference to his character rather than his physical actions, let alone his physical ability. The Greeks were aware of similar changes that had come about over time within some Greek societies concerning the ubiquity of violence or the threat of it. Thus, Thucydides noted that certain Greek tribes still carried arms in public places in his own day as a relic of the past when raiding and inter-communal violence had been ubiquitous. He states that the Athenians were the first to lay aside arms and adopt a more peaceful way of life.

Athenian Society and Democracy in the Classical Period 479–336 BCE

Thucydides may have thought that the Athenians of the fifth century BCE lived in more peaceful times than those of their predecessors, but violence played a central role even in Classical Athenian society. Physically harming fellow citizens was theoretically illegal, but remained a constant in reality. Violence supposedly played no significant role in democratic politics or society. Yet even in philosophical treatises on ideal societies physical force remained a necessity. Plato’s *Republic* required a military arm, while Aristotle recognised that violence was a necessary means to maintain order, security and status, particularly over slaves. Werner Reiss explores the competing roles between, on the one hand, the Athenian state (qua community) in curtailing and containing interpersonal violence in late Classical Athens and the rights of individual citizens on the other to assert

8 Thuc. 3:36.6.
their rights and defend their interests. Both of the latter might require physical aggression and physical defence of persons and property. Modern scholars tend to cast Athens either as a paradigm of early civic virtues where violence between individual citizens was mitigated through the popular courts and thus through the rule of law, or a place where the law simply extended the mechanisms whereby competing citizens and families fought their battles metaphysically in addition to physically. Werner Reiss notes these two polar positions regarding violence within Athenian society. Legal historians see democracy and its associated legal processes as ameliorating violence at Athens. Legal Classical Athens thus was different both from the past and from other Greek states (and by association other peoples). On the other hand, there are those who take a broader, more anthropological perspective and who see legal activity as simply an extension of extra-legal violence rather than a means of ameliorating physical aggression. It is easy to see how both sides are right and wrong simultaneously.

The Athenian legal system was a cornerstone of Athenian democracy, and thus unique in many ways. Yet the realities of the need for self-help in enforcing the law or protecting one’s rights within Athenian society, verging on vigilantism even if legally sanctioned vigilantism, and the exclusive power of elite citizens to exploit the legal system for their own benefit at the expense of others, even lower status citizens who lived within the community, appears self-evident when reading fourth-century BCE legal speeches and circumstantial stories, which appear in our ancient texts. Clearly, the important question requires estimation of the difference between theory and practice. Cohen recognised that ‘The debates have largely turned around what has become the cliched trinity of retribution, deterrence, and rehabilitation or, from a Foucauldian perspective, the exercise of the ever-increasing disciplinary power of the modern state.’ The important question remains,


to what extent does either model by which the state or the individual exercised violence against transgression fit Classical Athens?

The Athenian courts and our evidence for them, primarily found in the corpus of legal speeches from the very last years of the fifth and from much of the fourth century BCE, tend to present more theoretical and idealised visions of Athenian practice. Gabriel Herman offers an optimistic view that Athenian society ‘must be classed among the less violent societies of pre-industrial Europe’. He bases this conclusion on four key points: unarmed citizens; a non-militant ideology; the absence of a culture based on vendetta, duelling and blood feud; and the judicial system. But as we shall see, several legal cases illustrate that disputes between parties were in fact violent affairs and that legal self-help, by which individuals who had won in the law courts were still required to use their own initiative and resources to extract recompense from their opponent, and thus individual rather than community-driven action, was a central part of the Athenian socio-legal system that required, if this is not too extreme a term, citizens to use force against fellow citizens in order to extract justice. As we shall see, analysis of examples in the ancient sources demonstrates that violence was ubiquitous within Classical Athenian society between members of the community, even elite members within the community, whether it was low-level aggression, threats and coercion, or direct physical force up to and including murder, even within the mechanisms of the Athenian democracy and its law courts.

It is, therefore, perhaps misleading that many of our Athenian sources associate violence with oligarchy and aristocracy, more especially with the coup of 411 BCE, which Thucydides connected to private concealed murders and violent attacks. More significantly, the major aggression and violence of the Thirty Tyrants during their brief rule of Athens in 404–403 BCE attracted extensive commentary and criticism from later writers. The Spartans, apparently alone among Greeks, encouraged physical assault by one citizen against another, admittedly within controlled environments. Spartans carried this reputation with them when they travelled abroad and interacted with other Greek citizens. Thus, the Spartan regent Pausanias alienated his fellow Greeks at the Hellespont by his use of corporal punishment in the aftermath of the Persian invasion of Greece, and Clearchus did the same thing with the mercenaries he commanded on the Anabasis campaign. Yet, the Athenian democracy was well known for acts of brutality abroad itself during the

13 Herman, ‘How Violent’, p. 117. 14 Thuc. 8.66. 15 Pausanias: Thuc. 1.95; Clearchus: Xen. An.2.3.
imperial period of the fifth century BCE in destroying states, killing men and enslaving women and children, and even at home democrats were just as capable of violent acts as their oligarchic compatriots. For example, most of the men involved in the 411 BCE coup died violent deaths at the hands of democratic sympathisers, perhaps most famously Phrynichus, who was publically hacked down in the Athenian agora in front of large numbers of on-lookers. This was an act of violence lacking any legal sanction whatsoever, and a deliberately staged event. Perhaps as an ironic twist, Phrynichus’ murderers escaped any legal action and enjoyed the same esteem, rights and privileges as any so-called tyrannicide at Athens.16

It is now a common trope that the Athenian democracy was a military machine requiring the services of an increasing number of Athenian citizens, especially for the Athenian navy. Several studies demonstrate the militarised nature of the Athenians of the fifth century BCE. Indeed, many scholars now consider that democracy itself may well have been responsible for the violent and imperial nature of fifth-century Athenian thinking. The tenor of Thucydides’ assessment of Athenian decision making also suggests this view. Military service inured Athenian citizens to extreme acts of violence as they regularly fought together as hoplites or naval personnel.17 Even oarsmen might be required to fight as light infantry or beat opponents to death at sea with their oars. We all know that ancient Greek citizen males were far more likely to experience war than any of us today. In the Classical period Athens was at war two out of every three years. The likelihood of any Athenian man finding service on board a trireme as an oarsman or, if affluent enough, fighting in the hoplite phalanx was certainly more likely than other Greeks from smaller communities. Men made war and war made men, and military combat would have desensitised men to violence at every level. Athenians were not averse to voting for massacres. The sombre (and incomplete) list of towns destroyed and populations enslaved recalled by Xenophon after the disaster at Aegospotami pushes home the point regarding the violence of imperial Athens.18 Thucydides (3.82) chose his words carefully
when he wrote that in this period (as in others) ‘war was a violent teacher’, using the word *biaios* here emphatically.

In non-military contexts, however, violence permeated Athenian society as well. Legally slave-owners beat their slaves or the state tortured them to give witness. Capital punishments saw criminals nailed to planks of wood or thrown from rocks to their deaths. Corporal punishments were not uncommon.  

Anacreon notes one Artemon who was a bad man (*poneros*) who was accustomed to spending time in the stocks and being whipped. The sense of Anacreon’s poem suggests the regularity of such treatment for lower-status individuals. Domestic violence against wives and children proliferated. Traditional violent activities concerning animals, such as cockfighting and hunting, also abounded. This is not to mention the violence inherent in sacred rituals involving animal sacrifice.

In this context violence played a crucial role in managing Athenian social relationships and delineating socio-political groups. Its enactment enforced and sanctioned social boundaries. Thus violence acknowledged and reinforced such differences wherein the perpetrator and the victim delineated the active from the passive, the male from the female, the free from the slave, the citizen from the non-citizen. With all this in mind, Jason Crowley has recently stated that Athenians had a ‘high level of tolerance to low level violence’, to which he adds that ‘it is no wonder, then, that the interaction between Athenian men could be, and indeed often was, downright violent’. 

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21 See Chapter 18 in this volume.


23 Crowley, *Psychology*, p. 93.
But if this was true, and indeed it may well have been, from where did this tolerance come? To what extent was violence a natural part of the Classical Greek lived experience, especially in the world of Classical Athens? This unfortunately we cannot know, but we can perceive from the different types of evidence the level of violence and its portrayal within Athenian society.

**Violence on the Athenian Stage**

Athenian tragedies are littered with physical force, violent encounters and violent deaths. Even the historical tragedies, about which we know little and of which only one survives, seem to have depicted violent moments from the recent past. Herodotus tells us of (our first known historical tragedy) *The Destruction of Miletus*, by a man called Phrynichus (not the oligarch), which upset the Athenians so much as it depicted the siege, capture and presumably the subsequent massacre and enslavement of Athenian allies in 494 BCE.24 The only extant historical tragedy, *The Persians*, is a play about the great naval battle of Salamis.25 There is every chance there were other plays produced about the Persian Wars and the battles fought during them. The lost play called *The Phoenician Women* (*Phoenissae*) may well have portrayed the reaction to the defeat at Salamis among the relatives of those in the Phoenician fleet. There had to be other similar historical tragedies.

The corpus of extant tragedies from the fifth century BCE often represents the tensions evident in the relationships between the community and the individual or family, and the desires of each to suppress the power of the other, usually set in mythological contexts. Thus, violence is portrayed in terms of retribution and revenge in Homeric terms, inviting further retaliatory violence, in both a vicious cycle and a zero sum game at the same time. Scholars see this in both voyeuristic as well as educational terms. William Allan argues that the same motives that drove contemporary Athenian desire for punishment had equally applied to the heroes of the past seeking retribution, vengeance and justice, but that the law had become a central tenet by which such retribution was achieved. Vengeance therefore remained an important theme of justice on the fifth-century BCE stage and by association in Athenian courts. And thus, he suggests, by the fifth century BCE there had been a ‘fundamental shift in the process by which justice (*timôria*) was

24 Herodotus, 6.21.
achieved’. He notes of course that the same jurors in the courts sat in the audiences of tragedies.\textsuperscript{26} The state’s laws, theoretically, meant the kind of retributive justice meted out in violent tragedies acted out in trilogies like the \textit{Oresteia}, in which wives murder husbands and sons kill their mothers, would not have been tolerated in the real world of fifth-century Athens. Do such plays illustrate, even in an oblique way, how far Athenians had come from the cycles of violence portrayed in Greek myth? The leading scholar on the topic of vengeance in tragedy, Burnett, highlights, like Allan, the significant role of retribution present in tragedy. This is an important point, but as Allan suggests, fifth-century Athenians recognised the negative effects of personal feuds on the community, even if they sympathised with Orestes’ desire to avenge his father’s death.\textsuperscript{27}

Similarly, Athenian comedy is replete with violent acts. Scholars naturally consider that the purpose of the representation of violence on stage is to create audience superiority and solidarity as well as in crude terms to provide voyeuristic and indulgent entertainment to its spectators. Like tragedy, comedy aimed to entertain (as does modern cinema), and violence (like sex) sells. The combination of sex and violence is a common theme in so-called Old Comedy, produced in Athens in the fifth century BCE. Thus, not only did representations of sexual violence augment audience solidarity, but, it has been suggested, also aided ‘audience affirmation, re-masculinisation and compensation for the loss of masculine power’ in an age in which the Athenian community submerged or appears to attempt to submerge the powers of the traditional \textit{oikos} and its traditional head, the \textit{kyrios}. In sum, both tragedy and comedy functioned as outlets for unrequited desires as much as they did as entertainment for their community. Ruffell, therefore, describes the end of \textit{The Clouds} as the most startling display of comic violence and the humour of \textit{schadenfreude}, which results in Strepsiades’ desire to burn the students to death. He further identifies the most extended demonstration of violence as the torture scene in \textit{Frogs} (605–73). In the story, each slave offers the other up for torture and then Aeacus beats both up to see who screams first. Ruffell suggests that the whole routine relies on the fact that slaves are used to being and even deserve to be beaten. We might add, of course, that it was legal for slaves to be offered up for legal torture to extract evidence for


\textsuperscript{27} A. P. Burnett, \textit{Revenge in Attic and Later Greek Tragedy} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Allan, ‘Ethics’, 612.
the courts in trials concerning their masters. The sexual violence of plays like the *Thesmophoriazusae*, *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae* demonstrate the central-
ity of violence and sex on stage. Ruffell considers the *Thesmophoriazusae* as ‘unquestionably’ the most violent of the plays. He sees the treatment of Mnesilochus from dressing to singeing and plucking as extended torture and relies on ‘the enjoyment of the abuse of the comic male’. Ruffell concludes that, ‘In all three plays, the pleasure of the audience is in the watching of citizen male humiliation in violent and/or sexual terms.’

Beyond the dramatic stage, the world of fifth- and fourth-century Athens was, it seems, a violent place even with the law courts and an array of juridical procedures in place. Our evidence suggests nothing like the kind of state infrastructure or mechanisms in place to prohibit physical abuse even between citizens, theoretically protected by the law as they were, let alone those thousands of residents of Attica, women, children, metics, foreigners and slaves denied access to state legal protection. Status, and with it personal power, remained paramount in enabling violations against others and in protecting persons and property. This is no better illustrated than in the story of Alcibiades’ refusal to allow his wife to file for divorce with the Archon Basileus. According to Plutarch, Hipparete went to the archon to file, but Alcibiades seized her and forcibly carried her home through the agora. Despite the fact she was behaving in the appropriate manner, since she needed to be present in person to file for the divorce, no one prevented her removal and the divorce did not eventuate. She died soon afterwards, though our source makes no inference how, Plutarch merely observing at the end that opinion did not consider such violence (*bia*) as unlawful (*paranemos*) or savage (*apanthropos*). This section of the life begins with another tale of Alcibiades’ wanton violence in which he struck his teacher Hipponicus not from anger but as a joke described as an act of pure licentiousness (*aselgeia*). Interestingly, the incident concludes with Alcibiades going to his teacher’s house to offer his body for a beating in retribution. Both episodes illustrate the extra-legal, personal (if that is the right word) nature of aristocratic engagements, but also the role of physical encounters in personal and power relationships.

Violence and the Athenian Legal System

There was a great deal about Athenian society that required self-sufficiency and self-help. This was the case for legal matters as with most things. The

state did little to police itself despite the existence of the well-known Scythian archers – public slaves charged with keeping order within the city. Citizens had to do much that might be termed self-policing. In theory, Athenian law always seems to have required witnesses to support claims against miscreants. Indeed, Hunter thought that this created an environment in which bystanders would become involved in altercations as more than just witnesses. They would actively intervene on behalf of those being physically wronged. Against this view Sternberg argues that in the absence of prior relationships, bystanders had no other duty than to bear witness.\footnote{For the necessity of witnesses see Hunter, \textit{Policing Athens}, p. 132 and in general pp. 3–8, 120–53 and 185–9; R. H. Sternberg, \textit{Tragedy Offstage} (Austen: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 76–10.}

Arguably the most vivid illustrations of the role of violence in real Athenian relationships come from the legal speeches. Scholars are well aware of the loose interplay between state, as represented by the legal system, and private self-help in achieving justice in Athens. A good illustration of this relationship comes from Ps.-Demosthenes 47. The speech sets out a long saga that charts the enmity between two trierarchs, and thus men wealthy enough to be required to command and subsidise the maintenance of an Athenian naval ship. The name of the first trierarch, the speaker, remains unknown, but his antagonist is named Theophemus. The story begins when Theophemus refuses to hand over the additional equipment (\textit{skeue}) that went with the state warship (trireme) that he had relinquished to the speaker’s command. The central council of the Athenian government had passed a decree enabling trierarchs to collect the equipment in whatever way they could, thus empowering our speaker. Significantly, Theophemus hits the speaker and overcomes him physically as he attempts to recover the gear. The council then advises the speaker to bring a prosecution through the law of \textit{eisangelia}, by which any public office-holder might be ‘impeached’ for improper behaviour during their term of office. The speaker thus successfully prosecutes Theophemus, but only suggests a small fine and offers to go to arbitration over the violence. Theophemus refuses arbitration and both parties file suits concerning their violent encounter against each other. Sadly for the speaker, the courts hear Theophemus’ suit first and he wins. In the complex processes that follow whereby the speaker needs to pay a fine but delays doing so, Theophemus (with his relatives) goes to the speaker’s estate to ‘recover’ the equivalent value of the fine, and in the process leaves a freewoman seriously hurt and she subsequently dies. The speaker goes to the \textit{exêgêtai}, religious officials who oversee crimes of pollution, to ask
permission and advice to take Theophemus to court for the crime of killing the woman. They refuse him but suggest he seeks retribution through other means. The case of Ps.-Demosthenes 47 is the one in which our speaker has charged the brother and brother-in-law of Theophemus, as his accomplices, of violating his home and killing a freewoman.

What this whole episode illustrates is the significant role of personal action and responsibility for what was essentially a state issue from the beginning – notably, the passing of state-nautical equipment from one trierarch to his successor. The second and more damning point lies once more with status. The woman who died, free though she was, was not considered important enough to warrant a prosecution in her own right by the religious-legal exêgêtai. She was technically neither a member of the speaker’s household (if she had been a slave she would have been) nor a member of the Athenian state (she was not a citizen’s wife, daughter or mother). Finally, both issues demonstrate the privatised nature of the whole system. The state lacks the resources to assist our speaker in claiming the property that the law had decreed should come to him in the first instance, just as the state has no physical mechanism to enforce its own legal decisions. Gabriel Herman noted rightly that ‘the formal agencies that existed in Athens to enforce the law seem totally inadequate to the task’.30 Matthew Christ unpicks the legal speech in spatial as much as legal terms, whereby the private oikos represents the inner sanctum of the family, almost as a separate sphere from the polis that other citizens (and therefore the state) should respect. By extension, we might suggest that its violation was as much an act of violence as striking a citizen in the street.31

Murder remained an extreme act, despite the apparent ambivalence of the exêgêtai to the death of the freewoman connected to the house of the speaker in Ps.-Demosthenes 47. Murders even of dependants required purification and attention. Most famously, the Platonic dialogue Euthyphro centres round the deaths of two non-citizens within the household of the father of Socrates’ discussant in the dialogue. The father had bound and left to die a dependant worker (pelatês) who had himself killed a household slave. The son has decided to take his father to court on a charge of murder (dikê phonou). Socrates seems surprised at these events and Reiss suggests most Athenians would not have been concerned at the death of this dependant, especially in

light of the fact he was a murderer.\textsuperscript{32} Of course the whole issue provides an excellent platform for a Platonic dialogue on justice.

In fifth-century BCE Athens, democratic though it was, justice in every sense remained the province of family and connections, despite the democratic courts and communal ideology. We have seen this well illustrated in the loose relationship between state and individual in issues of self-help (vigilantism) and state-involvement (law). Even murder in Classical Athens retained traditional retributive norms in certain specific instances, rather than familial vengeance. A citizen was within his rights to kill anyone he found uninvited on his property if he considered them to be a threat or a thief, and further he might kill any man who sexually compromised his wife or any female relative under his authority. This included even his friends who had entered his house while he was absent if his wife was present inside. The most famous discussion of such legal execution is found in Lysias’ speech \textit{On the Death of Eratosthenes} in which the prosecution contended that Euphiletus used the law to murder the man he ‘caught’ in his house ‘with his wife’ having invited him there, while the defence argued that Euphiletus was merely exercising his time-honoured rights in defending his oikos. The defendant’s arguments invoked the invasion of the sanctum of the citizen’s household or oikos by an intruder and the transgression of his familial boundaries, equivalent to the physical space of his territory. Reiss identifies the ‘overlap and clash between archaic and modern notions of violence’ in the case.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{Violence and the Thirty Tyrants}

Let us conclude this discussion with a more detailed look at the most infamous episode of mass violence at Athens, which was for those who remembered it (and won) the reign of the Thirty Tyrants in the immediate aftermath of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). According to our sources the oligarchs killed about 1,500 citizens and residents of the city. Thus Wolpert wrote that ‘The Thirty carried out a systematic campaign of political murder unparalleled in the history of classical Athens.’\textsuperscript{34} As I noted at the start

\textsuperscript{32} Reiss, \textit{Performing Interpersonal Violence}, p. 42.

\textsuperscript{33} Well discussed ibid., pp. 150–1, but see Herman, ‘How Violent’ and \textit{Morality and Behaviour}, pp. 175–83.

\textsuperscript{34} For references and discussion of the Thirty see Xen. \textit{Hell.} 2.3; Diod. Sic. 14.3; Aeschin. \textit{Against Ctesiphon} 3.235; Lys. \textit{Against Eratosthenes}; Isocrates \textit{Against Euthynus} 21; well discussed by P. Krentz, \textit{The Thirty at Athens} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); A. Wolpert, \textit{Remembering Defeat: Civil War and Civic Memory in Ancient Athens} (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) and A. Wolpert, 'The
of this chapter, in Athenian democratic ideology democracies killed in public and in law, tyrannies and oligarchies murdered secretly and extra-legally. The murders by the Thirty reinforced this belief. Indeed, Ostwald thought that Athens could not have been, presumably in the minds of the Thirty, ‘Laconised without violence’, thus the murders were part of the political programme of those in ‘charge’.\textsuperscript{35} As Wolpert noted, ‘violence was a necessary and integral part of their rule that was inevitable once the Thirty plotted to overthrow the democracy and replace it with a narrow oligarchy’.\textsuperscript{36} Whatever the realities of the Thirty’s real aims or actions, their failure determined that the legacy of their tyranny would be remembered as one of violence and secrecy in the democratic state that re-emerged in the fourth century. Our evidence reflects this image. In such an environment, therefore, tyranny, oligarchy and extra-legal murder became intricately interconnected in democratic tradition.

Conclusions

Violence, in whatever form, whether murder or ‘just’ verbal abuse, remains an enigmatic concept. The word ‘violence’ – as power, force, aggression or physical harm – itself suggests rage, lack of control and illegality, but as we have seen, it can also mean actions of defence and protection. Its sense changed over time in ancient Greek thinking, as all senses do. The Athenians as a community of citizens perhaps embraced these changes as they became more democratic and more communal. Athenians in the fifth-century and fourth-century democracy understood and accepted an ideology that rejected heroic vendetta, blatant and wilful violence, like that sanctioned by the Homeric honour code, even though they still recognised (as we do today) the base needs which family feuds fulfilled, alongside the importance of personal vengeance in justice. These codes were thus represented on the tragic and comic stage and, perhaps, played out in the law courts, but legal suits now supplemented (not necessarily supplanted) family violence. They even played out in legal reality through the allocation of responsibility for enforcing legal sanctions and thus state rulings to the wronged individual. Athenians of the democratic period still struggled with notions concerning


\textsuperscript{36} Wolpert, ‘Violence’, p. 213.
the community, qua the state, as opposed to personal responsibility and family autonomy. Despite its strides towards socio-political unity, the role of violence within the Classical polis illustrates this ongoing tension between individual, family and community.

Ultimately, the ancient Athenian state was not capable in itself of enacting or enforcing its decisions systematically and therefore effectively, especially for all its members (by which I also mean its non-citizen members as well as citizen-males). Additionally, the state could not ensure that individuals remained safe and secure on a daily basis. When challenged by violence and harm from others, family well-being, security and honour were likely defended violently and extra-legally, given the attenuated law enforcement apparatus of the state. Our evidence from Homer’s epic poetry illustrates this was likely to have been the norm in early Greek contexts. The traditions laid by such an individual and heroic-based ‘self-help’ society and one centred on family and personal responsibility rather than on the community may well explain why Athenians juggled state and individual violence – bia – in such an accepting way, and thus accepted both so readily. On the one hand, the power of the state, through law, courts and community, ameliorated violence and made the whole community more cohesive and stronger; on the other, the interests of the individual and his family ensured the system would work ‘smoothly’, regardless of those (non-citizens) who fell between the cracks. Without violence there is neither state nor family – and the Athenians knew this well.

Bibliographic Essay

Werner Riess’s Performing Interpersonal Violence: Court, Curse, and Comedy in Fourth Century BCE Athens (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012) is the most significant volume in recent years on the topic of Classical Greek violence. Riess admits to limiting himself to Athenian theatre and the law courts in the period after 420 BCE. He thus leaves discussions on significant topics like violence in warfare and religion in Greek life to others. The theoretical concept of violence among Greeks does deserve more consideration. Good introductions, however, can be found in the following: Andrew W. Lintott, Violence, Civil Strife and Revolution in the Classical City (London: Routledge, 1982); David Kishik, ‘Life and Violence’, Telos (2010), 143–9; M. I. Spariosu, God of Many Names: Play, Poetry and Power in Hellenic Thought from Homer to Aristotle (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1991). Eli Sagan’s The Lust to Annihilate: A Psychoanalytical Study of Violence in Ancient Greek Culture (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1979) presents a pessimistic view of the power Homeric heroic violent codes held over later Greek society, resulting in an overly violent Classical culture that revered its past, despite its violence.


Schuster, 1995) and Odysseus in America (New York: Scribner, 2002) all discuss the connections between combat trauma and ancient warfare.


The role of the individual within the state legal system has been well discussed. Matthew R. Christ, ‘Legal Self-Help on Private Property in Classical Athens’, American Journal of Philology 119 (1998), 521–45 unpicks many of the issues that vexed state, citizen and household in achieving justice, often independently. The role of religion and justice is well discussed by Robert Parker, Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Roman Violence: Attitudes and Practice

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What happened before the city was founded or during its foundation is more suited to poetic fables than passed on as the uncorrupted memory of history, and I intend neither to confirm or refute such tales. We give licence to antiquity to render the origins of cities more august by mixing the human and the divine. If it should be allowed to any people to consecrate their origins and refer to gods as their founders, such is the Roman people’s glory in war that when they say the father of their founder or of themselves was above all Mars, then the nations of the earth may bear this claim with as much equanimity as they bear imperial rule. (Livy 1 pr. 6–8)

Life is not a tender business. (Seneca, Moral Epistles 107.2)

The Roman storehouse of memories was a blood-spattered place. War and violence and bloodshed were everywhere on display, beginning with the stories Romans told each other about their origins and rise to greatness. The father of the Roman people, Aeneas, fled burning Troy to sail the seas until he reached Italy, and there carved out with his sword a place for himself and his rag-tag band of refugees. Aeneas’ descendant and the founder of the city, Romulus, was born of the war-god Mars, killed his own brother in a quarrel, and (in one version of the tale) was himself murdered as an incipient tyrant. As Romulus enlarged his city, he arranged for women to be snatched from a neighbouring people by force – the infamous ‘Rape of the Sabine Women’ – and engaged in almost unbroken wars with nearby communities. Eventually Rome grew into the imperial colossus that bestrode the known world of the ancient Mediterranean basin. All of this was achieved by the massive

application of violence, which was openly acknowledged, indeed celebrated as a cardinal Roman virtue (as the epigraph from Livy illustrates).

In this chapter I focus on the centrality of violence to the Roman sense of self and survey some of the main ways in which it was made manifest in their culture and daily experience.

Warfare, Empire and Roman Militarism

One of our earliest surviving Latin inscriptions comes from the sarcophagus of Lucius Cornelius Scipio Barbatus, who was a consul (one of the two chief executive officers of the Roman Republic) in 298 BCE. The epitaph reads: ‘Cornelius Lucius Scipio Barbatus, born to his father Cnaeus, a brave man and wise, whose physical beauty most closely matched his virtue. He was consul, censor, aedile among you. He captured Taurasia and Cisauna in Samnium, brought to heel all of Lucania, and took hostages.’ This text replaced an earlier, much shorter version that was erased from the stone to make way for it. That is, at some point after Barbartus was entombed his descendants decided to augment his epitaph, most likely in response to the growing prominence and importance of the family, the Corneli Scipiones. The information they decided to include in the new epitaph is telling: after noting his personal qualities, the text stresses his public service and particularly his military achievements in advancing the Roman conquest of Italy, which had been an ongoing project since Rome was founded (by tradition in 753 BCE). Another fragmentary early inscription preserves part of a elogia, or funerary speech, for Caius Duilius (consul in 260 BCE). It records in great detail his military achievements in Sicily during the First Punic War, not least that

he was the first consul to perform a feat on the sea with ships and the first to equip and train crews and fleets of ships. With those ships he beat in battle on the open sea all the Punic fleets and the great forces of the Carthaginians in the presence of their commander Hannibal, and he captured ships and their crews by force: one seven-bank ship, thirty five-bankers and three-bankers, and he sank thirteen.¹

² CIL I¹ 7 = Dessau, ILS 1 = ILLRP 309 = CLE 7. The traditional dates of the Roman Republic are 509–31 BCE.
³ CIL I¹ 25 = Dessau, ILS 65 = ILLRP 319. The inscription likely accompanied a column decorated with ramming beaks captured from enemy ships that was put up in the Roman forum (one of two such columns Duilius erected to commemorate his victory; see Serv. ad Georg. 3.29). The inscription was recarved in the Augustan era but likely preserves, or at least echoes, the original content.
The inscription goes on to enumerate the loot – gold, silver and bronze coin – taken from the Carthaginians by Duilius. These two texts reveal much about the self-representation of the Roman nobility of the Middle Republic (264–133 BCE) and how they legitimated their social, economic and political dominance at the time when the Roman Empire was being forged. Central to their claim on legitimacy was war.

On a broad perspective, warfare was endemic to the ancient Mediterranean world. The great civilisations of the east – Mesopotamia, Assyria, Egypt, Persia – had engaged in the conquest and suppression of neighbouring peoples for millennia before the Romans arrived. Warfare marred the inter-state relationships of the Greek cities and became the raison d’être of their successor, the kingdom of Macedon. Philip II (382–336 BCE) created a formidable fighting machine in the two decades after ascending to the throne in 359 BCE, and his son Alexander III, dubbed ‘the Great’ (356–323 BCE), turned that war machine eastwards to carve vast realms out of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, whose existence he brought to an end. While the early history of Rome, from its traditional foundation in 753 BCE to about 300 BCE, has come down to us mostly in the form of fanciful and moralising tales, it emerges from this tradition that the Romans broadly followed the Mediterranean pattern, but were unusual in two respects. First, from very early on, when the Romans were just one small Italic community among many, they appear to have been particularly focused on establishing themselves as dominant over their neighbours. Whereas the similarly small-scale Greek city-states struggled over disputed borderlands or claims to be the leading city (hegemon) among their peers, the Romans appear to have been concerned with the matter of mastery from the start. It was not enough that others recognised Rome’s primacy – they had to be subject to it. As such, the Romans were almost constantly engaged in war and negotiation with the Latin communities around them and, once they had been subdued, with the peoples bordering the Latins, and then with further-flung peoples, and so on across the length and breadth of Italy until the whole peninsula was under their sway (by c. 270 BCE). They then extended this pattern of behaviour beyond Italy in the third and second centuries BCE, when great wars of conquest established the Roman Empire from Spain to Asia Minor. As such, war and violence stood at the very heart of the Roman historical experience.

The other main respect in which the Romans differed from their contemporaries was in their open attitude as to what constituted the community. Whereas concepts of membership in other Mediterranean communities were
highly exclusive, the Romans were uniquely relaxed about whom they admitted. The attitude is expressed in the very earliest stories the Romans told about themselves: how Romulus, having founded his new city, opened it up to anyone who would present themselves at the Asylum, the saddle between the twin peaks of the Capitoline Hill in Rome. There flocked ‘a crowd from neighbouring states, without distinction between free or slave, eager for change’ (Livy 1.8.6). It is nothing short of astounding that later Romans openly acknowledged an infusion of slave stock into the bloodline of the fledgling city. Whether it was true or not hardly matters. That they later thought it was true does, since it says much about how differently they defined what it meant to be Roman in contrast, say, to an Athenian or a Spartan, who would insist on pure freeborn, citizen ancestry as the most essential qualification for citizenship. The openness of the Roman concept of community had direct military consequences that pertains to the matter of violence. Armed with their distinctively inclusive sense of community, as they expanded their control over the Latins the Romans developed by degrees a system of benefit sharing with those they had subdued, until they had constructed a hierarchical nexus of bilateral agreements between themselves and all the communities of Italy. While the details of each agreement determined where in the hierarchy a particular state stood, one demand was common to all: the provision of troops for the army. The enlarged army facilitated further and more ambitious conquests, which in turn enlarged the military manpower pool in a positive feedback loop. The Italo-Roman war machine became self-sustaining.

The consequences of this situation for Rome were profound. Core aristocratic concepts came to be defined in large measure in military terms. Nobles competed to acquire gloria, which was earned first and foremost on the field of battle. They sought to outdo each other in virtus, which was essentially the excellence and fortitude displayed in war. They calibrated their worth against the prominence they enjoyed in public life, their dignitas, a large portion of which was derived from virtus displayed and gloria won. War was a central component in this conceptual ecology. Such was the perceived centrality of public, and especially military service to the aristocracy of Republican Rome that the writer Sallust (fl. c. 40 BCE) felt compelled to preface his first historical work with a lengthy justification of intellectual achievement as something not to be despised – and glorious both in war and peace:

4 As has recently been stressed by M. Beard, SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), esp. pp. 53–89.
For a long time mortals have discussed whether military success proceeds more from bodily strength or from intellectual excellence... [When men began] to consider lust for power a reason for making war and to think the most glory resided in the greatest empire, then finally it was discovered through risky endeavors that the greatest talent lies in war... It is a thing of beauty to serve one's country well; to speak well of it is hardly worthless. One can gain fame in peace as well as in war. Although by no means the same gloria accrues to the writer as to the doer of deeds, nevertheless the writing of history seems to me among the most difficult of tasks.\(^5\)

The aristocratic assumptions Sallust is reacting against are revealed in his apologia: action is the primary route to gloria, and military achievement is the primary mode of action.

Under the Republic, Roman nobles competed for election to the higher offices that came with military commands. Having led armies to victory, if sufficiently crushing, they re-entered the city in a grand pageant or 'triumph', which saw them process through the streets in a four-horse chariot at the head of their troops in parade gear. Adoring crowds lined the route. Chained captives and floats displaying trophies and heaps of loot followed on behind. Such was the scale of Roman conquests by the first century BCE that the triumph of Cnaeus Pompeius Magnus in 61 BCE took two days to complete and included inscriptions proclaiming the capture of 1,000 strongholds and just under 900 cities. Floats displayed such wonders as 75,100,000 drachmas of silver, a colossal statue of solid gold, exotic pieces of furniture, ramming beaks from captured ships, a gem-encrusted gaming board, exotic plants and trees, and 324 high-ranking captives.\(^6\) Names of generals who were granted triumphs were inscribed on stone (the fasti triumphales), along with a notation of the people over whom they had triumphed, and posted prominently in the Roman Forum. Victorious generals also had the opportunity to embed their names permanently in the fabric of the city by building monuments using loot taken from conquered peoples. Such structures were specifically commemorated as having been erected 'from war loot' (ex manubiis) in the inscriptions put up on them. Rome’s first stone theatre was funded in this way, paid for by Pompey from a portion of the riches paraded in his two-day triumph in 61 BCE. A brilliant piece of epigraphic detective work published in 1995 showed that Rome’s most famous monument, the very symbol of the city and of ancient Rome itself, the Colosseum, was built ex manubiis (the war

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5 Quotes taken from Sall. Cat. 1.1.5, 2.1.2 and 3.1.1 respectively.
in this case being the great Jewish revolt of 66–70 CE). The same dynamics that stood behind the epitaphs of Barbatus and Duilius cited above are here shown to be operative for the later emperors too.

But the reach of warfare stretched much further down the Roman social ladder from the elite. The armies that forged the Roman Empire in the Early and Middle Republic (c. 509–133 BCE) comprised citizen militia. The troops provided their own arms and presented themselves annually for service, beginning in their mid teens and continuing until the age of about 60. It is worth giving thought to what this meant in human terms. The ancient battlefield was a place of unspeakable brutality. Whereas most ancient armies were staffed by spearmen, such as the Greek or Macedonian phalangite, the Roman soldier was primarily a swordsman, his principal tool the fearsome gladius Hispaniensis (‘the Spanish sword’). Spears and lances, to be sure, inflicted nasty penetration wounds, but the ghastly injuries meted out by the gladius are strikingly evoked by Livy (31.34.1–5). Describing the horrified reaction of Macedonians, who found the corpses of comrades killed in a skirmish with Roman cavalry, he notes:

They had seen wounds caused by spears, arrows, and, rarely, by lances, since they were accustomed to fighting with Greeks and Illyrians; but now they saw bodies dismembered with the ‘Spanish’ sword, arms cut off with the shoulder attached, or heads severed from bodies, with the necks completely cut through, internal organs exposed, and other horrible wounds, and a general feeling of panic ensued when they discovered the kind of weapons and the kind of men they had to contend with.

About a metre in length, the gladius was well balanced, easily wielded and equally effective as a cutting or thrusting weapon. To be brought to bear, the legionary was obliged to get very close to his victim. For the Roman soldier, battle was a matter of engaging in butchery at close quarters. When using the gladius, he would be sprayed and caked in blood and gore, he would feel the reverberation as his blade struck bone or the kick as he thrust into living flesh. That is, for the majority of their adult lives, Roman males and their Italian allies were required to engage in levels of interpersonal violence scarcely

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7 G. Alföldy, ‘Eine Bauinschrift aus dem Colosseum’, ZPE 109 (1995), 195–226. Alföldy noted holes for letters from an earlier inscription on a stone recarved in the fourth century CE and, using these holes, reconstructed the original building inscription of the Colosseum, which declared that Vespasian (69–79 CE) ‘had ordered the new amphitheatre built from war loot [ex manubiis].”
conceivable to the modern imagination, and they did so more or less every year.\(^8\) And remember, this was how Roman *virtus* was calibrated.

In later centuries, when the age of the emperors had dawned (31 BCE – 476 CE), Roman armies became professionalised and the direct experience of battlefield violence was less widely disseminated across the male population. But by then warfare was firmly entrenched at the heart of what it meant to be Roman. Emperors were, first and foremost, military autocrats and became more overtly so as the Imperial Age wore on. They inherited the attitudes of the Republican aristocracy – and amplified them. The first emperor, Augustus (31 BCE–14 CE), was among Rome’s most ambitious conquerors and extended the empire’s borders to its familiar frontiers along the Rhine–Danube frontier in the north and the Euphrates in the east. Trajan (98–117 CE) launched campaigns of conquest into Dacia (modern Romania) and across the Euphrates, and Septimius Severus (193–211 CE) waged war against the Parthians in the east and the Caledonians north of Hadrian’s Wall in Britain. Even the more civic-minded emperors felt compelled to engage in military activity, such as the cloistered Claudius (41–54 CE), who invaded Britain, or the philosophically inclined Marcus Aurelius (161–80 CE), who embarked on genocidal expeditions across the Danube in 170–80 CE. In fact Marcus, very much an intellectual by nature, died on campaign in an army camp. Most emperors strove to outdo each other in adorning the city of Rome with buildings, arches, statues, reliefs and other forms of art that loudly proclaimed their military virtues. Trajan built his Forum ex manubiis taken from Dacia and erected in it his famous column, carved with a helical frieze depicting his Dacian campaigns. Marcus Aurelius erected a similar column commemorating his northern campaigns. The reliefs are unsparing in their depiction of the grim business the Roman army was engaged in across the Danube: we see villages burned, wailing women and children enslaved, menfolk massacred.\(^9\) This, it seems, was not something to be ashamed of.

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\(^8\) For the mid-Republican Roman battle experience, see P. Sabin, ‘Battle: A. Land Battles’, in P. Sabin, H. van Wees and M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), vol. 1, pp. 399–433. For the duration of military service, especially during the period of Rome’s expansion across the Mediterranean, see the famous speech of the centurion Spurius Ligustinus in Livy 42.34. In the twenty-nine year period spanning 200–171 BCE, Ligustinus served for twenty-two years under various commanders and rose to the highest position a rank-and-file could attain, First Centurion (*Primus Pilus*). Ligustinus states (Livy 42.34.11) that in 171 BCE he was ‘more than fifty years old’. Thus he must have entered service in his early twenties.

but rather something to be celebrated as barbarians getting their just deserts. The military was also present in the city of Rome itself in a manner that went beyond mere representation: the 9,000 soldiers of the Praetorian Guard and 3,000 men of the Urban Cohorts were stationed in a camp at the edge of the city and would have been a standard fixture in the city’s urban landscape.¹⁰

In sum, the violence of warfare, conquest and empire was enthusiastically celebrated in Roman culture in every era. According to Vergil, it was Rome’s divine mandate ‘to rule over nations with your empire (for this is your skill), to impose the habit of peace, to spare the conquered and lay low the arrogant’. ‘On these people,’ declares Jupiter elsewhere in the Aeneid, ‘I set no boundaries or duration on their possessions; I give them empire without limit. Harsh Juno . . . along with me will favour the Romans, masters of all, the togate nation.’¹¹ War and dominion over others was the particular province of the Roman people, a gift of the gods, their divinely ordained mission. In what ways and to what extent did this cultural trait manifest itself in the Roman daily experience?

**Spectacular Violence**

An obvious expression of the Roman comfort with violence is their devotion to violent spectacle, one of the characteristic features of their culture that has sunk deeply into the contemporary popular consciousness. The gladiator, for instance, is almost *de rigeur* in modern reimaginings of ancient Rome, exerting his appeal on contemporary audiences no less than on ancient ones. The Colosseum, that quintessential symbol of Roman civilisation, was an amphitheatre, a type of structure specifically developed to house gladiatorial shows. These events offered displays of spectacular violence on a sometimes vast scale. Huge resources were expended staging them. The inaugural games of the Colosseum in 80 CE saw 100 straight days of spectacles featuring over 5,000 animals (9,000 in some sources) and massed battles staged on and around prepared sets, while Trajan’s great celebration of his conquest of Dacia in 107 CE spanned 123 days and involved 10,000 gladiators and 11,000

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animals. Spectacles along these lines, although on a more modest scale, were exported all around Rome’s vast realm in the course of the first three centuries CE, so that amphitheatres are known from dozens of cities. Even in towns not equipped with the specialist building itself, other venues could be utilised: wooden arenas were erected in the open spaces of a town’s forum, or theatres, circuses or stadia were adapted to accommodate the games. Spectacles of violence therefore found ready audiences wherever they were put on, from Britain to North Africa and Spain to Syria.

While the origins of gladiatorial combats remain debated – though the best evidence points to roots in the funerary games celebrated in fourth-century BCE southern Italy – by the age of Augustus they had combined with two other forms of spectacle into a single, conglomerate show (munus gladiatorum). In the morning came the animal hunts, at lunchtime prisoners were executed in spectacular ways, in the afternoon the gladiators made an appearance. For the most part, the latter were professionals competing in stand-alone pairs announced in advance, though mass combats were not unheard of. All three elements of the show had an independent prehistory, but the developed Roman arena event melded them into a single performance, the mother lode of violent spectacle.

The popularity of the shows is not in doubt, and is demonstrated by a simple observation: many provincial amphitheatres are far too big for the towns that house them, and so they must have served the population of the surrounding region rather than just the community where they were located. Nevertheless, attendance at the shows was circumscribed in two important ways. First, there is the matter of their frequency. It remains unclear how often such costly events would be staged, particularly since they were put on at the expense of a single sponsor (the editor or munerarius). In venues outside Rome, which was home to the emperor and the uppermost echelons of the Roman socio-economic elite, sponsors of more limited means would be common. Much about the staging of these shows would therefore depend on the purely practical considerations of how many sponsors were

12 Dio. 66.25; Mart. Spect., passim; Suet. Titus 7.3 (Colosseum); Dio 68.15.1 (Trajan).
available in any given region, and how often they could afford to bankroll a show. Second, much of the seating at arenas was assigned by social rank, and this was enforced by an empire-wide law introduced by Augustus (the lex Julia theatralis). Even for the unreserved seats it seems likely that the system of patronage, which functioned on the basis of personal connections between the more and the less powerful, would have determined who got tickets. This meant that members of the common ‘mob’ may not have been able to attend many gladiatorial shows, even if they wanted to, unless they had connections to those who could provide them with tickets. Access to arena spectacles, then, appears to have been more restricted than we imagine, and the events themselves not terribly frequent – certainly so in the less developed parts of the empire.

As facets of Roman culture, modern scholars have interpreted arena games in various ways. Some have seen in them the most direct expression of the martial and imperial virtues the Romans held so dear. ‘Rome was a warrior state’ is the opening line of one classic study. On the sands of the arena, lowly slaves and volunteer fighters displayed the military qualities of endurance, skill-at-arms and contempt for pain and death to achieve victory over their opponents – all of which echoed the core values of the imperialist Roman community. As Tacitus (Ann. 12.56.5) writes of a naval spectacle staged by Claudius in 52 CE: ‘The battle, though one of criminals, was fought with the spirit of brave men, and after much bloodshed the survivors were spared extermination.’ The shows validated Roman concepts of fortitude, so that even convicts could display admirable courage and be spared for doing so. The animals hunts were often staffed with varieties of wild beasts – ostriches, giraffes, elephants, rhinoceroses, hippopotamuses, crocodiles, lions, leopards and so on – whose exotic appearance spoke to the extent and reach of the empire. Their collection and destruction in the controlled space of the arena, surrounded by the Roman order arrayed in its social hierarchy, reproduced the Roman sense of dominance over threatening forces. The executions did the same for human deviants and criminals, since only convicts of lower social rank suffered humiliating execution before


large crowds – the common murderers and rapists, the runaway slaves, the rebels and bandits, and prisoners of war. While the Romans were by no means alone in finding spectacles of death and destruction enthralling – and certainly basic psychological processes were at play in drawing the crowds to their seats – the arena games can profitably be read as cultural performances that reflected back to, and reinforced for the Roman audience, the essential values of dominance, conquest, war and control that are always central to an imperial state.\footnote{For these and other interpretations of arena games see Ville, Gladiature; Kyle, Spectacles; Wiedemann, Emperors; C. A. Barton, The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster (Princeton, NJ: University Press 1993); A. Futrell, Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997). For the psychological factors see G. G. Fagan, The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).} The matter of access discussed above warns against overstating the role of arena spectacles in broadcasting these messages widely in Roman society. As shows, they were cultural performances, but there were other contexts in which Romanness was reaffirmed and reinforced, as we surveyed above: at triumphs, in communal religious festivals, in the ideology of the empire and the person of the emperor, and in the art and architecture of the city. Arena games were only one among many such media of communication.

More popular than gladiatorial spectacles, and markedly less violent (at least officially), were chariot races (\textit{ludi circenses}). Whereas the seating capacity of the Colosseum was about 50,000 to 60,000, that of the Circus Maximus, Rome’s premier chariot-racing venue, stood at about 150,000 or more.\footnote{J. H. Humphrey, Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 126.} This alone says much about the relative popularity of each spectacle. Chariot races were staged as part of communal religious festivals, usually over the course of several days and largely paid for by the state, though the presiding magistrate (and, in time, the emperor) could subsidise the show with money from his own purse. The races were intense and dangerous, with chaos and death lurking just beneath the surface.

The standard format was for twelve four-horse chariots – three from each of the so-called circus factions, which were identifiable by their colour (red, green, white and blue) – to run seven laps to complete the course. The chariots ran around a central ‘spine’ (the \textit{euripus}), taking a hairpin turn at each end. That is, twelve vehicles with their drivers controlling forty-eight horses would careen around this course, making fourteen hairpin turns at high speed. The track was about 85 metres wide on each side, but the vehicles
naturally bunched up close to the spine as they jockeyed to find the shortest route around the course. Images of chariot races in Roman art show the vehicles to be small and light, their fronts barely reaching hips of their drivers, who would tie the reins around their waists to help guide their teams. It is not difficult to imagine the chaos that would ensue when one of these chariots crashed, especially in the middle of the pack. The vehicle would quickly disintegrate, the driver dragged behind his team, the chariots behind trying to avoid the wreckage. Reliefs and mosaics of races usually include scenes of crashes, or ‘shipwrecks’ (naufragia) in the fans’ parlance, complete with drivers being run over by the vehicles behind. Drivers (agitatores) were kitted out in a fashion not unlike modern bikers, with helmets, leg protection and leather strips bound around their torsos. They were equipped with whips for their horses and carried curved knives, which they could use to cut themselves free of the reins and other tackle in the event of a crash. Chariot racing was therefore a highly dangerous and violent spectacle, though not as overtly brutal as arena events. As with the gladiatorial spectacles, it offered an engrossing contest between skill (ars) and luck (fortuna), since even the most adroit gladiator or charioteer could be brought low and killed by a chance occurrence. Charioteers, like gladiators, exhibited talent and determination to overcome their opponents and the odds to achieve victory. Like winning gladiators, successful chariot drivers were treated as sports heroes by their fans.19

The third main type of entertainment spectacle staged in ancient Rome were theatre shows (ludi scaenici), which were not overly violent in terms of their performance. It is worth noting that in the case of chariot races and theatrical shows the spectators displayed a tendency to become unruly and riotous – something audiences at gladiatorial spectacles were not known to do. Organised gangs of supporters are usually held to account for these disturbances: in the case of theatres, the fans of particular actors, and especially pantomimes, and the supporters of the four racing factions at the circus.20 The record of circus riots is, for the most part, confined to the eastern part of the empire in the Early Byzantine era (c. 450–610 CE) but


theatre riots are on record for the Early Empire (c. 14–96 CE). One explanation for theatre and circus riots is the sort of tribalism that stands behind the soccer hooliganism of recent memory, though some scholars have accounted for the chronological disparity between the two by plausibly suggesting changes in the late imperial socio-economic and political landscape that stood behind the large-scale circus rampages on record, such as the infamous week-long Nika riot in Constantinople in 532 BCE that almost toppled the regime of the emperor Justinian and saw the centre of the city burned to the ground and thirty thousand people killed.21 That is to say, Roman spectators at the theatre and circus could express their rivalrous passions in the form of violent outbursts, though this was by no means inevitable.

Aside from the gladiatorial shows and chariot races, public executions were also forms of violent public spectacle, but consideration of them requires examining the wider context of Roman communal violence.

Communal, Legal and Interpersonal Violence

Self-help was a cardinal principle of Roman criminal law. In the absence of an extensive state apparatus for policing and law enforcement, it was up to victims and their relatives to seek recompense for a loss, whether of property or of life. Similarly, entire communities had to organise their own responses to security threats like bandits or pirates. The principle was expressed in law as *vim vi repellere licet* (‘it is allowed to repel violence with violence’). The principle extended to on-the-spot revenge.22 As a result, what was considered legitimate and illegitimate in the application of violence by the populace was much looser than we would accept today. In the novel *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (c. 120 CE) the hero Lucius finds himself transformed by a sorceress into an ass. In this guise he endures many hardships, including a period attached to a bandit gang holed up in cave. Banditry was a persistent and universal problem in the ancient world (and still is in the less developed...
corners of the globe), particularly in the trackless interstices between cities and towns. The bandits in *The Golden Ass* launch an assault on a rich man’s house in town and encounter fierce resistance from those within. Later, the townspeople organise a posse to take on the bandit gang head-on. When they catch up with them, the townsfolk butcher some of the brigands on the spot, apprehend others and then summarily execute them by hurling them into a gorge.\(^{23}\) In our world, this would be vigilantism of the worst sort, but on the principle of *vim vi repellere licet* it is no more than the townsfolk administering rough justice to the criminals threatening them.

Initially, laws concerning violent acts were determined first and foremost to establish proportionality in the private response to an assault or murder. Laws in our oldest body of Roman law, the Twelve Tables (450/449 BCE), stipulate fines or retaliation in kind for most forms of injury. They allow a nocturnal thief to be killed on the spot by a householder, but not a daytime burglar (e.g. Twelve Tables 8.2, 12–13) – presumably because during the day non-lethal alternatives were at hand. In essence, these statutes regulate the self-help doctrine. The rise of public disorder and violence in the disintegrating Late Republic (c. 133–31 BCE) is what sparked the first official *lex de vi* (‘law concerning violence’) in 78 BCE, but principled restrictions on the private deployment of violence were never fully worked out in the manner of modern criminal law. Conflict between citizens was seen mostly as something the parties should sort out between themselves, with the law available as an avenue to reconciliation.

When the state did get its hands on criminals, violence was the natural punitive medium. Pre-modern societies, lacking the necessary state apparatus to impose custodial punishment effectively, usually extracted retribution from the person of the convict. Capital and corporal punishment were habitual. It is not until quite recently, in fact, that protracted imprisonment has become normative in the West, and in many societies the pre-modern model is still implemented.\(^{24}\) The Roman world was no exception, but the

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Roman penchant for systematisation and legal specificity generated a graduated hierarchy of punishments that were expressly linked to the rank of the offender. The harsh, public and aggravated sentences were reserved for slaves, enemies of the state and the low-born free population. Thus whipping and crucifixion were the quintessential slave punishments, while fugitive slaves, bandits or low-born common criminals (denoted from the second century CE onwards as humiliores, ‘the more lowly ones’) could be sent to the arena for exposure to wild beasts, or condemned to gladiator schools or the mines. The upper classes (dubbed honestiores, ‘the more honourable ones’) were spared these humiliations and would be fined for having committed the same offences, or given the option of voluntary exile – often in one of their villas outside Rome – or, perhaps, an honourable suicide. The latter was especially true of those suspected or found guilty of treason against emperors – ‘the final necessity’, as Tacitus calls the imperial order to end it all (e.g. Tac. Hist. 1.3.1, 1.72.3). ‘Our ancestors in every case punished slaves more harshly than freemen, the notorious more severely than the respectable,’ wrote one Roman jurist (Dig. 48.19.28.16). The indignation of our mostly upper-class sources is reserved for cases where people of status were subjected to inappropriate punishments by tyrannical authorities rather than for the brutality of the punishments themselves. Instructive and remarkable for their illustration of these circumstances are the ancient schoolbooks (colloquia) preserved in the manuscript tradition. Composed for and by children aged 7 to 11 or slightly older, the colloquia sought to teach basic vocabulary by sketching daily routines: getting up, getting dressed, going to school, moving about in public and so on, all the while using key phrases and terms appropriate to each context. At one point, the child goes into the forum with his father, where a trial is in progress:

The defendant brought into court is a bandit. He is questioned as he deserves; he is tortured, the interrogator beats him, his chest is pummelled, he’s strung up, stretched, lashed with rods, thrashed thoroughly, he goes

25 See e.g. Suet. Aug. 27.4; Tib. 60; Cal. 32.1; Claud. 34 (and many parts of Cicero’s Verrines). For an overview of the system of differential punishment, see P. Garnsey, Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); R. MacMullen, ‘Judicial Savagery in the Roman Empire’, Chiron 16 (1986), 147–66.
through the whole series of torments, and still he denies his guilt. He must be punished: the sentence is death, and he’s led away to the sword. It is a horrific scene; one witnessed by a young child. The next case involves a rich man, who talks his way to acquittal. The divergent experiences of the humilior and the honestior at the hands of the law could hardly be clearer. Interestingly, much of the text of the schoolbooks comprises orders barked at slaves: ‘Dress me! Get my sandals! Bring water for my hands!’ Ancient Rome is one the more thoroughgoing slaving societies known to recorded history. Slaves were ubiquitous, found at all levels of society, from the vast work gangs toiling in the fields of the landed gentry to the trusted servant who shared much of the lot of the lowly freeborn. Cicero defines utter penury as the hideous condition of not owning even a single slave (Cic. Rosc. Am. 145). Romans therefore encountered slaves at all levels of society, since they were a constant feature of the social environment. In addition, Roman slavery was a social condition with no ethnic distinction between free and slave; indeed, slaves were often indistinguishable in appearance from the freeborn. Favoured or skilled slaves could have materially more comfortable lives than the lowly Roman freeborn. Yet, despite these social realities, legally slaves were little more than the living dead, the ‘speaking class of tool’, as one Roman author puts it. Slaves therefore inhabited a parallel universe to the free, where they were deemed legally non-existent and of no worth beyond that of property.

Violence, both physical and psychological, is inherent to the institution of slavery. Its direct application and the threat of its application permeate all levels of the slave experience, from initial capture and transport, to the degradations of the slave market, to the casual violence meted out to slaves as they went about their business. In ancient Rome, transgressions were punishable by flogging or worse. Cicero characterised slavery as coercion and the breaking of will (Rep. 3.37), a process symbolised by the whip, the hook and the cross (Rab. Perd. 16). The lot of the slave, even the household

28 See e.g. *Dig. 1.5.3.2*, 35.1.59.2, 50.17.209 (living death); Varro, *Res Rust*. 1.17.1 (speaking tool). These attitudes were inherited in part from the Greeks, see Arist. *Pol*. 1.2.4 (= 1253b23–33) for the slave as a ‘living tool’.
favourite, was entirely contingent on the whim of the owner. Privileges could be revoked at any time, and violence applied on the spot. Plutarch (Mor. 462A) comments: ‘we see that newly-bought slaves do not ask whether their master is superstitious or jealous – but whether he is quick to anger’. The surviving sources of all stripes are rife with casual comments and asides that involve doing violence to slaves. In the comedies of Plautus (c. 200 BCE), the slave characters live under the constant threat of a beating or a flogging. In the Satires of Juvenal (6.475–93), composed in the early second century CE, the sexually frustrated woman vents her anger on her slaves with the whip and the rod, and keeps an executioner on retainer. Hired torturers were brought in to conduct ‘examinations’ of slaves, if the owner suspected them of criminality (Cic. Cluent. 176–7). Alternatively, the owner could do the torturing himself: one of Caesar’s assassins was murdered by his own slaves, ‘one of whom he was mutilating as a punishment’, the author casually notes (App. B. Civ. 3.98). Servants at dinner parties were cuffed, beaten with rods or whipped for infractions as frivolous as a sneeze or a hiccup.29

The ubiquity of slaves in Roman society, the violence routinely deployed to cow and control them and the exposure of Romans to their maltreatment for the duration of their natural lives from infancy onwards are all circumstances that can only have had a profound and formative effect on Roman attitudes toward violence and its applications. The most obvious manifestation of this was the meting out of violence to those lower down the Roman social hierarchy than the perpetrator. We have seen how just such an attitude was manifest in Roman law in the differential treatment of offenders based on their social class. While the evidence is insufficient to quantify levels of quotidian interpersonal violence in ancient Rome in the manner we can for modern societies, it is clear from a variety of vignettes and anecdotes that violence trickled down from top to bottom. Patrons had the legal right to physically punish their clients, at least to a moderate degree (Dig. 47.10.7.2). The dominance of the father of the household (paterfamilias) over his charges – that is, all those living under his roof – was expressed as his legal

right to beat, sell or kill them. That this ‘fatherly power’ \textit{(patria potestas)} was very rarely employed in real life is less important than its expression in terms of the violent options that were legally open to its holder. Apuleius (Met. 9.35–8) charts the course of a dispute between a local squire (the powerful party) and a small farmer (the less powerful one). In attempting to drive the small farmer from his land, the squire resorts immediately to violence: his men attack the farmer, his cottage, his livestock. Matters escalate until five people lose their lives. Once more, the violence is seen to flow from the top down. Indeed, the normative nature of trickle-down violence underlay the forensic rhetorical strategy of plaintiffs claiming to be powerless victims of powerful perpetrators. We see this claim invoked repeatedly in papyri preserving lawsuits and petitions to authorities brought by people against wrongdoers. The claim was deployed even when the facts suggested otherwise, so that an ex-magistrate, and so a person of standing in his community, claims powerlessness in the face of violence done to him by mere fishermen.\textsuperscript{30}

The claim of powerlessness carried weight precisely because these are cases brought to the attention of the authorities, and so it was not obvious who was at fault. By posing as powerless victims, plaintiffs cast themselves in the role of those who normally suffered violence in Roman society but claimed that in this particular instance it was unjustified. The opposite claim – that the plaintiff was a powerful victim of a powerless perpetrator – was a non-starter, since violence inflicted from the bottom up was self-evidently illegitimate and there would have been no ambivalence about blame requiring a petition or a legal hearing in the first place. That said, it might appear at first glance that claiming the perpetrator was less powerful than the plaintiff could be a winning rhetorical strategy, since the violence would then be, by definition, illegitimate and illegal. But this was clearly not the case, since we never see that stance invoked by plaintiffs. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, claiming a higher status than a lowly perpetrator in a public petition would entail a loss of \textit{dignitas}, one’s public standing. It would require a public admission that a person of lower rank had inflicted harm on you and that you were not up to the task of retaliating privately, as you were legally entitled to do on the principle \textit{vim vi repellere liceat}. You would therefore be claiming to be a powerful person who had been subjected to the indignities of the powerless and now needed assistance from

the state to gain redress. Such a claim would make the claimant look like a weakling, hence the loss of dignitas. The claim of relative powerlessness, in contrast, recognised the habitual dynamic of how violence worked in Roman society – and so preserved the dignitas of the powerful plaintiff – but left the matter of legitimacy for the court to decide. Another advantage of the rhetorical claim of powerlessness was that it imputed to the perpetrator an overbearing arrogance (superbia or hubris), a vice the Romans traditionally found offensive. These cases of private litigation, therefore, reveal much about Roman attitudes toward violence in their everyday interactions and they make clear, as Jill Harries notes, that ‘violence was a crime of the powerful, inflicted on the powerless’.31

Given all this, it is hardly surprising that the entire caste of Roman legal and social thought, and the sensibilities of the elites, were appalled when the violence flowed from the bottom up or when the legal privileges that accrued to the dignitas of a victim were not properly respected. The most egregious infraction, of course, was when slaves killed their owners. In any slaving society, extra safeguards have to be put in place to prevent this from happening, and in ancient Rome, where slaves were ubiquitous, this was all the more necessary. The Roman response was straightforward: if a slave killed his or her owner, all the slaves in the household would be executed. That way, it was hoped, potentially lethal plots against owners would be betrayed by the other slaves of the house, if for no other reason than self-preservation. This ancient law, interestingly, was challenged by the public in 61 CE, when the prominent senator L. Pedanius Secundus was killed by one of his slaves and over 400 of his household servants were slated for execution as a result. The Roman plebs, thinking it unjust that so many of all ages should pay for the crime of one, took to the streets in protest, but the senators insisted on carrying out the sentence anyway (Tac. Ann. 14.42–5). The plebs objected in this instance to the number of innocents caught in the law’s net, and not to the law itself. It was not that violence would be done to slaves, but that the violence was in the popular mind illegitimate.

In general, if people of status were subjected to the sorts of aggravated and humiliating punishments reserved for the underclass, outrage ensued. A sustained expression of such indignation is offered in Cicero’s prosecutorial speeches against the former governor of Sicily, C. Verres, delivered in 70 BCE. Cicero repeatedly seeks to elicit the jury’s anger by describing how Verres

tortured and killed Roman citizens ‘in the manner of slaves’ or ‘in the manner of public enemies’, or how he had a leading citizen of a Sicilian city scourged in the forum of his own town. In contrast, a slave shepherd crucified for carrying a spear warrants no comment.\textsuperscript{32} It is characteristic of tyrants to ignore rank in giving vent to their cruelty, and the cruelty itself resided less in the acts of violence than to whom the violence was administered (e.g. Suet. Cal. 27–8).

Conclusion

One of Rome’s signal achievements was the establishment of several centuries of relative peace and security across the length and breadth of the ancient Mediterranean world. For most of the Principate (the period roughly from 31\ BCE to 235 CE) largescale wars and barbarian incursions were unheard of. There were revolts (two in Judea, for instance, in 66–70 CE and again 132–6 CE) but, for all their brutality, they were localised affairs. Many millions of people over perhaps eight or nine generations enjoyed a degree of security and prosperity almost unmatched until modern times. In the ancient Mediterranean basin where war, conquest and violence were inherent in the ambient milieu, this was no mean achievement.

But the Roman world was not a forgiving place, as the opening quote from Seneca demonstrates. Compared to what most modern developed countries would consider acceptable, pain and suffering and violence were a more everyday feature of life. With life expectancy hovering around 35 years, infant mortality rates were shockingly high and few would make it to old age. Palliative care was minimal. Death and suffering were therefore constant and proximate companions throughout life. In such an environment, attitudes towards the pain and suffering of others would tend to be hard. This baseline circumstance was exacerbated by the strictly hierarchical cast of Roman social thought. People belonged to groups, and individual worth was calibrated against that group membership. Whole swaths of the population were thus regarded as expendable or, in the case of slaves, worthless except as property. The hierarchical attitude extended to inter-state relations too, so that Rome’s enormous empire, which encompassed the known world, stood as a vast confirmation of who was more worthy than whom. Rome’s empire had been forged by the wholesale application of violence, which was openly

\textsuperscript{32} Cic. Verr. 1.5.13 (‘slaves’), 2.1.7, 2.1.8, 2.1.9, 2.1.13, 2.3.6, 2.3.59, 2.4.26, 2.5.72–3 (‘public enemies’), 2.4.84–7 (leading citizen), 2.5.7 (shepherd).
celebrated as strength and virtue and manliness. Vast public spectacles either showcased violence in the performances or were marred by violence in the stands. In everyday disputes and interactions, the legal principle *vim vi repellere licet* played out. Bandits and pirates prowled the countryside and the high seas, and communities looked to themselves for security on the self-help principle. While we lack the data to quantify precise levels and frequency of incidents, it appears that violence was in no small measure the currency of the Roman hierarchy. Aside from poverty and disease, Seneca lists among the three main fears in life ‘what comes from the violence of those more powerful than us’, which prompts him to recommend ‘let’s see to it, then, that we don’t give offence’ (Sen. Ep. 14.3–6).

**Bibliographic Essay**

Violence and representations of violence abound in the literature of ancient and late antique Judaism and Christianity. From the dystopic landscapes of an apocalyptic catastrophe to the images of wrathful judgement in the afterlife, pain, suffering, torture and destruction are features of both the present and the hereafter and a reality that demanded theological reflection. Of the many forms of violence narrated by ancient authors, none looms as large in the popular consciousness as the willingness of Christians and Jews to endure martyrdom. Arthur Darby Nock notoriously described Christianity as a suicide cult, and the ancient Christian writer Tertullian (Apol. 50) famously remarked that the blood of the martyrs is ‘seed’ for the growth and expansion of the church.¹ Both Christians and Jews were known among their pagan contemporaries for their willingness to die for their religious beliefs, even if in some cases they were mocked for their enthusiasm for death.² In situations of persecution, political oppression, military encroachment or arrest, both Christians and Jews preferred to die rather than compromise their religious beliefs.

The emergence of martyrdom among Jews and Christians in the ancient world cannot be understood without recourse to broader understandings of the importance of noble death in antiquity. Histories of martyrdom often begin at the point at which the Greek term martys began to be used to refer to a person who died on account of their religious beliefs.³ But even before the language began to crystallise around the concept of a special death, ancient Greeks, Romans and Jews valued the special deaths of those who sacrificed

² Celsus in Origen, C. Cels. 8.65 and Arrius Antoninus in Tertullian, To Scapula 5.1.
themselves for king, country, city or God. The idea of dying well permeates much of the ancient literature. Ancient philosophers, poets and historians ruminate on the qualities that render a particular death good. The pages of recorded Greek history are marked with the idea that a good death brings forth glory, fame and immortality. The Homeric heroes of the Trojan War fight for glory and everlasting fame. As he slaughters them, Achilles schools the Trojan princes, and the captivated Homeric audience, that to die well they must not ‘be piteous about it’; they must stand courageously greeting the death that awaits every person (Il. 21.122–3). The same notion that death confers honour is articulated by Pericles, whose funeral oration commends death on the basis that by ‘offering of their lives . . . they each of them individually received that renown which never grows old’ (Thuc. 2.43).

The deaths of famed philosophers such as Zeno, Anaxarchus and, most notably, Socrates, further cemented the idea that a good death was a death embraced for country, city, society or principle. Scholarly arguments that have sought the origins of martyrdom within the Judeo-Christian tradition have ignored the extent to which noble death was highly regarded in the ancient world. Jews and Christians were not alone in prizing the purposeful death of their heroes, but they did come to interpret their own identities as inextricably linked to their willingness to suffer and die.

Martyrdom in Ancient Judaism

In the 1920s Wilhelm Bousset and Hugo Gressman described Judaism as Religion des Martyriums (a religion of martyrdom). Certainly, at the same point when we begin to see the notion of ‘Jewishness’ solidified in the ancient literature, so we find the first records of Jewish martyrdom. Following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, Palestine came under the control of the Ptolemies, who continued to control the region until 198 BCE. Tensions between the rulers of Egypt and the Jewish people escalated and culminated in a series of conflicts. The texts that proved most important for discussions of persecution and martyrdom were those produced in response and resistance to the attempted reforms of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second

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5 Bousset and Gressmann, Religion des Judentums, p. 394.
century. It was in the formation and construction of a particular, distinct and coherent Jewish identity that these accounts of martyrdom emerged and Jewish history was reframed as one of loyal and obedient suffering.

The ideological and scriptural underpinnings for martyrdom in ancient Judaism can be found in the book of Daniel. In both the story of the three young men in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3) and that of Daniel in the lion’s den (Dan. 6) the protagonist prefers execution to apostasy. In both narratives the righteous characters are in fact delivered from harm because of their trust in the providence of God, but their actions, and these stories, became instrumental in the emergence of ideas about martyrdom. Iconographic depictions of these episodes adorn the walls of Christian catacombs in Rome, and the motif of a domesticated lion became a topos in accounts of Christian martyrdom. The paradigmatic martyrs of the period, however, are the Maccabees, who died during the reign of Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes IV. For scholars seeking to identify the beginnings of the concept of martyrdom, these martyrs are the first examples that fit modern definitions.

The emergence of the martyrdom topos in the context of the ancient discussion of what it meant to be Jewish meant that martyrdom became a marker of Jewish identity. Writing in the first century of the Common Era, the Jewish historian Josephus compares the willingness of Jews to die to that of the Spartans. He argues that the Jews surpass the patriotism of the Spartans inasmuch as they obey the laws even when they are a conquered people, not only when they are independent (Ap. 2.226 passim). He further located this instinct in Jewish identity, saying that ‘it is natural for all Jews, from birth onwards to revere the holy scriptures . . . and, if necessary, voluntarily to die for them’ (Ap. 1.8). Dying for the law was inextricably bound to what it meant to be Jewish.6

With the rise of rabbinic literature in the first centuries of the Common Era and beyond, and the circulation of the accounts of the martyrdom of heroic teachers like Rabbi Aqiva, Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion, and Rabbi Shimon ben Gamli’el and Rabbi Yishmael, the Jewish martyrdom tradition expanded and shifted.7 While in comparison with Christianity only a few martyrs are mentioned in rabbinic literature, these stories survive in multiple recensions

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7 BT Bava batra 10b; Sotah 48b; Berakhot 61b; Avodah zarah 8b; Sanhedrin 14b. See also Semahot 5 and Lamentations Rabbah 2.
and greatly affected the medieval ‘Story of the Ten Slain by the Kingdom’, which purports to describe events that took place during the reign of the emperor Hadrian. At least one story, that of Miriam bat Tanhum, is widely regarded as a fiction. Apart from the handful of named martyrs, rabbinic literature mentions several groups of martyrs and abstract discussions on the theological significance of death for God.

Tosefta Shabbat 15(16).17 specifies that as a rule any commandment can be broken in order to save a life, with the exception of idolatry, incest and murder. This seemingly liberal interpretation is tempered with this addition: ‘In a situation of persecution a man must give his life even for the slightest commandment’ (Sifra Ahare-mot, pereq 13.14). A distinction between the private and public performance of duty is derived from the teachings of Rabbi Yishma’el, namely, that a person must sacrifice his or her life for God rather than break a commandment if the situation arises in public.

The small number of martyrs, however, should not be confused with a lack of rabbinic interest in the theology of martyrdom. In the place of martyrdom stories we find extended discussions of the relationship of martyrdom to personal sin, identity and religious obligation. Even the biblical account of the binding of Isaac is reread in rabbinic traditions in the light of later conversations about martyrdom and self-sacrifice (Genesis Rabbah 65.22). The earliest version of the martyrdom of R. Hanina praises him and his family for their willingness to accept martyrdom as punishment for sin without even knowing which sins they had committed. The same theme is found in the account of the death of R. Shimon in the Mekhila, in which the martyr journeys to his death wondering which commandment he had broken. The discussion amplifies an idea present in the accounts of the Maccabean martyrs, that while the martyrs are sentenced on the basis of a human law, they are in truth being punished for having transgressed heavenly commandments. A clear exception to this idea is the death of R. Aqiva, who is sentenced by the Roman authorities to die for teaching the Torah but is never accused of having sinned against God. In this case, in the place of theodicy we find an alternative explanation: that martyrdom and withstanding brutal torture are themselves the fulfilment of the greatest

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8 Ra’an an S. Boustan, From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).
commandment – the commandment to love God. At least one version of his death describes him as laughing as he dies reciting the Shema.  

During the second-century BCE Maccabean uprising a prominent Jewish patriot by the name of Razis found himself trapped by Nicanor, the governor of Judea. Nicanor was a foreigner appointed by the Seleucid rulers to bring stability and order to the region and, according to 2 Maccabees, he decided to make an example of Razis. Nicanor dispatched 500 armed soldiers to make the arrest, but Razis, who had already ‘most zealously risked body and life for Judaism’ (2 Macc. 14:38), was insistent that he would not be captured alive. At first he attempted to fall upon his own sword, ‘preferring to die nobly rather than to fall into the hands of sinners and suffer outrages unworthy of his noble birth’ (2 Macc. 14:42). His attempt was unsuccessful. In the heat of the moment, and with the rabble clamouring at the door of his residence, his aim was compromised. He succeeded only in disembowelling himself and tried a second time to end his life by throwing himself from a tower. Once again, however, his attempt was thwarted. Still alive after the fall, Razis picked up his own intestines and climbed to a high rock. Here, with blood and life draining out of him, he hurled his entrails at the hostile crowd and, ‘calling upon the Lord of life and spirit to give them back to him again’, he threw himself off the rock.

The death of Razis is a sensitive subject in the history of Jewish martyrdom. It appears alongside the famous martyrdom accounts of Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons. But there is a categorical distinction in the way the death of Razis is described: in Jewish and Christian tradition it is almost always labelled a suicide, or a kind of ‘heroic death’, while the deaths of the others are called ‘martyrdoms’. The categorisation rests on Razis’s agency: he falls upon his sword, he hurls himself from the tower, he climbs to the high rock and throws himself off it. Yet within the narrative of 2 Maccabees, Razis’ death serves the same function as that of the other martyrs. Whether or not the modern interpreter distinguishes between the deaths of Eleazar and the Maccabean mother and her sons and Razis, it is clear that the same cannot be said for the author of 2 Maccabees. In the cycle of liberation, the deaths of the other martyrs each serves the same purpose. Just as the deaths of the martyrs in 6:18–7:42 mark a change of affairs for the Jewish people, so too the death of Razis is the beginning of the final triumph of Judas Maccabaeus in 15:1–28. Furthermore, the death of Razis is functionally similar to the deaths of the

Maccabees. Antiochus’ efforts to make the Jews consume pork and Nicanor’s attempt to kill Razis are efforts to control the populace through fear and exemplary punishment. By pre-empting Nicanor’s attempt to utilise his body for this purpose, Razis, like the other Maccabean martyrs, resists Greek attempts to assert power. The death of Razis, therefore, is functionally identical to that of the other martyrs.

In narratives of Jewish martyrdom contained in the rabbinic sources it is comparatively rare for martyrs to actively kill themselves (with the exception of groups who commit suicide to avoid prostitution). The distinction is drawn out in the account of the second-century martyrdom of R. Ḥanina, who actively provokes the Romans and refuses to hide his actions, or himself, from them, even after being warned by R. Yoseb. Kisma. Following his death, a Roman bystander is so affected by the sight that he commits suicide. The passage has drawn comparisons with both the crucifixion of Jesus (at which a Roman soldier declares Jesus to be the son of God) and the martyrdom of Polycarp. Read alongside either of these passages the death of R. Hanina becomes demonstrably better than that of his Christian contemporaries, inasmuch as he burns with a Torah scroll (rather than alone, as Polycarp did), and his death prompts not only recognition of his holiness (as Jesus’s does) but also the more active step of committing suicide. The only other rabbinic text that mentions someone actively throwing themselves into a fire is in b. Pesahim 53b, in which the frogs, during the plague preceding the Exodus, throw themselves into furnaces in order to establish a precedent for the burning of the three youths in Daniel.

Martyrdom in Early Christianity

From the composition of the first biography of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark, Christians wrestled to explain how it was that the long-awaited Jewish messiah had died a humiliating death befitting a common criminal. Even tempered with the awe-inspiring triumph of the resurrection story, Jesus’s fate created an explanatory crisis for his followers. While noble death had always been respected, the crucifixion was far from the glorious end of Achilles. The Jesus who begged and pleaded in the Garden of Gethsemane was a world away from the self-controlled Socrates who calmly bathed before death. In their responses to the

crucifixion, followers of Jesus brought about something of an ideological revolution. Drawing upon the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ of the book of Isaiah, they framed Jesus’s death as a necessity that liberated his followers from sin, judgement day, and the second death. The consequences of what scholars have called the ‘apology for the cross’ was a rehabilitation of what suffering and death meant for Christians everywhere.

Throughout the New Testament, Paul and the authors of the Gospels and Petrine Epistles present dying for Christ as an expected part of the experience of discipleship. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus instructs his followers, not merely his disciples but the larger group (8:34), to ‘deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it’ (8:35–6).

The basic premise throughout Mark is that following Jesus involves imitating his conduct and death. The exhortations to imitate the sufferings of Jesus are more explicit in the Pauline epistles. Paul encourages his churches to become imitators of those who suffer: ‘For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews’ (1 Thess. 2:14). He grounds his exhortation in the shared experience of suffering between the churches, which ties them together.

The expectation of suffering and death, which reverberates throughout the New Testament, seems to come to fruition only in the example of Stephen and the book of Revelation. In the latter, a single character, Antipas, is described as having died for the sake of the name. The expectation, however, is that others will follow. In a series of letters to the churches of Asia Minor, the author of the Apocalypse describes the heavenly rewards that await those who ‘conquer’ like the Lamb, that is, by dying.

In the first and second centuries CE the legal situation that undergirded state violence against Christians was murky and shifting. There was no formal or informal legislation against Christians. Though there is little evidence to suggest more than social alienation in this period, those examples of martyrdom – the execution of the Apostles, for example – left a deep impression on subsequent generations of Christians. Isolated

experiences of exceptional cruelty no doubt long reverberated in the Christian unconscious.\textsuperscript{13} Around 110 CE, Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia-Pontus in modern-day Turkey, wrote to the emperor Trajan complaining about the Christians and enquiring about the best manner in which to proceed. He describes the religio-economic impact of Christian conversion on local religious practices prior to the measures he has taken. The temples, he records, had been deserted, and no one had been purchasing sacrificial meat. Christianity had won admirers from every quarter; its participants included ‘persons of every age and every class, both genders ... not only [in] the town but villages and countryside as well’. Pliny writes that he has examined the Christians and found them innocent of any real crime. All the same, he is exasperated by their ‘stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy’, which he feels deserves punishment (Ep. 10.96). As a result, he has devised a system to deal with the Christians. Three times he asks the accused individuals if they are Christian. For those who deny being Christians he employs what has become known as the sacrifice test, in which an accused person is instructed to offer wine and incense to an image of the emperor and to curse Christ. Pliny’s letter asks Trajan for advice; he is unsure if the punishment should be the same for all and whether confessing to having been Christian in the past is sufficient for a guilty verdict. In responding, Trajan commends Pliny for his work and insists that Christians should be neither hunted down nor accused anonymously. Trajan confirms that for an accused person to offer sacrifice is sufficient proof of innocence (Ep. 10.97).

In the exchange, Pliny’s frustration with Christian obstinacy is almost palpable. Against Geoffrey de Ste Croix, Adrian Sherwin-White argues that it was for their defiance (contumacia) that Christians were arrested and executed.\textsuperscript{14} Certainly, Christians attracted the derision and scorn of Roman writers and administrators, and the martyr acts present their protagonists as evasive and difficult in the courtroom. At the same time, however, as Geoffrey de Ste Croix notes in his rejoinder to Sherwin-White, obstinacy (obstinatio) and defiance (contumacia) were separate charges, and the latter is not mentioned in the Pliny–Trajan correspondence. Only once they were in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13] See the statement of Ramsay MacMullen that ‘brutal routines of law in action were no doubt stored away in the memory of every citizen’, in his ‘Judicial Savagery in the Roman Empire’, Chiron 16 (1986), 152.
\end{footnotes}
the courtroom did Christians have the opportunity to display their obstinacy, and, therefore, it is unlikely that Christians were arrested for being defiant.\(^{15}\)

Most of the early mistreatment of Christians, therefore, was performed on an ad hoc basis. Things changed in the mid third century CE, when the emperor Decius (249–51 CE) issued now lost legislation in an effort to deploy religion as a means of unifying the Roman Empire, which was then undergoing a severe crisis.\(^{16}\) The result of this legislation, which appears to have been issued in the spring of 250 CE, was that people would have to sacrifice to the genius of the emperor and would receive, in exchange, a *libellus* (literally a ‘little book’, but practically speaking a receipt of participation).\(^{17}\) Those who refused to sacrifice would be executed. The specifics surrounding the Decian decree are unknown; it is unclear if only the head of a household sacrificed or if all family members (including slaves) were required to participate.

Though it was directed at everyone, Christians felt an especially heavy burden.\(^{18}\) Some died as martyrs, but for other Christians the prospect of choosing between hell or death proved too daunting. Whether out of fear of torture or fear of apostasy and damnation, they elected either to try and obtain a certificate by bribery or to follow a fourth path: exile.\(^{19}\) For the first time, Christians felt organised imperial pressure to conform to the religious standards of their day.\(^{20}\) The persecution, however, appears to have lasted only a short period: all of the extant *libelli* can be dated to a few months.\(^{21}\)

For six years after the death of Decius, Christians enjoyed a period of relative peace. The calm was broken, however, during the reign of Valerian (253–60 CE), as the new emperor struggled with his military campaigns against the Persians. In late 253 and in 254 CE Valerian travelled east to deal with the eastern threat in Antioch, remaining there until his capture in 260 CE. During this period he composed two letters to the Senate about Christians. The first

21 John Knipfing, ‘The Libelli of the Decian Persecution’, *Harvard Theological Review* 16 (1923), 345–90. Three more *libelli* were discovered after Knipfing’s article (PSI vii.78; SB vi.9084; *P.Oxy*. xli.2990).
was issued in 257 CE and demanded that church leaders participate in pagan rituals and that Christians stop meeting en masse in cemeteries. After the first edict failed to make any sizeable impact, he issued a second stronger statement about Christians in 258 CE, in which he directed that bishops, priests and deacons were to be put to death at once. Additionally, Christian senators and high-ranking officials were to lose their status and property and, if they did not deny Christ, were to be executed as well. Christian women of senatorial rank were to lose their properties, as were members of the imperial household who, additionally, were to be dispatched to imperial estates where their views would make them less of a political liability.

The implementation of these regulations so soon after the Decian decree suggests that Christianity was not significantly undermined by Decius’ efforts. Similarly, only a handful of Christians seem to have died as a result of Valerian’s second letter in 258 CE. After Valerian was captured by the Persians, his successor, his son Gallienus, revoked his legislation. For the following forty years Christians were not subjected to any state-sponsored persecution.

In the opening years of the fourth century, as a commemoration of twenty years of rule, the emperor Diocletian, sponsor of the fourfold leadership of the Roman tetrarchy, issued a series of edicts designed to elicit unity and foster the peace of the gods, which targeted Christians. The ensuing violence, known as the Great Persecution, came in waves. It began on 23 February 303 CE with the destruction of the newly constructed church in Nicomedia. The publication of the first edict the following day made the holding of Christian meetings illegal and ordered the destruction of Christian places of worship and the confiscation of Christian scriptures. Christians were denied the right either to petition the courts or to respond to legal actions brought against them, making them especially vulnerable in judicial contexts. Christians with distinguished social statuses lost their rank and imperial freedmen were enslaved. Everyone, including Christians, was now expected to sacrifice before engaging in any legal or official business. According to the Christian writer Lactantius, Diocletian’s goal was to enforce the edict ‘without bloodshed’.

A second edict was published in the summer of the same year, ordering the arrest of Christian clergy (Euseb. Hist. eccl. 8.2.5). According to Eusebius, the impetus for the second edict was a series of political uprisings in Melitene and Syria in which Christians were implicated. In November, in preparation for

22 Cyprian, Letters 80.2. 23 Lactant. De mort. pers. 11.8. 24 Euseb. Hist. eccl. 8.6.8–9 and Martyrs of Palestine, praef. 2.
the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of his reign the following year, Diocletian issued a third edict (Euseb. Hist. eccl. 8.2.5 and 6.10.). This provided an amnesty for the imprisoned clergy, providing that they sacrificed. Some scholars have hypothesised that Diocletian wanted to secure good publicity for his persecution and that he issued this edict in the hope that clergy would apostasise.25

The fourth and final edict, issued in the spring of 304 CE, was the most severe.26 It required that everyone, including children, gather in a public space to offer sacrifice. If they refused, they were to be executed. For such a firm piece of persecution, the fourth edict is overlooked by most ancient Christian commentators. It is never referred to by Christians in the west, by Lactantius in his On the Deaths of the Persecutors, or by Eusebius in his Church History. Eusebius mentions this edict only in his Martyrs of Palestine. It is difficult to deduce from Eusebius exactly how far-reaching the persecution was. Of the ninety-nine Christians executed in the Martyrs of Palestine, only sixteen can be said to have been actively sought out by the authorities.27

The ferocity of the persecution varied based on geography and the character of individual Roman governors and authorities. In the west, only a portion of the legislation was enforced, and even then somewhat sporadically; in northern Africa executions began in Cirta, modern-day Algeria, in May 303; and the persecutions in Britain and Gaul, the area of the empire controlled by Constantius, were relatively mild. Lactantius tells us that things progressed no further than the destruction of church buildings, while Eusebius protests that no buildings were destroyed there at all.28 Persecution appears to have died out in the west during the following year and was officially ended by the emperor Constantius in July 306 CE. Constantius went further, though: he not only granted freedom to Christians in Britain, Gaul and Spain, but he even restored their confiscated property to them.29 By 313 CE the rights of Christians throughout the empire were restored, although the persecution of Christians continued, according to historiographers, in the east under a succession of Persian kings.

Christian understandings of the experience of martyrdom and persecution and the value of death for God varied from place to place, author to author,

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26 Eusebius, Martyrs of Palestine 3.1 and Lactant. De mort. pers. 15.4.
Second-century understandings of martyrdom in Asia Minor tended to focus upon the martyr as an imitator of Christ, portraying their protagonists as following in the footsteps of Jesus and dying ‘in accordance with Gospel’ (Ignatius, Letter to the Romans, 6.3; Martyrdom of Polycarp, 1). Among Christian authors located in Rome in the second century CE, martyrs were philosophically styled (Acts of Ptolemy and Lucius, Acts of Justin and Companions, Acts of Apollonius), their deaths emulating Socrates as much as they do Jesus, while the generic form and style of the stories conform to the genre of the apologia. Apocalyptically styled visions feature in the early Latin martyrdom literature produced in North Africa (Passion of Perpetua and Felicity), and a similar sense of the cosmic battle reverberates beneath Gallic discussions of martyrdom (Letter of the Churches of Lyon and Vienne).

By the time of the Decian decree, these traditions had taken on a more sharply dualistic view. Greek martyrdom accounts edited during this period reveal an increased interest in portraying the martyrs as victims of the machinations of the Devil. In the same vein, Decius is presented as acting in consort with Satan himself. By the time of the Diocletianic persecution, Christian authors, following the terms of the legislation itself, are interested in the fate of Christian books and the moral status of those who safeguard the sacred scriptures. Violence towards these artefacts came to be understood as synonymous with violence against human beings.

One challenge for the scholar of persecution and violence is the veritable explosion in the production of martyrdom stories in the post-Constantinian period, a period in which Christians were no longer persecuted. Many of the stories from this era concerned with martyrdom perform ideological work and served to police orthodoxy and orthopraxy as well as justify violence against Jews and pagans. The reconfiguration of ‘martyrdom’ in the fifth century so that it came to include, for example, dying in the course of destroying pagan temples, is evidence of how the experience of violence could be mobilised against dissenting groups.

In ancient Christian literature the distinction between martyrdom and suicide is sharply drawn only in conversations about martyrdom among heretical groups. A number of orthodox Christians martyrs – Agathonike, Lucius, Agathonike, Lucius,

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the unnamed bystander of the Acts of Ptolemy and Lucius – die deaths that could be safely designated as suicidal. Unprompted, Agathonike throws herself into the pyre on which other martyrs burned (Acts of Carpus, Papylius and Agathonike, 44). Her death proved problematic for the Latin translator of the account, but to the original author she is described, with the others, simply as a martyr. Chronologically speaking, the first objector to the idea of volunteering for death was the Christian philosopher Clement, who fled violence in the city of Alexandria in 202 CE. Clement denounces voluntary martyrdom as something done by the heretics: ‘We ... say that those who have rushed on death (for there are some, not belonging to us, but sharing the name merely, who are in haste to give themselves up, the poor wretches dying through hatred to the Creator) – these, we say, banish themselves without being martyrs, even though they are punished publicly’ (Clement, Miscellanies, 4.16–17). While Clement is believed by most to be denouncing adherents of the New Prophecy movement, there is no evidence that these Christians were prone to martyrdom by suicide.31 Clement is framing the conversation in a way that protects himself from accusations of cowardice, and in doing so constructs an idea of ‘true martyrdom’ as distinct from volunteering for death or suicide.

For Christians in particular, the crystallising moment that distinguished suicide from martyrdom was the composition of Augustine’s City of God. Here Augustine makes the first systematic argument that the Bible prohibits voluntary martyrdom and suicide.32 Augustine’s stance should be read against the backdrop of the fall of Rome and clashes with violent schismatic groups whom he had sentenced to death. The salient point is that it was only in the fifth century that Christians firmly divorced suicide from martyrdom.

Conclusion

The importance of martyrdom for the formation of Jewish and Christian theology and identity should not be underestimated. At the same time, however, claims about the importance, uniqueness and ubiquity of martyrdom in Christianity are ideologically fraught. For much of the Christian era, martyrdom has been seen as an exclusively Christian practice and, perhaps,

32 August. De civ. D. 1.20. Lactantius makes the same claims in Divine Institutes 3.18.
also as an indication of Christianity’s possession of religious truth. There is much at stake, therefore, in claims that martyrdom emerged only with the birth of Christianity. In the same way, claims that Christians were under constant attack by Jews and Romans serve to distinguish Christians from Jews in the 40s and 50s CE and also to celebrating the remarkable ‘against the odds’ survival of Christianity. Both sets of claims – that martyrdom is a Christian invention and that Christians were constantly persecuted – should be evaluated in the light of the ancient evidence, if only because the theological work that martyrdom does in twenty-first-century settings is different from that of antiquity. The presence of suicidal martyrs in both traditions highlights a complicating tension in the history of Jewish and Christian martyrdom: that prior to the rise of Christianity in general and the turn of the third century, martyrdom and suicide were not clearly distinguished from one another. Instead, they are part of the larger category of the good death in antiquity. Ultimately, the significance of martyrdom within either Judaism or Christianity does not rest on the existence of continuous political oppression or persecution, or on the supposed uniqueness of these practices.

Bibliographic Essay

Much of the secondary literature on suicide and martyrdom among ancient Christians and Jews uses as its source texts the two-volume Herbert Musurillo collection Acts of the Pagan Martyrs and Acts of the Christian Martyrs. Additional source texts for Christianity can be found in the Acta Sanctorum (71 vols.; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1643–1940). For the usually marginalised martyrdom accounts of the Donatists, see Maureen Tilley, Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in North Africa (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996). Syriac martyrdom accounts have received notably less attention than Greek and Latin versions, but important critical editions and preliminary analytical scholarship has been undertaken by Kyle Smith, Constantine and the Captive Christian of Persia: Martyrdom and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016). Jewish martyrdom accounts can be found in the critical editions prepared by Saul Lieberman and available at www.lieberman-institute.com; English translations of portions of these can be found in Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from the Graeco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

Classic studies of martyrdom among ancient Jews include Saul Lieberman, ‘The Martyrs of Caesarea’, Annaire de l’Institut de Philologie et d’Histoire Orientales et Slaves 7 (1939–44), 395–446, which was the first scholarly piece to draw attention to the connections between Christian and Jewish martyrdom accounts, and Gerald Blidstein, ‘Rabbis, Romans and Martyrdom: Three Views’, Tradition 2.3 (1984), 54–62. Both should be read with the more theoretically savvy approach of Ra’anan S. Bousstan, From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).
For much of the Common Era commentators and scholars have used modern definitions of martyrdom and suicide to distinguish between the two. The result is a divided and often truncated body of primary sources that follows the canon of traditional religious groups rather than the ancient evidence. Exceptions to this rule include Arthur J. Droge and James Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), which should be leavened with William Tabernee, ‘Early Montanism and Voluntary Martyrdom’, *Colloquium* 17 (1985), 33–44. On the invention of the category of ‘voluntary martyrdom’ as a theoretical patch to create space between the categories of martyrdom and suicide, see Candida R. Moss, ‘The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern’, *Church History* 81.3 (2012), 531–51.

Introductions to the study of martyrdom in the ancient world abound. W. H. C. Frend’s magisterial *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965) remains a standard only in the ambitiousness of its scope. It suffers from a tendency to homogenise ancient Christians. More recent scholarship has focused on the diversity of ancient evidence. A less monolithic version of Frend’s theory is reproduced in Jan Willem van Henten’s study of the Maccabean martyrs, in which he posits that the deaths of Jewish heroes for the ‘salvation’ of their people formed the notion of martyrdom in the early church: J. W. van Henten, *The Maccabees as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 1997). Others have sought to diversify the phenomenon; in *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, Anchor Yale Reference Library (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012) the present author traces the multiple ideologies of martyrdom that spanned the ancient world, while others have undertaken studies of individual martyrs or regions in an effort to diversify our understanding of the cult of the saints in antiquity. See, for example Vasiliki M. Lamberis, *Architects of Piety: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Cult of the Martyrs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).


PART VI

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REPRESENTATIONS AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF VIOLENCE
Kingship, Violence and Non-violence in Indian Thought, c. 500 BCE to 500 CE

UPINDER SINGH

The advent of the Early Historic period in northern India in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE saw the emergence of monarchical and oligarchic states and the beginnings of a sustained discussion of the relationship of kingship with violence and non-violence. The succeeding centuries were marked by a great deal of political conflict and violence, both internal (within states) as well as directed externally towards other states and forest people. Violent succession conflicts, patricide and fratricide within ruling houses, coups and incessant warfare formed the context for a serious and sophisticated intellectual response to the problem of political violence, one that was marked by overlap and diversity of perspectives and change over time.¹

The beginnings of this discourse also coincided with the emergence or increasing prominence of religious traditions that valorised renunciation and non-violence while expressing strong views about the political domain; a coincidence that had an enormous long-term impact. Buddhism emphasised non-violence, and it is likely that the banner of non-violence was raised by other thinkers and sects as well. Jainism was an older tradition that took the practice of non-violence to great extremes. The early emergence of a strong tradition connecting renunciation and non-violence in the religious domain had a significant impact on the political domain and led to an enduring tension between kingship and renunciation, violence and non-violence.

In ancient Indian thought, Sanskrit compound words with a negative prefix, such as ahimsā, ‘non-violence’, acquired a much greater importance than the terms they negated (in this case, hiṃsā, ‘violence’) as well as a very strong positive value.² Along with another term, ānṛśaṁsya, which means

¹ For a detailed discussion, see Upinder Singh, Political Violence in Ancient India (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
'non-cruelty or compassion', ahimsā was considered to be an important virtue. There were a variety of perspectives across time and textual genre on the connection between these virtues and kingship. Apart from distinguishing between necessary force and violence in the exercise of political power, ancient Indian intellectuals also focused on two specific activities that involved the king’s threat or use of force, namely war and punishment. The term often used for the king’s force was daṇḍa (literally, ‘rod’), which also refers to the king’s justice.

Over the centuries the king’s use of force was frequently discussed in relation to the ideas of dharma (pious duty); heaven and hell; liberation from the cycle of birth and death; and renunciation. It was also discussed from a pragmatic political perspective. By the middle of the first millennium CE a ‘classical’ model of kingship had emerged, one in which the use of a certain amount of force by the king was accommodated and legitimised. At the same time there was a recognition of the dangers of excess, and of force veering into violence. In this chapter I move between the neutral term ‘force’ and the word ‘violence’, the latter carrying the connotations of force that is considered excessive, unrighteous or unjustified. It should be understood that the political discourse of legitimate force was an important part of political ideology. It was constructed and was, in fact, essential for the justification of a variety of political acts involving violence.

Violence and non-violence in ancient India have usually been discussed within the framework of the three dominant religious traditions – Brahmanism/Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. There are certain qualitative differences in the value placed on non-violence in these three traditions. While non-violence was recognised as a virtue in several Brahmanical texts, it was not a central precept. Jainism and Buddhism, on the other hand, introduced an extended, powerful and systematic discourse on ethics in which non-violence towards all beings was central. Their primary concern was with the negative passions that led the perpetrator to engage in violent acts and the impact that these passions and acts had on future lives through the operation of the laws of rebirth and karman (the theory that actions have consequences that have an impact across several births). The Jainas followed the principle of non-violence with greater ardour than any other Indian religion because of their unique theory of the nature of reality, which saw the world as permeated with different kinds of life forms which must, as far as possible, not be harmed. The idea of violence was not restricted to violent acts; it included violent words and thoughts.
Non-violence was an important part of practice for Jaina and Buddhist monks, nuns and laity. Since the king was an important part of the laity, he too was bound to its practice. However, there were two caveats. Jainism and Buddhism recognised that laypersons could not practice non-violence as strictly as members of the monastic order. They also recognised that the office and function of the king were unique and required a separate, special response. Therefore, when applied to the political sphere, the principle of non-violence was seriously diluted. In view of the fact that political thought constantly interfaced with an awareness of political realities, and that interaction and dialogue were part of the cultural matrix, it is not surprising that the distinctions between Brahmanical/Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina perspectives sometimes get blurred. Furthermore, religion is not the only lens through which the issue of political violence should be examined; there were a variety of non-religious disciplinary and literary perspectives as well.

Dharma, which became a central civilisational concept in India, was an important framing concept for the discussion of kingship, violence and non-violence. Although the word occurs in Vedic texts, it is only in post-Vedic texts that it acquired its classical meaning – the duties of an individual as part of society. It has been suggested that this development was a Brahmanical response to the increasing importance and ethical content given to this term in Buddhism and by the Maurya emperor Āsoka (268–32 BCE). In the Brahmanical tradition, where neither an organised priesthood nor a textual canon existed, dharma became the subject of a special discipline dealt with in a vast corpus of texts known as Dharmaśāstra. The understanding of dharma in these texts was based on the idea of two normative fourfold divisions. The first was the ideology that divided society into a hierarchy of four hereditary classes – Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra, each considered as having innate qualities suitable for performing certain specific social functions. Of these, the Kṣatriya varṇa was associated with fighting and ruling. The king was considered a pre-eminent Kṣatriya, born to fight and rule, and the use of a certain amount of force, especially in war and punishment, was thought to be part of his job. In actual fact, ancient Indian kings came from a variety of social backgrounds, although they sometimes claimed to be Kṣatriyas after

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4 The Brāhmaṇas were associated with the performance of sacrifices and with knowledge, specifically the studying and teaching of the Vedas; the Vaiśyas were associated with production-related activities such as agriculture, animal husbandry and trade; the Śūdras were supposed to serve the higher varṇas and perform menial tasks.
coming to power, but that was beside the point and did not upset the normative model. In the Brahmanical tradition, non-violence was eventually incorporated as part of the set of duties applicable to all people, irrespective of class and gender, known as sāmānya-dharma, but this was not as important as the performance of duties associated with one’s varṇa.

Apart from varṇa, the second normative axis important not only for social discourse but also for the political discourse on kingship, violence and non-violence, was that of the division of the life of men of the three upper varṇas into four consecutive stages known as āśramas – brahmacarya (celibate student-hood), grhastha (the householder stage), vānaprastha (partial renunciation) and saṁnyāsa (complete renunciation). The householder stage involved active engagement with worldly duties; non-violence was especially associated with renunciation. Although renunciation was not considered as obligatory in the theory of the four life stages, it cast a long and powerful shadow over the institution of kingship. The Brahmanical tradition espoused the view that the king must discharge his duties and should he want to become a renunciant, he must do so only after fulfilling his social and political duties.

An important part of the discourse on political paramountcy was the idea of the cakravartin – the paramount king who was victorious over the four quarters. Jainism and Buddhism valorised the Kṣatriya, the king and the world victor (cakravartin), whose chariot wheels rolled everywhere unimpeded. But they held the one who had attained supreme knowledge and insight (the Jina in Jainism and the Buddha in Buddhism) to be unquestionably superior to him. They also questioned the āśrama scheme and argued that renunciation was an option that could be taken up at any time in life, and that it was the only way to attain the highest goal of liberation from the cycle of birth and death. In order to qualify for true greatness, a king had to abandon his position, worldly life and the violence that was part of it. The life stories of the Buddha and Mahāvīra, both of whom renounced kingship in search of the highest truth, clearly showed that the world victor was not as great as the world renouncer.

The king’s force and punishment are central to ancient Indian theories of the origins of kingship. They are described as necessary for the maintenance of order and the prevention of chaos. In the Agganna Sutta of the Sutta Piṭaka, an early Buddhist text (whose composition is placed roughly between the

third and first centuries BCE), the origins of kingship are traced to a certain stage in a process of progressive moral decline, when vices such as theft, accusation, lying and punishment had made their appearance among beings. The beings assembled and lamented this situation and decided to appoint a man who would punish those who deserved punishment; in return they agreed to give him a portion of their rice. This ruler was given the designation ‘Mahāsammata’, which means ‘the Great Elect’ or ‘one who has been elected or appointed by the people’. In this contractual theory, the king’s force is associated with his punishment and justice, especially with reference to the maintenance of property rights.

The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata are the two great Sanskrit epics, composed between c. 400 BCE and 400 CE. The epics have had enormous cultural impact across the centuries in India as well as other parts of Asia, and this impact extended to the domain of political ideas. There are two accounts of the origins of kingship in the Sānti Parva, the twelfth book of the Mahābhārata. The first talks of a decline from a state of perfection, when men fell prey to error and confusion, leading to greed and desire, and a decline in dharma. The gods ultimately approached the god Viṣṇu, asking him for one who would rule over humans. Viṣṇu produced a son from his mind, Virajas, who was followed by his son and grandson. But these three did not want to rule. Anaṅga was next in line and ruled well; he was followed by his son Atibala, who was unfortunately addicted to vices. Then came Vena, enslaved to sensual pleasure, who did not discharge his duties properly. The sages killed Vena (in a rather violent manner) by stabbing him with blades of sacred kuśa grass. They churned his right thigh, out of which emerged an ugly man named Niṣāda, who was told to make himself scarce. Then they churned Vena’s right hand and from that came Pṛthu. He emerged fully equipped for his role as a warrior, with armour, sword and bow and arrows, knowing how to administer the rod of force (daṇḍanīti). Pṛthu represents the king as the preeminent warrior and maintainers of justice.

6 S. Collins (trans.), Aggañña Sutta: The Discourse on What is Primary (An Annotated Translation from Pali) (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2001).


8 Mahābhārata 12.59.1–134.
In the second account of the origin of kingship in the Śānti Parva, we are
told that long ago the people came together and made agreements among
themselves in order to counter social anarchy, violence and insecurity. They
agreed to get rid of violent, aggressive men who stole, violated women and
performed other such evil acts; but they were unsuccessful in doing so. So
they went to the god Brahmā and begged him to appoint a king. Brahmā
chose Manu, but Manu did not take up the task immediately because he was
afraid of the cruel (krūra) acts that kingship required, especially among men
who were always prone to wrongful behaviour. The people urged Manu
not to be afraid and reassured him that the sin incurred by his cruel deeds
would go away. They also offered to give him one-fiftieth of their cattle and
gold and a tenth of their grain. Soldiers skilled in war would follow him
everywhere, and one-fourth of the merit earned by the people would go to
him. Manu accepted this contract and proceeded to go around the earth,
suppressing the wicked and making them perform their duties. This account
emphasises the contractual relationship between king and subjects, the need
for kings in order to prevent social violence, and the king’s essential exercise
of force in war and the administration of justice. It also recognises the
violence inherent in the king’s job and absolves him of the sin arising from it.

The violation of the varṇa order is central to the vivid descriptions of chaos in
the Brahmanical tradition. The king’s force is often said to be necessary in order
to prevent the onset of ‘the law of the fish’ (matsyanyāya), a state of anarchy in
which the strong devour the weak. In fact, in the Māṇavadharmaśāstra, also
known as the Manusmṛti (dated between c. 200 BCE and 200 CE), the king
appears above all as a stern policer and punisher. This important text states that
the lord created his son Daṇḍa (‘Punishment’) from the energy of Brahman for
the sake of the king. It is fear of punishment (daṇḍa) that makes all creatures
follow their dharma. The text goes on to bestow fulsome praise on punishment.
It is clear that daṇḍa refers to punishment that is measured and fair; it can only be
wielded by one who is self-possessed, not by one who is foolish, greedy,
irresolute or attached to the objects of the senses. The king must wield the
rod of punishment properly, and must be both harsh and gentle. Just punish-
ment sustains order; unjust punishment not only leads to disorder, it can kill the
king and all those associated with him.

Apart from justice, ancient Indian texts also discuss the king’s force in
relation to war. The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata are highly political texts

11 See Patrick Olivelle, Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Māṇava-
Dharmaśāstra (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. books 7 and 8.
whose narratives are marked by dissension within the royal household, exile, war and violence. Both emphasise primogeniture as the proper basis of royal succession. By the time of the compilation of the Rāmāyana, the hero Rāma was considered an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu, but through most of the epic, he is portrayed as an ideal man and ideal king. Although he is the eldest and most worthy son, he prefers to go into exile to honour his father’s promise to a favourite queen rather than fight for his right to the throne. But he wages war against the demon Rāvana to rescue his abducted wife Sītā. The violence of the war between Rāma and Rāvana is mitigated by its being presented as a righteous war and as part of a cosmic battle between the gods and demons. It is also mitigated by the fact that although he discharges his duties as warrior, prince and king in an exemplary fashion, Rāma is also portrayed as an embodiment of compassion, the refuge of all beings, and as worthy of devotion.

The Mahābhārata has a more nuanced and elaborate discussion of the problems of kingship and violence than any other ancient Indian text and highlights the dilemmas and grey areas through its narrative as well as didactic portions. Non-violence is described as part of the dharma for all varnas. Practising this and other virtues leads to heaven. Ahiṃsā and ānṛṣaṁśya are the two important words in the epic’s treatment of the problem of violence. It has been suggested that ahiṃsā (non-violence) was the ideal for the renunciant; it was impossible to practise it in absolute terms while living a worldly life. Ānṛṣaṁśya (which includes goodwill, empathy and compassion), on the other hand, was as an ethic for worldly life.12 Both terms are mentioned as the ‘highest dharma’ in the Mahābhārata, although many other things are also given this status, including truth, the Veda, following one’s spiritual teacher, honouring guests, and wealth. And yet, in spite of the frequent mention of non-violence and compassion as virtues, neither constitute the central message of the epic. To some extent, this is because, due to its complex compositional history and multi-vocal nature, the Mahābhārata cannot be reduced to a single, central message. But the story is an inherently bloody, violent tale. Of the hundreds of thousands who fight day after day over eighteen days on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, only ten survive. As in the Rāmāyana, this war, too, is part of the age-old gods versus demons conflict, the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas representing the two sides respectively. But the

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violence of war and the unhappiness that follows in its wake, even for the victors, are vividly on display.

Given its loose and rambling structure, it should not come as a surprise that the *Mahābhārata* abounds in contradictory statements about violence and non-violence. The dominant view in the text is that force or violence that is necessary to the performance of one’s hereditary calling, and therefore one’s duty, is justified. The god Kṛṣṇa is one of the arch proponents of necessary violence. In the *Mahābhārata*, it is not killing in battle, but the killing of kin in battle, that is the problem. The most powerful and philosophically complex response to this problem occurs in the *Bhagavadgītā*, which is part of the Bhīṣma Parva, the sixth book of the epic, and is usually dated between c. 200 BCE and 200 CE. The *Bhagavadgītā* is set on the eve of the great war, when Arjuna, seeing his close kin and friends among the enemy array in front of him, lays down his arms and declares that he will not fight. His charioteer, the god Kṛṣṇa, explains why he must do his duty as a warrior. Weaving together strands from Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Vedānta philosophies with the ideas of duty and religious devotion (*bhakti*), the *Bhagavadgītā* represents a unique philosophical synthesis. Its idea of *karmayoga* emphasises the eternal and indestructible nature of the self (*ātman*) and the importance of following one’s varṇa duty; it is the fruits of actions and not actions themselves that are to be renounced. The warrior must fight because it is his duty to do so, but he must fight with complete detachment, free from ego, pride, desire, anger and covetousness. Kṛṣṇa’s teaching is addressed to the warrior Arjuna, but it also applies to the king, who is presumed to be a warrior par excellence.

In the *Mahābhārata*, compassion and its variants – pity, sympathy, gentleness – are listed among the virtues that a king should possess. But how was the king to practise non-violence? The eldest Pāṇḍava brother Yudhiṣṭhira (initially would-be king and later king) who is devoted to dharma and free from cruelty is tormented by this problem. The epic emphasises that an excessive predilection for non-violence is disastrous for a king. In his long discourse on kingship while lying on a bed of arrows in the Śānti Parva, the wise Bhīṣma warns the vacillating Yudhiṣṭhira of excessive compassion. A king saddled with compassion is like a eunuch and is not respected by his people. Furthermore, absolute non-violence is impossible. All living creatures inflict some kind of harm on other creatures. All livelihoods involve doing some amount of violence. One does not incur sin by violence that is connected to one’s hereditary calling. It is the king’s duty to protect his
people and ensure their welfare, and the use of force towards such ends is necessary. Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira that a kingdom is the worst scene of killing and a gentle man would find it unbearable. Yudhiṣṭhira observes that since the king kills many people while engaged in war, his dharma is surely the most sinful of all dharmas. Bhīṣma seems to accept this point, but observes that this sin can be driven away by protecting the people and making them prosper, performing sacrifices, giving gifts and ascetic practices. So although the violence inherent in kingship cannot be avoided, compensation and atonement are possible.

At the same time, the epic distinguishes between necessary force and wanton violence. And it also warns that the excessive cruelty and violence of the king and his neglect of his duties can lead to justified violence against him. A cruel king, who does not protect his people, who robs them in the name of levying taxes, is evil incarnate and should be killed by his subjects. A king who, after promising to protect his subjects does not do so, should be killed by them, as though he were a mad dog. So although it upholds and exalts the institution of kingship, in exceptional situations where the king does not perform his duties and is cruel to his people, the Mahābhārata sanctions regicide.

In Jainism and Buddhism, dharma, or its Pali/Prakrit form dhamma, refers to their doctrines in which non-violence had an important place. Apart from detailed injunctions against harming the various forms of life that inhabit the world, Jainism has detailed prescriptions about acceptable and unacceptable occupations. Jobs which involve violence are to be shunned and those that involve some amount of violence, such as governing and farming, are considered less respectable. The soldier’s job is neither specifically approved nor proscribed, although it could be included in the vocation of governing. The moral dimensions of warfare are not discussed directly in detail in Jaina texts, but there seems to be some ambivalence and variation in the attitudes. The Bhagavatī Sūtra, composed in the early centuries CE, challenges the idea that soldiers who die fighting bravely go to heaven. And yet, there is no strong indictment of war. The attitude seems to be that if one has to fight, one must do so with the right inner dispositions. The strong emphasis on non-violence in Jaina doctrine did not translate into a shunning of war by followers of the faith. Jaina rulers were not pacifists. For instance, the first

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century BCE/first century CE Hathigumpha inscription of the Jaina king Kharavela, who ruled in Kalinga in eastern India, boasts of his great military victories.

The absence of an unequivocal condemnation of war can also be seen in Buddhism. Buddhist texts extol the cakkavatti (the Pali form of Sanskrit cakravartin), the paramount king who is victorious over the whole earth, and associate him with seven treasures – the wheel, elephant, horse, jewel, woman, landed householder and counsellor/advisor. But in Buddhism there are not one but two kinds of wheels, that of the Buddha and that of the cakkavatti, and the former is greater than the latter. In its idea of the dhammiko dhammarāja – the righteous king who rules according to morality – Buddhism goes a long way in endowing kingship with morality. But the early Buddhist tradition does not explain clearly how exactly a king becomes a cakkavatti. In the Mahāsudassana Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, King Mahāsudassana, accompanied by his fourfold army, follows the wheel of power as it rolls from ocean to ocean. Wherever the wheel stops, kings welcome him and invite him to rule over them. Mahāsudassana graciously accepts and delivers a discourse on Buddhist piety. King Dalhanemi of the Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta (also in the Dīgha Nikāya) is victorious over the whole earth up to the oceans and attains his victories through dhamma, without the use of force. The vagueness on the military aspects of the cakkavatti’s career reflects a conscious masking, even a denial, of the element of violence inherent in imperial ambitions.

Benevolence to all beings, including humans and animals, is part of the Buddhist ideal for all, including the king. Buddhist texts frequently critique the killing of animals, especially in sacrifice, but there is no unequivocal rejection of the violence involved in kingship. In the Samyutta Nikāya, we are told that once when the Buddha was living among the Kosalans in a hut in the Himalayan forests, he wondered whether it was possible to exercise rulership righteously, without killing and without instigating others to kill, without confiscating and without instigating others to confiscate, without grieving or causing grief. The evil being Māra read the Buddha’s mind and approached him, urging him that he (the Buddha) was indeed capable of exercising such rulership on account of his spiritual powers. But the temptation did not work. We see here a recognition of the fact that a king cannot rule without

engaging in violence. The king's violence could be mitigated, but not eliminated.

The Buddhist Jātakas, stories of the previous lives of the Buddha, each connected with a moral, emphasise the ideal of the compassionate king who is willing to give up his life for others. In many of the stories, the bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) is in fact such a king, very often in the animal world. Some Jātaka stories have an anti-war subtext. Prince Temiya is so horrified at the violence inherent in kingship that he decides to become an ascetic. The virtuous and kind king Mahāsilava refuses to resist or fight when attacked. Instead, he sends his enemies away laden with presents. Confronted with imminent death, he ultimately regains his kingdom because the usurper is overwhelmed by his moral virtues. Similarly, the bodhisattva born as the king of Vārāṇasi refuses his soldiers' entreaties to let them fight the enemy, and instructs them to do nothing. When the enemy arrives at the city gates, he orders them opened. The king and his courtiers are thrown into prison. The bodhisattva is filled with intense pity, which leads to the enemy king's body being racked with great pain. Realising that this is the result of imprisoning a righteous king, the enemy king restores the bodhisattva to his throne. But along with such stories where kings refuse to engage in battle, there are many more Jātaka stories where good kings, including bodhisattvas, fight wars and win them.

Royal inscriptions take us deeper into the intersection of political ideas and practice. It is clear that the Buddhist and Jaina kings of ancient India fought wars. The only exception is the Maurya king Aśoka (c. 268–232 BCE), and even he did not eschew war completely. Aśoka is best known as a Buddhist emperor whose life's mission was to spread virtue not only within his own dominion but also in the domains of other kings. Aśoka had the idea of overlapping political and moral empires, and the universal inculcation of a set of social ethics rooted in ideas related to merit and demerit, and heaven and hell became the king's main agenda. The chief architect and promulgator of this ethical code was Aśoka himself. Most of his edicts talk about the content and benefits of following a code

18 Mūgapakkha Jātaka; ibid., vol. i, Jātaka no. 51, pp. 128–33.
19 Seyya Jātaka; ibid., vol. i, Jātaka no. 282, p. 273.
of virtue that he calls dhamma. Non-violence towards all beings, humans and animals, was an important part of this dhamma, which was inspired by, but not identical to, the dhamma of Buddhist texts.

Aśoka’s thirteenth rock edict is an especially important and unusual document. It talks of the death, deportation and suffering that was caused by a war waged by the king against the people of Kaliṅga in eastern India in the ninth year after his consecration. The king expresses his remorse for the event, but moves on to a reasoned critique of warfare in general. He explains that war causes widespread suffering; apart from those who suffer directly, those attached to such people also suffer great emotional pain and suffering. The king regrets such suffering caused by war, especially to good people. He announces that he will not wage war and exhorts his descendants to do likewise, advising them to be light in their punishment if they cannot eschew war completely. But in this edict Aśoka goes on to threaten the forest people that he will not hesitate to use force against them if they create any trouble. Furthermore, it is significant that the pacific emperor Aśoka, who renounced war and urged his successors to be merciful and moderate in punishment, did not abolish the death penalty. The only concession he made, his fourth pillar edict informs us, was to give a three-day respite to those sentenced to death. The edicts of Aśoka, otherwise suffused with the ideas of non-violence and positive caring for all beings, human and animal, reflect the difficulty of absolute non-violence for a king, even a Buddhist king.

Apart from religious texts and royal inscriptions, certain political treatises discuss statecraft from the pragmatic perspective of an ambitious king, to a great extent (but not absolutely) shorn of metaphysical and religious preoccupations. The two most important of these are Kauṭiliya’s Arthaśāstra and Kāmandaka’s Nītisāra. The age of the Arthaśāstra is a matter of debate; the dates suggested range from c. 300 BCE to the early centuries CE. Kauṭiliya advocates the use of whatever kind of force is required for the king to protect and enhance his interests both within his kingdom and against external enemies. At the same time, he also states that of the three kinds of royal power – military might (prabhuśakti), counsel (mantraśakti) and energy (utsāhaśakti) – the power of counsel is superior. Similarly, of the four

expedients of conciliation (sāma), liberality (dāna), force (danā) and creating dissension (bheda), Kauṭilya recommends the use of the other three expedients before recourse to force. Even when it comes to war, he urges prior careful calculation of likely cost and benefit.

The Arthaśāstra is not, therefore, a votary of the unbridled violence of the king. It advocates the considered and measured (though decisive and ruthless) use of force that is necessary in order to protect the king’s interests. It is also very concerned with the protection of the king from the violence of others. The text has a very detailed discussion of crimes and punishments, and the latter range from fines to exile, corporeal punishment, mutilation, torture and death. Kauṭilya accepts the right of the state to take life as punishment for certain crimes, especially those that are treasonable or involve the theft of royal property.

The Nītisāra of Kāmandaka (or Kāmandaki), a later text which may have been composed between c. 400–700 CE, is similar to the Arthaśāstra in its advice to the king to use killing and force in order to maintain his position against his enemies.23 Kāmandaka, too, is concerned with the constant exposure of the king to the threat of violence and assassination. And yet there are some significant differences. This text warns the king of the risks, uncertainties and dangers of war, identifies sixteen types of war that should not be fought, and describes war as having many negative qualities. It is also against the death penalty, stating that capital punishment should be avoided even for the gravest offence, with the exception of usurpation.24 This is in sharp contrast to Kauṭilya, who recommends the death penalty for several offences. Furthermore, unlike Kauṭilya, Kāmandaka considers the royal hunt as the worst of the royal vices. Apart from exposing the king to physical danger, it weakens the king’s character, can lead to a neglect of royal duties, and has the inherent evil of taking life.25 All this suggests a political perspective in which pragmatism was tinged with a tilt towards the ethics of non-violence.

Texts and inscriptions of the first millennium CE reflect the gradual emergence of a classical Indian ideal of kingship, marked by many common elements and some differences. The Allahabad pillar inscription of the Gupta

24 Nītisāra 15.16. 25 Nītisāra 15.23.
emperor Samudragupta (c. 350–70 CE) expresses this ideal eloquently. In its thirty-three lines, composed in a combination of fine Sanskrit prose and verse by a high-ranking official named Hariśena, the inscription delineates the portrait of an ideal king. It eulogises Samudragupta’s long chain of aggressive military campaigns and victories. He is said to have fought hundreds of battles with his prowess as his sole ally; some kings were uprooted by him, others violently exterminated, and still others captured and released and forced to demonstrate their acknowledgement of his paramountcy. But there is a careful balancing of the image of the king as warrior with pacific elements, including mention of Samudragupta’s benevolence and his achievements as a great intellectual, poet and musician. The Allahabad pillar inscription indicates the attempt of political ideologues to describe, aestheticise and celebrate the king’s military victories and, at the same time, balance the violence of kingship with pacific qualities and attainments.

The emergence of a classical Indian model of kingship is even more evident in Kālidāsa’s Raghuvamśa, a long poem about the great kings of the Ikṣvāku lineage. Although Kālidāsa mentions flaws in the character of a few kings of the lineage, by and large his work contains a strong idealisation of kingship expressed in poetry of the highest order. The poet blends the martial, ritual and benevolent aspects of kingship. The celebrated king Raghu proceeds on a ‘conquest of the quarters’ (digvijaya) in which he performs a military circumambulation of the subcontinent, occasionally fighting bloody battles and ultimately receiving the submission of all. There is both a celebration of war and an aestheticisation of its violence. The violence of kingship is also mitigated by Kālidāsa’s advocacy of an attitude of complete detachment in the king’s performance of his duties, the fighting of wars only for the sake of fame, and the idea that after fulfilling their duties, it is proper for great kings to renounce the world. While Samudragupta of the Allahabad pillar inscription is a king-poet, Raghu is a king-renouncer.

Artistic representations of kings can also form an eloquent source of information on the relationship between kingship and violence. Unfortunately, such representations are rather infrequent in ancient Indian

art. Where the king does appear carved in stone, it is generally in relief sculptures at Buddhist sites, and the portrayals are pacific. An exception are the Kuṣāṇa kings, immigrants from central Asia, who are represented in sculpture in the round. A headless statue of the first-century king Kaniska found in Mathura shows him in central Asian military attire and heavy boots. He firmly clasps the hilt of a great sword in his left hand and holds a mace in his right. This is the earliest visual image that combines two important ingredients of ancient Indian kingship: the king as warrior and as dispenser of justice.

Coins reflect a partial, abridged form of the textual and epigraphic representations of kingship. The martial aspect is prominent on coins of the Gupta dynasty (c. 300–600 CE), where the king appears as a warrior with weapons, but also as a performer of the horse sacrifice (aśvamedha), an elaborate, violent sacrificial ritual which proclaimed his political paramountcy. He also appears as a hunter, on foot or mounted on a horse or elephant, killing or on the verge of killing a lion, tiger or rhinoceros. But these vigorous portrayals emphasising the king’s prowess are complemented by the portrayal of two kings (Samudragupta and Kumāragupta II) playing a musical instrument. Once again, the warrior ethic is very deliberately tempered with pacific and creative elements.

In south India, early Tamil poetry, often referred to as Sangam poetry, composed between c. 300 BCE and 300 CE, revolves around love and war and reveals a polity marked by a multitude of chiefdoms and early kingdoms. The poems reflect a culture with a distinctive ethos, where war is taken for granted and celebrated. Heroes who died in battle were deified and the hero stones (vīrāgals) set up in their memory were worshipped. The valorisation of war especially extends to chieftains and kings, and the intensity of the warrior ethic is illustrated by the custom according to which a king defeated in war committed ritual suicide, accompanied by his close family and associates.

In ancient India there were different perspectives on the king’s force and violence in general, and on specific issues such as war and punishment. These perspectives were grounded in a variety of concerns – pragmatic, metaphysical, religious, ethical and philosophical. Texts and inscriptions usually present highly idealised images of kings, which should be understood as an attempt to legitimise and exalt the institution of kingship. They emphasise that the king should be endowed with qualities of character, should have the

benefit of proper education and training, and should achieve self-mastery. But there was also an awareness that real kings did not always live up to the ideal and often had failings and vices. Ancient Indian epics and legendary accounts single out certain kings for their evil nature.\(^{29}\) The understanding of tyranny focuses on innate traits in the character of individual rulers. Bad rulers have a lack of discernment, balance and self-control. They are immoral, unjust, given to excess, cruel, and do not give due respect to religious elites, especially Brähmanas. But bad men are not necessarily bad kings. Duryodhana of the *Mahābhārata* and Rāvaṇa of the *Rāmañja* are villainous characters, prone to anger, cruelty and arrogance, but they are not described as ruling badly. We have seen that the *Mahābhārata* states that it is not wrong to kill bad kings. But it should be emphasised that neither this, nor any other text, promotes regicide, except in exceptional circumstances. Ultimately, the power, authority and the use of force by the king are upheld in the Indian tradition.

Embedded in much of the political discourse of ancient India is a tension between violence and non-violence, a recognition of the desirability of the ethical principle of non-violence and of the pragmatic need for the king to exercise a certain amount of force in the course of the discharge of his duties. Even the pacific Aśoka gives a stern warning to the forest people. In general, ancient Indian political discourse distinguishes between force and violence. The king’s power of force (*danda*) is described as essential, as central to the origins and functions of kingship. This includes the force used in war and punishment. However, a distinction is made between necessary force and force that is unnecessary, disproportionate, excessive or random. The former is accepted. The latter – which should be properly understood as violence – is critiqued, even condemned.

The political theorists recognised force as one of the four expedients of royal policy but recognised the limits of its efficacy and did not recommend it as the first option. They also warned that an excessive use of force could result in the king becoming a target of the violence of others, either through a popular uprising or assassination at hands of his enemies. In fact, the king is seen as a constant target of the violence of others, especially his queens and sons. This danger could be countered by constant vigilance and shrewd political management. But what about the violence of the king? In a polity where there were no institutional restraints to the potential violence of the

\(^{29}\) For a list of such kings, see Walter Ruben, ‘Fighting against Despots in Old Indian Literature’, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 48.49 (1968), 111–18.
king, the Indian tradition put forward the idea that the pursuit of power and statecraft must be based on careful consideration of actions and consequences. It also emphasised self-control as a desirable royal virtue. While the necessity for the king’s use of force was recognised by all thinkers, it was increasingly balanced and tempered with several pacific and benevolent elements. As a result, by the middle of the first millennium CE the king’s force was justified, legitimised, aestheticised and celebrated. Nevertheless, the awareness of the dangers of the king’s actual and potential violence was never completely erased.

Bibliographic Essay


Violence and the Bible

DEBRA SCOGGINS BALLENTINE

Within the world history of violence the Bible is relevant for our reconstructions of the lived experience of violence among ancient Israelites and Judeans; our understanding of the literary representations and constructions of violence in biblical stories produced and preserved by Judean authors and scribes; our analysis of the interpretation of biblical representations of violence in subsequent historical periods, mainly within Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, from late antiquity to the present, as discussed by other contributors to these volumes; and for addressing the many modern assumptions about how the Bible may or may not justify ‘religious violence’ in particular. Unlike data sets discussed in other chapters, we lack visual representations of violence from Israelite and Judean material culture, such as monumental art. This chapter focuses on biblical representations of violence, providing an analytical overview rather than an historiographical essay.

The Bible is an anthology of texts that were, on the one hand, produced in particular socio-political circumstances over the span of about 1,200 years and, on the other hand, collected and transmitted among Judeans who continually reinterpreted and emphasised particular themes. Historical Judean individuals were agents and victims of violence at various historical moments, and experience of various types of violence shaped the telling of biblical stories. The Bible is a product of its ancient cultural milieu, so the types of violence featured in biblical stories are the sorts that existed throughout ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean societies: state violence in war; ritual violence within cultic institutions; violence between individuals, some of which was deemed criminal in civil legal codes, and some of which appears as normalised, systemic violence.1 Biblical stories depict the full range of what

1 See Chapter 10 in this volume as well as the chapters on Greek and Roman traditions.
Johan Galtung has categorised as direct, structural and cultural violence. These biblical depictions were generated from interested points of view, such that we may identify rhetorical features that serve to code examples of violence in various ways. As literary data with a complex transmission history, the study of the Bible with a special focus on violence necessitates questions that foreground the nature of the evidence. How does the Bible represent violence? How does the literary nature of the Bible shape these representations? How is violence a central feature of biblical theologies featured in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament?

Theorising the ‘Sanctification’ of Violence

As the majority of those interested in the Bible consider it a ‘religious’ document and associate it with so-called ‘biblical religions’, meaning modern Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is essential to be clear about relationships between ‘religion’ and ‘violence’. While much of the violence featured in biblical literature is not particularly ‘religious’, biblical themes, typologies and passages have been utilised to justify violence throughout the past 2,000 years. Various authors, interpreters and agents of violence have utilised biblical notions to ‘sanctify’ particular instances and types of violence. By ‘sanctify’ and ‘sanctification’, I mean the rhetorical use of religious or specifically biblical notions to justify violence and present it as legitimate. Such a rhetorical strategy holds purchase by appeal to the notion that divine beings have communicated standards or directives that agents claim to be or consider themselves to be enacting. Contemporary theorisation of violence convincingly shows that social factors are the root motivations for violent acts, such as economics, education, resources, social standing, political agency, group issues including constructing and maintaining a sense of an in-group us versus out-group them(s) as well as dehumanising others, and racial, ethnic, gender, nationalistic and religious aspects of identity constructs. Thus, religion, and within that category biblical tradition, is one among many sources of rhetoric.

Anthropologists and sociologists such as Anton Blok, Bettina Schmidt, Ingo Schröder, Göran Aijmer, Jon Abbink and David Riches have observed that we tend to respond to tragic events by labelling them ‘senseless violence’. This is a means to express shock and our rejection of the

perpetrators’ motivations. It is a means to offer comfort and affiliation through mourning, which is important in modern times as it was in ancient times. However, we must directly investigate the ‘sense’ embedded in the perpetrators’ view. Adopting current theories of violence as strategic, meaningful, context based and communicative facilitates our parsing out of the role of religion as distinct from social causes. Religious traditions and ‘sacred’ texts, especially the Bible, may be a source of rhetoric, a source for evaluating aspects of behaviour as ‘values’, a source for shared views of authority, group self-understanding and a sense of rallying around a deity as a shared cause. These notions are utilised to frame motivations for violence that is ultimately rooted in the immediate social context. This is not an apologetic distinction, but rather an insistence on unpacking religious rhetoric as such, as rhetoric with implicit truth claims that are subject to critical enquiry rather than divinely authorised prerogatives. Religious and biblical rhetoric is prominent and seemingly useful for justifying violence because it appeals to notions of universal or divine authority. Violence is ritualised, and this changes standard reactions and consequences.

David Riches’ ‘triangle of violence’ includes agent(s), victim(s) and witness(es). Their perspectives may differ on interpretation of the acts of violence. For ‘religious violence’, victims and witnesses especially may reject the agent’s justification through ritualisation and appeals to divine authorisation.

Biblical Representations of Violence

When we analyse biblical representations of violence we must recognise, as Jonathan Klawans says, that ‘it matters whether the violence in question is...
celebrated, legitimated, merely tolerated or even condemned’. Generally, violence perpetrated against characters whom biblical narrators favour is framed as illegitimate. In turn, violence perpetrated by favoured characters is tolerated, legitimated or celebrated. The Bible depicts violence carried out by a variety of agents who represent the range of character types featured in the biblical anthology more generally. Violence attributed to human characters may be presented as legitimate or illegitimate, depending on the social context within the narrative. Sometimes violent acts are presented as resulting from divine directive or permission, but many are mundane. Taking two central human characters, Moses and David, we see ambivalence regarding their violence that requires careful scrutiny. Moses, whom many biblical books portray as the model prophet, kills an Egyptian and hides the body (Exod. 2:11–12). David is a ‘man after Yhwh’s own heart’ (1 Sam. 13:14), yet acts as a mercenary for Philistine commanders (1 Sam. 29) and women sing in celebration of his killing of tens of thousands (1 Sam. 18:7; 21:11; 29:5). These stories do not identify these killings as pious, nor are they commanded by the deity. Regardless, Moses, David and many biblical agents of violence remain in the deity’s favour. Thus, the narrative implicitly condones violence committed by favoured characters and devalues the lives of their non-Israelite, non-Yahwistic (see also Exod. 22:20) or otherwise rival victims. Moreover, such stories establish a narrative model of the divinely favoured person who nonetheless commits violence.

The process of analysing how biblical authors portray violence carried out by various sorts of agents must address how the literary context shapes our understanding of the featured violence as well as whether the type of violence is utilised in biblical theologies. We may also identify when particular types of violence might be generalised in subsequent post-biblical contexts in the service of purported ‘sanctified’ violence. I include violence associated with patriarchs within folklore-type narrative that functions as the foundational story for Israelite and Judean origins and state formation; individuals in civil legal codes; priestly violence in cultic prescriptive codes; violence carried out by prophets within historiographic narratives as well as books attributed to prophets; Israelite and Judean kings within historiographic narratives surrounding the royal court, including acts of war, political rebellions, coups and assassinations; violence attributed to kings of neighbouring polities, presented as aggressors and/or agents of the deity; and

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finally violence attributed to divine beings across and throughout biblical genres, which is the most theologically charged.

**Patriarchs and Foundational Figures**

Biblical patriarchs appear as agents of violence primarily in narratives depicting skirmishes over territory as well as narratives featuring interpersonal violence. Abram leads a rescue battle against nine kings (Gen. 14). Levi and Simeon lead an exceedingly deceptive attack and slaughter the men of Shechem (Gen. 34). While they claim their motivation for the attack is retribution on behalf of their sister Dinah, the narrative facts betray less sympathetic motivations considering that their father Jacob condemns their actions and that they take substantial material goods, animal properties and human captives. Judah subjects his daughter-in-law and sexual partner to symbolic violence by denying her resources and threatening her (Gen. 38). Moses kills an Egyptian man in angry response to seeing him strike a fellow Hebrew (Exod. 2:11–12). Joshua and subsequent leaders engage in offensive and defensive group combat throughout the narratives in the books of Joshua and Judges. Biblical narratives assume that violence is an aspect of attaining territory. Folklore about founding figures is prominent within biblical traditions. While cases of interpersonal violence sometimes feature ambivalence regarding the particular figure’s actions, in most cases the perspective sympathetic to the patriarch or leader character is privileged.

Especially regarding territory, biblical narratives assert that Israelite characters rightfully acquire land. In terms of theology, divine provenance and divine endorsement of Israelite and Judean claims to the land exhibit significant historiographic and political ideologies. Within the narrative world, if we entertain the perspective of the inhabitants of Jericho (Josh. 6:1–22), for example, they might disagree with Israelite claims to the land as well as divine endorsement of the taking of their town. We have no extra-biblical evidence that indicates actual Israelite military takeover within the region, much less the mass killing of Canaanites. Rather, biblical and archaeological data

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exhibit continuation of Canaanite culture within Early Iron Age settlements. Biblical narratives of attaining the so-called Promised Land serve to distinguish those designated as Israelites from non-Israelite neighbours. Despite the legendary nature of a complete ‘conquest’ of Canaan, based on interpretations of schematic passages such as Joshua 23, the overarching theological payoff is evident: stories that justify violence against Israel’s neighbours as they attain the land promote Israeliite and Judean monarchical claims to territory. It is likely that these claims were especially important at times when the Assyrian, Babylonian, and later Persian, Greek and Roman empires exerted political and military pressures on Judean polities.

For example, Ziony Zevit proposes that the notion of ḫerem, often translated ‘utter destruction’ or ‘ban’, which we find in Deuteronomistic narratives, was modelled after Assyrian practices. The earlier Moabite Mesha stele describes a similar approach of Moabite king Mesha against Israelites in the town of Nebo, which he devoted to the deity Ashtar Chemosh. Moreover, John J. Collins observes that in Deuteronomy’s story, the deity commands ‘utter destruction’ of towns with immediate proximity, whereas combat at distant towns followed typical war mores (Deut. 20:10–20; cf. Deut. 7). This suggests that the story of wiping out these people served to explain how Israelites or Judeans came to displace previous inhabitants.

An intimately related topic is the characterisation of Canaanites as a threateningly bad influence on Israelites. In Numbers 33:50–6, Yhwh tells Moses to tell the people that their divinely endorsed possession of the land hinges upon driving out, though not killing, the current inhabitants lest they trouble the Israelites. We might infer from Numbers 33:52 that the specific issue with the current inhabitants has to do with the cultic objects and places that the Israelites are commanded to destroy. This indicates that the issue with current inhabitants is that their cultic objects and places somehow threaten the exclusive covenant loyalty that Yhwh demands from the Israelites, and in the final verse (Num. 33:55) Yhwh through Moses states that he maintains the prerogative to drive the Israelites from the land they are


about to gain just as he is about to drive out the current inhabitants. Similarly, Deuteronomy 7 demands exclusive covenant loyalty to maintain the land and commands destruction of various cultic items. But, notice the striking difference here: rather than driving out the current inhabitants, the Israelites are to ‘utterly destroy’ them (Deut. 7:2). Collins and Zevit agree that Deuteronomistic negative portrayals of Canaanites were directed at disfavoured behaviours or groups of Judeans around the time of Josiah, who is credited with broad social and cultic reforms in the late seventh century BCE.10 Leviticus 18 further negatively characterises Canaanites and exhibits rare and harsh associations of behaviours with Canaanites. Likely dating to sixth-century priestly sources, the authors utilise the notion that the Canaanites were driven from the land and add that the land spewed them out because they had specific abominable behaviours. The warnings against various behaviours serve as prescriptive norms rather than accurate descriptions of the behaviours of Canaanite people. Bible-based notions of divinely endorsed ‘conquest’ as well as takeover of less-worthy original inhabitants have been used as models in modern propaganda. Specifically, Collins discusses such rhetoric associated with Puritans against Catholics in Ireland and Europeans against original inhabitants of the Americas.11 Dismantling ideological uses of Bible-based notions that modern authors utilise to further their social and political agendas, especially those leading to violence, requires scrutiny of the how interpretations of biblical ideas are rooted in and reflective of the immediate social and political contexts of the interpreters.

**Individuals in Civil Legal Codes**

Apart from narratives about foundational figures, how does the Bible represent violence within society in general? The biblical anthology includes several civil legal codes, which distinguish between various types of agents and victims within society. Various agents and human victims include the free Israelite man, wife, children, servants and resident aliens. As literature, civil legal codes are prescriptive in nature and include both apodictic and casuistic formulations. On the one hand, biblical civil regulations share a great deal in common with diverse ancient Near Eastern legal codes, suggesting veracity in their portrayal of actual mores. Civil legal regulations likely respond to the sorts of civil dilemmas that happened across these societies. On the other hand, we do not have a firm sense of how such regulatory codes were carried out or how the featured violent acts and

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violations may have occurred. Civil legal codes exhibit well the contested nature of violence, that is, how harmful acts may be considered legitimate from certain perspectives and illegitimate from others. If an individual is found guilty and punished with physical harm or loss of status, such punitive physical or social harm is presented as legitimate acts that achieve justice. Individuals punished might contest the legitimacy and justness of the violence enacted upon them.

A fascinating example is the case of the hypothetical wife who attempts to assist her husband as he fights with another man by grabbing that man’s ‘shameful parts’, most likely referring to the man’s genitals. Deuteronomy 25 relates several types of civil judicial matters, and 25:11–12 directs the reader to cut off the hand of the well-meaning wife who has grabbed her husband’s opponent’s genitals rather than spare her. There is no directly comparable ruling for a man. The closest comparanda are the following cases from Exodus 21. If a man attacks another who dies, the attacker should die (Exod. 21:12); if a man ambushes another in order to kill him, he should die (Exod. 21:14); if men are fighting and one strikes another with a stone or fist and the injured does not die, the striker must pay for the injured person’s loss of time (Exod. 21:18–19); if a man strikes his male or female servant, and the servant dies straight away, the abusive master is punished, but not killed; if the servant lives a couple of days before dying, the abusive master is not punished since he has already lost his own human property (Exod. 21:20–1); if two men are fighting and one accidentally injures a pregnant woman such that she miscarries, the husband may exact punishment on the other man; if the pregnant woman sustains further loss, the man who has injured her is liable for equal injury – life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, bruise for bruise (Exod. 21:22–4). These examples clearly exhibit a social hierarchy reinforced within the judicial system and legal code, topped by the free man. His wife has less privilege but far more than the owned man or woman who is treated as property. While the *lex talionis* obliges the man who has accidentally injured a pregnant woman to render equal for her loss, ultimately the man is protected from disproportionate retribution. That is, the husband is not granted judicial permission to kill the man who has injured his wife. Bringing this back to the case of the wife in Deuteronomy 25:11–12, she is not equally protected by *lex talionis*. There is no explicit indication in Deuteronomy 25:11 that the man’s genitals have been permanently injured. If we entertain the possibility that the genitals are permanently injured, then we might understand that the loss of the woman’s hand is supposed to be
equal to the man’s loss of functional genitals. Such supposition could then be analysed, contested, rejected, or accepted. If it is the case that cutting off the woman’s hand is punishment for merely grabbing, but not necessarily permanently injuring, another man’s genitals, then she suffers a disproportionate punishment that reflects male hegemony. Much later, early medieval commentary from Rashi states that the rabbis considered the cutting off of the woman’s hand to be figurative. She must pay a sum contingent upon the social status of the men initially fighting in order to rectify embarrassing the man. This interpretation of the mutilation of the woman indicates rabbinic analysis, contestation and rejection of the initial formulation of the literary case. This example is one of hundreds of biblical civil legal statements that we may fruitfully analyse in order to study the intricacies of legal codes as literature as well as the social norms proffered through them and the accompanying violence.

More directly pertaining to theologies, across the ancient Near East, legal codes are presented as endorsed and received from the gods. Likewise, biblical poetry often refers to Yhwh as a just deity and even judge, using legal models. Based on legal models, biblical authors utilised notions of retribution and enactment of judgement, punishment and justice to frame historical experiences of political and military misfortune as acts of the deity, as justified enactments of violence against humans. A central feature of the theological logic that certain biblical authors developed in order to bolster their interpretation of the situation of Judeans in the world and especially their relationship to the land and their patron deity is the notion of ‘abomination’ relative to notions of purity and holiness. At risk of oversimplifying, the basic idea is that gods are holy, and things set apart for gods are sacred. Interaction with sacred things, places and people requires purity. In turn, impurity can hinder enactment of rituals that are purportedly key to maintaining the relationship between the people and deity. Similarly, abomination can threaten the presence of the deity, in that the deity might leave or cause individuals or the whole people to leave (Lev. 18:24–30; Deut. 18:12; Jer. 2:7–8; Ezek. 33:26; Mal. 2:11; 1 Kgs 14:24; 2 Kgs 16:3; 2 Kgs 21:2, 10–16; 2 Chron. 33:2; 2 Chron. 36:5–8; 2 Chron. 36:14; Ezra 9:1, 11, 14). ‘Abomination’ is a constructed category that is contingent on social norms and interested stances within any given social group or literary corpora that features such a category. Within the biblical anthology, abominations include various disfavoured sexual acts such as many forms of incest, bestiality, and sex with a menstruating woman (Lev. 18; Lev. 20); disfavoured types of divinatory practices (Lev. 20:6, 27; Deut. 18:10–12; 2 Kgs 21:6); failing to distinguish between clean and unclean
living things (Lev. 20:25; Deut. 14:3); non-Yahwistic iconography (Deut. 7:25–6; Deut. 27:15; 2 Kgs 21:7; 2 Kgs 23:13); offering animals with blemish (Deut. 17:1); ritual killing of humans (Lev. 18:21; Lev. 20:2–5; Deut. 12:31; Deut. 18:10; 2 Kgs 16:3; 2 Kgs 21:6; 2 Chron. 28:3); abrogating exclusive covenant loyalty (Deut. 13:14; 17:2–4; 20:18; 32:16; 2 Kgs 21:1–5); women wearing clothing associated with men and men wearing clothing associated with women (Deut. 22:5); making a vow offering to Yhwh using an animal or goods that have been given as payment to a prostitute (Deut. 23:18); remarrying one’s ex-wife (Deut. 24:4); using unfair weights and measures (Deut. 25:13–16). This range exhibits that the biblical category ‘abomination’ includes both regulations that we might label ‘civil’ laws as well as rules that we might label ‘ritual’ or priestly laws.

Priests and Prophets

Priests and prophets appear as social, religious and sometimes political authority figures in biblical historiography and books attributed to prophets. How does the Bible represent violence associated with priestly and prophetic agents, and what literary aspects are at play? As with civil legal codes, ritual codes that feature priests as agents of violent acts are prescriptive. We can only speculate to what degree a historical practice of such regulations were enacted. For example, we do not know if actual priests subjected individual women whose husbands suspected them of adultery to the violent and humiliating ritual of drinking ‘bitter waters’ that cause her physical harm (Num. 5:12–31). Likewise, we cannot provide clear evidence as to whether or how often potential priests were subjected to structural violence of denied access and participation in priestly duties on account of physical characteristics deemed to be disqualifying blemishes (Lev. 21:17–24). Leviticus 17:3–4 requires that someone slaughtering an animal must bring part of it to the tabernacle for the deity, and the consequence for failing to do so is being ‘cut off’ from the people. Such exclusion might imply physical violence, and would certainly involve structural violence of denying access to the community and group self-identification (see other examples of this punishment in Exod. 31:14; Lev. 17:9–10; Lev. 19:8; Lev. 23:29; Num. 9:13; Num. 15:30; Lev. 20:3–6). Within the narrative world of the text, there are plentiful cases of violence that are presented as legitimate within ritual or priestly actions and institutions. 12

12 Many types of examples are discussed in S. Olyan (ed.), New Perspectives on Ritual Violence in the Hebrew Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
One case of violent ritual that is deemed illegitimate across several biblical books is ritual killing of humans. While Exodus 13:2 and 22:29–30 feature the deity requiring human firstborns along with first fruits and animal firstborns, Exodus 34:19–20 differs by specifying that substitutes for firstborn human sons are accepted. Numbers 3:12–13 differs further by identifying the Levites as a collective substitution for all firstborn Israelites. We also have biblical data pertaining to killing of one’s children at times of calamity. Jephthah secures military victory by promising a burnt offering to Yhwh of whomever is exiting his house when he returns from victory, and he follows through despite that the victim is his only child, his daughter, who does not protest her ritual killing (Judg. 11). The king of Moab staved off defeat and sent the Israelite army fleeing by ritually killing his eldest son and heir apparent as a burnt offering, presumably to his patron deity Chemosh (2 Kgs 3:26–7). These stories exhibit killing of human children as an effective means of securing a deity’s assistance in war. Elsewhere, this practice is portrayed negatively. In the story of Abraham securing the deity’s promise of descendants and possessions, Elohim requests killing of his son as a burnt offering, and he carries out the request until the last moment when the deity provides a substitute (Gen. 22). While it is possible that an earlier version featured Abraham completing the ritual killing of his son (Gen. 22:16–19), the substitution in the canonical version of the story might indicate an attenuation of the idea that Yhwh would desire ritual killing of humans. Deuteronomy 12:31 and 18:10 explicitly denounce the practice. Oracles in Micah 6:6–8, Jeremiah 19:4–9 and Ezekiel 16:20–1 imply that Judeans have made such offerings, but Micah suggests that they are ineffective in procuring Yhwh’s favour and Jeremiah objects that Yhwh never asked for such a thing. Within the Deuteronomistic history, the practice is so clearly portrayed as illegitimate that the narrator accuses disfavoured kings Ahaz (2 Kgs 16:2–4), Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:1–16) of the practice. The narrator utilises the notion as a rhetorical tool to portray them negatively, and the negative portrayal of Manasseh in particular furthers a theological apologia for the downfall of Judah. Considering this literary history, we may reconsider the rhetorical work undergirding New Testament texts that portray the crucifixion of

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14 Francesca Stavrakopoulou, King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities (New York: De Gruyter, 2009).
Jesus as a ritual killing that accomplishes positive outcomes.\textsuperscript{15} The notion that \textit{Theos} himself would decree ritual killing of his ‘only son’ builds upon prior traditions of ritual killing of humans, yet stands in contrast to biblical condemnation of the practice.

Generally, ritual acts of violence are presented as divinely ordained, justified through sanctification because the deity has given directives for such acts. Similarly, biblical prose and prophetic books occasionally feature various prophets as agents of violence. For example, Elijah commands the killing of a mass of rival prophets (1 Kgs 18:40). While this killing is not explicitly labelled as pious or commanded by the deity, Elijah remains in the deity’s favour. The narrative implicitly condones his violent acts and devalues the lives of his rivals. The model of divine sanction for priestly, prophetic, and ritual acts of violence is noteworthy. While biblical examples are specific and limited in scope, later authors generalise the model in order to present arrays of social, political and ritual violence as sanctified, justified by association with the divine. Some individuals even claim to be priests or prophets, associating themselves with biblical figures as a means to further their claims to authority. When such utilisation of biblical traditions involves justification of violence, we can identify motivations and means within the immediate social and political contexts of the agents. The biblical anthology is not a direct source, per se, of violence, but rather agents have invoked biblical models of sanctification as a rhetorical tool for presenting their actions as divinely inspired, ordained or commanded.

\textit{Kings of Israel and Judah}

Second to the deity, human kings are portrayed as being responsible for the bulk of biblical violence. As with patriarchal characters in Torah narratives, kings are lead agents in war in royal narratives. Killing in war is presented as a normal, legitimate occurrence, and biblical characters celebrate success in war and the great numbers that warriors kill (1 Sam. 18:7; 21:11; 29:5). In addition to gaining and defending territories, kings adjudicate civil matters that involve punitive and retributive violence, and respond to challenges to their royal authority. Assassinations and coups abound in the royal courts featured in biblical historiography. This literature purports to maintain association with court records while clearly providing a Judean Jerusalem-centred spin on events as well as weaving throughout Deuteronomistic

theological interpretations of Israel and Judah’s successes and misfortunes. As the following examples show, acts of violence associated with royal agents that enjoy divine endorsement within the narrative are presented as justified, especially violence that serves military and political gain or maintenance. However, violent acts carried out by characters who are not favoured within biblical historiography are cast without approval.

The Judean queen Athaliah reigns for six years after Jehu assassimates her son, the previous ruler, in a bloody coup. She secures the throne by killing the remaining royal sons. 2 Kings 11 does not include the typical formulas utilised to frame the lives of Judean and Israelite kings; 2 Chronicles 24:7 calls her wicked; and the people rejoice when she is assassinated and the city becomes tranquil (2 Kgs 11:20; 2 Chron. 24:21). While the narrative casts her violent acts as illegitimate and the violence done to her as justified, she calls out ‘Treason! Treason!’ before men drag her out of the temple, condemn her followers to death and kill her. The priest in charge of the conspiracy to assassinate Athaliah crowns king a 7 year old (2 Kgs 11:21–12:2). Both Athaliah and the priest Jehoiada kill for political gain and personal security. Jehoiada and the young king Joash are favoured within the narrative and portrayed as having the deity’s favour, whereas Athaliah is not favoured. This difference is exhibited in how their respective violence is portrayed as justified or corrupt.

Another fascinating case is the character who assassinated Athaliah’s son prior to her reign and murder, namely Jehu. The narrative in Kings is more sympathetic to Jehu than to Athaliah, however the deity’s purported avenging for Jehu’s coup in Hosea 1:4 makes Jehu’s overall portrayal ambivalent. He has the deity’s favour and is chosen to become king of Israel and to end the house of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kgs 16:1–7; 19:15–17; 2 Kgs 9:1–13; 10:30). Jehu has a decree from the deity to act violently against Ahab, and he accomplishes a bloody coup, killing royals and a temple full of people through deception, and reigns over Israel for twenty-eight years. Those he kills are portrayed as lacking the deity’s favour. To the degree that this leads the reader to lack sympathy for these victims, this mechanism of divine favour and disfavour dehumanises them.

Finally, select stories featuring Joab and Abner in 2 Samuel feature four types of violence: defensive, retributive, punitive, and, for the involved kings, politically strategic violence. Abner was the captain of the Israelite army and Joab was the captain of the Judean army. Joab’s brother Asahel relentlessly chases Abner, who kills Asahel, presumably to protect himself. There is no explicit justification or rejection of this killing, but Abner’s words suggest that he gave Asahel warning and opportunity to cease and
that he did not set out to kill Asahel (2 Sam. 2). Joab and his other brother Abishai, in turn, kill Abner as retribution for Abner killing their brother (2 Sam. 3:27–30). It is vital to know that Abner was Saul’s captain and had placed Saul’s son Eshbaal on the Israelite throne after Saul died in battle (2 Sam. 2:8–9). Subsequently, Abner defected to the Judean king David, purportedly because Eshbaal challenged Abner for sleeping with one of the dead king Saul’s concubines (2 Sam. 3:6–21). Eshbaal understood this act to suggest that Abner meant to claim the position of the former king. Abner’s defecting to David is politically advantageous to David in gaining Israelite loyalty and territory. David mourns for Abner, and the narrator blames Joab for killing him in retribution for his own brother’s killing. However, it is also politically advantageous that Abner is dead and therefore not a potential rival for Israelite loyalty, especially considering his successful military career and that he was Saul’s relative. While the fate of Joab’s brother Abishai, another central figure in David’s army, is not covered in the narrative, Joab too is assassinated. Once Solomon gains David’s throne, Joab is among several figures who are killed in order to secure Solomon’s position (1 Kgs 2). Joab’s killing has clear political strategy since Joab backed David’s heir apparent, Adonijah, Solomon’s elder brother (1 Kgs 1). Suspiciously, the story goes that, from his deathbed and in private, David himself condemned Joab for the very acts that benefited David’s authority (1 Kgs 2:5). It is not a coincidence that politically exigent assassinations are rendered with such nuance in the narrative.

As these examples attest, royal violence is more political than religious. While divine endorsement of successful royals is assumed, assassinations, such as the assassination of Saul’s son and king of Israel, Eshbaal, whose death leads to David acquiring kingship over Israel (2 Sam. 4), are not presented as particularly godly, pious, or holy acts that everyday Israelites, Judeans, or subsequent religious audiences are to emulate. Rather, we may recognise that royal violence was part of ancient realia, so biblical authors include such violence in their writings.

The greatest theological impact of royal violence portrayed in biblical narrative centres around the figure of David, the first Judean king who also gained the throne of Israel. He is characterised as a ‘man after Yhwh’s own heart’ (1 Sam. 13:14) as well as a sneaky, rogue mercenary; a warrior who has killed tens of thousands; ruthless acquirer of political power; and adulterer who conspires to have an innocent man killed. After attempting to cover up taking Uriah’s wife, David conspires to have this loyal soldier killed (2 Sam. 11). In this case, Yhwh does punish
David by causing the baby to die (2 Sam. 12:15). Reconciliation of these characterisations of David requires scholarly textual and literary interpretation. In a non-critical setting, however, interpreters have developed apologetic explanations to bridge the cognitive dissonance. One result is the narrative possibility of an exemplary pious person who nonetheless commits unjustified violence.

Neighbouring Kings

Non-Israelite and non-Judean kings appear as both aggressors and agents of Yhwh. Within historiography kings of more powerful polities exert structural and physical forces against Israelite and Judean kings and populations. Political subjugation and military defeat occurred as a fact of life in the ancient Near Eastern geopolitical landscape (see map 31.1). Literary representations of such events include theological interpretations that serve to apologise for subjugation and defeat. The idealised situation is that the patron deity ensures the safety, health, thriving, and possessions of his or her loyal people. Therefore, if a people suffers, the question arises as to why the patron god did not or could not protect them. The creative and theologically safe explanation is that the patron chose not to protect his or her people from the neighbouring king, and the god’s motivation for choosing not to protect and even facilitate attacks by utilising aggressive kings against the people is key. Rather than portraying the patron god as unjust and failing to uphold his or her covenant promises, we read that the people must have fallen short of their obligations to the patron god thereby abrogating the covenant. We see this shared theological logic in biblical as well as other ancient Near Eastern literatures.

The most prominent examples of the Judean god Yhwh purportedly using non-Israelite and non-Judean kings are Assyrian king Sennacherib, Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and Persian king Cyrus. Around 721 BCE the polity of ancient Israel, including its capital Samaria, was defeated. Assyrian king Shalmaneser laid siege to Samaria and his successor Sargon oversaw Samaria’s fall. Two decades later, Assyrian king Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem. While other Judean towns were damaged, the Assyrians left without entering Jerusalem. Isaiah 10:5–19 speaks of Sennacherib as the instrument of god’s own anger, and casts the Assyrian king’s military threats and actions as results of the Judean deity’s decrees. Jerusalem will suffer just as Samaria has suffered, and the theological apology lays blames on the people. The Judean deity is portrayed as being in control of the geopolitical landscape. Once he accomplishes his goals by means of Sennacherib, the deity
will deal with the powerful and haughty Sennacherib, who purportedly credits himself with his accomplishments that are ‘actually’ the prerogatives of the Judean god. Notice that Yhwh is the agent of violence against his own people through the Assyrian king as well as against the Assyrian king, and theological justifications serve to legitimate the violence. Similarly, Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar appears as the means for the Judean god to enact his will against Judeans, who carry the blame for their misfortunes. Ezra 5:12 states that the god of heaven gave the Judeans into Nebuchadnezzar’s hand because they provoked the deity’s anger and includes the fact that doing so led to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the forced migration of Judeans into Babylonian exile. Prior to destruction, Jeremiah pleads with the Judeans to submit to Nebuchadnezzar’s political subjugation in order to avoid a worse fate, and he does so by claiming that Yhwh has determined that the Babylonian king will dominate Judean lands and people (Jer. 27:6). Likewise, 1 Chronicles 6:15 continues this characterisation of Nebuchadnezzar as lacking agency in the downfall of Jerusalem and the exile of Judeans. Casting the Judeans’ own patron deity as the agent of violence rhetorically disarms these powerful kings. However, the theological precedent of a patron deity causing the suffering of his or her own people is ominous (see below). The biblical anthology does feature a prominent positive example of Yhwh using a non-Judean king to benefit the Judeans. According to 2 Chronicles 36:22–3 and Ezra 1:1–4, Persian king Cyrus allows the exiled Judeans to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. Isaiah 44:28–45:7 credits Yhwh with Cyrus’ political and military successes, even applying messianic terminology to Cyrus. While this example is positive for the Judeans, Cyrus defeated the Babylonian forces, and the Babylonian version of Cyrus’ success at the expense of Babylonians utilises shared theological logic in crediting the Babylonian patron god Marduk with Cyrus’ successes (Cyrus Cylinder, BM 90920). Additionally, it is noteworthy that Egyptian kings are not present in this manner, as instruments of Yhwh’s agency. In the exodus narrative, we do see the motif of Yhwh ‘hardening pharaoh’s heart’, which has a similar rhetorical effect in that it detracts from the Egyptian king’s agency (Exod. 7:3–5, for example, and throughout Exod. 4–14). However, there is no apology for the pharaoh’s oppression of the people as being something Yhwh intended in order to punish the Israelites.

**Divine Beings**

The biblical anthology features many instances of violence that feature divine beings as agents. Generally, divine beings are utilised within explanations of
violence in order to provide a theological layer of interpretation to the events at hand. That is, divine beings are the central aspect of theological apologies and explanations for violence, and we may analyse what rhetorical payoff there is for shifting instances of violence away from human agency. These cases impact theologies contained within both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Even passages that we might label ‘utopian’ visions or fantasies are predicated on successful divine violence against parties cast as enemies of favoured deities (Isa. 11; Rev. 21–2).

Related to the theological explanations that feature the patron deity using a non-Israelite and non-Judean king against his own people, this same theological apology for military misfortunes appears without reference to human kings as well, making the deity the direct agent against his people. The Moabite patron god Chemosh gives his sons and daughters, meaning the Moabite people, into captivity under the Amorite king Sihon (Num. 21:29). 2 Kings 3:26–7 implies that Chemosh responds positively to the ritual killing of the eldest son of the king of Moab by aiding the Moabites in battle against the Israelites. In Jeremiah 44, Judeans credit the Queen of Heaven with their misfortunes, using the shared theological apology described above. They argue against the prophet Jeremiah with their reasoning that Judean misfortunes began only when they stopped honouring the Queen of Heaven (Jer. 44:17–19). The casting of the Queen of Heaven as the divine agent responsible for Judean misfortunes stands as a competing explanation for the fall of Jerusalem within the biblical anthology, which primarily features Yhwh as the divine agent of his people’s suffering. For example, Jeremiah 21:3–7 features Yhwh fighting against his own people with the Babylonian army and sabotaging Judean weapons. In Ezekiel 9, Ezekiel sees Yhwh command a group to go throughout Jerusalem killing all but a select few, not sparing young or old or women or children. Recall that crediting one’s own patron deity with his or her people’s suffering is an assertion that one’s patron deity remains the most powerful god despite evidence, specifically the suffering of his or her people, to the contrary (see also 2 Kgs 21; 2 Chron. 36). Alternative explanations include the notion that Yhwh has abandoned and forgotten his people (Ps. 74; Ps. 79; Ps. 89:46–51; Lam. 5:19–22) or that the Babylonians and Judah’s neighbours the Edomites are to blame (Ps. 137; Obadiah).

Aside from theological apologies for communal calamity, the biblical anthology is stocked with imagery of Yhwh as a divine warrior who, for

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16 See Debra Scoggins Ballentine, ‘The (Mis)Foreignization Problem in Hebrew Bible Studies’, conference paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, Georgia, 23 November 2015.
example, treads upon people in vengeance such that his clothes are splattered with blood (Isa. 63:1–6). His sword devours flesh and he makes his arrows drunk with blood (Deut. 32:34–43). Collins observes that two of the oldest biblical passages portray Yhwh as a warrior (Exod. 15; Judg. 5). The divine captain of Yhwh’s army visits Joshua at the beginning of his campaigns in Canaan (Josh. 5:13–15). Yhwh sends plagues and causes suffering both directly (Num. 11:33; Num. 16:46; 2 Sam. 24:15; Zech. 14:12) as well as through his agents such as Messengers of Affliction, Death and Pestilence (Ps. 78:49–50), the Messenger of Yhwh (Exod. 23:23; Isa. 37:36).

As discussed, biblical data indicates that, despite the vast quantity of humans that Yhwh purportedly kills, the Judean deity did not prefer to receive human ritual killings. While several texts indicate Judeans and Israelites viewed ritual killing of humans for Yhwh as legitimate (Exod. 13:2; Exod. 22:29–30; Judg. 11; see also 2 Kgs 3:26–7; Micah 6:6–8; Ezek. 16:20–1), elsewhere substitutions of animals or living service of humans appears as a less violent preference (Gen. 22; Exod. 34:19–20; Num. 3:12–13), and select texts reject the legitimacy of ritual killing of humans (Deut. 12:31; Deut. 18:10; Jer. 19:4–9; 2 Kgs 16:2–4; 2 Kgs 21:1–16).

Several biblical texts look forward to divine violence in the future. Daniel 10 and 12 feature Michael as the divine prince and protector of Yhwh’s people. Collins suggests that biblical apocalyptic literature is characterised by forbearance in the present that foresees eschatological vengeance. The War Scroll (1 QM) anticipates battle between the Sons of Light and Sons of Darkness, and Revelation anticipates battle between opposed camps of divine beings, the heavenly deity and his associates versus ‘Satan’ and his associates. David Frankfurter proposes that particularly violent biblical fantasies in New Testament apocalyptic texts (1 John, 2 Thessalonians and Revelation), which might have served rhetorically to dissipate violence, can nonetheless be utilised as canonical models for dehumanising others and instigating the destruction of perceived enemies. Within early biblical interpretation, Collins emphasises the theme of reserving the right of punishment of enemies for the deity rather than humans in the present moment, and he cites rabbinic and Pauline

interpretation of Deuteronomy 32:35 as an example.\textsuperscript{21} This is possibly related to the political and military dominance of other polities over Judean societies, which we can trace from the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires, through the Persian Empire, to the Greek and Roman Empires.

Biblical Violence and ‘Monotheism’

When explaining biblical violence, some have argued that ‘monotheism’ is central. However, biblical violence is not exceptional within the ancient cultural milieu. As biblical authors represented their lived experience, they incorporated familiar types of violence. Israelite and Judean depictions of violence are comparable to contemporary portrayals of violence from Egyptian, ancient Syrian and Mesopotamian sources. Shared discourse regarding violence across ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean societies indicates that the notions of ‘monotheism’ or ‘polytheism’ should not be central within our scholarly explanations and interpretations of ancient violence.\textsuperscript{22} Bruce Lincoln makes the important point that scholars must approach religious texts with the same scrutiny and standards we use for non-religious texts.\textsuperscript{23} The same applies to biblical texts within the realm of ancient literature. There should be no sense of biblical exceptionalism or use of peculiar notions that we would not also use for other ancient data to account for biblical data, violent or otherwise.

Biblical Structural and Cultural Violence and Post-Biblical Intolerance

Biblical representations portray as legitimate direct violence in war, punitive violence associated with judicial proceedings and some retributive violence. Biblical literature also assumes social systemic or structural violence such as institutions of slavery and servitude, and ethnicity-based, gender-based and body-wholeness-based restrictions within ritual codes, and privileging of the free male in civil legal codes. In terms of cultural violence, we see bias against

\textsuperscript{21} Collins, ‘Zeal of Phineas’, 16.
\textsuperscript{22} Both John Collins and Jonathan Klawans have discussed how monotheism is not an accurate explanation for biblical violence as well: Collins, ‘Zeal of Phinehas’, 3–4; Klawans, introduction to Religion and Violence, p. 9.
non-Israelites, women and individuals with physical ‘blemish’. Cultural violence might be the most ripe for subsequent generalisation in service of intolerance and violence in post-biblical contexts. Within the Bible, there is a spectrum of inclusive and exclusive views regarding ‘foreigners’, but harsh rhetoric exhibited in some biblical texts has been generalised as a model for enacting many sorts of exclusive positions or general intolerance.

Conclusion

The Bible depicts violence carried out by a variety of agents who represent the range of character types featured in the biblical anthology more generally. Violence attributed to patriarchs, prophets, priests, Israelites and Judeans, ‘foreigners’ and royals may be presented as legitimate or illegitimate, depending on the social and political context within the narrative. Sometimes violent acts are presented as resulting from divine directive or permission, but many are mundane. Violent acts and characteristics associated with Yhwh or his divine subordinates are portrayed as legitimate in almost all cases. The rhetorical strength of the notion that the deity’s violence is ‘just’ is exhibited when military and political misfortunes, which are portrayed with extensive suffering of direct and symbolic violence, are explained as ‘just’ punishment from the deity against his own people. Within both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the notion that divinely directed violence accomplishes some divine plan enables misrecognition of the now ritualised violence.

Analysis of representations and constructions of violence that biblical literature features indicates the following. Judean authors and scribes were well aware of direct violence within the lived experience of Judeans. Biblical authors utilised stories of violence and violent themes in their literary constructions of ancient Israelite and Judean origins, polity formation and destruction, and theology. Instances, types and themes of violence within the biblical anthology may be presented as legitimate or illegitimate as well as divinely ordained or solely mundane. In subsequent socio-historical contexts, from late antiquity to the present day, mainly within Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, the Bible is one source among many for rhetorical claims that agents employ to portray violence as legitimate and even divinely approved. Interestingly, Stephen Geller convincingly argues that Bible-based violence tends to be bolstered with literalist readings
of biblical stories. Scholarly theorisation of violence and religious violence in conjunction with critical study of religion and ancient literature, including the Bible, facilitates distinguishing between the claims of those who utilise the Bible to justify violence and how the biblical anthology actually represents violence of various sorts in various ways. Whether considering violence in modern or ancient times, we have the opportunity to productively investigate how violence is portrayed, who benefits and who suffers from the portrayal, and to challenge claims about the Bible as we examine the social impacts of ancient ‘biblical violence’ and modern ‘bible-based violence’.

Bibliographic Essay


Representations of Violence in Ancient Mesopotamia and Syria

DAVIDE NADALI

Mesopotamia and Syria encompass a wide area of the ancient Near East. Both regions have independent historical trajectories but, at the same time, they are linked to each other by cultural, religious and political relationships across the millennia. It is, in fact, nearly impossible to find a precise border between the two regions. Although it is important to distinguish local features, common traits are significant when outlining links that explain cultural and political transmissions and exchanges between Mesopotamia and Syria. Moreover, the birth of Near Eastern archaeology in northern Iraq in 1842 led to the favouring, in the past, of the conviction that there existed a centrality of ancient Mesopotamia that led to the phenomenon of Mesopotamia-centrism. In contrast, archaeological researchers in Syria not only showed the political and cultural independence of Syrian cities and reigns, but also pointed out how cultural transmission, rather than having an exclusively Mesopotamian origin, possibly had a Syrian root and Syrian development phase.¹

Mesopotamia consists of the portion of land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, although its borders expand, culturally, to north-eastern Syria (Jezirah) up to southern Anatolia. In this context, scholars usually speak of Greater Mesopotamia. Ancient Syria mostly corresponds to the modern

Map 31.1 The ancient Near East.
country, although cities with Syrian culture extend over southern Turkey, Lebanon and the southern Levant.²

As far as the representation of violence is concerned, it is possible to recognise what could in fact be labelled a canon of representations of violence in Mesopotamia and Syria from the fourth to the first millennia B.C.E., from the moment of the origin of the first cities and ancient states up to the time of the large empires. Cultural interchanges and quotations can be easily identified, establishing a continuous common thread among typical pictures of violence in different contexts and in different visual documents. It thus seems that violence follows a specific code and language that highlights how violent behaviour is one aspect of human nature, and for that reason we are able to share and understand the signs of violence both when it is performed and when it is suffered (according to one’s perspective and point of observation). Violence thus becomes a cultural element, an essential feature that lays the foundations of other fundamental acts, transformations and innovations in the history of humanity.

Is this the reason for the large diffusion of violent pictures on different media across the history of ancient Mesopotamia and Syria? Probably yes, but there are, of course, other reasons for the necessity of representing violence and the political and/or religious situation. The context where those pictures were displayed might change the original meaning and perception of how violence was used, assimilated and fostered. It is, however, interesting to focus on how violence has been represented in Mesopotamia and Syria, showing the many common aspects and references. The representation of violent scenes and actions follows a pattern, and scholars could indeed easily draft a diachronic atlas of pictures that encompasses the selection and classification of scenes that show the gestures, attitudes and feelings the images suggest and foster. Beyond the iconographical aspects of the pictures of violence (that is, how violence has been treated and represented in visual media), it is interesting to investigate why violence has been represented and what implications such representations had in the ancient societies of the Near East. In this respect, not only the content but also the context of the representations must be evaluated. Taking only the content of those pictures into account, one might run the risk of simplifying the message. Conversely, the context of use of those pictures (the place where they were eventually

displayed) points to their real significance within the space (the geography of violence) of people’s daily lives (if those images were thought to be addressed to a wide audience). As a direct consequence, the visibility of the scenes of violence will necessarily imply a re-evaluation of the visual support: in both Mesopotamia and Syria, representations of explicit acts of violence or indirect references to aggression and killing can be found on different types of media, with a clear intention of creating a monument to violence.

Violence can be an unavoidable consequence of the use of strength, or it might be an intentional choice to achieve specific objectives. In this respect, representations of violence in war in Mesopotamia and Syria follow a similar visual canon, with recurrent figurative themes of violence where the environment (cutting of trees) and parts of the enemy’s body (head and limbs) are affected. In both cases, we can speak of a physical violence against different kinds of bodies. It seems that dismemberment both increases and exalts the power and effectiveness of violence, aiming as it does at annihilating victims’ complete shapes. At the same time, single parts of the body are used to establish a new reality – this is clear in religious contexts where the bodies of deities and divine figures are specifically reassembled for the creation of the world. On the other hand, rulers and kings replicate, on the human side, the actions of gods, focusing on single parts of enemy bodies that are then recontextualised and receive a special treatment (this occurs with the severed heads of enemies killed on the battlefield, which receive very special attention in pictures with a real intention for exhibition). As a consequence, the display of violence encompasses both large monuments (stele, bas-reliefs) and small objects such as cylinder seals. The use of cylinder seals is particularly intriguing, given their dimensions and apparent unsuitability for propaganda. The public visualisation of violence is often discussed, specifically when dealing with imperial political systems, but the example of cylinder seals suggests a need for the reconsideration of existing theories. The visibility of violence therefore affects its concrete use in daily life as pictures must be first put in their original context to evaluate the effect and meaning of violent scenes on the audience. Conversely, if no (public) audience was explicitly meant to see those images, then scenes of violence must have been used differently towards a targeted and educated audience who knew how to interpret and combine them.

Examples of Violence

When does violence occur? Warfare is the easiest and, one could say, the most natural context: it is founded on violence involving people, things and
the landscape in general. Violence is an intrinsic procedure of war, and without it there is no war. The large majority of pictures and representations of violence in both Mesopotamia and Syria is strictly related to representations of wars and battles where the bodies of enemies are explicitly targeted by violent actions. The wide dissemination of these representations and the analysis of violence as a direct consequence of war minimises and is detrimental to the study and comprehension of other forms of violence, which are less spectacular than aggression in war and even in ancient times did not receive the same degree of attention and dissemination in the visual media.³ I think, therefore, that the equation of violence with war is misleading. At the same time, however, war-related violence attracted the attention of ancient Mesopotamians and Syrians, and, as a consequence, has caught the attention of modern scholars. Although other forms of violence existed in ancient Mesopotamia and Syria that could in fact be connected to, for example, religious themes,⁴ violence in warfare has prevailed and still does. To a certain extent, we can speak of a spectacularisation of violence with the proliferation of representations and pictures purposely created to satisfy a voyeuristic craving for the bodily pain suffered by others.⁵ It seems that violence in the religious domain is accepted and indeed necessary for the transformation and creation of a new condition.⁶ In the Mesopotamian Epic of the Creation and the poem Atrahasis, the creation of both the world and human beings is the result of the sacred killing (the sacrifice) of an antagonist, Tiamat (the creation of the world), and of Aw-ilu/Qingu (the creation of humankind).⁷


⁴ It is interesting to note that when violence is referred to in the religious sphere it is defined as sacrifice, that is, justified violence, which is totally different from the groundless brutality of war. See Beate Pongratz-Leisten, ‘Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East: Offering and Ritual Killing’, in A. M. Porter and G. M. Schwartz (eds.), Sacred Killing: The Archaeology of Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), pp. 291–304.

⁵ ‘In the Assyrian reliefs, war and violence are staged as an aesthetic spectacle that relies on an image of violence that does not simply terrify but fascinates and entices the viewer’: Zainab Bahrani, Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia (New York: Zone Books, 2008), p. 219. On the diffusion and perception of violent pictures in modern society, see Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of the Others (New York: Picador, 2003).

⁶ Ralph (ed.), Archaeology of Violence, pp. 7–8; Pongratz-Leisten, Sacred Killing, p. 293.

Not only is the finality of violence different in this case; the executor of the violent act also belongs to different domains. Usually, gods are allowed to perform a sacred killing and, even when involved in fights and warlike actions, the killing caused by gods operates within a cosmic plan while the killing and violence caused by human beings in war has a more utilitarian aim that is the physical elimination of the enemy. If the enemies of the gods are eliminated to become part of a new project, enemies of human beings are simply killed because they are a thorny presence that prevents the ruler from accomplishing his plans of conquest and expansion of control and power over other territories and their wealth. At the same time, because the wars they fight and the enemies they kill are different from those faced by the gods, rulers want to present their violent actions in reference to the myths, actually paraphrasing the same poetic language that is translated and adapted to the description and representation of the human fight. Kings are said to use the same weapons as the gods to defeat their enemies and representations replicate this similarity. If on the Stele of the Vultures of King Eannatum (Early Dynastic period, second half of the third millennium BCE) the god Ningirsu holds a net containing the enemies, it is King Sargon of Akkad (in the following Akkadian period) who holds the net of enemies in front of the seated goddess Ishtar on stele Sb2 (Figures 31.1 and 31.2). The king is not only the champion of the fight but also the one who celebrates the victory and the outcome of the battle. In this respect, kings use the same weapon and are represented in the same attitude and position as the gods. Can we infer that the actions of the gods inspired those of men, giving wars a rituality that we can retrace in ritual texts and oracles that were played and declaimed before battle?

Representations of violence in the arena of war principally focus on the explicitly excessive abuse of violence, showing the cruelty of actions against the bodies of enemies, who are beheaded, impaled, flayed and tortured. Violence is directed at both living and dead enemies, and these different types of violence can be singled out in the representations. Within the

Figure 31.1 Stele of the Vultures of Eannatum (side 2).
framework of what I call the spectacularisation of violence, the rage directed against even the corpses of enemies points to the meaning and value of violence as a deliberate cultural and political choice. As a consequence, the representations crystallise the moment, on the one hand, and also contribute to the narrative of violence in all phases of the battle, on the other. In particular, when violence is not simply presented (as an icon) but re-

Figure 31.2. Stele Sb2 of Sargon of Akkad.
presented (it is settled as part of a narrative plot), it is the result of a cultural process that aims at explaining the mechanism of the violence in all its components, pointing to a real involvement and reaction from observers. A single icon of violence represents an a-spatial and a-temporal act of aggression that is therefore fixed in a kind of recurrent figurative topos, unrelated to a precise context. A narrative of violence is the result of a construction that aims at telling and fixing a story that can be handed down. Indeed, the icon is sometimes the result of the selection of a single moment that is extrapolated from the narrative and chosen as the culminating scene.

When representations of violence are isolated from their context, they can be analysed from the iconographical point of view, that is, focusing on the themes of the representation, the attitudes and gestures of the figures involved in the action, the balanced or unbalanced relationship between the one who causes and the one who suffers the violence. In sum, representations of violence can be studied according to their content (what they represent). Furthermore, representations of violence probably attain their full significance when the context and type of audience are taken into account. Where were the representations displayed? Were they addressed to a specific audience?

The Spectacularisation of violence

As violence is logically linked to warfare, the dissemination of representations of fights and battles necessarily implies the frequent presence of scenes of violence in ancient Mesopotamian and Syrian visual media. Although, as already noted, violence does not automatically derive from war, it is, however, true that the most significant representations and enactments of violence in the region have a warlike nature: torture, killing and any other forms of oppression and aggression seem to find their most ‘natural’ explanation and *raison d’être* in war contexts. Other forms of violence are represented: context scenes and duels between animals and heroes that can be attributed to cultic and religious phenomena often occupy the figurative space of cylinder seals showing friezes of alternating figures of animals and men fighting and confronting each other.¹⁰

Violence in war contexts is present on several types of visual media and it is reflected in different pictures encompassing several aspects, degrees and

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dimensions of aggression and abuse: the repetition and, to a certain extent, creation of canonical representations of violence result in the existence of real monuments to war where violence is clearly exhibited, becoming the tangible trophy and proof of the victory and outcome of the conflicts.

At the same time, within the spectacularisation of aggression, it cannot be excluded that representations of violence reflect a degree of ritualisation, which would explain the regular repetition and canonisation of scenes. In particular, the decapitation of enemies is frequently represented, and not only the beheading but also the collection of heads are important moments that are purposely emphasised.\textsuperscript{11} The violent actions against precise and selected parts of the human body are represented as crucial moments of the fight and the result of the action (the cutting and dismembering of the body’s integrity) reflects the ultimate achievement of the war (the violence enacted on the enemy bodies seals the event and guarantees its success). Heads, hands and other dismembered parts of enemy bodies work as the trophies of war that are collected, counted and exhibited in the triumph.\textsuperscript{12} Severed heads are the most meaningful diachronic and transverse example, showing how this part of the body is deliberately chosen for its intrinsic properties (the presence of the senses of sight, smell, taste and hearing).\textsuperscript{13}

Severed enemy heads occupy an important role in the visual media of the ancient Near East. Since Neolithic times the heads of humans had been collected, transformed (the decayed parts of skulls were reconstructed using painted clay) and used within private rites and cults.\textsuperscript{14} In later periods, since the third millennium BCE, they had been the favourite trophy in war. Heads suffered the most violent acts (cuts and injuries, right up to the most extreme action of beheading) and became a recurrent figurative theme in


\textsuperscript{13} In addition to beheading, the heads of enemies are also hit in the eyes, ears and nose, as happens with the heads of royal statues and effigies, which are deliberately damaged. See Natalie May, ‘Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East’, in N. May (ed.), \textit{Iconoclasm and Text: Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond} (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2012), pp. 1–32.

\textsuperscript{14} Alain Testart, ‘Des Crânes et des vautours ou la guerre oubliée’, \textit{Paléorient} 34.1 (2008), 33–58.

The head is, therefore, the most physical and tangible expression of the trophy of war. Heads are not only piled up in heaps in front of the officials of the Assyrian army, but are clearly held and exhibited in the hands of each soldier. This image has a very long tradition and goes back to representations of war of the third millennium BCE. Beyond the above-mentioned Neolithic representations of beheaded figures in the Neolithic period (the paintings from Çatal Hüyük),\footnote{James Mellaart, Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. 167, fig. 47, pls. 45, 48–9.} severed heads of enemies are represented in the narrative of war. One of the best preserved examples is the inlays dated to the Early Bronze Age IVA found in the Royal Palace G at Ebla (Syria) (see Figure 31.3). The soldiers of Ebla are represented holding heads in their hands or carrying heads in backpacks. Texts from the State Archive of Ebla also register the delivery of severed heads of enemies to the king of Ebla.\footnote{Alfonso Archi, ‘Two Heads for the King of Ebla’, in M. Lubetski, C. Gottlieb and S. Keller (eds.), Boundaries of the Ancient Near Eastern World: A Tribute to Cyrus H. Gordon (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 386–96.} The soldiers of Ebla’s careful collecting of the severed heads was intended to be concluded in front of the king of Ebla, who received the ‘gifts’ and, presumably, rewarded his men. The scenes and archival registrations of severed heads at Ebla in the third millennium BCE anticipate a custom that was to be well documented and widely represented in the first millennium BCE during the Neo-Assyrian period in northern Iraq. Assyrian reliefs along the walls of the palaces of the Assyrian kings, as well as the official inscriptions of the chancellery register, include the cutting and counting of the severed heads of enemies, with Assyrian soldiers represented delivering the heads or even playing with them. A relief from the throne room in the North-West Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud (BM 124550) shows Assyrian soldiers coming back from the battlefield and throwing heads in the air.\footnote{Paul Collin, Assyrian Palace Sculptures (London: British Museum Press, 2008), p. 47.} This example also
shows that the enemy heads were part of the booty of the campaign: they were collected and brought back to camp, while the headless corpses were left on the battlefield to the mercy of birds of prey and wild animals.

Ebla and Assyria are similar with regards to another interesting aspect: a text from Ebla (TM.75.G.2429) records ‘6 shekels of tin to be melted in 54 shekels of copper: decoration for the head of Ilba-Išar which (is) on the gate of the king’. As rightly suggested by Alfonso Archi, the delivery of metal was for the support of the severed head of Ilba-Išar that was exhibited at the (palace or, more probably, city) gate of the king: exhibition of severed heads and corpses of the enemy by the city gates was common in the Assyrian

period. The inscriptions of Assyrian kings clearly state that the bodies and heads of enemies were hung up in front of the city walls, and enemy kings were deported to Assyria and there exhibited at the city gate together with animals such as bears (thus highlighting the similarity of enemies with the less noble animals).  

I erected a pile in front of his gate; I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me (and) draped their skins over the pile; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on stakes upon the pile, (and) some I placed on stakes around about the pile. I flayed many right through my land (and) draped their skins over the walls. I slashed the flesh of the eunuchs (and) of the royal eunuchs who were guilty. I brought Ahi-ia-baba to Nineveh, flayed him, (and) draped his skin over the wall of Nineveh. (Thus) have I constantly established my victory and strength over the land Laqû. (Assurnasirpal II)  

As for Nabû-ušabši of the (land of Bīt)-Šilānī (lit. ‘son of Šilānī’), I defeated him on the outskirts of the city of Sarrabānu, his city. Moreover, I impaled him before the gate of his city, while making (the people of) his land watch. (Tiglath-pileser III)  

In a pitched battle, [they captured him (Nergal-ušezib) alive and brought him] before me. At the Citadel Gate of Nineveh, [I bound him] with a bear. (Sennacherib)  

These examples, from third millennium Syria and first millennium Mesopotamia, show how violence was exhibited following specific actions and political agendas. The presence of the enemy (either alive, as a corpse, or as a body part) by the city gate points precisely to the intention of giving the outcome of the king’s military campaign the highest visibility. Being the pre-eminent point of entrance and exit, the city gate marks the boundary between the city and the outside and was the obligatory passage for all people entering or leaving. As a consequence, the enemy remains exhibited

there were surely seen by quite a large number of people (and this clearly was the intention, as in fact King Tiglath-pileser III explicitly says).

Aggression and the mutilation of the bodies of enemies did not solely involve the head. The importance of the head possibly depended on the fact that it made the enemy recognisable, at least temporarily.\(^24\) In this respect, the case of the head of Elamite king Teumman, killed by the soldiers of Assyrian king Assurbanipal, is probably the most famous example (see Figure 31.4).\(^25\) Looking at the representations of Teumman’s head in the Assyrian


reliefs from both the South-West and North Palaces at Nineveh, it is possible to accurately follow its ‘journey’ from the battlefield to the city of Arbela and finally to Nineveh, where, according to the most common interpretation, it is represented hanging from a tree in Assurbanipal’s garden.26 But other enemy body parts suffered mutilation, including hands, arms and legs. Once a living body or corpse had been mutilated (a direct form of violence: first level) they were abandoned with the precise intention of erasing the memory and identity of the individual (an indirect form of violence: second level). While the head is a symbol of identity and identification, the beheaded and mutilated body is totally anonymous. The intervention of birds of prey and other animals causes the complete disappearance of even the smallest fragments of the corpse (a casual form of violence: third level). Pictures show birds of prey attacking the dead bodies of enemies lying on the ground: the upper register of the Stele of the Vultures shows vultures devouring the last remains (hands and arms, but also heads) of the soldiers of Umma,27 while the lower register of the stele of Sargon of Akkad (Sbr) shows vultures and dogs eating and destroying the bodies of the enemy soldiers.28

Violence in war has different levels of cruelty. In particular cases violence is used to retain the identity of individuals that have been killed and, more precisely, beheaded. This is particularly the case for important figures, such as the enemy king or high officials: these heads or bodies, which were exhibited in front of cities, at the gates, could still be identified by name. On the other hand, violence is used to erase identity, and bodies are purposely mutilated so that they can no longer be identified as a person: representations of war in both Mesopotamia and Syria in fact show corpses of beheaded and mutilated enemies lying on the ground while being attacked by animals or overwhelmed by chariots. Beheading, however, is not the distinctive element: only selected heads undergo a specific (ritual) treatment; others were not detached, as is seen


27 Winter, Pictorial Narrative, fig. 9.
28 Nigro, ‘Two Steles of Sargon’, 98, fig. 12; Dolce, ‘Perdere la testa’, p. 70.
in the stele of Sargon of Akkad (Sb) or in the seal impressions from Mari;\textsuperscript{29} or, even when detached from the body, they were simply collected in heaps to be counted (as on the Assyrian reliefs) or left to be attacked by animals (as in the bottom register of the stele of King Dadusha of Eshnunna, from the eighteenth century \textit{BCE}.\textsuperscript{30} The latter scene shows two rows of cut heads with birds of prey disfiguring the faces, the clear intention being the annihilation and denial of recognisability of the features of the character).

In all cases, the effect of violence is doubled: enemies are killed during the fight and, even when dead, their corpses are still mutilated with deliberate determination. Texts and pictures of the third millennium \textit{BCE} provide evidence of this additional \textit{post-mortem} aggression. In particular, the third register of the Stele of the Vultures of Eannatum of Lagash shows men carrying baskets of earth to cover a heap of enemy corpses.\textsuperscript{31} This detail does not refer to the burying of the dead soldiers of the army of Eannatum, but, on the contrary, displays the wording of contemporary royal inscriptions where the kings refer to the raising up of piles of bodies that are left on the battlefield in what we could label a temporary spectacularisation of the violence, since these heaps were destined to vanish.\textsuperscript{32} In a letter sent by Enna-Dagan, king of Mari, to an unnamed king of Ebla, the king of Mari lists

\textsuperscript{29} For the seal impression from Mari, see Dominique Beyer, ‘Les sceaux de Mari au IIIe millénaire: Observations sur la documentation ancienne et les données nouvelles des Villes I et II’, \textit{Akh Purattim} 1 (2007), 231–60.


the conquests made by himself and his predecessors that always end with the raising up of heaps of corpses.

Thus (says) Enna-Dagan king of Mari to the king of Ebla: Aburu and Ilgi, in the territory of Ba’lan, Ianūpu, king of Mari, conquered; he left on the mountain on Labanan a mound (of bodies) . . . And Iblul-Il, king of Mari, took possession of Gallab’1, . . . and of the Ganum (of Ebla) and conquered Abarsal at Zahiran; and Iblul-Il, king of Mari, left sev[en] mounds of bodies. 33

Heaps of bodies, severed heads, impaled bodies and corpses and enchained enemy kings at the city gates all show different levels of violence (the enemy kings at the city gates could have been exhibited while still alive, so we can speak of a psychological humiliating violence), but they could all be grouped as examples of open-air monuments: violence is therefore directly exhibited in places where it was supposed to be seen by many.

As for the visual representations of violence, where were those pictures displayed? Monuments of war (that also display violence) were differently arranged and displayed within the urban space: they could be placed outdoors or inside temples and palaces. The third millennium BCE inscriptions of the kings of Lagash record that King Umma, when he deliberately declared war on Lagash by crossing the boundary, destroyed the stele that had been placed there to define the limit between the two city-states. 34 On the other hand, both inscriptions and archaeological contexts show that monuments were mostly displayed in temples and palaces. The temple in Mesopotamia was not simply a religious space but a socio-economic structure that managed and administered properties, lands and goods. Conversely, temples in Syria exclusively managed the cult, while palaces had a properly political and economic role.

What does this difference imply? Can we conclude that there was a different audience? Can we simply distinguish between religious (Mesopotamian) and secular (Syrian) spectators? Of course not, and the relationships between pictures and observers, between the one who commissioned the work and the audience, and indeed between the one who commissioned the work and the work itself, are much more complex and articulated. In sum, if works in temples were created for the gods, this does not mean that works outside temples did not address the divine world. Equally, works in palaces could,

erroneously, lead to strictly a-religious interpretations, even though it is clear that gods, although not physically present in the palace, were nevertheless the recipients of the visual message. This aspect can also be singled out in the Assyrian period, when representations of violence, and precisely those derived from war, were exclusively located in palaces.\textsuperscript{35}

In this analysis of the spectacularisation of violence, can we conclude that the focus is the content of the representation, the narrative of violence, notwithstanding the place (context) where it is displayed? I think this question opens new perspectives for trying to understand the reasons for the representation of violence (the why) and the question of the intended audience (the whom). As a consequence, studies on the use and meaning of violence in ancient societies must also take into consideration questions of where and how pictures of violence were enacted, showing the effect of images on the people looking at them.

The Visibility of Violence

The visibility of violence must take into account two questions: where was violence represented, and where was it exhibited? The first question concerns the nature of visual supports. Pictures of violence occur on different media that have different uses, finalities and which imply different levels of visibility. When dealing with war, it might be natural to think of imposing and large monuments of war, while fights, battles and violent acts can also be found on smaller (portable) objects that potentially suggest a different perception and evaluation.

Next to large reliefs (steles), wars and scenes of violence were also present on cylinder seals and minor works such as the typical inlays of the third millennium in both Mesopotamia and Syria that could have been originally mounted on larger panels. Inlays presumably once decorated wooden boards, and we may therefore think of composite larger monuments. However, the single elements were quite small in size and therefore the monumentality of those works (at least giving monumentality the meaning of a large, imposing object) can be called into question.\textsuperscript{36} The case of cylinder seals is even more striking and surprising. Indeed, for all their small dimensions and practical use, cylinder seals would appear to be quite an inappropriate place for a celebration of military events and emphasising the violence


\textsuperscript{36} For an overview of the inlays from Mesopotamia and Syria, see Rita Dolce, Gli intarsi mesopotamici dell’epoca protodinastica (Rome: Università di Roma ‘La Sapienza’, 1978).
inflicted upon the enemies. Moreover, due to the small space for images that cylinder seals permit, scenes of violence must necessarily be summarised with the creation of iconographically reduced models (we could say figurative canons) that are constantly repeated and gave birth to our iconographical typological motifs and definitions, such as ‘the triumph of the god/king over the enemy’, ‘the duel between the god/king and the enemy’, ‘the smiting of the enemy’, that crystallise single acts and performances built upon recurrent motifs of gestures and position. Rare in fact are cylinder seals that bear the representations of larger and longer narratives of war events with scenes of violence. Among the few known examples, we can include the seal impressions from Uruk, the seal impressions of the seal of Ishqi-Mari from Mari, the seal impressions from Tell Beydar (Figure 31.5) and Neo-Assyrian

cylinder seals depicting sieges.\textsuperscript{41} Scenes of violence are relegated to brief sequences or even single figures, such as enemies falling from battlements (Tell Beydar), the execution of enemies (Uruk, Mari, Tell Beydar), corpses trampled and possibly overwhelmed by chariots (Tell Beydar, Mari) and severed heads (Mari). Assyrian cylinder seals depicting sieges are indeed miniature versions of the large palace reliefs, showing the attack and plundering of enemy cities. As Irene Winter has pointed out, the imagery of the seals depicting hunts and libations is often the reverse of the palace reliefs, as if the latter have been used as a source for the iconography of the seals.\textsuperscript{42} In this respect, can we apply the same reasoning to the seals showing images of war and violence? That is, do they reproduce and replicate representations of monuments (reliefs, steles etc.)? This would indeed explain the necessity of adapting complex narratives, rich in detail, to the small space of the cylinders by selecting shorter sequences or even single details. Hence, cylinder seals would not have had the task of representing larger events of divine and human battles with scenes of violence against the enemy; they did not have the same function as steles and bas-reliefs. On the other hand, by copying fragments of larger monuments, they spread the representations of war and, more specifically, violence. In fact, because they could not reproduce the entire representation of an event, seal cutters selected an image that became an icon, a part referring to the whole. Taking the image of the god/king smiting the enemy into account, this caused both the diffusion of the violent image, on the one hand, and its decontextualisation, on the other. Their presence on the seals was probably important to mark both the owner of the seal and the operation of sealing in the management of the administration. The violent image thus became a sign of identity and identification and, in this recontextualisation, it probably also lost its original function and meaning, that is, the representation of a precise moment of violence in space and time.

The second question (where the representation of the violence was displayed) concerns the location of those scenes within the space and landscape.

As already pointed out, cylinder seals contributed to a large diffusion of the representation of violence (the seal itself as an easily portable object, and its impression on several documents and items). Large reliefs and inlays were mostly originally located within temples and palaces, but what was the degree of visibility of those monuments? In particular, the presence of large images of violence on the monuments of war is usually seen as the result of the imposition of an ideology via a heavy programme of propaganda. However, if monuments were indeed in places that did not have free mass access, then we should change our mind about the propagandistic nature and purpose of those images. The real point is that we actually have no clear information and data on the type and frequency of the audience that could enter temples and palaces in Mesopotamia and Syria. However, rather than the result of imposition, the diffusion of images of aggression probably depends on the cultural value of violence as a means by which human beings face, communicate and deal with the other.

The question of visibility, moreover, concerns the place where monuments and objects representing violence were physically located, and thus when, where and by how many people they could be seen. As an important moment of the narrative of a myth or a battle, violence often defines the culminating act of an event and, for that reason, it occupies a dominant role and space. Assyrian kings clearly state in their inscriptions that impalement and the exhibition of the severed heads and flayed skin of enemies must occur in the most visible places – city gates, walls of the city, in front of the city. As we have seen, Tiglath-pileser III wanted the people of the city of Sarrabānu to see their king impaled before the gate. As a result, Assyrian pictures of battles and sieges show the punishment and execution of enemies right in front of the walls and city gates of enemy cities, sometimes on elevated positions so that impaled men and severed heads can be clearly seen from a distance and from the perspective of the intended audience, that is, the enemy within the city. The execution and consequent exhibition of severed heads and corpses were theatrically arranged, that is, the place was ‘chosen for high visual impact on the intended audience’, and I would also add for a high sound impact since the enemies were also impaled alive and their agonising screams would have significantly affected the target audience.

The intended audience of the violence, exhibited on the spot of the highest visual (and aural) impact, was the people of the enemy city as represented on

the reliefs. That is, violence is represented for the internal audience of the pictures themselves (the enemies under attack or already defeated by the Assyrians) rather than an external audience (the observers of the reliefs in the palaces or ourselves now facing the reliefs in museums). The same can be observed on slab 5 in room 33 from Sennacherib’s South-West Palace at Nineveh. Ambassadors of the land of Urartu are invited (obliged?) to assist, exactly as a performance, in the execution and torture of Elamite enemies after Assurbanipal’s battle against Teumman by the River Ulai. In this context, the violence is first addressed to the ambassadors and, later, to the observers of the reliefs.

Were, in fact, Assyrian reliefs open to the public? Could people reach the innermost rooms of an Assyrian palace, look carefully and undisturbed at the reliefs and be affected by the atrocity of the represented violence? Or looking at the scenes of dismemberment and exhibition of severed heads in front of the city on the bronze bands of the Balawat Gates of Shalmaneser III, are we sure they were so clearly visible once they were mounted on wooden doors that reached a height of about 8 metres?\(^44\) It seems that we have overestimated the impact of the representations of violence since we have now the opportunity to look at and enlarge even the smallest details, which were not supposed to be seen, at least not by a large audience.\(^45\)

\textbf{Conclusion}

The representation of violence in both Mesopotamia and Syria had a cultural role and meaning at both religious and political levels. Indeed, the two are deeply intertwined and it is not possible to draw a sharp distinction. In fact, it might be said that this distinction was not even experienced by the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia and Syria. Even when violence has a clear political use (for example, in war), aspects of rituality that conform to the religious sphere can be recognised. The head, for example, becomes the focus of all kinds of violence, but at the same time it undergoes a series of rites so as to vanquish its power once it has been detached from the body. In this respect, pictures of violence are often the result of the assimilation and elaboration of themes that have a long-lasting tradition: for that reason, from the fourth to the first millennia BCE codified scenes of violence can be

\(^{44}\) For the most recent reconstruction of the Balawat Gates of Shalmaneser III, see John Curtis and Nigel Tallis, ‘More Thoughts on the Balawat Gates of Shalmaneser III: The Arrangement of the Bands’, \textit{Iraq} 77 (2015), 59–74 (with previous bibliography).

recognised and singled out. They show similar and recurrent figurative motifs and we can therefore speak of a visual pattern of violence. This probably depended on the fact that the message needed to be immediate and clear to each viewer, and it was therefore based on a common shared visual language.

Pictures show details of the pain of others and the brutal modalities human beings invented and perfected to inflict suffering and cause death, but how were they seen and experienced? Notwithstanding the limits of our comprehension of the ancient audience, it cannot be totally excluded that these pictures targeted a special public, except on some occasion when people were introduced to the front of pictures showing the details of torture and death. In the first instance, if we think of the Assyrian palace reliefs, for example, the king himself and his court were the primary audience: in this context, any propagandistic conclusion should be revised as it would be odd to think of the Assyrian king trying to persuade and convince himself. Thus the idea of the aesthetic of violence was firstly directed to an inner audience, that is, the king and the members of his court: the long walls of the rooms of the Assyrian palaces, particularly in the Sargonid period (eighth to seventh centuries BCE), were extensively covered with slabs depicting the military campaigns of the king with the registration of details of violence against people, animals, the environment and monuments. Assyrian reliefs were not works of art to be admired, nor were the Assyrian palaces museums. At the same time the Mesopotamian temples of the third millennium BCE (where monuments celebrating wars and showing scenes of violence were presented to the gods) were also not buildings open to the general public: again, the aesthetic of violence, the exaltation and fascination for violent pictures, were directed at an inner and very specific audience. Within the Mesopotamian temples, the gods had direct evidence of the actions of the kings: violence, particularly in warfare, was necessary to succeed and it might in fact be said that violence was, in a certain sense, sacralised. The violent actions of the kings in fact refer to and even imitate the use of violence of the gods as it is narrated in the Mesopotamian myths: as a paradigmatic example, the death and dismemberment of the body of the antagonists in the Epic of the Creation and the poem Atrahasis are essential to establish the new reality, the creation of the world and the origin of humankind.

Violence is a need and a natural impulse of human beings against other people, animals and things. The representation of violence transforms that act into a spectacle and into something that is fixed and enduring. As the Assyrian reliefs show, representations of violence are first directed to other pictures – an inner violence, a meta-violence – with pictures registering aggression and torture that happened in reality but that are now going on just on the ‘screen’. This violence was, however, necessary, at least in the eyes of those who committed it, and even authorised it: its representation in monuments guaranteed the preservation of memory through enactment, becoming a component that explained, justified and re-established the foundation of these societies.47

Bibliographic Essay


47 On the inescapable presence and power of violence within society, and the reciprocal implication of violence and civilisation on the history of humankind, see Wolfgang Söisky, Traktat über die Gewalt (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1996).

Representations of War and Violence in Ancient Rome

Susann S. Lusnia

Representations of war and violence were pervasive throughout the Roman world, displayed in homes and public spaces. From a purely artistic perspective, violent scenes allowed artists to showcase their ability to render a variety of dramatic, contorted poses, portray strong emotions and compose dynamic and complex scenes. From the viewer’s perspective, however, the violent images that pervaded Roman life were intended to commemorate, moralise and even entertain. Roman battle scenes drew upon Hellenistic concepts of pathos, sympathy and fate, where the pitiful circumstances of the defeated enemy served to glorify the victor. Yet at a time of increasing wars (and victories) and greater interest in arena spectacles, some Romans were questioning the moral implications of viewing violence, as several literary examples demonstrate. Still, violence played a significant role in Roman identity. Rome’s foundation myths involved acts of rape, fratricide and war. The brutal rape and suicide of a Roman noblewoman allegedly precipitated the expulsion of Rome’s last king and the formation of its republic. Ancient historians document the expansion of the Roman Empire through numerous military campaigns, and not surprisingly the earliest images of war and violence in Roman art were connected to the celebration and commemoration of military triumphs.

Scenes of violence appear in nearly every artistic medium produced by the Romans, from grand-scale public art to private displays in homes, villas and tombs, and even on personal objects such as gems and lamps. Many of the scenes combine eroticism and violence in ways that reflect social and political power in Roman society. This chapter examines a selection of images in three contexts – private (domestic settings), funerary (often a private monument with a public audience) and public (state monuments) – spanning from the third century BCE to the early fourth century CE.
Displays of War and Violence and the Roman House

Scenes of war and violence appear in a variety of media, while their subject matter ranges from historic battles to mythical vengeance and even arena games. Visual tokens of wars fought and lands conquered by the Romans appeared on the facades of noble houses. At first, spoils of war were hung on Roman houses, and eventually battle scenes adorned the reception spaces of the home, especially in the primary reception rooms known as the atrium and tablinum. Describing the immense damage from the Great Fire in Rome (64 CE), Suetonius laments the destruction of ‘the houses of the generals of long ago that were still adorned with enemy spoils’. Some of the earliest battle scenes and war imagery that survive from the Roman world are from domestic contexts. The display of battle trophies and war booty had been part of Roman domestic decoration since at least the third century BCE, when armour and weapons seized from conquered enemies adorned the facades of the homes of military leaders. Inside these same homes one might also have seen precious metal objects, furniture, artworks and slaves, the spoils of a successful military campaign. Nowhere is the connection between the Roman house and war displays more evident than at Fregellae, a Latin colony located to the south-east of Rome along the Via Latina. The leading citizens of the town appear to have commemorated their role as participants in Roman military campaigns through the decoration of their homes.

Terracotta relief fragments found in house 2 at Fregellae depict victories, trophies, a tripod with omphalos and two male figures wearing trousers and pointed shoes, perhaps identifiable as eastern barbarians. A second set of fragments depicting Macedonian shields, horses and at least one elephant was found in building L, another atrium house before its later conversion to industrial use. Dating the fragments to between 190 and 170 BCE, Filippo Coarelli suggests that the reliefs depicted Roman battles against Antiochus III during the First Syrian War, for which the Fregellans supplied troops. These reliefs appear to be the oldest surviving Roman historical reliefs. Located in either the atrium or the tablinum, the most public parts of a Roman house, the relief fragments are likely to have come from friezes that were set into the walls at roughly eye level, just above the orthostats or dado course, of the First Style wall decoration common in Italy in the early second century BCE. If the

1 Suet. Ner. 38.2.
2 Livy 37.34.6; F. Coarelli, ‘Due fregi da Fregellae: un documento storico della prima guerra siriana?’, Ostraka 3 (1994), 93–108.
Fregellans were following Roman practices, then visitors would have first seen war trophies hanging on the facade before entering the atrium or tablinum adorned with these reliefs. The theme of war and successful conquest would have been carried through the house into the hortus (garden) and triclinium (dining room), where looted artwork, tableware or furniture could have formed part of an eclectic display of war booty. The terracottas from Fregellae are extraordinary for their early date and their likely role in celebrating the role of the local elites in historical military events.

In Pompeii violent images of different sorts are found. Rather than commemorate Roman military victories, these representations projected the cultural and social aspirations of local citizens. Riot in the Amphitheatre, a painting originally in a small house in region I (Figure 32.1), illustrates a

violent brawl that erupted between Pompeiians and Nucerians during a gladiatorial spectacle that occurred in 59 CE at Pompeii. The painting illustrates a fight between rival citizens in and around the amphitheatre and palestra. The historian Tacitus describes how the brawling began with stone throwing, which escalated to weapons and resulted in numerous deaths and injuries. The Pompeians bested the Nucerians, but the city suffered a ten-year ban on arena spectacles and the disbanding of certain associations, while the man who organised the event, Livineius Regulus, was punished with exile. Why would an event with such negative outcomes be an appealing household decoration? The most obvious reason is that the homeowner had a significant tie to it. Perhaps he was proud of having participated in the brawl, or maybe he was a member of one of the banned collegia, which may have been ‘fan club’ organisations that supported professional gladiators or were followers of the iuwens, the training organisations for young male citizens at Pompeii who also performed gladiatorial-type shows. The size of the house suggests that its owner was not a member of Pompeii’s wealthy elite, and the fact that gladiatorial combat scenes once stood to either side of the riot scene implies that the owner enjoyed viewing arena games. John Clarke has argued that the painting may have represented a perverse pleasure, an upended social order of excessive fandom juxtaposed with the orderly gladiatorial combatants. However, if the owner had indeed participated in the riot, then commemorating it with a visual display in his home, just as an elite citizen might have displayed his war trophies, also mocks the social conventions. In that case, *Riot in the Amphitheatre* is a non-elite response to the triumphal commemorations of the elites, where a public brawl becomes equated with military achievement, perhaps an attempt to assert a position within a power structure to which the patron had little or no claim.4  

During Pompeii’s last decades, especially from the Augustan era onwards, violent myth scenes became common in wall decoration. Mythological landscapes emerged as the focal point of Roman wall paintings of the late Second Style, becoming especially popular in the Third and Fourth Styles, that is, from around 30 BCE to the late first century CE. The architectural framing of these scenes gives the illusion of viewing them as if through a window or as pictures in a gallery. From a modern perspective, however, it is surprising how often scenes of extreme violence adorn the walls of places we associate

with frivolity or calm, such as dining rooms and bedrooms. Subjects include Actaeon’s fatal encounter with Diana, Medea as she contemplates killing her sons Phaedra and Hippolytus, Hylas and the nymphs, Apollo and Diana’s slaughter of the Niobids, various mythical rape scenes, and violent scenes from the Trojan War saga.

How Roman patrons selected the images that decorated the walls of their homes and whether we should interpret the groupings as programmed displays have long been points of debate. Karl Schefold has argued for deeply moral and religious meanings in the choices made by patrons, while Roger Ling sees aesthetic concerns of composition and balance as the primary factors influencing selections. The eclectic decorative assemblages have led scholars to employ theories from literary criticism, film theory and reception studies in their attempts to explain the use of specific mythological scenes. The repetition of subjects in a highly similar fashion suggests that pattern books played some role in the dissemination of the mythological and other motifs featured in Roman decoration. Among the several violent scenes on Pompeian walls, the punishment of Dirce appears most frequently, which, like many mythological scenes, combines violence and eroticism.

Dirce’s violent punishment appears in five examples at Pompeii: three in dining or entertainment rooms, one in a tablinum and one in the apodyterium of a bath complex. In the Casa dei Vettii, the depiction of Dirce is one of several violent scenes spread across rooms N and P – the Pentheus and Ixion Rooms, respectively – which are decorated in the Fourth Style. The rooms, likely dining areas, are arranged as pendants. Starting from the left and moving clockwise around the Ixion Room are Daedalus and Pasiphae, The Punishment of Ixion and Ariadne and Dionysus. In the Pentheus Room, clockwise from the left, are The Infant Hercules Strangling Snakes, The Death of Pentheus (Figure 32.2) and The Punishment of Dirce (Figure 32.3). Continuing across the two rooms, the myth panels form a chiastic arrangement (a-b-c-c’-b’-a’), with each room containing two scenes of transgressive behaviour and one of divine favour. The panel scenes are linked through formal elements of composition as well as narrative themes. The north and east walls of the Ixion

7 Ling, Roman Painting, pp. 212–20, on painters, patrons, workshops and pattern books.
Room are compositionally connected by shared gazes of Pasiphae (north) and Hera (east), while both myth narratives revolve around transgressive sexual behaviour resulting in monstrous offspring. The similar poses of Pentheus (east) and Dirce (south) form pendants: each has arms spread wide, a bare torso and falls to one knee while surrounded by tormentors. Both deaths occur in Bacchic settings. In short, the layout and choice of scenes in this house were not random.

Because the Casa dei Vettii is generally thought to have belonged to freedmen, the paintings have been compared with the artistic tastes of Petronius’ fictional freedman, Trimalchio, of the *Satyricon*. Recently, film theory, gender studies and reception studies have contributed new ways of

Figure 32.2 *The Death of Pentheus*, fresco, first century c.e., room N, Casa dei Vettii, Pompeii.
looking at the mythological scenes in Pompeii. The approaches to the Casa dei Vettii paintings argue that the mythological panels enforce Roman social codes deeply embedded in a patriarchal structure visualised as divine power over the human, where transgressors are punished and the divinely favoured are rewarded. The tormentors and victims in the violent scenes – Pentheus dismembered by the bacchantes, Dirce tied to the bull by Amphion and Zethus – can be mapped on to the master–slave and patron–client relationships within the household.

Mythological landscapes could also be staged using sculptures in villa gardens and imperial horti, a phenomenon beginning in the late first century BCE and well developed by the early second century CE. Sculptural groups depicting the Niobids, the doomed children of Niobe slaughtered by Apollo and Diana as punishment for their mother’s hubris, are especially vivid examples. Here, too, the erotic and the violent are combined: Niobe’s sons and daughters are young and beautiful, with drapery slipping away from their figures as they writhe in pain, grasping at arrows lodged in their bodies. The largest surviving group of Niobids, eleven statues, comes from the Horti Lamiani near the Esquiline Hill in Rome. Four statues belonging to another Niobid group are linked to the Horti Sallustiani in the area of the Quirinal and Pincian Hills. Both properties were imperial possessions under the Julio-Claudian emperors.

The statue groups in the Horti Lamiani and Sallustiani were posed in the natural landscapes of the gardens. The theatricality of these displays placed the viewer inside the action of the myth, confronting figures that were simultaneously erotic and filled with terror. For example, a female Niobid (Figure 32.4) from the Horti Sallustiani desperately reaches for the arrow that has pierced her back, while her drapery has fallen away from her body revealing her naked breasts, torso and left thigh. Her upward gaze directs the viewer’s eye towards the source of her terror, which remains invisible to the viewer. Zahra Newby compares the settings of these groups to the mythological landscape paintings, only in this instance, as the viewer wanders through real landscape he is subjected to an almost ‘live action’ experience, surrounded by the death and torment that comes from an unseen force above. Newby suggests that strolling among the statues puts the viewer in an awkward and uneasy position: while they are uncomfortable imaging themselves as a potential victim, nonetheless there is pleasure to be gained from the sculptures’ beautiful eroticism. In an imperial garden, an unsettling stroll among dead and dying Niobids could be a clear reminder of the power of Roman emperors to punish transgressive behaviour, especially those actions that challenge his authority.

During the second to fourth centuries CE elite citizens had few means for promoting their achievements and asserting their authority. Sponsoring an

arena spectacle was an acceptable way for local elites to provide benefactions and bring fame upon themselves. During this period polychrome mosaics of gladiatorial combats, wild animal hunts and even executions adorned elite homes in many parts of the empire. The scenes fall into three basic types: animals versus animals; men versus animals, depicted as hunts or executions *ad bestias*; and men versus men, usually as gladiatorial pairings. Like the

Figure 32.4 Dying Niobid, marble, Horti Sallustiani, Rome.

662
mythological paintings, these mosaics usually decorated the floors of dining and entertainment spaces, where host and guests would be at leisure to study and debate the images. If the mosaic depicted an actual spectacle staged by the host, then he could relive that moment as often as he liked, and his guests would be able to share the thrill upon viewing the scene. If the scenes were imaginary, guests were nevertheless entertained.

Katherine Dunbabin suggests that a mosaic in the Sollertiana Domus in El Djem, Tunisia (Figure 32.5) was a special commission depicting specific arena events. The partly preserved mosaic features scenes of animals attacking bound men, criminals or prisoners of war condemned to execution ad bestias. In one vignette, what is possibly a leopard bites the face of the bound victim while blood gushes from wounds on his body and pools on the ground. Unlike the death of Pentheus or the trampling of Dirce, here the viewer encounters real-life, gory scenes of death. A variety of amphitheatre scenes appear in a third century CE mosaic floor of the Roman villa at

Figure 32.5 Mosaic, marble tesserae, late second/early third century CE, Sollertiana Domus, Thysdrus (El Djem, Tunisia).

Zliten (Figure 32.6). The space adorned with the mosaic was probably a dining room. Sixteen square panels, alternating between geometric opus sectile and emblemata of fish, form the centre of the floor. A wide border of opus sectile panels surrounds this, while a narrow mosaic guilloche border separates it from a frieze-like band in which amphitheatre scenes appear. Another narrow guilloche divides the figural scenes from an outer geometric mosaic border. Musicians, officials, gladiators, hunters, wild beasts and executions ad bestias appear in the figural border. Various gladiator types populate the scenes – murmillo, Samnite, thraex, retiarius and secutor – and are either fighting or in the act of missio, identifiable by the raised index finger of the wounded or fallen gladiator as he pleads for salvation, or by the glance of the victor awaiting the signal to spare or kill the fallen combatant. Surrounding the room and positioned just in front of the dining couches where guests could have easily seen them, these vignettes recreate the thrill of attending actual events, complete with spurting blood and lunging animals.

Figure 32.6 Mosaic with scenes of gladiators and referee from a Roman villa at Dar Buc Ammera à Zliten (near Leptis Magna), third century CE.

Regarding gladiatorial mosaics in domestic settings, Shelby Brown observes that the most common subjects are either fights between pairs of gladiators or the act of missio, when a fallen gladiator pleads for his life. Because the victorious combatant or a referee usually looks directly at the viewer out of the frame of the mosaic, Brown argues that the missio scene casts the viewer in the role of provider of the games, the elite benefactor who is judge, giving the sign to spare the fallen or not. While a modern viewer might have sympathy for the fallen victim, Brown maintains that missio scenes were not intended to elicit empathy for the victims. The viewer was expected to be thrilled by the sight and not at all sympathetic to the plight of the fallen or punished. Domestic mosaics featuring arena spectacles reinforce the power structures of the Roman social order in much the same way that mythological landscapes do, inviting viewers to witness the violent punishment of transgressors of that order.

War and Violence on Funerary Monuments

Romans funerary monuments appear in many forms and employ an extensive repertoire of decorative themes, ranging from military battles and gladiatorial combats to violent mythological scenes. The scenes appear as paintings, architectural reliefs or on sarcophagi, and, like the domestic images, illustrate Roman concepts of power (and powerlessness) while commemorating the deceased. The earliest examples of violent imagery in Roman funerary contexts depict historical scenes, possibly the conquests and military exploits of the deceased commemorated by the monument.

Beginning around the third century BCE, the earliest military scenes appeared in Roman tombs; at the same time the first recorded gladiatorial combats were held in the Roman Forum as part of a funeral display. One of the earliest surviving historical paintings is from the tomb of Quintus Fabius in Rome. This chamber tomb, constructed on the Esquiline Hill and dating to the first half of the third century BCE, was discovered in the late nineteenth century. Its occupant may have been Q. Fabius Maximus Rullianus, who led the Roman army and its allies to victory at Sentinum in 295 BCE. Inside the tomb was a painted frieze arranged in at least four registers, only the middle two of which are preserved to full height. The scenes are possibly the earliest

18 Livy, Per. 16.
example of a continuous narrative in Roman art: two standing figures, labelled ‘Fannius’ and ‘Fabius’, appear in two different scenes in the second and third registers. In the second register, Fabius wears a toga and holds a long spear (hasta), indicators of his Roman identity and social status. Also in the second register at the far left is a wall with towers, perhaps a city or fortification. Fannius and Fabius extend their right hands towards each other, the Roman gesture of dextrarum iunctio, the signal of a truce. In the fourth register, below these figures, armed men fight in a fragmentary battle scene. Peter Holliday has suggested that the arrangement of the scenes is ‘purposeful’, a contrast of calm and orderly peace with the confusion of war, that also symbolises the dual civil and military roles of a Roman magistrate. These scenes, too, like those in domestic settings, reinforce Roman conceptions of power: in this case, Romans’ ability to wield power over non-Romans through military conquest and territorial expansion.

The late first century BCE saw a concentration of military authority in the hands of a few and eventually those of the emperor. In response to the new social order founded by Augustus, tombs of the elite and the rising middle class in many cities of the empire began to feature gladiatorial scenes and celebrate an individual’s life achievements as local benefactor and magistrate. At Teate Marrucinorum, sometime before 40 CE, Lusius Storax, a freedman and sevir Augustalis, constructed a tomb within an enclosure on property belonging to a burial society. The tomb had a temple-like facade with a pediment relief and a frieze depicting gladiatorial combats (Figure 32.7). The pediment features Storax, seated among a group of men on a podium, likely the city magistrates of Teate, along with others, perhaps seviri or members of the city council. Manuel Flecker suggests the scene represents the missio, when Storax, in his role as benefactor, would have spared the fighter(s) in the frieze below. The frieze itself illustrates a variety of gladiators, but the viewer does not witness death or the fatal blow but rather a series of combative poses anticipating the fatal moment. As in the painting in the tomb of Quintus Fabius, these reliefs highlight Storax’s public life, social status and importance in the community. Set on the exterior of the tomb, they were a public memorial to a man whose status in life had shifted.

20 Clarke, Ordinary Romans, pp. 147–52, with previous scholarship; M. Flecker, Römische Gladiatorenbilder: Studien zu den Gladiatorenszenen der späten Republik und der Kaiserzeit aus Italien (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015), pp. 120–6 and Kat. A 27.
dramatically from slave, once powerless against violence, to successful freedman with the power to stage violence in the form of arena spectacles and hold the power of life and death in that realm by either granting or denying the plea of the fallen gladiator.

Sarcophagi became important funerary monuments in the second century CE. An elaborate marble sarcophagus was a statement of wealth and culture, although not necessarily of social status, since some middle-class Romans had lavish sarcophagi while senatorial elites had simple ones. Located in niches inside chamber tombs with poor lighting, sarcophagi were probably inaccessible and essentially invisible most of the time, yet they were a popular means for commemorating and honouring the dead for several centuries. The range of decoration on sarcophagi includes simple garlands, channel-cut striations and complex compositions of mythological and biographical narratives populated with multiple figures. Among these later themes are groups of sarcophagi depicting violent myths and battle scenes.

Violent mythological scenes appear on a small number of sarcophagi dating to the mid second century CE, c. 140–80. The subjects are similar to those seen in wall paintings or sculptures decorating Roman houses, for example, the slaughter of the Niobids, the fall of Troy and the deaths of Actaeon and Phaëthon. These stories can be read as representing tragic losses, allegories for sudden death or loss, extreme grief and pain, the horrors of war or a horrible death, and as such may have provided viewers with a way to contextualise their grief in heroic or tragic ways that elevated their mourning. A more challenging narrative, however, is that of Medea, seen on the Medea Sarcophagus of c. 140–50 CE, in Berlin (Figure 32.8). The myth unfolds from left to right across the front of the sarcophagus in four scenes. In the first, the sons of Jason and Medea present a wedding gift, the poisoned cloak, to Creusa, for whom Jason has abandoned Medea. The next scene, near the centre of the sarcophagus, illustrates the horrifying death of Creusa, burned alive by the poisoned cloak, as her helpless father looks on from the left. Immediately to the right is Medea gazing down at her two sons in the moment before she kills them. The final scene depicts Medea escaping in her

Figure 32.8 Detail of the Medea Sarcophagus, marble, c. 140–50 CE, Antikensammlung, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

23 Ibid., pp. 70–82.
chariot drawn by winged serpents, with the dead body of one of her sons flung over her left shoulder.

Various attempts have been made to explain this and other violent mythological scenes on sarcophagi. Paul Zanker and Björn Ewald have suggested that these horrific stories invited mourners to contemplate worse circumstances than their own and perhaps offered comfort while validating their grief through shared parallels, such as loss of children or spouse. 24 The Medea narrative, however, which appears on at least sixteen sarcophagi with little variation, proves challenging. 25 Because of her horrific deeds, Medea does not appear to be a sympathetic or worthy character. Zanker and Ewald suggest that Creusa and her gruesome death might be the intended focus on these sarcophagi, which would suggest interpreting the scene as referring to the deceased in some way. Klaus Fittschen proposes reading them simply as an expression of grief, not as any sort of assimilation or analogy for the deceased. 26 Genevieve Gessert has argued that Medea’s narrative on sarcophagi functioned as a sort of visual consolatio, parallel to the literary letter of consolation, where Medea should be viewed as a negative exemplum, someone who had ‘overstayed her welcome on this earth’, in contrast to the deceased. 27 Many of the myths on sarcophagi also appear in Roman wall paintings, including one scene from the Medea narrative, when Medea contemplates killing her sons. In household settings, these myths could present messages about power structures of Roman society, including the punishment of transgressors. Perhaps in the funerary context these same myths convey a message of powerlessness, one’s ultimate lack of power over death.

After the mid second century CE, as the use of violent mythological scenes declined so sarcophagi with battle scenes appeared, reintroducing the theme of military exploits into the repertoire for funerary commemoration. The earliest examples in this genre display battles as a narrative flow from left to right with no clearly identified central figure. The battles are somewhat idealised, featuring enemies of Rome’s distant past, such as the Gauls, rather than contemporary subjects. By the end of the century battle scenes develop a centralised focus on a primary figure, who is slightly larger and around whom all activity revolves. The battles also feature contemporary foes. 28

24 Zanker and Ewald, Living with Myths, p. 104.
26 Ibid., 230. 27 Ibid., 245.
scenes depict numerous combatants, overlapping one another, in all manner of poses: triumphant, on horseback, on foot, falling, wounded, dying and dead. The battle scenes are typically framed with trophies and barbarian prisoners, often a male and female pair at each corner. The left and right sides have complementary scenes in lower relief. Common to all these sarcophagi is the depiction of fierce combat between clearly identifiable Romans and barbarians.

A particularly fine example from c. 190–200 CE is the Portonaccio Sarcophagus (Figure 32.9). The main figure in the battle scene, a Roman commander who is helmeted and on horseback, is positioned near the top and slightly to the left of the central axis. He appears about to strike or trample an enemy whose outstretched right arm reaches towards him in a plea for mercy. Around him are fellow soldiers viciously fighting barbarians who are bearded and helmetless. The inclusion of biographical scenes – birth, marriage and the commander granting clemency to captives – along the front edge of the sarcophagus lid indicate that the battle scene should be understood as an element of the life story of the deceased. However, a curious
detail of this otherwise exquisitely finished sarcophagus is that the portraits of both the deceased and his wife remain unfinished.

Like most of the battle sarcophagi of the later period, the Portonaccio Sarcophagus can be categorised as a biographical sarcophagus. It has the elements associated with the genre in which episodes of the deceased’s life are equated with imperial Roman virtues. The battle scene illustrates *virtus*, or military valour, while his receiving of a submissive barbarian displays his *clementia*, or mercy. *Concordia*, or harmony, is signified by the marriage scene. On other sarcophagi the deceased is also shown making a sacrifice to represent his *pietas*, or devotion to the gods. The military, civic and domestic roles of the Roman male are presented, including his power over others: husband over wife, commander over soldiers, and Romans over barbarians. Although the portraits of the deceased and his wife are not finished on the Portonaccio Sarcophagus, it was intended as an individualised monument. Along with their role as personal memorials, the battle sarcophagi of the mid second to early third centuries were also aspects of the competition between the military elite of the period. Victorious commanders no longer received triumphal monuments for their achievements, as those were reserved for the emperor. The shift to individualised portraits for the central figures and to contemporary adversaries in the battle scenes in these later sarcophagi accentuated the *virtus* of the deceased in a way that may have implied a ‘private apotheosis’ of the individual, and thus we see an emphasis on the prowess and courage of the deceased as the indicator of his worthiness for commemoration.

**War and Violence on Public Monuments**

Violent battles scenes did not adorn public monuments until the second century C.E. However, there is ample literary evidence that paintings of battles were carried in Roman triumphs and later displayed in various locations. The Roman triumphal procession itself was a particularly powerful yet ephemeral means of celebrating military conquests. People lined the

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streets of Rome to view a procession that displayed not only paintings but also captured loot, models of conquered cities, re-enactments staged as scenes on floats pulled by prisoners of war (who would later be sold as slaves), the Roman soldiers who fought in the campaign and their general adorned as *triumphator*.

After the triumph, plunder and battle paintings were placed in temples and public porticoes while a selection of spoils might be exhibited at the homes of the military leaders to advertise their status, a reflection of the competitive nature of the Roman elite. Public monuments specifically intended to commemorate military victories are first evidenced in the third century BCE, although none of these, nor any of the Republican arches from the second and first centuries BCE, survive.

Throughout the first century CE the decoration of victory monuments emphasised symbols of victory such as trophies, laurel or oak crowns, elements of the triumphal procession and personifications of Victory and conquered nations. Allegorical imagery stood in the place of actual scenes of war and its violence. For example, on a provincial monument to the Julio-Claudian emperors, the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, one panel relief illustrates Claudius subduing Britannia (Figure 32.10). The emperor is portrayed in heroic nudity, with only a billowing cloak, helmet and shield. He stands above Britannia, whose body is turned towards the viewer, her right breast exposed, her drapery falling away, and he is forcing her to the ground, physically subduing her, in the same manner as female figures in the mythological scenes at Pompeii, such as Dirce, are portrayed as they are about to be raped or punished.

In the second century the emphasis on victory monuments shifted from the allegorical to more realistic, historical reliefs. Trajan memorialised his Dacian campaigns by using the spoils to construct an elaborate forum advertising the victories of the Roman army. The south entrance to the forum resembled a triumphal arch. Figures of Dacian prisoners stood along the attic above its porticoes overlooking the main plaza. Above these were the military standards of the legions who had fought in the campaigns. The Column of Trajan, dedicated in 113 CE, dominated in a small courtyard just north of the Basilica Ulpia, flanked on its east and west sides by libraries. The so-called Great Trajanic Frieze, offering an abbreviated glimpse of the Dacian campaigns, may have decorated the basilica’s attic on its northern side, facing the column,
illustrating a more complex narrative with its helical frieze. The column offers an unusual mix of scenes, of which battle scenes represent about a

quarter, while the rest are scenes of marching, construction, sacrifices, negotiations and other activities. The combatants, Roman and Dacian, are easily distinguished by their clothing, armour and weaponry, and the two sides are generally arrayed ‘in massed and orderly ranks’, suggesting that the images may derive from paintings.\(^{37}\) (It is worth noting, too, that the scenes would have been painted and thus their relationship to painted battle scenes would have been even more evident to the viewers.) Despite the orderliness of the battles, brutal realities are portrayed. In the left half of scene 24, two Roman soldiers present severed heads to the emperor Trajan, while on the right a Roman on horseback holds a severed head of a Dacian by the hair with his teeth as he continues his attack (Figure 32.11). In scene 45 (Figure 32.12) a group of non-Roman women torture a pair of Dacian prisoners, burning them with torches. Sheila Dillon argues that Roman viewers would have understood this scene as doubly humiliating to the enemy because foreign women are attacking the men in a manner usually reserved for the punishment of slaves.\(^{38}\)

The scenes on the Column of Trajan juxtapose the viciousness of war with the mundane activities of the Roman army, namely gathering materials and constructing camps, the observation of sacrifices, and audiences with the emperor. The Column of Marcus Aurelius, c. 180–193 CE, offers a more brutal and chaotic vision of war. During the second century the depiction of war in Roman reliefs changes, moving away from the influences of the Hellenistic tradition and its more orderly arrays of battle towards massive scenes of swirling violence. Sarcophagus workshops in Rome may have been partly responsible for these trends, but as Martin Beckmann notes, the wars that Marcus Aurelius conducted were of a different nature from those carried out by Trajan.\(^{39}\) The Dacian campaigns were expansionist and pre-emptive, adding new territory to the empire while suppressing a potential threat. Marcus Aurelius was quashing a rebellion, repulsing barbarians who had physically invaded Italy and threatened the safety of Rome. The Column of Marcus Aurelius narrates a punitive war focused on the utter submission or destruction of the enemy.

This difference can be seen best in the portrayal of women and children on the two columns. As Dillon has demonstrated, the women on the Column of
Trajan are less dishevelled, dressed more elegantly, and are usually at the edges of scenes. On the Column of Marcus Aurelius, women are often in the middle of battles, ‘forcibly separated from their children, physically and sexually assaulted, and even killed’. Dillon and Beckmann both argue that while these scenes allude to the nature of the campaigns illustrated, they should not be taken as historically accurate snapshots. The kinder treatment of the women on the Column of Trajan, Dillon argues, may also be read in conjunction with the civil, mundane scenes of the army as references to the virtues of a good emperor, such as justice, clemency, discipline and order.40 The violent subjugation of women and children on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, then, while certainly a reality, was also intended to symbolise the

utter defeat of a rebellious enemy. Interpreted in this way, the scenes on the two columns become examples of the words of Anchises to Aeneas: ‘spare the submissive, and annihilate the insolent’.

Battle imagery continued in the third century CE on Severan monuments at Rome and elsewhere, but a new format for violent display was also introduced. The Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum, dedicated in 203 CE, is the earliest known triumphal arch decorated with battles scenes. Four large panel reliefs placed over the lateral bays of the triple-bay arch illustrate scenes from the emperor’s campaigns against Parthia and were likely derived from paintings executed by artists travelling on campaign with the emperor. The paintings may have circulated beyond Rome, possibly serving as models for Severan monuments in Cyrene and Lepcis Magna. The use of battle scenes on triumphal arches continues the iconographic trends of the second century CE, but it also served a specific purpose in the legitimation of Severan rule and dynastic succession. The Parthian victory and the designation of Caracalla, the elder son of

41 Verg. Aen. 6.853.
Severus, as co-emperor were celebrated on the same day, 28 January 198 CE, and thus the dynasty was, in effect, born on the battlefield. Those campaigns were also connected to the suppression of a rival claim to the imperial throne by Pescennius Niger, who had been supported by the Parthians and their allies. The arch, therefore, not only celebrated the Parthian victory and the creation of the Severan dynasty but also served as a warning to those contemplating rebellion.

The Severan period brought another innovation: colossal sculpture groups of violent myths. The Baths of Caracalla held several of these colossal groups, including the renowned Farnese Bull group, depicting the punishment of Dirce, sculpted of marble and standing 3.7 metres high (Figure 32.13). A second group includes a warrior, about 3 meters tall, holding the leg of a young boy who hangs upside down across the warrior’s back. The pair is identified as Achilles and Troilus. The Farnese Bull probably stood in the east palestra, and Achilles and Troilus probably in the frigidarium. Both compositions required the viewer to move around and take in views from several angles to get the full

45 For the date, see Feriale Duranum, col. I, ll. 14–16.
46 Achilles and Troilus (Achilles and Troilus?): MANN, inv. 5999.
meaning and effect of the depiction. Only by moving around can one see the wounds on the body of Troilus, for example. The trampling of Dirce and Achilles’ slaughter of Troilus seem odd, perhaps even uncomfortable, subjects with which to adorn an imperial bath complex. Although public sculptures generally embodied positive messages, Ralf von den Hoff argues that colossal groups such as these are the product of aesthetic concerns cultivated by the Second Sophistic, especially an increased interest in ‘horror and furor’, the arousal of emotion in the viewer, and admiration for artists’ technical skills to produce such complex compositions. He also suggests that these groups in their grandeur were a form of entertainment, too, much like arena spectacles.\(^{47}\)

The early fourth century CE witnessed a final innovation in the representation of war and violence in the Roman world. For approximately six centuries Romans had avoided the direct commemoration of civil strife and generally refrained from illustrating battles in which they were defeated on their public monuments. The historical battle reliefs on the Arch of Constantine, however, broke the long-standing custom, representing the civil war battles between Constantine and Maxentius on a triumphal arch. The triple-bay arch was constructed as a pastiche, with decorative elements taken from monuments of Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius alongside original Constantinian historical and other reliefs.\(^{48}\) The historical frieze is broken into six sections and chronicles the war with Maxentius. Four sections are located, one each, above the lateral bays on the north and south faces, with the final two segments, one each, on the east and west sides. The narrative begins with the west segment and moves counter-clockwise along the south face, then to the east side, ending over the north-east lateral bay.

Recent studies of the Arch of Constantine have tended to focus on its reuse of earlier sculpture, the reworking of portraits, and how these features play into memory and viewing.\(^{49}\) The battle scenes, located on the south face, have received relatively little attention, despite their remarkable deviation from prior practice in Roman victory monuments. In the scene above the south-west bay the Constantinian forces lay siege to Verona (Figure 32.14a),


Figure 32.14a–b Relief, marble, 315 C.E., Arch of Constantine, Rome (Italy): (a) Siege at Verona, (b) Battle at the Milvian bridge.
the walled city in the right half of the scene. Unlike earlier battle scenes, there is no distinction between the two sides: they wear the same armour and carry the same weapons because both sides are Roman. The Roman inside the city hurl rocks at the attackers, while one figure tumbles from the left corner of the city wall. The scene depicting the decisive battle at the Milvian Bridge (Figure 32.14b), above the south-east bay, epitomises total carnage and utter defeat. Bodies of dead and dying soldiers are floating in the river beneath the bridge while on the left personifications of Rome and Victory once flanked the figure of Constantine observing the battle from a boat as he crosses the river. Such violence depictions had previously been reserved for scenes in which Romans wreaked death and destruction on rebellious barbarians, not on fellow Romans.

How did Roman viewers react to these scenes? Elizabeth Marlowe has noted that Constantine presented himself as liberator urbis suae, ‘liberator of his city’, an appropriation of Maxentius’ title of conservator urbis suae, ‘preserver of the city’, effectively recasting Maxentius as a tyrant from whom Rome had to be liberated while allowing Constantine to continue many of his programmes and building projects.50 The dedicatory inscription on the arch refers to Constantine avenging the state from a tyrant and another in the main passageway proclaims him liberator orbis, ‘liberator of the world’.51 Although Constantine refrained from purging the senate and administrative

51 CIL 6.1139
elites, except for those closest to Maxentius, the battle reliefs on the arch may have been a warning to those who had been left in power at Rome – the threat of harsh consequences for usurpers and would-be tyrants.

Conclusion

In book 6 of the Aeneid Anchises tells his son Aeneas, ‘Remember, Roman, you will govern all peoples by military might; these will be your talents: to impose the rule of law, to spare the submissive, and to annihilate the insolent.’ These few lines characterise an aspect of Roman identity tied to military exploits, conquest and the domination over others that was proudly displayed in numerous ways. Representations of war and violence could serve as reminders of Roman power structures: the power of the Roman people over non-citizens; the power of Roman males, as family patriarchs, over households, including women, children, slaves and clients; and finally, the power of the emperor over his subjects, often expressed either as heroic behaviour rewarded by divine favour or transgressive behaviour punished through divine agency. Triumphal monuments, both through allusive and actual representations of battle, prompted Romans to recall the wars fought to expand and maintain their empire and evoked civic pride. Violent scenes adorning tombs, and later sarcophagi, were deemed appropriate commemorations for the dead, perhaps to elicit sympathy and express the pain of grief or sudden loss. In the Roman private house, the images of violence found on

52 Zos. 2.17.2. 53 Verg. Aen. 6.851–3.
its walls and floors or adorning household objects could present multiple messages: moralising tales from mythology, the family’s military exploits, or the homeowner’s role in providing bloody entertainment in the arena. Every violent image, however, was a means of visualising power that reflected social and political roles in Roman society.

Bibliographic Essay


This chapter will examine some of the martial messages contained in six chapters of the voluminous Śānti Parvan (Book of Peace), which is the twelfth book of India’s great epic, the Mahābhārata (MBh). The six chapters – namely, MBh 12.98–103 – appear in an identifiable segment of the text, MBh 12.93–107, which James Fitzgerald entitles ‘Law, Force, and War’,¹ and this section is set within one of the major divisions of the Śānti Parvan (MBh 12.1–128), entitled ‘The Laws for Kings’ (rajañādhamaparvan). While most of the information in the Śānti Parvan is composed for and about kings, the six chapters describe in detail the ideological and social strategies that a king can employ to convince men to fight in battle. As such, the chapters contain a wealth of information on the identity of warriors and depict a set of martial expectations and ideals – a blueprint – which a king can draw on to edify his soldiers (at least the types of soldiers imagined by the author(s) of the chapters). Consequently, the six chapters of the Śānti Parvan give us a rare window into some of the discursive practices that enactors of the ancient Indian state – kings and ministers; generals and military officers; Brahman priests and Kṣatriya nobles – may have employed to socialise men into a martial ideology, while justifying it as the most ethical way to live.

While the six chapters are complex in their martial messages, I will examine primarily the discourse about the sūra, the paradigmatic ‘heroic warrior’. According to the six chapters, the sūra perfectly embodies the martial ideals of the army. The chapters are clear that this character’s actions and demeanour define the standards by which all warriors will be judged. In

other words, the role of the śūra is an aspirational standard expected of all soldiers, whether high-born members of the aristocratic Kṣatriya class or men from the lower classes. Consequently, the concept of ‘heroism’ (śaurya, derived from śūra) is not merely a romanticised ideal reserved for epic archetypes because a śūra can come from the ranks of many different kinds of men from various regions. As the text succinctly states, ‘heroes with great courage and great strength are born everywhere’ (MBh 12.102.6). In addition, since a hero provides protection in times of peace and danger, people should construct an image of him and pay homage to his deeds (though, according to the text, they fail to do this; MBh 12.98.16–17). This is one of the most explicit statements in ancient Indian literature of hero worship. It may also reflect the appearance of hero-stones throughout the subcontinent in the early centuries of the Common Era.

The importance placed on the śūra in the six epic chapters is particularly interesting. As I have argued elsewhere, in the Rgveda (c. 1200 BCE) the accented term śūra designates the quintessential heroic champion, whose martial role is exemplified by the warrior god Indra in his battle with the demonic serpent Vṛtra. Since the Mahābhārata was composed in Sanskrit at around the turn of the Common Era, the six epic chapters draw on and propagate a much older ideal of heroism dating back a thousand years or more. As will be seen, the use of Vedic precedents is further seen in the concept of the ritual of battle, in which the bodies and body parts of warriors

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2 According to Arthaśāstra 6.1.1 (hereafter AŚ), the army functions as one of the main institutions of the ancient Indian state, and both the MBh and AŚ affirm that it should be comprised of four divisions: elephants, chariots, cavalry and infantry. In addition, according to AŚ 6.1.11 soldiers in the army do not always come from the ranks of the Kṣatriya class. This is implied throughout MBh 12.98–103, which uses the heroic ideal of the śūra and that of Kṣatriyas to underscore just how all ‘warriors, soldiers’ (yodha, yodhin) should behave.

3 Hero-stones (vīragal) commemorate the violent death of a warrior, either in battle or in cattle raids, and his subsequent ascension to heaven. See S. Settar and G. D. Sontheimer (eds.), Memorial Stones: A Study of Their Origins, Significance, and Variety (Dharwad: Institute for Indian Art History, Karnataka University, 1982).

4 See J. L. Whitaker, Strong Arms and Drinking Strength: Masculinity, Violence, and the Body in Ancient India (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. pp. 109–31. Throughout the epic, Indra plays a key role in legitimising the actions of heroes. In relation to Vṛtra’s slaying, he asserts that he became overlord of the gods by defeating many demons in battle, among them Vṛtra (MBh 12.99.43, 48–9); and according to MBh 5.132.23cd–24ab, ‘a hero (śūra) attains fame by killing just one enemy. Indra became Great Indra by merely killing Vṛtra’.

are equated with sacrificial offerings in a violent rite that bestows heavenly rewards upon the slain. The six epic chapters are thus enormously significant for our understanding of the concept of heroism in ancient India. In addition, they help us to understand the role the ancient Indian state played in fostering heroic ideals while allowing us to speculate on some of the institutionalised practices that may have informed the identities of real high-born warriors and common soldiers. (It is important to note here that the state is in essence the kingdom ruled by an all-powerful king who resides at its imagined centre with his royal family, partisans and conquered vassal lords paying tribute. Enemy kings may exist outside its borders, but need to be allied with or conquered.)

Consequently, this chapter will consider some of the complex ways in which men were socialised into a state-sponsored ideology of warfare in ancient India while exploring various discursive strategies that sought to convince men, young or old, that fighting and dying in battle was the expected, right and most honourable thing to do.

Sources

Before examining the six epic chapters in question, it is necessary to make some general observations about the textual sources. As one of the world’s longest narrative poems, the *Mahābhārata* focuses on the actions of aristocratic warriors and kings who comprise the Kṣatriya class. The main story narrates at length a multi-generational conflict between two closely related royal families, the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, whose fight for control of the throne culminates in an eighteen-day apocalyptic war. The five Pāṇḍava brothers are the heroic exemplars of law and order (*dharma*). While victorious in the end, the Pāṇḍavas at times contravene ethical and legal prescriptions by employing underhand tactics to win the war, often at the behest of their divine counsellor, Kṛṣṇa. Their hundred Kaurava cousins, led by the Duryodhana, are said to embody chaos and disorder (*adharma*), yet during their unlawful reign the kingdom prospers and they also uphold the ideals of fair fighting.

6 This idea is evident in the Śānti Parvan (see esp. MBh 12.59), the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* (e.g. MDhŚ 93.294–7) and the *Arthaśāstra* (see AŚ 6.2.14–22 and AŚ 8.1–2). For consideration of the ancient Indian state, see R. Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the Mid-First Millennium BC in the Ganga Valley* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1984), and P. Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya’s *Arthaśāstra* **(New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 38–51.

As the twelfth book of the epic, the Śānti Parvan contains an enormous amount of information on governance, ethics and issues of law and its enforcement. The section entitled ‘Law, Force, and War’ (MBh 12.93–107) replicates the larger framing device of the Śānti Parvan since it presents an ongoing conversation at the war’s end on dharma between the eldest Pāṇḍava brother and newly consecrated king, Yudhīṣṭhira, and his grandfatherly patriarch, Bhīṣma. Throughout the epic, and especially in its twelfth book, arguments are made for just war in contrast to unjust war under the broad heading of rājadharma. The epic also prescribes rules of chivalrous fighting for members of the warrior class under the heading of ksatriyadharma. Issues of jus ad bellum and jus in bello are directly addressed in MBh 12.93–7, yet the idealistic rules of warfare are frequently circumvented by prescriptions that allow a king to use ‘crooked’ (vakra) strategies which ‘slightly squeeze the law’ (MBh 12.101.1): a fact underscored by Kṛṣṇa’s sustained advice to the Pāṇḍavas elsewhere in the epic. In addition, while the epic accounts of violence are heavily romanticised, especially in terms of the superhuman nature of its main characters, the information in the Śānti Parvan has a clear didactic purpose as the episodes communicate messages about how real kings and warriors should act, often in situations where the right course of action is unclear legally or ethically.

Prescriptions about warfare also appear in legal texts called generally Dharmasūtras (‘Treatises on Law’). One such text called the Mānava Dharmasāstra (MDhŚ) was composed at the beginning of the Common Era by an orthodox Brahman named Manu, who proclaimed honourable warfare the ‘eternal duty/law of warriors’ (MDhŚ 7.98b: yodhadharmah sanātanah). A similar sentiment is expressed in the Mahābhārata, which quotes Manu as saying ‘war must be waged according to law’ (MBh 12.96.14a: tasmād dharmena yoddhayam). The point here is that the Mānava Dharmasāstra provides parallel information on warfare as well as detailing ethical prescriptions for warriors (see especially MDhŚ 7.87–98). Furthermore, Manu drew on the Arthaśāstra in his discussions of kingship. Composed in the first centuries of


the Common Era and attributed to a single author, Kautilya, the *Arthaśāstra* is a practical manual on statecraft which contains extensive information for kings and ministers on diplomacy, governance and war. As will be seen, some of the broader didactic messages contained in the six epic chapters correspond thematically with advice given to kings in the *Arthaśāstra* on how to encourage troops to fight and die in battle. These sources are thus attestations of a shared cultural milieu evinced by ideologically motivated thinkers who express a direct concern with shaping the identity of warriors and the ideals of heroism for military and political ends around the turn of the Common Era in India.

The Śūra as Paradigmatic Heroic Warrior

*Mbh* 12.98 opens with Yudhiṣṭhira posing a fundamental soteriological question to Bhīṣma: ‘By what actions can a king win heavenly worlds?’ His concern is predicated on the fact that because kings slaughter many people during military campaigns, then ‘no law is more evil than the law of the martial class’ (*Mbh* 12.98.1ab: *ksatradharmān na pāpiyān dharma ’stī*); specifically, those who rule through warfare. What follows is a sustained justification for violence that is not only meant to edify kings but also intended to define the identity and responsibilities of soldiers in the king’s army. Since a strong, fearless king is unparalleled on earth, then in order to understand the moral, social and cosmological implications of his actions, a king’s role in battle is correlated with that of the śūra. The chapters consistently focus on the theme of a śūra’s bravery and his ritualised death and ascension. At its core, the truest realisation of heroism is to fight and die willingly in the front lines of battle. For example:

\[
\text{Every heroic warrior inspired to sacrifice his highest, having abandoned his life, never showing his back to the enemy, reaches the same heavenly world as Indra. (Mbh 12.98.31)}
\]

\[
\text{Just fifty heroic warriors who know each other well, who are riled up, who have given up all hope of survival, and who are determined can smash an enemy army. (Mbh 12.103.20)}
\]

In the first example, heroism is defined by a warrior’s fearless self-sacrifice in battle, which is given a soteriological justification in the concept of Indra’s heaven. The value placed on men who fully internalise and enact heroic

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ideals is underscored in the second example, which conveys some of the sentiments expressed by Marlon Brando’s character Colonel Walter E. Kurtz in his famous ‘the horror’ speech in the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* – namely, that a small force of soldiers completely committed to the cause could win any conflict, no matter the physical or psychological cost. A warrior’s death in battle thus affirms his commitment to his duty and the law, both subsumed under the concept of dharma, as well as securing his place in the heaven of the greatest warrior of all, Indra.

The theme of obtaining heaven after dying in battle is central to MBh 12.100.1–18, which involves an ancient dialogue between two kings, Pratardana and Janaka of Mithilā. After donning ‘a ritual thread for the purpose of making war’ (MBh 12.100.2a: *yajnopavītā sangrāme*), Janaka addresses his soldiers to motivate them, while evoking images of heaven (svarga) and hell (naraka):

> Look at these brilliantly shining celestial worlds for those who do not fear! They overflow with Gandharva girls and furnish everything you could wish for! They will never waste away. On the other side are these hells for those that run away. They will fall into them immediately and endure everlasting ignominy as well. Having seen these worlds, having resolved to give up your lives, be victorious over the enemy and do not end up as subjects in the bottomless hell. The unsurpassed gate into heaven rests upon the base of heroes’ giving up their lives. (MBh 12.100.4–7ab)

Since the chapters reflect a heavily patriarchal and gendered perspective, it is both unsurprising and informative that the slain hero will be greeted in heaven by alluring ‘Gandharva girls’ who will fulfil his every (sexual) wish. In the same eroticised vein, another stanza states that a bevy of celestial nymphs or Apsarases – thousands, in fact – will beg to be his wife.11 If ever there was a euphemism for the promise of liberal sex in ancient India, this would be it, and of course, the fantasised incentives underlying the ideals of heroism and bravery are self-evident. As can be seen, the promise of Indra’s heaven and the threat of hell are deliberately used to shape the identity of warriors, while circumscribing their choices as men.

The theme of a warrior’s heroic death takes on a personal, embodied element as the demeanour of a śūra is characterised by an extreme tolerance

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for pain and injury, which is also correlated with metaphysical rewards. For example: ‘However many sharp blades cut his skin in battle, that many heavenly worlds does he enjoy, heavenly worlds that fulfill his every wish and never fade away!’ (MBh 12.98.12). According to this stanza, injuries sustained in battle symbolise a warrior’s righteous commitment to war as well as the guarantee of heavenly ascension. In short, a warrior literally bleeds for heaven. It is not hard to imagine that battle wounds, and the scars they leave, would function as badges of honour and emblematically signify membership in a closed military world predicated on stoic toughness and resolve in the face of physical and psychological trauma. In fact, Bhīṣma informs Yudhiṣṭhira that a sūra who fights vehemently, filled with ‘oaths and rage’ (MBh 12.98.29), will take no heed of his wounds in battle. In addition, the hero’s anticipated injuries and death in battle are elevated to the highest form of merit-generating, religious devotion because any form of suffering that he endures from burning wounds will produce more merit than an ascetic can accrue from the physically gruelling practices of asceticism (MBh 12.98.13–14). Consequently, it is ‘unrighteous’ (adharma) for a Kṣatriya to die on his bed, ‘coughing up phlegm and bile, weeping pitifully’. At his time of death, if a noble warrior’s body is without any battle wounds, then his life’s deeds receive no praise from those who ‘know the ancient ways’. Such a death is simply ‘unmanly, unrighteous, and pitiful for proud men’, and ‘miserable, terrible, and wicked’. A true man (vīra) with any pride and self-respect does not deserve such a death, and a Kṣatriya should die in battle surrounded by his fellow warriors with his body completely disfigured by sharp weapons. Being killed in battle is thus ‘celebrated and honoured in the world’, and due to the ‘abundant merit’ it accrues, the warrior goes to the same heavenly world as Indra (MBh 12.98.23–30).

The six epic chapters communicate a coherent gendered message about how all martially inclined men should think, feel and act in relation to violent expectations, and such values are encoded in the myth of Kṣatriya excellence and the heroic role of the sūra. In R. W. Connell’s words, ‘True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body.’ In the epic chapters, a warrior’s body functions as a dominant symbol of core socio-political and religious values which circumscribe a man’s sense of self-worth and agency to the point that the only way he can demonstrate his devotion to

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dharma and the gods is by repeated acts of violence, by experiencing physical pain, and ultimately by dying in battle. Indeed, the key characteristic of ‘all heroic warriors’ is that they ‘have forsaken their own bodies’ in battle (MBh 12.102.13b: sarve śūraš tanutyajah). This ideology is not new: it has a much older precedent in the R̥gveda, which states that ‘heroic champions who abandon their bodies’ (RV 10.154.3b: śūraśo ye tanūtyājah) and die fighting in battle rise immediately to heaven. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock have aptly observed, aggressive warlike cultures regularly socialise men to think of their bodies as inherently defined by violence to the point that they cannot but think of themselves as foolhardy warriors whose self-worth comes from protecting the socio-political and cosmic order. To be a real/true man, a warrior must turn his body into a weapon of war to be used against other bodies, yet ultimately this will inflict harm on himself. The hero is nevertheless subject to the usual ethical guidelines incumbent on Kṣatriyas. He is prohibited from slaying old men, children, women, Brahmans and those who have surrendered, though he is expected to spare no enemy combatant in battle. Conversely, any warrior who enters into a kind of uncontrolled berserker rage represents the extreme of the heroic ideal. Such men are considered to be dangerous because they ‘pay no heed to the law’, yet in recklessly abandoning their lives in battle the king benefits doubly from their deaths by gaining victory and in removing any potential problems in the future (see MBh 12.102.18–20). Therefore, according to the six chapters of the Śānti Parvan, heroic masculinity is performed and legitimised through acts of violence and displays of physical and mental toughness rather than being a natural consequence of biological sex. What is more, while a hero’s body is scarred with social prestige and the promise of heaven, his life is not his own but a tool of the army and the state.

The Ritual of Battle

The embodied ideals of personal suffering and merit are aligned with the concept of the ‘ritual’ or ‘sacrifice of battle’ (saṃgrāma- or yuddhayajña) wherein the gore and carnage of war are said to be sacrificial oblations.

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14 Such individuals can yield by placing grass in their mouths, presumably to indicate their subordinate status as cows, or by simply stating ‘I am yours’ (MBh 12.99.47). Cf. Gautama Dharmasūtra 10.18.
For example, *MBh* 12.99 documents an ancient dialogue between King Ambarīśa and the god Indra. After dying from (presumably) natural causes, Ambarīśa ascends to Indra’s heaven, yet is dismayed to find that one of his ministers, Sudeva by name and the lord commander of his armies (*senāpati*), dwells in a higher heavenly world because he died in battle. The king opines somewhat incredulously to Indra that he defeated armies in battle, ruled the earth righteously, studied religious doctrine, practised celibacy and performed the correct rites for guests, ancestors and the gods. How, then, could a warrior surpass the king in heaven? In response, Indra is clear about the rewards and fame gained by a hero in this world and the next, and the gist of what the god tells Ambarīśa can be summed up in two stanzas that quintessentially justify the violent, yet transcendent life of a śūra:

Son, this Sudeva performed the tremendous sacrifice of battle, and so does any other man who wagers war: Every warrior equipped for battle is ritually consecrated, and when he goes to the front of the army he gains the right to perform the sacrifice of battle – that’s a settled conclusion.

(*MBh* 12.99.12–13)

To unpack Indra’s declaration, all soldiers enter into battle in a ritually consecrated state equivalent to sacrificial patron in Vedic rites (we recall that King Janaka dons a ‘sacred thread for battle’, further underscoring war’s ritualised nature). Nevertheless, to bring the violent rite to its promised conclusion of heavenly ascension, warriors must make an offering of themselves in the front lines of battle, which, as has been seen, is tantamount to acting as a śūra. Consequently, Ambarīśa accepts Indra’s explanation and takes its injunctions to heart as ‘the perfection of warriors’ (*MBh* 12.99.50 cd: *yodhānav... siddhim*).

A heroic warrior’s freely flowing blood absolves him from all accumulated sins. Blood is but one of the bodily offerings a slain warrior can make in this violent rite. The epic chapters describe at gory length the correlation of body parts and martial paraphernalia with ritual implements and practices for no other reason than to underscore that death in battle is a sacred ritualised act in line with an ordered cosmos, however Pyrrhic such a self-sacrifice may have been. The grisly analogies mimic the older Vedic model of secret correspondences that align individual, ritual and cosmic phenomena so as to reveal the underlying interconnected nature of the cosmos. Such secretive knowledge

grants wealth and prestige to the knower in this world and heavenly realms and immortality after death. Consider, then, some of the epic descriptions – cited from MBh 12.99.15–26, 30–4, 36–8 – wherein elephants and horses act as priests; the chunks of enemy flesh and blood are food offerings and clarified butter; carrion animals such as jackals, vultures and ravens are the recipients of the offerings, the weapons of war are the ritual implements; cries and shouts are liturgies; the kettle drum acts as the singer; the lines of battle are different kinds of sacrificial altars and other significant sites on the ritual ground; a headless corpse standing upright in the midst of the slain is the sacrificial post of the heroic warrior; and the river of gore and carnage with a ‘gravel bed made up of the bones of brave men’ (vīrāṣṭhīśarkarā) is ‘the concluding bath of the warrior’s great sacrifice’. According to Indra, the field of battle is the sacrificial altar of heroes and for this reason they should not be mourned. To quote the god at length:

The heroic warrior (śūra) who, for the sake of his lord, attacks at the front of the army and does not turn back out of fear – he has heavenly worlds like mine. He who strews the altar area with dark blue swords shaped like the crescent moon and severed arms that look like spiked clubs – he has heavenly worlds like mine. He who is committed to victory and expects no one to accompany him as he penetrates into the middle of the enemy army – he has heavenly worlds like mine . . . He who strews the altar area with the heads of his enemies and piles of his enemies’ horses and elephants – he has heavenly worlds like mine . . . But when a warrior is frightened and retreats and is then slain by the enemy, he goes to the hell that has no bottom, no doubt about it. He whose gushing blood forms a flooding river dotted with hair and flesh and bones, he goes the highest course. But he who slays a commander of the army and then mounts his chariot, he strides with the boldness of Viṣṇu, he has the wits of Brāhmaṇ. He who captures an enemy leader alive, or a warrior who sets their standard, or one who is honoured among them – he has heavenly worlds like mine. One should never mourn for a hero (śūra) cut down in battle; for there is nothing sad about him – the slain hero is exalted in a heavenly world. (MBh 12.99.27–9, 35, 39–43)

The epic analogies underscore the fact that immortality can only be achieved in the two overlapping yet socially uneven realms: the first, ritual sacrifice, is reserved for wealthy high-class males, while the second, the ritual of battle, is

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16 In some Vedic rituals an animal is tied to the ‘sacrificial post/pole’ (yūpa) before being suffocated (note MBh 12.99.26 where a slain warrior makes his own body the post when he protects the wealth of Brahmans). The ‘concluding bath’ (avabhṛtha) marks the end of some Vedic rituals and serves to purify the sacrificial patron, his wife, and the priests from sin.
open to all soldiers no matter what their class status. For individual warriors, war is a righteous act under the auspices of dharma and death in battle is the highest form of sacrificial offering that guarantees heavenly ascension for the victim. Injury and death in battle are unequivocal testaments to a warrior’s martial devotion and cosmically sanctioned heroism. Therefore, in ideological terms, soldiers are doubly blessed as consecrated participants in a holy rite and as its sacrificial victims, as triumphant victors in this life and in the next. The six epic chapters thus justify the heroism of aristocratic warriors and common soldiers by aligning it with the ideals of the Vedic ritual tradition and by equating death in battle with sacrifice and heavenly ascension. In no uncertain terms, warfare is a sacred act that brings about heavenly salvation for the courageous dead (who may not have been able to participate in and receive the promised rewards of Vedic rituals in the first place). However, like Indra’s heaven, the concept of the ritual of battle is a somewhat cynical ploy because soldiers only transcend ritual and social hierarchies by giving their lives to the army and willingly dying in the front lines of battle.

Cowards

Another major theme consistently deployed in the chapters is the juxtaposition of the śūra’s bravery with the deplorable actions of ‘cowards’ (bhīru, literally ‘fearful’), who are considered to be ‘the lowest of men’ (MBh 12.98.15). In the din of battle, a śūra charges forward while a coward flees under the hero’s protection, which is described as a ‘course of action unworthy of heaven’ (MBh 12.98.19). Of course, we recall that cowards fall into a bottomless hell if they flee in battle, and because of their pathetic nature, ‘cowards are food for the heroic warrior’, just as predators prey on the weak (MBh 12.100.15). In fact, Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira to ‘never give birth to vile men like these’ (MBh 12.98.20). While every effort should be made to encourage troops before and during battle (see e.g. MBh 12.101.43), the shameful acts of craven soldiers will incur the wrath of the gods, especially Indra, who may kill cowards through rather specific means involving sticks or stones, or by burning them with straw (MBh 12.98.22), which

17 According to MBh 12.100.14ab, ‘heroic warriors ought not to try to attack those fleeing because of the danger they present’. The warning here is against turning your enemies into killers with nothing to lose – an attitude not too different from that expected of a śūra in battle.
Fitzgerald suggests is a ‘mode of execution tantamount to burning at the stake’.\(^{18}\) Indeed, the gods may cause any noble warrior who acts like a coward to die ‘like an animal’, which would involve a pseudo-ritualistic form of strangulation or suffocation. The underlying threat is palpable, and of course if real people enforced such divine threats, then their acts of retribution would be in line with the gods’ wishes. Cowardice is thus simply ‘not approved’ (\(MBh\) 12.98.25). In social and cosmological terms, it is the single most abhorrent thing a soldier can do.

Of course, kings, military officers and heroic warriors should work hard to encourage men to fight and die. For example, the king should stand confidently at the head of the army and arrange his chariots, elephants, cavalry and foot soldiers according to the best fighting strategy (\(MBh\) 12.100.8). In addition, everyone who wants victory, especially those who are ‘extremely zealous to fight well’, should stir up the army ‘like monsters churn up the ocean’ (\(MBh\) 12.100.11). Likewise, ‘an effort should be made to fire up even the cowards. They should be able to stand the mere sight of the enemy’s troops, and in proximity to them’ (\(MBh\) 12.101.43). Hence, soldiers should mutually encourage each other, especially anyone who is dejected or languishing in the rear. The king should also inspire his men during the height of battle by making supporters play instruments (conch shells, horns, kettledrums, cymbals, etc.), as well as having them shout battle-cries and disseminate information such as ‘the enemies have broken; the army of our allies has come; attack without fear’ (\(MBh\) 12.101.45–7), whether or not such statements are true. The importance placed on encouraging troops is made abundantly clear in one section where the king makes his soldiers swear a collective oath before battle to never abandon each other or flee the field, and to give up their lives for the sake of victory. The oath is presented here in full.

Having caused his [i.e. the king’s] soldiers to assemble according to rank, they should be addressed, ‘We take a solemn oath for victory in battle. We will not abandon each other. Any of us who are afraid (\(bhīnu\)) must refrain from the battle right here and now, lest they [i.e. the enemy] slaughter us by opening breaches in our ranks after the battle has begun. Fleeing, one slays himself and his whole side in the battle. Upon fleeing one suffers the loss of his property, execution, ignominy, and a bad reputation. Disagreeable and unpleasant words are the lot of the man who flees battle, his lips quivering

\(^{18}\) Fitzgerald, \textit{Mahābhārata}, p. 743. Cf. \textit{MDhŚ} 8.377, where a Vaiśya or Kṣatriya who has sex with a Brahmān woman under someone’s protection should be punished in the same manner as a Śūdra (i.e. deprived of his property, mutilated and killed) or ‘burnt with a straw-fire’ (\textit{dagdhatavyau vā katāgninā}).
and his teeth chattering, having dropped all his weapons, having abandoned his comrades when their lives were at risk. It is the same for one who has obligated himself to the enemy. May it be so for our enemies. Those who turn and run away are subhumans; merely increasing their number, they are nothing in this world nor in the next. All excited the enemy will rush up to a deserter with praise and good wishes, son, the way his friends will rush up to a man who has just won a fight. When your enemies rejoice at your setbacks, I think that pain is harder to endure than being killed. Understand that the Goddess Royal Splendor is the basis of Law and of all happiness; she goes to the enemies of cowardly men (bhīru); a heroic warrior (śūra) goes to her. We, desiring heaven, having let go of our lives to do battle, shall deserve to gain the course of strictly observant men, whether we win victory or are killed. Having sworn this oath, having completely given up their lives, heroic men [vīra; JW: ‘brave/true men’] fearlessly plunge into the enemy army. (MBh 12.101.29–39)

While the ideals of heaven, hell and the ritual of battle encode a warrior’s identity in lofty cosmological terms, the epic chapters detail pragmatic incentives for men who excel on the battlefield. For example, warriors who break through an enemy’s lines or regroup when their own lines are compromised should receive double pay and enjoy the food and drink of the king. If such men command ten soldiers they are to be promoted to the command of a hundred soldiers; and a tireless heroic warrior should be given the command of one thousand such men (MBh 12.101.27–8). Interestingly, in some legal texts the concept of śauryadhana (‘reward for heroism’) refers to wealth given by a king or lord when he is pleased with a soldier or servant who has put their life in danger or performed a brave act. Consequently, while they are framed in idealistic terms, the six epic chapters are well aware that the primary way to convince men to die in battle is to play on their sense of self-worth and that of their comrades by aligning bravery with the promise of financial and heavenly rewards and cowardice with the terrors of hell and concrete social repercussions including execution. It is not hard to imagine that in a complex lived world in which martial ideals and masculine identities would be constantly negotiated, reproduced and reinforced, positive assurances and negative threats, designed to ensure conformity, would function in a similar manner as verbal attacks on the manliness of men today, who may be called ‘wussies, wimps’ or other more specific sexist and homophobic insults. In these terms, the juxtaposition of the transcendent ideals of heroism

and bravery with the moral and soteriological failings of cowardice represents one of the key ideological strategies for shaming men into violent acts while forging a unified homosocial identity centred on bravery, toughness and obedience in the face of masculine relationships and military expectations.

**Arthaśāstra**

Before drawing this chapter to a close I would like to compare some of the broader didactic messages contained in the six epic chapters with those contained in Kauṭilya’s *Arthaśāstra*, which offers similar pragmatic advice to the king on how to convince soldiers to fight and die in his name. In a masterful demonstration of propaganda, the king should deploy a host of performances to rouse his men to battle (*AŚ 10.3.26–47*). In particular, he should act piously before battle in front of his men by fasting and sleeping with his weapons and mount. He should employ priests to secure victory and the support of heaven, and should associate himself with men from honourable noble families who have heroic qualities (*saurya*) and impeccable reputations. He should position priests and astrologers among his troops to praise their superiority while at the same time proclaiming the king’s omniscience and close relationship with the gods to embolden the troops and terrify the enemy. Priests should perform victory rites for the troops while cursing the enemy forces. The king should make his troops feel as if they are consecrated heroic warriors (*śūra*) of old, who have undergone a ritual purification bath that will secure them heaven upon their deaths in battle. If this were not enough, bards and poets should move among the troops heralding heaven for those who act bravely as heroes (*śūra*), while reinforcing the idea that cowards (*bhīru*) will be excluded from this ultimate reward. The king should appeal to his troops’ sense of fairness by telling them that he will share the spoils of war equally with them. The king’s general (*senāpati*) should inform his troops that they will receive specific monetary rewards for killing individual targets such as the enemy king, heroes, corps leaders, cavalrymen and individual infantrymen. Lastly, when arrayed for battle, he should station physicians for his men to see, as well as women who will supply food, drink and encouragement. However, the strategic expediency of these tactics, designed to instil confidence and loyalty in the troops, is made all too clear, as the king should show himself to his troops by riding in a chariot or on an elephant, but a man disguised as the king should ride at the head of the army into battle. As far as I know, Bhīśma never divulges this little secret to
Yudhīṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata*, though we can reasonably speculate that the prescriptions, expectations and ritual practices, which are described at length in *MBh* 12.98–103 and deliberately designed to shape the actions and identities of soldiers, would underlie the kinds of information that Kauṭīlya suggests in passing should be used to encourage troops before battle.

**Conclusion**

The six epic chapters – *MBh* 12.98–103 – provide us with the clearest account of what is entailed by the concept of heroism and who exactly is a hero in India’s Classical Age (at least according to the author(s) of the chapters). The concept of heroism is defined by the superlative martial actions of the śūra, the heroic warrior par excellence, and his unwavering displays of bravery in the face of daunting or impossible odds. Indeed, this martial ideal is stated in absolute, if not paternalistic terms:

> Like children, all in the world depend upon the arms of heroic warriors, always. So heroic warriors deserve honour under all conditions. In all the three worlds there is found nothing that is superior to the hero’s fighting [śaurya; JW: ‘heroism; heroic power’]. The heroic warrior protects everything; everything depends upon the heroic warrior. (*MBh* 12.100.17–18)

In the context of the six epic chapters, heroism is a deeply gendered concept available exclusively to men willing to risk their lives in battle, and is considered to be culturally normative as part of the widespread myth of Kṣatriya excellence. Since this gendered ideology appears to be culturally and politically dominant, at least in our Sanskrit sources, then perhaps it represents a form of hegemonic masculinity which required all martially inclined men to position themselves in relation to it. As R. W. Connell states, ‘Hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women’. In the epic chapters the heroic ideal is consistently juxtaposed with the failed masculinity of cowards and the supportive, yet subordinate role of females, whether family members or heavenly nymphs. Consequently, if a man was recognised to be a śūra – that is, to have successfully enacted some of the values of this hyper-masculine ideal – then his performance would yield social power and dominance in the forms of wealth and fame, as well as legal and religious legitimation. According to Simon Brodbeck, the concepts of personal fame

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and renown (yaśas, kīrti) play a significant role for the warrior class throughout the epic and reflect a masculine economy of prestige in which ‘popularity, fame and fortune’ are presented ‘as natural goals’ for warriors, whose honour and reputation are paramount and must be earned and protected through repeated acts of aggression.\(^\text{21}\) As Kṛṣṇa explains to Pāṇḍava Arjuna in a famous section of the epic known as the Bhagavad Gītā (2.34), ‘for one who has been honoured, dishonour is worse than death’. As has been shown, the six epic chapters underscore the threat of public shame and punishment because if a warrior flees the battlefield then he will suffer ‘the loss of property, execution, ignominy, and a bad reputation’ (MBh 12.101.31). In these terms, while there is no shame in being wounded in war, it would be a moral and soteriological failure to not be injured or killed in battle. Consequently, a warrior’s body is his most valuable asset for achieving fame, fortune and a blissful afterlife in a violent marketplace: it is his primary means to the dividends of patriarchy, but it comes with the highest price.

Since acts of bravery grant a warrior rewards such as fame and wealth in this world and heavenly ascension in the afterlife, we can think of heroism in ancient India as a transcendent ideal. That is to say, heroism can only be achieved within the framework of the military, in the chaos of battle. Conversely, heroism cannot be achieved through world-renouncing asceticism or in the domestic realm of the ancient Indian ‘householder’, whose lifelong duties involve being married, typically to one woman, having male children and patronising ritual sacrifices.\(^\text{22}\) Since the domestic realm is also considered to be the domain of women, then the ideals of heroism reflect a form of masculinity that offers certain life choices unavailable to females.\(^\text{23}\) Heroic masculinity also transcends social norms because it affords certain privileges for the slain warrior’s family who are excused from making food offerings or libations, from taking a purifying bath, and from observing any period of impurity (MBh 12.99.44). While it may have been a small


\(^{22}\) Outside of the six epic chapters, broader uses of the concept of heroism appear. For example, according to MBh 7.133.23, Ksatriyas are ‘heroes’ on account of their arms and Brahman priests (‘twice-born’) are ‘heroes’ on account of their words/speech. Likewise, in the Yājñavālkalya Śrīmānti (1.324) a warrior’s death in battle and heavenly ascension is correlated with the achievement of ascetics, who gain heaven from yogic practices.

\(^{23}\) The epic contains the famous story of the jilted female Ambā, who seeks revenge on the warrior Bhīṣma by being reborn as a man who can eventually fight him in battle. See A. Custodi, ‘“Show You Are a Man!” Transsexuality and gender bending in the characters of Arjuna/Bhīmahannā and Ambā/Śikhaṇḍin(ī)’, in S. Brodbeck and B. Black (eds.), Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 208–29.
consolation, the fact that a warrior’s family gains the benefit of not having to observe a state of mourning or impurity may have contributed to family members’ sense of pride and conviction in sending a beloved son or husband to war. Indeed, in the eleventh book of the Mahābhārata, entitled the Strī Parvan (Book of the Women), grieving mothers of slain warriors express their sorrow for their sons’ deaths in battle. Some of the mothers even express pride in encouraging a violent death because it ultimately protected the family and its lineage, as well as granting their sons access to heaven with all its rewards. Conversely, some wives express jealousy and disdain at their slain husbands since they have left them behind and get to enjoy the company of nymphs in heaven (see e.g. MBh 11.20.22–5). Consequently, female characters, particularly the wives and mothers of epic heroes, are portrayed as key proponents who enforce a man’s duty to fight in battle while preparing him for an honourable death. This ideal is underscored at MBh 5.131–4, which narrates a conversation between the noblewoman Vidurā and her son Saṃjaya (‘Victory’), wherein she scolds him for being dejected on account of his defeat in a prior battle. After chastising him by questioning his parentage (‘neither I nor your father begot you!’), manhood (‘you are a man with the tools of a eunuch!’) and courage (‘get up, coward, don’t lie there defeated’), she demands that Saṃjaya live up to his name by fighting and dying in battle. To quote part of her scathing reprimand: ‘May no woman ever bear a son like you, without anger, without enterprise, without manhood, the joy of your enemies! Don’t smolder – blaze up. Attack with vengeance and slay the enemies’ (MBh 5.131.28–9). The didactic function of this story is stated in no uncertain terms: if a pregnant woman hears it then she will give birth to a brave and virile son (vīra) who will become a heroic warrior (śūra) able to conquer his enemies (MBh 5.134.17–21). The heroic ideal, with its promise of worldly fame and heavenly ascension, thus caters directly to the martial class and soldiers from lower classes because it offers a transcendent path – a saurya mārga – that surpasses normative morality, duty and social hierarchies while at the same time it subverts states of ritual

24 Cf. MDhŚ 5.98: ‘When a man is killed in battle with upraised weapons according to the Ksatriya law, the settled rule is that for him both sacrifice and purification are accomplished instantly’ (trans. Olivelle, Law Code of Manu, p. 92).
25 For the role of epic women and their investment in the martial ideology, see Brodbeck, ‘Myth and Ideology’, p. 95. I would like to express my thanks here to John Taylor, who read the section ‘Law, Force, and War’ with me in my advanced Sanskrit course (autumn 2013), and to Molly Dunn, who drew my attention to the lamentations of high-born women in the Sṛī Parvan and their active role in communicating warrior ideals to their husbands and sons (Mahābhārata course, spring 2014).
purity and ascetic liberation. In these terms, the six epic chapters completely undermine, if not outright reject, the validity of competing modes of social and religious life for warriors, whether low- or high-born.

Unfortunately, because our sources are deeply influenced by the ideological and theological concerns of the priestly Brāhmaṇical tradition, it is impossible to know if the ideals of heroism presented in the six epic chapters document the practices and beliefs of actual martial groups or reflect the rarefied machinations of individuals, whose primary goal is to instruct the king. It may be the case that the chapters represent a reality somewhere between the two scenarios and document the attempt of politically minded Brahmins and royal councillors to insert themselves into the existing practices of different martial groups. If the ideals of heroism in some degree were current among martial groups or tribes, then presumably they contributed to group cohesion and the enforcement of a circumscribed masculine identity that demanded bravery and toughness in potentially deadly situations. Nevertheless, while heroism functions as a dominant expression of hegemonic masculinity, it is likely that only a minority of men would have been able to embody or enact its ideals while alive, though presumably some men were afforded the title ‘hero’ after being killed in the front lines of battle. On the other hand, many more men were probably able to capitalise on the indirect benefits of hegemonic masculinity in the form of social prestige and wealth, as well as demonstrating their commitment to dharma and the gods by serving in the army or by being members of a warrior band.

Finally, Bhīṣma’s core political message to Yudhīṣṭhira is easy to infer; namely, that as a major stakeholder the king should take a direct role in propagating the hyper-masculine ideals of heroism because they are so closely intertwined with the goals of the army and the state: according to the chapters, they reinforce each other. Heroism thus functions as a key ideological tool of the state and the chapters skilfully interweave individual, ethical, ritual and cosmological ideals in a tour de force of militarised propaganda. In other words, the chapters are clear that to edify and manipulate real bodies, the body politic must take a direct role in shaping the identities of warriors. In terms of the underlying goal of the six epic chapters, heroism is a fundamental ideal the king must propagate in order to define the identity of his troops, to secure victory and to absolve himself from any soteriological failings. Consequently, the state should be directly invested in

26 At MBh 12.103.4 the king can perform a series of ritual expiations (prāyaścittavādhi) to absolve himself of any sins accrued in war. Cf. MBh 12.98.3. On this issue, see Feller Jatavallabhula, ‘Raṇayajñā’, 78. Cf. MDhŚ 5.94–5.
the process of constructing and disseminating the ideals of heroism for its own political and military needs. With this said, while heroism plays a direct role in securing the king’s transcendent sovereignty – that is, his state of political dominance and metaphysical absolution – the king suffers a somewhat different fate than his loyal soldiers.27

Bibliographic Essay


While the concept of heroism in ancient India has received some scholarly attention, it has been poorly defined. For a critical reflection see J. Whitaker, Strong Arms and Drinking Strength: Masculinity, Violence, and the Body in Ancient India (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 59–62. The Sanskrit terms vīra and vīrya are typically translated as ‘hero’ and ‘heroism’ respectively, but I have argued that in the Rigveda they convey an explicitly gendered meaning as ‘virile/brave man’ and ‘virility, manliness, masculine power’, while the term sūra designates the true heroic champion (Strong Arms and Drinking Strength, pp. 59–108 and 109–31). For further consideration see J. Whitaker, ‘I Boldly Took the Mace (Vājra) for Might: Ritually Weaponizing a Warrior’s Body in Ancient India’, International Journal of Hindu Studies 20.1 (2016), 51–94. Likewise, vīra and sūra are frequently conflated in the secondary literature: see H. Brückner et al. (eds.), The Concept of Hero in Indian Culture (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007), which lacks any critical analysis of the exact nature of heroism; Brückner (p. x) states somewhat naively that the Sanskrit words vīra, marya, sūra/sūla and malla mean ‘hero’ and correspond to the ancient Greek term hērōs (following Sontheimer); cf. Bollée (pp. 1–5) in the same volume. According to K. McGrath, The Sanskrit Hero: Kaṇṭha in the Mahābhārata (Leiden: Brill, 2004), no substantive semantic differences exist between vīra and sūra in the Mahābhārata (see pp. 23, 55), yet elsewhere

27 At AŚ 9.1.1–16 kings are warned against seeking individual glory in battle and should play a long-term game to maintain political supremacy, involving diplomacy, trade and subterfuge.
he notes that although displaying close synonymy, the term vīra is best translated as ‘warrior’, whereas śūra means ‘hero’ (p. 28, n. 8). While the six epic chapters are not indicative of the whole epic, a clear semantic distinction can be seen in the use of vīra and śūra. In this vein, P. Caracchi has drawn a more definitive conclusion about the meaning of vīra and śūra in medieval bhakti texts of the Sant tradition; namely, that śūra denotes ‘hero’: ‘The Hero in Sant Tradition’, in Alessandro Monti (ed.), Hindu Masculinities Across the Ages: Updating the Past (Torino: L’Harmattan Italia, 2002), pp. 223–45.
Index

Abbink, Jon 608
Abner, and Joab 619–20
‘abomination’, biblical notion of 615–16
Abram (Abraham) 611
sacrifice of son 617
Abu-Lughod, Lila 395
Abydos, Egypt, First Dynasty burials 464
acephalous society warfare see hunter-gatherers; raiding
Achaemenides, son of Amestris 370
Acts of Ptolemy and Lucius 583, 584
Acy-Romance, France, Iron Age human sacrifice 453
Adrianople, battle of (378 CE) 264, 268
adultery
biblical punishment of women 616
punishment by male members of household 385
by women in Greece 384, 390
Aegospotami, battle of (405 BCE) 538
Aeneas 550
and Anchises 676, 681
Africa
Homo erectus 58
Homo sapiens 58
Later Stone Age 99–104, 104
see also hunter-gatherers; Kalahari
Agathonike, martyr 583
Agathos Daemon, boxer 504
Agia Triada, Crete, depictions of combat 133
Agricola, emperor 249
agriculture
animal husbandry 483
Japan 160, 167, 174–6
Maya 200
see also farmers
Agrippa II, king of Jews 251
Agris, Charente, France, Iron Age helmet 147
Aguateca, Guatemala, Maya site 209
Aijmer, Göran 608
Akhenaton, pharaoh 188, 191
Akhtoy III, pharaoh 345
Akkad, kingdom of 221, 228
culture 460
fall of 230
Alcibiades 542
treatment of wife and dog 392–4
Alesia, battle of (52 BCE) 154
Alexander the Great 29, 235, 552
Alexander Severus, emperor 254
Alexandria, destruction of the Serapeion (391 CE) 513, 515, 520–2
Alken Enge, Jutland, Iron Age massacre deposit 448
Allan, William 540
Allen, Danielle 383
Alvarado, Pedro de 214
Amarna Letters, between Babylon and Egypt 234
Amenemhet II, pharaoh 346
Amenhotep II, pharaoh 183, 186
Americas
evidence of violence in Paleoamericans 23, 54
initial colonisation 190
ritualised violence 7
skeletal evidence of health 329
warfare 42, 51, 201
see also Chichen Itza; Maya people; Yanomamo people
Amestris, wife of Xerxes
mutilation of Masistes’ wife 364, 367, 369
reputed sacrifice of children 371
revenge on Apollonides of Cos 371–2
revenge for death of son 370–1
rivalry with Artāynte 365–70
Amfreville, France, Iron Age helmet 148
Amida, Persian siege of (359 CE) 265, 267
Index

Ammianus Marcellinus
  battle narrative 264, 265
  on siege of Amida 265
Ammonites, violence against women of
  Gilead 366
Amytis, daughter of Amestris 371
Amytis, wife of Cyrus the Great, and death of
eunuch Petasakes 373
Anacreon, on punishment 539
Anchises, and Aeneas 676, 681
Andrieskraal, South Africa, Later Stone Age
  remains 106
anger, and justice in Athens 438
Anglesea island, Wales, Roman conquest
  of 329
animal sacrifice 7
  Buddhist critique of 598
  Egypt 184
  Gupta horse 603
  see also animal sacrifice, Greece and Rome;
  human sacrifice
animal sacrifice, Greece and Rome 475–90, 539
  civic regulations 477, 478, 483
  classical vegetarian writers and 475, 477,
  485–6
  Empedocles’ view of 484
  ended by Christianity 489, 490, 582
  Epicurean view 485
  exemption of working oxen 481, 485
  Greek gods and 488
  Greek sacrificial holocausts 481
  images 478
  inspection of entrails 479
  Porphyry’s Abstaining from Meat 486–9
  and provision of food 480
  Pythagorean view of 484–5
  Stoic view 485
  Theophrastus on 485–6
  victim as channel of communication with
  gods 480, 481, 483
  wild animals 481
animals
  compared with slaves 479
  and doctrine of substitutions (to excise
  maladies) 471–2
  fights with heroes 637
  husbandry 483
  and justice (Greece) 482, 484–5, 490
  killed in siege of Carthage 243
  legal status of 475
  legal treatment of as criminals 477, 481
  as power symbols in Egypt 343
  trial for murder 483
  and violence 15
  violence by 22, 481, 483
  see also hunting
Annals, Chinese philosophical texts 431–2, 435
Antigonids, defeat by Rome 243
Antioch, riot of the statues (387 CE) 518
Antiochus Epiphanes IV, King 573, 574, 577
  desecration of Jewish temple (168 BCE) 512
Antoninus Pius, emperor 252
Antonius, Marcus 407
  and trial of Norbanus 405
Antonius, Marcus (Mark Antony) 415
Aphrodisias, Sebastion (Turkey), monument
  672, 673
Aphrodite, goddess of love 484
Apollo, god, on animal sacrifice 486, 487
Apollonides of Cos, Amestris’ punishment of
  371–2
Appian, on Punic Wars 242, 245
Apuleius 567
  The Golden Ass 562
Aqiva, rabbi 574, 575
Arabs
  invasions of Roman Empire 257, 259
  and wife beating 386
Arausio, battle of (105 BCE) 405
Arbela, Mesopotamia 643
Arbousse-Bastide, Tristan 171
archaeology 6
  of battlefields 155, 248, 249
  changing perspectives of 444–5
  and destruction of pagan temples 515
  early China 419–20
  evidence of climate change 47, 51
  evidence from 20, 21
Iron Age
  Britain 321, 323, 334, 337
  ritual violence 442–3, 457
Japan 161–71, 164, 175
Later Stone Age Africa 101–8, 103
  of LBK burials 306
Maya 198–217
  projects 198
Mesopotamia 219, 227, 629
Neolithic massacres 299, 301, 304
Roman 247
  signatures of violence 164
South America, forager raiding warfare 42
Syria 629
  and warfare 42, 43–4, 55
see also bioarchaeology; burials; fortifica-
  tions; hill forts; settlements; skeletons;
  skulls; weaponry

705
archery see arrows and arrowheads; bows and arrows
Archi, Alfonso 640
Ardrey, Robert 99, 109
arenas, amphitheatres
role of 35, 557, 558
seating by social rank 559
see also sport, combat; theatre
Aristides, AElius 252
Aristophanes
Clouds 392
Lysistrata 390–1
WaspS 380
Aristotle 33
on animals 483
on violence 534, 535
armies
Greek, hoplites 498
size of
Bronze Age 134
Roman 242
see also Chinese army; Roman army; soldiers; warfare; warriors
Arminius, Germanic leader 155
armour, Bronze Age 130–2, 138
cloak ‘armour’ 131
corselets 130
greaves 132
helmets 131
organic (layered linen) 131
scale 130
tin bronze plate 130
two-part plate 130
armour, Japan, wooden breastplates 170
Arras, Yorkshire, Iron Age cemeteries 324
Arrhachion, pancratist 501–3
arrows and arrowheads 65, 68, 75
arrowheads 101, 102, 106, 119
bronze, Aegean 128
European Neolithic 85, 89, 90, 93
Iron Age 144
Japanese 163, 170
Neolithic China 419
poisoned, San, Kalahari 108, 110
stone, Aegean 128
stone, Korean style 167
wounds from 43, 303, 313
see also bows and arrows
arsenals, Roman fabricenses 271
Artaxerxes I, king of Persia 370
Artaxerxes II, king of Persia 362
and brother Cyrus 374
and Parysatis 375
and wife Stateira 375, 376
Artaγnte, daughter of Masistes, rivalry with Amestris 363–70
Artemis, goddess of hunting 481
Arthasªstra, treatise on statecraft 687, 697–8
Artoxares the Paphlagonian, eunuch at court of Persia 373
Asconius, and travelling retinues 403
Ashurbanipal, king of Neo-Assyria 363, 469, 471, 642
Ashurnasirpal II, king of Persia 366, 639, 641
punishments of enemies 373
Aªoka, Maurya emperor, India 591, 599–600
Asparn-Schletz, Austria, Neolithic massacre site 80, 88, 308–9
Aspeberget, Sweden, rock art 129
Assyria 28, 461
in biblical narratives 612, 621
display of trophy heads 639, 640, 649
New Empire 29, 32
palace reliefs 639, 642, 650, 651
punishment by blinding 373
and substitute king ritual 468
and violence against women 367
see also Mesopotamia; Syria
astrology, Mesopotamia 468
prediction of eclipses 469
Athaliah, queen of Judea 619
Athenian theatre 540–2
comedy 541–2
tragedy 540–1
Athens
Agora Bronze Age burials 133
Bouphonia festival 487
coup (411 BCE) 537
and democracy in classical period
535–40, 545
legal system and law courts 536–7, 542–5
and legal speeches 543
and witnesses 543
military campaigns 537, 538
military service 538
murder law 483, 544
Scythian archers 542
slaves 33
and status 544
Thirty Tyrants 537, 545–6
violence, law and community 531–47
as violent city 382, 383, 537, 539–40
weakness of state 535, 544, 547
Atossa, wife of Darius I 362
Atrahasis, poem 633, 651
Atrahasis, Babylonian creation myth 466, 651
and flood story 467
Augustine, Saint, City of God 584
Augustus Caesar, emperor 248
and expansion of empire 556
and gang violence 415–16
and golden age of Rome 240
and regulation of gladiatorial games 505, 558
and reorganisation of collegia 416
Res Gestae 248
Australia, forager societies 50, 52
axes Bronze Age 127–8, 129
Neolithic 92, 118, 119, 419
as tools 128
Aztecs see Nahua
Baadsgaard, Aubrey 462
Babylon, rise of kingdom of 233, 234, 460
diplomatic relations with Egypt 234
Kassite kings 234
Babylonian Empire, Old 28
astrologers 468
culture 465
Bacchanalia, suppression (186 BCE) 512
Bagapates/Mastabates, eunuch at court of Persia 374
Bahlam Ajaw, Maya king of Tortuguero 206
Bahraei, Zainab 222
B’ajilaj Chan K’awiil, king of Dos Pilas 208
Balawat, Assyria, Gates of 650
Ballito Bay, Natal, Later Stone Age 105
remains 105
banditry, Rome 562
barbarian tribes
on Chinese frontiers 278
horsemanship 262
as increasing threat to late Roman Empire 261
migrations 36
and siege warfare 268
barbarian women
Greek portrayal of 360
Roman depictions 674
Batavian revolt against Rome 251
Bathsheba, wife of King David 362
Battersea Shield 147, 150
battle narratives, Roman 264
battles
blood and carnage of 692
Maya depictions of 208
as ritual sacrifice for warriors (India) 691–4
Roman 241, 244, 263–6, 555
Roman depictions 654
see also fighting; warfare
Baven, Germany, Bronze Age arrowheads 129
Beckmann, Martin 674
beheading see decapitation; headhunting; heads
Belgium, Neolithic enclosures 92
Bhagavadgītā 596, 699
Bhagavatī Sūtra 597
bia, Greek word for violence 476, 533
Bi, personification of violence 534
Bible, New Testament
apocalyptic texts 624
Book of Revelation 578, 624
Epistles 578
Gospel of Mark 577, 578
Bible, Old Testament (Hebrew) 31, 607–27
Amos 366
apocalyptic stories 624
blinding as punishment 373
cultural and social context 607, 609
Daniel 574, 624
and destruction of enemies 612–13
Deuteronomy 612, 614–15, 617
divine sanction for violence 618, 626
divine violence 622–5
Exodus 617
Ezekiel 367
Hosea 366
individuals in civil legal codes 613–16
and Israelites’ claim to territory 611–12
Jeremiah 617, 622, 623
Joshua 611
Leviticus 613
Micah 617
Nehemiah 376
and neighbouring kings 621–2
Noah myth (Genesis) 467
post-biblical intolerance 625
religious justification for violence 7, 608–9
representations of violence 607, 609–11, 626
on royal courts 362
story of Jezebel 368
violence of kings 618–21
violence by patriarchs and foundational figures 611–13
violence by priests and prophets 616–18

Index

707
Index

Bible, Old Testament (Hebrew) (cont.)
Yhwh 615, 621, 623
see also Bible, New Testament;
Christianity; Judaism; patron deities
bioarchaeology 114, 304, 323
Bronze Age 132–4
evidence of health 43, 338
see also skeletons
birds of prey, corpses on battlefield left for
643, 644
bishops, Christian 518, 522, 525
negotiators in late antiquity 274
Bisitun inscription, Darius I’s 366, 374
Blok, Anton 608
‘blood money’ 85
bodyguards, Roman elites 402
illegally armed 407, 410
military veterans 407
payment to gangs 413
for travelling 403
bog bodies, Iron Age 450–3, 458
Britain 327
Lindow Man 451
Oldcroghan Man (Ireland) 451
as ritual execution 327, 451
torture and dismemberment 451, 452
Boii, Celtic people, mass deportation of 246
Bonampak, Mexico, Mayan murals 198, 208
Book of Documents, Zhou dynasty China 422–3
Book of Songs, Zhou dynasty China 421–2
‘Climb the Wooded Hill’ 421
‘No Wraps’ 422
‘Sixth Month’ 421
‘They Beat Their Drums’ 422
‘Waves of the Pan’ 422
Bottéro, Jean 471
Boudicca, British Celtic queen, rebellion
249, 334
bows and arrows 65, 68, 75
adopted by Maya 212
Bronze Age 119, 128–30
Neolithic 119, 302
Roman use of 263
San, Kalahari 111, 113
see also arrows and arrowheads; spears
boxing, Greece 496, 497–8, 500–1
hand bindings 500
rules and referees 500
submission 500
Brading villa, Isle of Wight, Roman Britain,
body in well 336
Brahmanism (Hinduism) 590, 591–7
āśrama stages of life 592
concept of cakravartin (paramount
king) 592
dharma in 591
Māṇavadarśanāśāstra text 594
varna hereditary class 591
Brastad, Sweden, Bronze Age weapons 127
Britain 320–39
age and gender differences 338
Iron Age 321, 324–9
figurines 149
hill forts 152
oppida 152
see also Maiden Castle
Roman 329–38
indigenous victims 335
military activity 332
social changes 332
urban centres 333, 332, 335
Roman invasion (43 CE) 249, 323, 332, 333
Brodbeck, Simon 698
bronze
mechanical properties of 123, 136
sheet metalworking 130, 138
Bronze Age
combat sports in Greece 496–7
early cities 27
emergence of elites 26
fortifications 26, 120, 134–6, 139
initial Bronze Age (IBA) 118–20
osteoarchaeology 132–4
specialised weaponry 26–7, 120–30, 138
armour 130–2
shields 121–2
swords 122–6
warfare in Europe 117–39
bronze objects, Chinese, in Japan 170, 173
Brown, Peter 36
The World of Late Antiquity 257, 274
Brown, Shelby 665
Buckley, William 52
Buddha (Gautama) 33
Buddhism 590
benevolence 598
bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) 599
in China 293–4
and concept of cakkavatti (paramount
king) 598
dharma in 597
Jātakas 599
and kingship 598–600
and laws of rebirth 590
non-violence 589

708
power of monasteries 293
uprisings 294
Buffel’s Bay, South Africa, Later Stone Age remains 106
Burch, Ernest 52
burials 43, 54
Bronze Age, Athens 133
Bronze Age warriors 139
chambered tombs 89
evidence of human sacrifice 419
with grave goods
Mesolithic 71, 73
Mesopotamia 227
Neanderthal 64
Royal Cemetery at Ur 461
Japan
jar coffins 167
Yayoi warrior graves 168–9
Late Palaeolithic 65, 75, 189
LBK rituals 306, 311
Maya 198
Mesolithic 70
Neolithic cemeteries 83, 299, 304–6
non-normative Roman Britain 336, 339
not given for those killed in warfare 54, 67
and ritual slaughter of attendants 227, 420, 460
see also burials, Iron Age; cemeteries;
funerary rites; mass graves
burials, Iron Age
chariots 145, 146, 326, 327
children, Britain 322
Claudian invasion of Britain 334
and evidence of human sacrifice 227, 453–4
good 322
hill forts 325, 446, 454
performative violence 326
slave (Wales) 328, 449
weapons in 145–7, 157
Burkert, W. 488
_Homo Necans_ 478
Burna-Buriash, king of Babylon 234
Burnett, A. P. 541
Bushmen see San hunter-gatherers

Cadbury Castle, Somerset, Iron Age battlefield 155
Caepio, Quintus Servilius 405
Calakmul, Mexico, Maya site 204
Calgacus, Caledonian chieftain 249
California
deaths of women in warfare 55
forager societies 50

Callinicum, Syria, attack on synagogue (388 CE) 513
Campbell, Brian 244
Canaan, Israelites’ conquest of 611
Cancuen, Guatemala, Maya site 209
cannibalism
by animals 489
during sieges 267
Cape Province, South Africa, shell middens 109
captives
Chinese massacres of 287
execution of 67
Maya 208, 215
for human sacrifice, Maya 201
Neo-Assyrian taking of 236
Persian treatment of 268
see also prisoners of war
_Capture of Joppa_, Egyptian story 193
Caracalla, emperor, public sculpture 676–9, 677
Carn Brea, Cornwall 84
Carthago (New Carthage), Roman capture of 242
Casilinum, battle of (554 CE) 263
Čaška Veles, North Macedonia, Bronze Age remains 133
Cataline Conspiracy (63 BCE) 402
Catherwood, Frederick 198
cavalry
Chinese army 287, 289
Persian Empire 262
Roman army 246, 262, 263
Ceibal, Guatemala, Pre-classic Maya site 202, 203, 215
Celtic culture 441–2
‘cult of the head’ 442, 454–7
cemeteries
Iron Age 135, 324
Mesolithic 69, 70
Neolithic 83, 90, 304–6
Roman Britain 323
Ur Royal 227, 461–4, 472
see also burials; mass graves
Cetatea Veche, Romania, Bronze Age site 130, 135
Champotón, Mexico, Maya site 210, 213
chariots
Iron Age 145, 146, 326, 327
Roman races 560–1
charitable activities, Christian church and 273, 274
Chariton, _Callirhoe_ (Greek novel) 394
Index

Chatters, James 23
chemical warfare, Persian use of sulphur fumes 266
Chemosh, deity of Moab 612, 617, 623
Chi You, Chinese warrior god 292
Chichen Itza, Mexico 209, 216
skull racks 209
Spanish at 213
children
biblical ritual killing of 617–18
evidence of abuse, Roman Britain 335
evidence of deficiency diseases 337
and infanticide (China) 293
Iron Age burials, Britain 322
Late Palaeolithic burial 65
Mesolithic burials 71
sacrificial victims, Maya 202, 203
as victims in Later Stone Age (Africa) 108
China 277–94, 418–36
baoli (violence) 277
Buddhism 293–4
civil wars 281
daoism 292
everly cities 27
Eastern Jin dynasty 281
equivocal view of war and heroism 418, 432, 436
ethnic conflicts 281
Former (Western) Han dynasty 279, 283
Han dynasty 29
and claims to legitimacy 284, 433–4, 436
end of empire 36
Later (Eastern) Han dynasty 279
legitimate violence 277
Neolithic defensive enclosures 25, 419
northern frontiers 279, 286
north–south division 280
private armies 286, 289–90
Qin dynasty 436
fall of 433
First Emperor’s campaigns of conquest 278, 281, 286
justification for wars of unification 432–4
massacres of captives 287
terracotta army 32
revenge as duty 434–6
Shang dynasty 28, 282
oracle bones 420
Zhao depiction of 422–3
Spring and Autumn period 424
Sui dynasty 281
Three Kingdoms period 280, 283
treatment of warfare in philosophical texts 425–32
Warring States period 278, 282, 285, 292, 424
wars of unification 279, 283, 285, 424
Western Jin dynasty 281, 283, 284
Yellow Emperor myth 292
Zhao kingdom 287
Zhou empire 29, 282, 421–4
Eastern Zhou 424
end of Western Zhou 424
overthrow of Shang 422–3
see also Chinese army; warfare, China;
Zheng, emperor
Chinese army 285–92
barbarian elites in 291
cavalry 287, 289
conscription 280, 286, 288
divination 292
hereditary soldiery 290
incorporation of defeated enemies 291
infantry 286
Later Han adaptations 288–9
manpower problems 290–1
mercenaries 281
and private armies 280–90
professionalisation 288
and training 286, 287, 288
Warring States mobilisation 285
Christ, Matthew 544
Christianity, in late antiquity 512
bishops 274, 518, 522, 525
and classical animal sacrifice 489, 490, 582
and conversions of Jews of Minorca 525–7
Diocletian’s edicts against 581–2
emphasis on peacefulness 519, 522
and freedom under Constantius 582
and heretical groups 583
impact on Roman warfare 273–4
intra-Christian conflicts 523
and martyrdom 521, 523, 524, 577–84
moral condemnation of violence 519, 524–7
New Prophecy group 584
persecution 522, 524, 578–81, 582
and post-biblical intolerance 625
and sacred forms of violence 519
understandings of martyrdom 582–3
use of violent language 519
Cicantakhama the Sagartian 366
Cicero, Marcus Tullius
and Clodius 412, 413
on gladiators 505
personal bodyguards 402
and Pompey 410, 412
prosecution of Verres 568
on slaves 565
and trial of Norbanus 405
Cimbri tribe 449
Cinna, Lucius Cornelius 247
circumcelliones, Donatists 523
circumcision, Egypt 190, 192
Cirencester, Gloucestershire (Corinium Dubunnorum), female Roman British burials 335
cities, earliest 27
and defence 30
Maya 199, 206
Mesopotamia 27, 30, 219, 221–2, 227
see also Athens; Constantinople; Rome; settlements
city gates, display of trophy heads at 640, 649
civilians
 compulsory employment to maintain Roman army 272
and sieges 241, 243, 267
soldiers’ violence towards 272
Clarke, John 657
Claudius, emperor 312, 333, 556, 559
monument 672, 673
Clearchus of Sparta 376, 537
Clement, Christian philosopher 584
clergy
 Diocletian’s edicts for arrest of 581
negotiators in late antiquity 274
see also priests
clientela relationship, Rome 401, 566
climate change
 as cause of warfare 47, 51, 315
environmental crisis (third millennium BCE) 356
Little Ice Age 47, 51
Clodius Pulcher, Publius, tribune 403, 411–13, 414
and Cicero 412
*The Clouds*, comedy 541
Coarelli, Filippo 655
Coba, Mexico, road to Yaxuna 207
Coelius, Sextus, public scribe 414
Cogan, Mordechai 367
Cohen, David 384
Cohen, E. 534, 536
coins
 Iron Age
 depiction of warriors 143, 150
depiction of weapons 148
representation of Indian kings 603
Colchester (Camulodunum), evidence of Boudican rebellion 334
collective violence 12, 39
murder of single dangerous male 53
Neolithic massacres as 315
see also gang violence; inter-group violence; intra-societal violence; massacres; warfare
collegia (local community associations), Rome 401, 411–12, 413
Augustan reforms 416
Collins, John J. 612, 624
Columbus, Batholomew 213
Comalcalco, Mexico, Maya site 206
Commodus, emperor 254
communities
 and boundaries 84
and identity 84
size of Neolithic 95
see also neighbours
community distress, and prehistoric violence 108
Confucius 33
*Analects* 426
and *Annals* 431
intellectual heirs of 427–8
Connell, R. W. 690, 698
conscription
 Chinese army 280, 286, 288
Roman army 270–1
violence during 271
Constantina (Tella), siege of 267
Constantine, emperor 273
Arch of 678–81, 679
conversion to Christianity 512, 514
and toleration of Donatists 524
Constantinople
 attack by Goths on (378 CE) 268
foundation of 257
Persian siege of (626 CE) 259, 269
popular riots 518, 562
Constantius, emperor, end of persecution of Christians 582
Copan, Guatemala, Maya kingdom 204, 208, 216
Córdoba, Francisco Hernández de 213
Corinth, Isthmian games 499
Coriolanus, Gaius Marius, legend of 240
Cornelius Scipio Barbatus, Lucius 551
Cornell, Tim 239
Cornesti-Iarcuri, Romania, Bronze Age fortifications 120
cosmology
Egyptian concept of *maʿat* (cosmic order) 186, 351, 356
Indian 688, 692, 696
Iron Age 441, 446, 457
Mesopotamian 466
Cotta, Lucius Aurelius 405
Crete
′Boxer Rhyton′ 496
defensive Bronze Age settlements 135
Crickley Hill, Gloucestershire 84
Crowley, Jason 539
Ctesias of Cnidus
on Achaemenid Persia court 362, 372
*Persica* 373
on rivalry of Parysatis and Stateira 375
story of Amestris’ revenge on Apollonides of Cos 371–2
story of Amestris’ revenge for death of son 370–1
Cuello, Belize, Maya mass burial 203
Cultural Hegemony, theory of 253
Cursing of Akkad, Mesopotamian text 230
cylinder seals 632, 646–8
animals and heroes on 637
Mari 644, 647
Cyrus, king of Persia 374, 621, 622
Dacia, Roman wars against 252, 556, 672
Dadusha, king of Eshnunna 644
Daimond, Jared 6
Dalhanemi, king 598
 Дана, ′Punishment′ 594
Danebury hill fort, Hampshire 443
Iron Age burials 329
Daoism, and Way of Great Peace sect 292
Darius I, king of Persia 362
Bisitun inscription 366, 374
Darius II, king of Persia 363, 365, 372
Dart, Raymond 99
Darwin, Charles, *On the Origin of Species* 39
David, king of Israel 362, 610, 620
De Zilk, Netherlands, Bronze Age site 130
Deacon, Hilary, and Janette Deacon 109
dearth rates
acephalous society warfare 41
correlation between murder and death in combat 253
Jōmon period, Japan 176
warfare 41–2
dearth tolls
Chinese full-scale warfare 287
interpretation of numbers 245, 247
Jewish War 250
in Roman wars 241, 242, 245
Social War (Italy) 247
Debrück, Hans 241
decapitation
of enemies (Mesopotamia) 638–43, 649
by Germans 252
Iron Age deposited remains 450
as punishment in Egypt 352
Roman Britain 336
see also executions; headhunting; heads; mutilation
Decius, emperor, and Christians 580, 583
defence
early cities 30
by states against nonstate peoples 28, 30
see also enclosures; fortifications
Delphi, Pythian games 499, 503
Dendra, Greece, Bronze Age armour 130
Denmark
Iron Age 132, 147, 448
Mesolithic burial sites 70
Neolithic endemic violence 91
deportation
Chinese forcible migrations 291
mass Roman 246
depositions, Iron Age
bog bodies 448, 450–3
watery contexts 448
weapons 147–8, 158, 447–9
wooden boats 448
The Destruction of Miletus, tragedy 540
dhärma (pious duty) 590, 591, 597, 686
Didius, Titus 405
*Dīgha Nīkāyā*, Mahāsudassana Sutta 598
Dillon, Sheila 674
Dio Cassius 248
Diocletian, emperor 270
anti-Christian edicts 512, 581–2, 583
Dionysius, on Veii 240
Dirce, Punishment of 660
dismemberment
bog bodies 451, 452
of enemies 632, 638
Dlamini, Nonhlanhla 106, 113
DNA
and archaeological evidence of infections 43
potential for research 51
see also genetics
Dnjepr Rapids, Ukraine, Mesolithic cemeteries (Vasilyevka) 69
Dobe !Kung, murder rate 100
Dogs, as scavengers 368
Dolabella, Publius Cornelius 415
domestic violence 14
Athens 539
beating of parents 392
Greece 380–2, 381, 398
evidence for 396–8
see also women
Donatists, Christian schismatic 523
Dos Pilas, Guatemala, Maya site 208
Dossey, Leslie 397
Döttenbichl, Germany, Iron Age–Roman battle 154
Douglas, Mary 476
Drake, Harold 513
duels, between warring champions 189, 194, 498, 509
Duilius, Caius 531
Dunbabin, Katherine 663
Dunidam, Jeroen 362
Dura-Europos, Roman fortress, Persian capture of (256 CE) 266
Eannatum, king, and Stele of the Vultures 634, 635, 644
Ebla, Syria, display of trophy heads 639, 640
Eckstein, Arthur, Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome 239
eclipses (solar, lunar, planetary), Mesopotamian kings and 469
Edessa 272
siege of 267
troops billeted in 272
Edington Burtle, Somerset, Bronze Age site 130
Egami, Namio 162
Egnatius Rufus, and urban uprising 415
Egypt 28, 179–95, 342–58
acculturation of foreigners 192, 347
administrative audits 355
animals as power symbols 343
annexation by Rome 248
bureaucracy (‘civil service’) 344, 350, 357
capture of foreigners for labour 347
combat ritual and festivals 183–7
concept of ma’at (cosmic order, stability) 351, 356
concept of the Restorer 358
contempt for enemies 344
crisis at end of Old Kingdom (c. 2200 BCE) 356–8
and demand for commodities 345–6
development of Pharaonic system 342–5
diplomatic relations with Babylon 234
effect of Nile flooding on 47, 352–4
expeditionary forces 349
raids 349
sieges 349
frontier defences 350
domestic violence 36
funerary ritual of human sacrifice 464, 473
hunting scenes 342
and Israel 622
military forces 348–50
recruitment and training 349
Naqada I period 181
Naqada II period 187
Naqada III period 188
Netherworld Books 186, 190
punishments 351–2
rituals of execration 185, 191, 346
sphere of influence 345–7
state violence 342, 350–2
violence in afterlife 355–6
violence among the gods 352–4
see also pharaohs; warfare, Egypt
Ejsbøl, Denmark, Iron Age weapons deposit 448
El Djem, Tunisia, Domus Sollertiana mosaic 663
El Mirador, Maya pyramid site 203
Elijah, prophet 618
elites
emergence in Bronze Age 26
Japan 173, 175
Mesopotamian military 227, 231
and private armies in Later Han China 289–90, 291
punishment of 33
and ritual slaughter of attendants 227, 460
and warfare 36
and warriors 137, 138
see also elites, Roman
elites, Roman
and intermediaries with gangs 414
and popular support 404–6, 407–8
provision of games 509–10, 558
punishments 564
Empedocles, on animals and justice 484
enclosures
communal construction of 83, 96
and defences 84, 92, 94
evidence of attacks on 84, 94
Neolithic 25, 83, 92
see also fortifications; hill forts
Index

Enki, Babylonian god 466, 467
Enmetena, king of Lagash 224, 228
Enna-Dagan, king of Mari 644
Entremont, Provence, stone monuments 454–5, 456
Enûma eliš, creation epic 466
Ephesus, council of (431 CE) 524
Epic of the Creation, Mesopotamia 633, 651
Enu ¯ma eliš, creation epic
Enmetena, king of Lagash 224, 228
Enna-Dagan, king of Mari 644
Entremont, Provence, stone monuments 454–5, 456
Enu ¯ma eliš, creation epic
Ephesus, council of (431 CE) 524
Epic of the Creation, Mesopotamia 633, 651
Epicureans, on animal sacrifice 485
Epirus, Roman conquest (167 BCE) 245
Esarhaddon, king of Babylon 469, 471
ethnic cleansing see deportation
ethnography and evidence of warfare 45
of forager societies 49–50
and intra-societal violence 52
study of Kalahari San 100–1
Etsuji, Japan, Yayoi settlement site 171
Eulau, Saxony-Anhalt
arrowheads 119
Mesolithic ambush site 70
Neolithic mass grave 80
Eunapius, pagan writer 520
Euripides, Melanippe myth 390
Europe
Bronze Age warfare and weaponry 117–39
Iron Age 142–58, 441–58
Neolithic period 79–97, 86
Roman army in 153–5, 157
warrior ideology 7
Eusebius
Church History 582
on Diocletian edicts against Christians 581
Martyrs of Palestine 582
Eutherius of Tyana 524
evolution, warfare and 47
excarnation
Late Bronze Age 457
Neolithic 314
executions and death penalties
ad bestias (Roman amphitheatre) 493–4, 564
Athens 539
burial alive 371, 420, 453
of captives 67, 366
for cowardly soldiers 694
flaying alive 366, 374
impalement (of enemies) 649
in Indian texts 600, 601
of poisoners in Persia 377
see also executions and death penalties, Egypt; punishments
executions and death penalties, Egypt
beheading 185, 352
of criminals 185
dead by fire 185, 352
hanging inverted of defeated enemies 186
impalement 188, 191, 352
public 195
throwing to the crocodiles 352
exile, as punishment for elite Romans 564
Fabius Maximus 245
Fabius, Quintus (Maximus Rullianus), Tomb of 665
Faqing, Buddhist rebel leader (515 CE) 294
Faraoksp, South Africa, Later Stone Age remains 106, 107, 112
farmers
group size 95
pastoralists 113
relations with forager societies 49, 55, 82–5
social structure 95–6
see also agriculture
Faulkner, Neil 239
Fei River, Battle of (383 CE) 284, 291
Fertile Crescent, cities 27
feuding 53–4
Mesolithic 94
see also inter-group violence; intra-societal violence
Fiavé-Carera, Italy, Bronze Age site 130
fighting
bodily techniques, pre-Bronze Age 118
close-quarters sword 124
collaborative 136
Bronze Age 122
face-to-face 69
lines of battle, Bronze Age 121
and single combat (monomachia) 189, 498, 509
techniques 125–6, 136
see also battles; sport; warfare
Filippokva, Russia, Iron Age weapon burials (kurgans) 146, 150
Final (Late) Palaeolithic period 58
burials 65, 75, 189
hunter-gatherer violence in 65–6
Fisher, Nick 382, 383
Fiskerton, Lincolnshire, Iron Age site 449
Fitzgerald, James 684, 695
Flaminius, Gaius, agrarian law (232 BCE) 404
food, as weapon, Egyptian warfare 191
forager societies see hunter-gatherers
fortifications
and archaeology 43
Bronze Age 26, 134–6, 139
initial (IBA) 120
Italy 135
Mycenae 134
Chinese frontier 286
Iron Age 151–3
oppida 151–3, 441
Japan, Inland Sea 172
Maya 198, 207, 210
Mesopotamian palaces and city walls 227
see also hill forts; oppida; settlements
Foucault, Michel 13
Fowler, Michael 361
France
increased Neolithic violence 93
see also Gaul; Gournay-sur-Aronde;
Marmesse; Massalia; Ribemont-sur-Ancre; Saint-Césaire
Frank, Tenney 238
Frankfurter, David 624
Fravartish, of Media 366
Fregellae, near Rome, terracotta reliefs
frescoes (wall paintings)
chamber tomb 665–6
Greece 496
mythological scenes 657–60, 659, 660, 669
Pompeii 656–60
The Frogs, comedy 541
funerary monuments, Roman
allegorical 668
depictions of war and violence 665–71
sarcophagi 667–71, 668, 670
funerary rites
Iron Age Britain 322, 339
LBK 306, 311
and ritual violence 457
Roman Britain 323
see also burials
Galba, Servius Sulpicius 245
Gallic Wars
Caesar’s account of 156, 157, 247–8
death toll 247
Gallienus, emperor, and Christians 581
Gambash, Gil 251
gang violence, early imperial Rome 415–16
gang violence, late republican Rome 400–16
employed by Marius 408
and intermediaries 414
at public assemblies 414
Sulpicius and 408–10
Gal, Azar 6
Gaul, Iron Age 147, 450, 457
human sacrifice 453
Julius Caesar on 143, 446
sanctuaries 449–50
see also Gallic Wars
Gaza, destruction of Marnas temple 515
Gebel Sahaba see Jebel Sahaba
Geller, Stephen 414
gender relations 32
behavioural differences 51
and sexual dimorphism 51
see also women
genetics
evidence for Neolithic population
migrations 91–3
and warfare 48, 50–1
‘warrior gene’ 51
see also DNA
Germany
and Rome 143, 155, 248, 252, 254
violence of tribal fighters 249
see also Halberstadt; Herxheim;
Heuneburg; Manching; Talheim;
Tollense
Gessert, Genevieve 669
Gibbon, Edward 36, 252
Gilgamesh, epic of 31, 221, 222, 467
wrestling 494
Gilmore, David, model of machismo
violence 382
gladiators 505, 506, 508, 509, 558
in domestic mosaics 661–5, 663, 664
on funerary friezes 666, 667
in Roman elite retinues 403
see also sport, combat, Roman
Glauberg, Germany, Iron Age statue 149
Gloucester, Roman British mass grave 337
Golfart, Walter, on barbarian settlement of
Roman Empire 258
Goths 263, 268
sacking of Rome (410 CE) 268
Gournay-sur-Aronde, France
animal sacrifice 450
Iron Age weapon deposits 148, 450
Gracchus, Gaius, bodyguards 407
Gracchus, Tiberius 414
agrarian legislation 406–7
Gradište Idjoš, Serbia
arrowheads 129
Bronze Age remains 117
Grauballe Man, bog body (Jutland) 452
Gravettian period 58, 64, 75
Greece, ancient
  animal sacrifice 475–90
  Archaic Age 496
  athletic games 35, 495, 499
  changing ideas of violence 534, 546
  combat sport 496–504
  early Bronze Age fortifications 120
  endemic violence 382, 383, 398
  festivals for gods 499
  gymnasia 499, 500
  and honour-and-shame nexus 14, 384–6
  and myths of gods and heroes 34, 534
  violence against women 14, 380–98
    in literature 387–94
    triggers for 396
  warfare 552
  see also Athens; domestic violence
Greek language
  bia (violence) 476, 533
  hybris (arrogance) 533
  thusia and sphagia (sacrifice) 477
Grosseibstadt, Germany, Iron Age weapon burial 146
Grotte des Enfants, Liguria, Late Palaeolithic burials 65
Gundestrup Cauldron 145, 148, 149
Guti people, as threat to Akkad 230
hagiography, Christian 516
Hahn, Johannes 512
Halberstadt, Germany
  Neolithic mass grave 80, 89, 310–11, 312
  victims as non-local 310
Hallstatt scabbard 145, 148, 149
Hambledon Hill, Dorset 84
Hammurabi, king
  conquests 233
  Law Code stele 223, 225
Han Feizi, Chinese philosopher 430–1
Hanina ben Teradion, rabbi 574, 577
Hanson, Victor David 238
Harries, Jill 568
Harris, William V., War and Imperialism in Republican Rome 239, 244
Hashiguchi, Tatsuya 166
Hathigumpha inscription, India 597
headhunting
  Celtic ‘cult of the head’ 442, 454–7
  stone monuments, Provence 454–5, 456
see also decapitation
  heads, severed
    of enemies 632, 638–45, 640
    ritual treatment of 643, 650
see also skulls; trophy body parts
Hebrews, and Garden of Eden 34
helmets 131
  boar’s tusk 131
  bronze sheet 131
  horned 132
Iron Age 144
  decorated 147
  Waterloo bridge 147, 151
Helvetii tribe 247
Hephaestus, son of Hera 388
Hera, wife of Zeus 388
  ‘Punishment of’ 389
Heraclius, emperor 259
Herman, Gabriel 537, 544
hero-god, combat with monster, motif of 354
Herodotus, Histories
  Persian royal women 360, 362, 372
  story of Amestris and Artaynte 363–70
  on theatre 540
heroism
  Chinese view of 418, 432, 436
  Indian view of 684–702
Hersheim, Germany, Neolithic site 91, 305, 314
Hesiod, on animals and justice 489
Heuneburg, Germany, hill fort 151, 152, 441
hill forts
  Bronze Age defensive 120, 135, 151
  destroyed by fire 135
hill forts, Iron Age 151, 152, 443–7
  burials 325, 327, 329, 446, 454
  complex entrances 447
  display of trophies at gates 446, 454
  evolution of 444
  lack of water 444, 446
  shortcomings for defence 444–5, 447
  symbolic interpretation 443, 445
Hinduism see Brahmanism
Hirabar, Japan, Yayoi tomb 173
Hirschlanden, Germany, Iron Age statue 148
Historian’s Records (Shiji), Chinese text 432, 434
Hittite empire 28
Hjortspring, Denmark, Iron Age weapons deposit 147, 448
Hobi, Japan, shell midden 164
Hochdorf, Germany, Iron Age weapon burial 145, 157
Index

Hodgson, Dawn 462
Hohenstein-Stadel, Germany, Mesolithic skull nest 73
Hokkaido, Japan, hunter-gatherers 160
Holocene period 58
Homer
on athletic events 496, 500
Iliad 32, 497, 534
violence against women 387–9
Odyssey 32, 533, 534
homicide (murder)
Chinese terminology 431
and deaths in combat 253
murder in Old Testament 31
by slaves of owner (Rome) 568
as tool of political intrigue (China) 430–1
Homo, earliest species 58
Homo erectus 58
evidence of violence 59–60
Homo heidelbergensis 58
evidence of violence 59–60
Homo neanderthalensis 58
see also Neanderthals
Homo sapiens 58, 59
honour cultures 10
honour-and-shame nexus in Greece 14,
384–6
and level of abuse 394–6
and machismo 382
and masculinity 10, 382, 394–6
and women 11
Horemheb, pharaoh 184
Hornish Point, Scotland, Iron Age sacrificial burial 453
horse pits, staked, Maya use of 214
horses
in Iron Age warfare 145
see also cavalry
Horus, Egyptian falcon god 344
and Seth-animal myth 353–4
Hulu caves, Nanjing, China, Pleistocene skulls 60
human rights, in classical philosophy 490
human sacrifice 7, 35, 419
Iron Age, evidence from burials 453–4
Iron Age Britain 327, 453
bog bodies 327
Maya 198, 210
of captives 201
children 202, 203
mass graves of victims 201, 203, 208, 210
Neolithic China 419
ritual killing of servants and burial with elites 227
Rome 35
Shang dynasty China 420
see also animal sacrifice
human sacrifice, Mesopotamia 460–73
killing of royal retinue at death of kings 460, 461–4
substitute king ritual 460, 468–72
humans
debate on nature of 99
violence as innate in 6, 19
Humphreys, Anthony 109
Huns, and Roman warfare 262
Hunter, Fraser 143
hunter-gatherers
avoidance of conflict 21, 301
ethnographers’ encounters with 49–50
evidence of violence (Palaeolithic and Mesolithic) 58–76, 82
explorers’ accounts of 50
Final (Late) Palaeolithic 65–6
in Japan 160
Mesolithic 58
raiding warfare 40, 41, 48–50
relations with farmers 49, 55, 82–5
social structure 82, 94
and territory 93, 109, 300
Upper Palaeolithic 64–5
see also San hunter-gatherers, Kalahari
hunting 35, 539
in Egyptian rock art 342
Greek literature on 481, 483
India 601
Neanderthal risky strategies 61, 75
Roman arena spectacles 559
warfare equated with, in Egyptian depictions 181, 182–3, 195
Husain, Irfan 395
Hyksos, Theban attack on 193
Hypatia, philosopher 513
Iberia
Bronze Age shields 121
hilltop defensive fortifications 120
see also Spain
Ignatius, Letter to the Romans 583
Illerup Âdal, Jutland, Iron Age weapons deposit 448
Inanna, Babylonian goddess 472
Inarus of Libya 370
India
Buddhist non-violence 589
India (cont.)
and concept of non-violence 7, 589, 604
distinction between force and violence 590, 597, 604–5
early cities 27
heroism and warrior identity 684–702
ideal of heroism 685
Jainist non-violence 589
kingship and violence 589–605
political treatises 600–1
political violence 589
religious traditions of non-violence and
renunciation of violence 589
Vedic texts 32
see also Brahmansim (Hinduism);
Buddhism; Jainism; kings and king-
ship; Mahabharata; Santi Parvan; war-
fare, India; warrior ideology
India, modern northern 395
infanticide, religious meaning, China 293
injuries
accidental 68, 74
archaeological evidence of battle wounds
43, 54, 204
assistance and care for 62, 64, 75
blunt-force trauma 68, 69
healed 108, 307, 324
parry fractures of ulna 68, 69
penetrative weapons 62, 65, 66, 69, 75
Mesolithic 68, 70
Neolithic arrows 303
traumatic bone lesions 101, 108
see also skeletons; skulls
inscriptions
Chinese steles 283, 432–3
Moabite Mesha stele 612
Roman 531
Zhou dynasty bronze vessels 423
see also inscriptions: Indian, Maya,
Mesopotamian (below); pictorial representations
inscriptions, Indian 599–600
Allahabad pillar 601
Hathigumpha 597
inscriptions, Maya hieroglyphic 205, 206, 216
emblem glyphs 206
Hieroglyphic Stairways 208
inscriptions, Mesopotamian 219, 231
Assyrian 641
steles 223, 225, 632, 646
stele of Dadusha 644
stele of Sargon 634, 636, 643
Stele of the Vultures 224, 228, 634, 635,
643, 644
violence and warfare in 221, 224
Instruction of Merikare, Egyptian fiction 194
inter-group violence 51, 89
Iron Age 445
Britain 325
Gaul 450, 457
Late Palaeolithic 66
Mesolithic 67, 69, 75, 113, 301
Neolithic 89–90, 300
interpersonal violence 9, 14, 31
among forager societies 40
Neanderthal 62
prehistoric Japan 164
skeletal evidence of 59, 325, 337
see also domestic violence; fighting;
homicide
intra-societal violence 40, 523
ambush 70
Late Palaeolithic 66
management of 40
and warfare 52–3
Inupiaq people, Alaska 50, 52
Ireland, Bronze Age shields 121, 122
Iron Age
early cities 27
improved weaponry 28
see also hill forts; Iron Age, Britain; Iron Age, in Europe
Iron Age, Britain 321, 324–9
hill forts 152
slaves 328
Iron Age, in Europe 142–58
battlefields 153–5
culture and society 441–2, 446
evidence of violence 142, 157
fortifications 151–3
Gaulish sanctuaries 449–50
ritual violence 441–58
and Roman armies of conquest 157
scale of violence 142–4
symbolism of weaponry 143, 145, 157, 443
weaponry 143–5, 150–1
written descriptions 156
see also hill forts
Iron Gorge (Gates), Serbia, Lepenski Vir and
Vlassac Mesolithic sites 69
Isara, battle of the River (146 BCE) 245
Ishizaki Magarita, Japan, Yayoi settlement
site 171
Israel, kings of 618–21
Itazuke, Japan, Yayoi settlement site 171
Iunius Brutus, Decimus, and first gladiatorial spectacle 504
Iximché, Guatemala, Maya fortification 210

Jainism 590
*dharma* in 597
and laws of rebirth 590
non-violence 589
on warfare 597–8
James, Simon 143
Japan
archaeological research trends 161–3
ecological diversity 160
*Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* texts 32
Japan, prehistoric 6, 160–77
agriculture and violence 160, 167, 174–6
archaeological record of violence 163–71, 164, 175
hunter-gatherers 160
Jōmon period 160, 174
skeletal trauma 164–6
population increases 174, 175
settlements 165, 171–2
warrior graves 168–9
Yayoi period 160, 175, 176
skeletal trauma 166–8
warfare 162
Jebel Sahaba, Sudan, Late Palaeolithic Qadan culture burials 66, 189
Jehu, king of Israel 619
Jephthah 617
Jericho 611
Jerusalem 622
Jesus Christ 34
death of 577–8, 617
and imitation of suffering and death 578

Jewish War (66–73 CE) 250–1
and siege of Masada 250
Jews
conversion, Minorca 525–7
suicide by 577
violence against in late antiquity 515
willingness to endure martyrdom 572
see also Judaism
Jezebel, queen 368
Joab, and Abner 619–20
John Chrysostom, bishop 518
Josephus
account of Jewish War 250–1
on martyrdom 574
Joshua 611
Joshua the Stylite, chronicler 267, 272
Judah 611

Judahism
and book of Daniel 574
martyrdom in 573–7
rabbinic literature 574–6
and theory of martyrdom 575
see also Bible
Judea
kings of 618–21
Ptolemaic control over Palestine 573
Julian, emperor 269
persecution of Christians 523

Julius Caesar
account of Gallic Wars 156, 157, 247–8
assassination 248
on battles 154, 264
on construction of oppida 152
and Dolabella 415
on Gauls 143, 446, 450
use of popular violence 410–11

just war
Chinese notions of 281–5
Mesopotamian concept of 224
Justinian, emperor 259, 273
elimination of religious dissent 515
and Nika riot 518

Juvenal, *Satires* 566

Kaanul Snake Kingdom, Maya 205, 216
war with Tikal 205
Kalahari Desert
linguistic variations 109
and territorial ownership 109
see also San hunter-gatherers
Kalahari Research Group 99
Kālidāśa, *Rāghuvamśa* 602
Kalkriese, Germany, site of Battle of Teutoburg Forest (9 CE) 154, 249
Kāmandaka, Nitisāra 601
Kaqchikel social group, Guatemala 210, 212, 214
Kauṭīlya, *Arthaśāstra* 600–1, 687, 697–8
Kavad, king of Persia 267
K’a’wiil Ajaw, Queen Lady of Coba 207
Kebara, Israel, Late Palaeolithic burials 66
Keegan, John 264
Keeley, Lawrence 92
*War Before Civilization* 21, 44, 55
Kennewick Man, North America 54
Kessel, Roman battlefield 248
Kharavela, Jaina king 598
Khoekhoe pastoralists, South Africa 113
K’iche social group, Guatemala 210, 212, 214
Kilianstädten see Schöneck-Kilianstädten
kin networks 40
kings and kingship, India 589–605
administration of justice 593
and armies led by disguised substitute 697
Buddhism and 598–600
classical model of 590
and compassion 596
compensation for inherent violence 597
and Danda, ‘Punishment’ 594
and dharma (pious duty) 590, 591
and expediency of force 604
and force in warfare 594–6
Maya people 203, 204, 215
and practice of non-violence 591
regicide sanctioned 597
role in encouraging soldiers in battle 695,
697–8, 701
theories of origin of 592–4
kings, Mesopotamia
annual military campaigns 235
claims of supremacy 225
divine kingship 220, 229, 235
and domestic stability 224
dynastic imagery 223
military campaigns for booty 223, 231
monopoly of violence 221, 223, 225, 234
power of 223
royal graves and death pits of Ur 461–4
scale of divine mandate 235
substitute king ritual 471
as war leaders 228
K’ínich Janaab Pakal, Maya king of
Palenque 207
K’ínich Kan Bahlam, Maya king of
Palenque 207
K’ínich Yax K’uk’ Mo’, Maya king 204
Kinzig, Wolfram 515
Kish, Mesopotamian city 228
Kishik, David 533
Kitakogane, Japan, Jōmon site 166
Klawans, Jonathan 609
Knossos, New Hospital site, bronze
helmet 131
Kōjiindani, Japan, Yayoi hoard 173
Korea, weapons in Japan 168, 170
Kowoj social group, Maya 212
Krapina, Croatia, Neanderthal remains 61, 62
Kṣatriya varṇa (hereditary class) 591, 686, 690
Kuma Nishioda, Japan, Yayoi site 168
Kuruksētra, battle of 595
Kuśāna kings, India 603
Kyushu, Japan, Yayoi sites 166
La Tène, Switzerland
decorative style 447
human remains 449
Iron Age sword deposits 147, 150, 448, 449
Lactantius, On the Deaths of the Persecutors 582
Lagash, Mesopotamia 224
wars with Umma 228, 645
Langklip, South Africa, Later Stone Age
remains 105, 105
Late Neolithic Corded Ware culture
(CWC) 92
Late Palaeolithic see Final Palaeolithic; Upper
Palaeolithic
Later Stone Age (Africa) 99, 104
archaeological evidence for violence
101–8, 103
scale of violence 114
see also San hunter-gatherers
Latin
meanings of violentia 476
sacrificium and immolatio (sacrifice) 477
Latium, Roman hegemony over 240
LBK see Linearbandkeramik (LBK) period
(Neolithic)
Leakey, Richard 99
LeBlanc, Steven 21
Lee, Richard 100, 108
legal codes
biblical ritual 616
control and punishment 31
control and punishment 31
Greece 384, 536–7, 542–5
Judean (biblical) civil 613–16
and legal treatment of animals 475, 477,
481, 483
lex talionis 614
Mesopotamia 223, 225, 226
and norms of violence 14
see also Rome, republican
Lepidus, Marcus Aemilius 405
Levi, attack on Shechem 611
Li Feng 423
Libanius 522
For the Temples (381–92 CE) 515, 516
Libya, wars with Egypt 190
Ligurians, mass deportation of 246
Lincoln, Iron Age shield in River Witham
147, 150
Lincoln, Bruce 372, 625
Lindow Man, Iron Age bog burial 328, 451
Index

Linearbandkeramik (LBK) period (Neolithic) 90, 303, 306
burials and mass killings 306–11
funerary rituals 306, 311
Lisnacrogher, Ireland, Iron Age site 449
literature
evidence of religious violence in late antiquity 516–17
Tamil (Sangam) poetry 603
violence in 31
see also literature: Chinese, Christian, classical, Egyptian, Greek, rabbinic, Sumerian (below); texts
literature, Chinese 418
allusion to violence 421
Annals 431–2, 435
Book of Documents 422–3
Book of Songs 421–2
Gongyang Commentary 435
Historian’s Records (Shiji) 432, 434, 435
Ritual Record 435
treatment of warfare in philosophical texts 425–32
Zhou Rituals 435
Zuo Commentary 431, 435
literature, Christian
and martyrdom 583
and suicide (voluntary martyrdom) 583–4
literature, classical vegetarian 475, 477
Porphyry 486–9
Theophrastus 485–6
literature, Egyptian 193, 194–5
fictional 194
historical novel 195
royal novel 194
literature, Greek
Callirhoe 394
examples of violence against women in 387–94
and notion of good death 573, 585
timōria (revenge) 368, 370
and vengeful woman 360–1, 377
literature, rabbinic 574–6, 577
Tosefta Shabbat 575
literature, Roman see Cicero; Josephus; Julius Caesar; Livy; Plutarch; Seneca; Tacitus
literature, Sumerian/Babylonian 463–4
The Chronicle of Early Kings 471
The Death of Bilgames 463
The Death of Ur-Namma 464
Epic of Erra and Isun 467
Little Ice Age 47, 51
Liu Bang, Former Han emperor 279, 292
Liu Bei, Shu-Han emperor 284
Liu Xiu, Later Han emperor 279, 284
Livy (Titus Livius) 550
on battles 241, 555
on Celts 454
on Epirus 245
on illegitimate use of violence 403–4
on Punic Wars 242
Second Macedonian War 243
on Veii 240
Llyn Cerrig Bach, Wales, Iron Age slave burial 328, 449
London, Iron Age weapons 147, 150
Lorenz, Herbert 151
Lövåsen, Sweden
Bronze Age weapons 127, 128
rock art 132
Lü, empress, torture of rival 434
Lu Xun, and Daoist rebellion 293
Lucan, poet 442
Lusitanians, Roman massacre of (150 BCE) 245
Luttwak, Edward 250
Lysias, On the Death of Eratosthenes 545
Maba, China, Pleistocene skulls 60
Maccabeans, martyrdom of 574, 576
Macedonia 552
Macedonian War, Second (200–197 BCE) 243
maces, pear-shaped, Egyptian 187
McHardy, Fiona 360
machismo 382–3
Maddern, Philippa, ‘moral hierarchy of violence’ 10
magic, Egyptian recourse to 346
Mahābhārata, Sanskrit text 32, 593, 595, 684, 686
on compassion 596
and regicide 597, 604
Śānti Parva 593–4, 684–6
Śrī Parvan 700
on warfare 687
Mahāsudassana, king 598
Maiden Castle, Dorset, hill fort 151, 152, 443, 444, 447
cemetery 155, 334
Mailleraye-sur-Seine, France, Iron Age weapon cremation 146
Mamom pottery, Maya 202
Māṇava Dharmaśāstra, treatise 687
Manching, Germany, Iron Age settlement 148, 151, 153
Manishtushu, king of Akkad 221
Index

Mannlefen 3, Alsace, Oberlarg Mesolithic skull nest 74
Manu, and king as warrior 594, 687
Már-Isar, Babylonian scholar 469, 470
Marcellus of Apamea 524
Marcomanni, German tribe 252
Marcus Aurelius, emperor 252, 556 column 674
Marduk, god of Babylon 622
Mari 644
cylinder seals 644, 647
Marincola, John 361
Marius, Gaius, general 408 alliance with Sulpicius 409–10
Marlowe, Elizabeth 680
Marmesse, France, Bronze Age cuirasses 130
marriage monogamy, hunter-gatherers 94 polygynous, pastoralists 95
Martial, on gladiators 506
martyrdom 572–85 actively sought 523 and choice of exile 580
Christian 521, 523, 524, 577–84
Christian literature on 583 and classical notion of a good death 572–3, 585
Judaism 573–7 and suicide 576, 583–4
Masada, siege of (73 CE) 250
masculinity and honour 10, 382, 394–6 in Indian warrior ideology 690, 698–9 and machismo 382–3
Masistes, brother of Xerxes 363, 365
mass graves
Maya massacre victims 209 sacrificial victims 201, 203, 208, 210
Mayapan 211
Neolithic 25, 306–11 Halberstadt 80, 89, 310–11, 312 Kiliarstäden 80, 88, 309–10
massacre victims, disorganised 299 Talheim 80, 88, 89, 307–8, 311
Roman Gloucester 337
see also burials
massacres
China 287 Jutland 448
of Lusitanians (150 BCE) 245
Maya royal family at Yaxuna 205
Mesolithic 301
of war captives by Chinese 287
see also massacres, Neolithic
massacres, Neolithic 299–317
archaeological indicators 299, 301, 304 as collective response to threats 315 evidence of 80, 88, 94, 96 identification of 304–6 LBK burials and mass killings 306–11, 316
mass graves 299
men as perpetrators 312 patterns and peculiarities 311–15 possible ritual nature of 314 sites of conflict (unburied bodies) 299
Massalia, France 442
Matsugi, Takehiko 175
Mattern, Susan 238
Maxentius, war with Constantine 678
see also warfare, Maya
Mayapan, Mexico, Maya fortification 210, 211, 216 Cocom and Xiu conflict 213
Mead, Margaret 50
Medbo, Sweden, Bronze Age weapons 127 medicine and care for injuries 62, 64, 75 human sacrifice 460 use of scapegoat 460
Medinet Habu, Thebes, mortuary tomb 182
Megabyzus, of Persia 370
Melkobosstrand, South Africa, Later Stone Age remains 105
Memmius, Gaius 412
Index

men
and biblical civil legal codes 614
and machismo 382–3
mass grave as evidence of inter-group conflict 89
murder of single dangerous male 53
skeletal evidence of violence 326
see also domestic violence; masculinity; patriarchy; warriors; women
Mencius, Chinese philosopher 282
aversion to violence 427
Merneptah, pharaoh 188, 191
Meskalamdug, Sumerian king 463
Mesoamerica 200
see also Chichen Itza; Maya people; Nahua
Mesolithic era
burials and cemeteries 69, 70, 71, 73
defined 58
evidence of violence 66–74
feuding 94
intensification of violence 66, 67, 75
inter-group violence 67, 69, 75, 113, 301
massacres 301
Mesopotamia 219–36, 360
cities, city-states 27, 30, 219, 221–2, 227
concept of just war 224
cultures of 460
definition 219, 629
Early Dynastic period 227–8
economy 231, 232
environment 226
examples of violence 632–7
growth of territorial state 221, 224, 228, 233
historical developments 226–34
Inana goddess 222
later period 235–6
law codes 223, 225, 226
military campaigns 220, 221, 235, 460
myths and epics 465–8
Neo-Assyrian Empire 235, 362
Persian invasion (502–5 CE) 267
punishment of crime 460
relations of gods and kings 634
religious ritualised violence 633–4
representations of violence 629–52
public access to 649
visibility of 646–50
royal graves and death pits of Ur 461–4
spectacularisation of violence 633, 637–46, 652
substitute king ritual 460, 468–72
temples 645, 651
Third Dynasty of Ur 230–3
treatment of enemies 614–7, 648
violence as cultural element 631
violence in war 632, 637
world view of conquest 222–3
wrestling 494
see also Akkad; Assyria; Babylon; kings; Sumeria; Syria; Ur; warfare, Mesopotamia
Mexico see Bonampak; Chichen Itza; Maya people; Mayapan; Yaxuna
migration
barbarian tribes 36
Chinese forcible 201
evidence of Neolithic 91–3, 301
Roman Britain 337, 338, 339
millenarianism, China 294
Milo, Titus Annius, and Clodius 403, 412
Minami-Usu, Hokkaido, Jōmon site 16; 166
Minamikata, Japan, Yayoi site 168
Minatogawa, Japan, late Pleistocene site 164
Minorca, conversion of Jews 525–7
burning of synagogue 525, 526, 527
Mirgissa, Egyptian fortress 185
Miriam bat Tanhum 575
Mithridates of Caria, eunuch at court of Persia 374
Moab, king of 617
Moabites 612, 623
Mochlos, Crete, Agora Bronze Age burials 133
Moctezumah, Aztech emperor 214
Modder River, South Africa, Later Stone Age remains 105, 107
Modrzejewski, Joseph Mélèze- 482
Molina, Manuel 231
Molleson, Theya 462
Mommsen, Theodor 238
Monkodonja, Croatia, Bronze Age fortifications 120
monks, Christian, conscription into Roman army 271
monomachia (single combat in battle) 189, 498, 509
Mont Lassois, France, hill fort 151
Montejo the Younger, and Maya 213
Montfort Saint-Lizier, France, hill fort 151
Montfort Saint-Lizier, France, hill fort 151
Palaeolithic burials 65
Monthuhotep II, pharaoh 194
Morris, Alan 102, 103
Morris, Ian 28, 46
Morse, Edward 161
mosaics, Roman, domestic gladiatorial scenes 661–5, 663, 664
Moses, prophet 610, 611, 612
Index

Mountain Arapesh tribe, New Guinea 50
Mozi, Chinese intellectual, on violence 428–9
Mulhouse-Est, LBK cemetery 90
murder see homicide
Mursa, Battle of (351 CE) 271
mutation
and display of body parts 190
Egypt 190, 352
of enemy on battlefield 190, 365, 366, 643
and Neolithic massacres 310, 313
Persia 366, 374
of women 364, 367, 369, 614, 615
see also decapitation; dismemberment
Mycenae
Bronze Age shields 121
fortifications 134
organic armour 131
shaft graves 136
myths
Babylonian epic of creation of humans 466–7, 651
Chinese Yellow Emperor 292
flood story 354, 467–8
of golden (peaceful) past 34, 45
Greek 34, 390, 534
hero-god and monster 354
Horus and Seth 353–4
Mesopotamian 465–8
Roman 34, 668, 668–9
in frescoes 657–60, 669, 660, 669
Sumerian 222

Nabatake, Japan, Yayoi site 171
Nagano Miya-no-mae, Japan, Yayoi site 167
Nagy, Gregory 535
Nahuat (Aztec) people 201
as allies of Spanish 214
Naka, Japan, Yayoi settlement site 171
Nakao, Hisashi 164
Naram-Sin, king of Akkad 229
Naram-Sin stele 223
Nasca, Scipio, opposition to Tiberius Gracchus 406–7
Nataruk, Lake Turkana, Kenya, Mesolithic
inter-group violence 67, 75, 113, 301
Native American tribes, Pequot 446
Neanderthals 58
archaeological sites 61, 62, 63, 75
care for injured people 62, 75
evidence of violence in 60–4, 75
risky hunting strategies 61, 75
Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon 621, 622
Nefertiti, queen of Egypt 193
Nehemiah, at court of Artaxerxes I 376
neighbours
and domestic violence 395
and public order in Rome 400
Nemean games, Argos 499
Kreugas–Damoxenos boxing match 501
Neo-Assyrian Empire 235
Royal Annals 362
see also Ashurbanipal
Neolithic era 24, 79–97, 86
cemeteries 83, 90, 304–6
changing patterns of violence 25, 79
enclosures 25, 83, 92
evidence for population migrations 91–3, 301
evidence of violent skeletal trauma 81, 85–9, 86, 87
factors in collective violence 302, 315
in-group and out-group violence 89–90, 300
increased inequality 93–6, 300
LBK burials and mass killings 306–11
massacres 299–317
move to settled farming communities 79, 300
need for cooperation 300, 302
population growth 83, 95, 315
scale of violence 80, 94, 96
social norms of violence 90–1
use of tools as weapons 302–3
see also Linearbandkeramik; mass graves;
weaponry, Neolithic
Nestorius 524
Netherworld
Egyptian 186, 190
Mesopotamian 464, 472
New Guinea
Dani people 48
Mountain Arapesh tribe 50
Nguni cattle herders, South Africa 111, 113
Nicanor, governor of Judea 576
Nicomedes, destruction of Christian church (303 CE) 581
Nietzsche, Friedrich 475
Nigeria, Kano dynasty 362
Nika riot (532 CE), Constantinople 518, 562
Nile, river, changes in flooding patterns 47
Nimrud, North-West Palace relief 639
Nineveh, Assyrian relief 642, 650
Ningirsu, god 224, 654
Niobids, Roman sculptural groups 661
Nippur Murder Trial, Mesopotamia 225
Nirenberg, D. 513
Nock, Arthur Darby 572
non-violence, India 7, 33, 589–605
Buddhist and compensation for unavoidable violence 597
impossibility of absolute Jainism 589
as part of dharma practice of 591
Norbanus, Gaius, tribune of the plebs, trial (95 BCE) 404–6
Norheim, Germany, Iron Age weapon deposits 148
Nozick, Robert, theory of revenge 368, 369
Nubia Egyptian campaigns in 184, 191, 195
Egyptian slave raids in 347
Nuceria, riot (53 CE) 656
Nydam, Denmark, Iron Age weapons deposit 448
Ofnet (Große Ofnet), Bavaria, skull nests 71–3, 72, 75, 82, 305
oikos (family, family property, house), traditions of 384–6
Oldcroghan Man, Irish bog body 451
Olmo di Nogara, Italy, Agora Bronze Age burials 133
Olympia, athletic games 495, 496, 499
Ômori shell midden, Tokyo 161
Opimius, Lucius, consul 407
oppida, Iron Age 148, 151–3, 441
oracle bones, China 420
Orestes 541
Osterby Man, bog body (head), Germany 452
Östra Gerum, Sweden, Bronze Age cloak armour 131
Ostwald, M. 546
Otterbein, Keith 175
Ottoman Empire, harem politics 363
Ötzi, Tyrolean Iceman 54
Pachomius, Egyptian monk 270
paganism crimes of 521, 528
Egypt and 520
late Roman legislation against 515
persecution of Christians 522
paintings see frescoes
Palaeolithic era defined 58
rarity of human remains 59
warfare 6
see also Final (Late) Palaeolithic period; Later Stone Age (Africa); Upper Palaeolithic
Palenque, Mexico, Maya site 204, 207
Pannonia, rebellion against Rome 249
Parkington, John 112
Parthia Arsacid regime 258, 260
invasion of Roman Empire (161 CE) 252
and Rome 254
see also Persia
Parysatis, queen of Persia 372
blinding of eunuch Mithridates of Caria 374
and death of eunuch Artoxares 373
and death of eunuch Bagapates 374
rivalry with Stateira 375–6
Pass Lueg, Austria, Bronze Age helmet 131
Paterculus, Velleius 247
Patrae, annual bonfire to Artemis 481
patriarchy modern traditional cultures 386–7, 394–6
see also domestic violence; wife beating patron deities Chemosh of Moab 612, 617, 623
Queen of Heaven 623
role of 621
violence against own people 622, 623, 626
patronage, Roman clientela institution 401, 566
Paul, St 578
Paullus, Aemilius 245
Paulus Orosius, on massacre by Cimbric warriors 449
Pausanias, regent of Sparta 537
Pausanias on animal sacrifice 479, 481
on boxing 501
Pax Romana 252–3
peace Christian emphasis on 519, 522
evidence for periods of 45
Neolithic period 79
see also non-violence
Pedanias Secundus, L., murder of 568
Pentheus, death of (fresco) 658, 659
Perpetua, Christian martyr, dream 493–4, 504, 505
Persepolis, reliefs 365
Persia, Achaemenid 360–78, 552
dynastic politics 361
Persia, Achaemenid (cont.)
  poisonings at court 376
  power of women in royal court 362–3, 372
  punishment of eunuchs 372–5
  punishment techniques 366
  rivalries in harem 377
Persian Empire 235
  cavalry and archery 262
  rise of 29
  Sassanid dynasty 254, 258
  and siege warfare 265, 266
  as threat to Rome 258, 260, 269
  treatment of captured Roman cities 268
  use of elephants 266
  use of sulphur fumes 266
  see also Parthia
Persians, tragedy 540
Pharaohs, Egypt 342–5
  as avatars of Horus 344
  icons of power 187–8, 343
  retinue, Followers of Horus (smsw-Hr) 348
  smiting with mace 344, 347
  trampling of enemies 188
  and waf-khasout (bending back) gesture 188
Philip II, king of Macedonia 552
Philip V, king of Macedonia 243
Philop Judaeus of Alexandria 503
Philostratus, on the pancratiast Arrhachion 501, 503
The Phoenician Women, play 540
Phrynichus, general 538
pictorial representations
  Egyptian warfare 32, 179–95
  Fregellae terracotta reliefs 655–6
  inlays (Mesopotamia, Syria) 640, 646
  Iron Age warriors and weapons 148–50
  Japanese warriors 172
  Roman warfare, Trajan’s column 252, 672, 675, 676
  see also cylinder seals; frescoes; inscriptions; mosaics; rock art; sculpture; statues
Piedras Negras, Mexico 216
  rivalry with Yaxchilan 207
Pierce, Leslie 363
Pindar 476, 503
Pinker, Steven 6
  Better Angels of Our Nature 22
Piye, king of Nubia 191
Plataea, battle of (479 BCE) 498
Plato 33
  Euthyphro dialogue 544
  Laws 482, 483
  Republic 535
Plautus, on slaves 566
Pleistocene era 48, 59
Plettenberg Bay, South Africa, Later Stone Age remains 106
Pliny 245
  and Christians in Bithynia-Pontus 579
  plunder
    after battles, Egypt 190
    displayed in Roman houses 655
    by Roman army 254, 554, 556
Plutarch 375
  on Epirus 245
  on Gallic Wars 248
  Life of Alcibiades 392–4, 542
  on Punic Wars 242
  on slaves 566
  story of flaying of Bagapates/Mastabates 374, 375
  on Sulpicius 410
poison
  San arrowheads 108, 110
  use at Achaemenid court of Persia 376, 377
Polybius, on Punic Wars 242
Polycarp, martyr 577
Pompeii, frescos and sculptures 656–60
Pompey (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus) 247
  and Cicero 410, 412
  triumph 534
  and use of popular violence 410
population
  Iron Age estimates 441
  Japan 174, 175
  Maya 210
  Neolithic rise of 83, 95, 315
  and warfare 51
  population density, and body size 109
Porphyry 515
  Abstaining from Meat 486–9
  and rights of animals 490
  sacrifice of cattle 487
  sacrifice of pigs 486
  sacrifice of sheep 487
Index

Port, Switzerland, Iron Age sword deposits 147
Portonaccio sarcophagus 669–71, 670
Poseidonius, on Celts 454
Postumius, Marcus, publicanus 403, 411
Praetorian Guard, Rome 249, 557
Prexaspes, Cupbearer at court of Cambyses 376
priests
violence by (Bible) 616–18
see also clergy
primates, aggression and violence 22, 49
prisoners of war, Egypt 184
acculturation into Egypt 192
binding of 185, 193
care for 190
treatment of 186
prisoners of war, Rome, ransom 274
Procopius 263, 264
Propertius, on animal sacrifice 479
property
acquisition and protection of 33
and oikos 384–6
Prthu, king as warrior 593
Pseudo-Demosthenes 543–4
public monuments
battle imagery (Roman) 676–7
to civil conflict (Arch of Constantine) 678–81, 679
emperor Claudius 672, 673
paintings as models for 676
Roman provincial 672, 676
Rome 671–81
of victory 672
see also funerary monuments
Punic Wars 242–3, 244
Second 35
Third 245
punishments
Athens 539
biblical ritual codes 616
and lex talionis (retributive) 614
and status 33
see also executions and death penalties
punishments, Egypt 351–2
100 lashes 351
exile 352
of foreign enemies 184
incarceration 351
mutilation 352
recourse to magic 346
punishments, Persia 366
blinding 366, 373, 374
burial alive 371
flaying alive 366, 374
gouging out of eyes 373
molten lead in ears 374
mutilations 366
pricking of eyeballs 371, 373
public display 374
‘Trough’ or ‘Boats’ 371
punishments, Rome 563–5
hierarchy of 563
in late antiquity 517
for slaves 564, 565–6
Pyrrhic War 242, 244
Pyrrhus, king of Epirus 242
Pythian games, Delphi 499, 503
Qafzeh, Israel, Neanderthal juvenile burial 63, 75
Quadi, German tribe 252
Quirigua, Honduras, Maya kingdom 208
Q’umarkaj, Guatemala, Maya fortification 210
Quoin Point, South Africa, female Later Stone Age skeleton 101, 102
raiding
death rates and pervasiveness 41
by forager parties 40, 48–50, 94
Maya 201
Rāmāyana, Sanskrit text 593, 595, 604
Ramesses III, pharaoh 182, 191
‘Rape of the Sabine Women’ 550
Razis, martyrdom of 576–7
rebellions 15
Britain (Boudicca) 249, 334
China 287, 292, 293, 294
Roman Empire 249, 569
records, written
earliest 27
see also literature; texts
Reformation, view of religious violence 514
Reiss, Werner 533, 536, 544
religion
association of monotheism and violence 513–14, 625
Iron Age societies 442, 446
and legitimation of violence 7
and military ritual, China 292–3
and modern state toleration 514
and ritualised violence 7, 446
violence motivated by 8
see also Bible; Buddhism; Christianity; cosmology; Jainism; Judaism; symbolism

727
Index

religious violence
sacred killing (Mesopotamia) 633
see also Bible; religious violence, late antiquity; ritual violence

religious violence, late antiquity 512–28
Critique of narrative of 515–20
destruction of temples 515
language of 518
nature of 513
pre-Christian 512
representation of violence
Mesopotamia and Syria 629–52
Roman 654–82
see also coins; frescoes; inscriptions; literature; pictorial representations; rock art; sculpture; statues

resources, competition for 23, 302

revenge
as duty in China 434–6
as justification for war 285
theory of 368

revenge violence 85
in Greece 540, 546
Rome 562
by women 360–78
see also vigilantism

Ṛgveda, heroic champion in, 685, 691
Rhine, river, late Roman frontier 259, 269
Ribemont-sur-Ancre, France
Iron Age weapon deposits 148, 450
ossuaries 450
Riches, David 608, 609
Ridley, Matt 95
Riot in the Amphitheatre, fresco in Pompeii 656

riots
Antioch 518
Constantinople 518, 562
in late antiquity 518, 562
Nuceria 696
and public ritual 518
at Roman circuses 561, 656
Roman theatre 561

ritualised violence 5, 35
and biblical notion of abomination 615–16
divine sanction for 618
Iron Age Europe 441–58
killing of children (biblical) 617–18
and religion 7, 446
see also animal sacrifice; human sacrifice; religious violence

rock art
Egypt 342

Kalahari 110, 111, 113
Scandinavia 121, 129, 132
Rollinger, Robert 360, 363

Roman army 555–6
acts of genocide 334
archers 262, 263
auxiliary troops 143, 249
cavalry 246, 262, 263
changes in battle tactics in late antiquity 263–6
as citizen militia 555
combat engineers 246
conscription 270–1
demonstrations against levy (151 BCE) 246
discipline 238, 243, 253–4
effect of Christianity on morale 274
evidence of brutality 245–6, 254
field armies 272–3, 275
frontier forces 272
heavy infantry 246, 262
hoplite system (militia) 240
increased size of 270, 273, 275
institutional violence in late antiquity 270–3
and Iron Age Europe 153–5, 157
legions 246, 249
manipular legion system 242
phalanx organisation 254
professionalisation 246, 249, 556

tattooing 270

Roman Empire 36, 550–70
and aggression 254
animal sacrifice 475–90
civil war (191–93 CE) 254
conquered people’s perception of 249
control of 252
domestic depictions of war and violence 655–65
Early 248–55
emperors as military leaders 556
funerary monuments 665–71
gang violence in 415–16
gladiatorial spectacles 505–10, 557–60
increased tempo of warfare 254
invasion of Britain 249, 323, 332, 333
life expectancy 569
Marcus Aurelius’ column 252
nature of imperialism 238, 245
Pax Romana 252–3, 254, 260, 569
provincial monuments 672
rebellions 249, 569
representations of war and violence 654–82
Severan dynasty 254
third-century endemic civil war 254

728
Index

triumphant (for victorious generals) 554, 560, 671
Year of the Four Emperors (69–70 CE) 251
see also Roman army; Roman Empire, late antiquity; Rome, republican
Roman Empire, late antiquity 257–75
alliance of church and state 514
Arab invasions 257, 259
barbarian invasions 254, 258, 259, 261
changing social and religious identities 516, 527
Christianity in 273, 512
persecution 522, 524, 578–81, 582
violent imposition of 513, 515
civil wars 260, 261
and Danube frontier 259
emphasis on defence 273
fall of Western Empire 257
forms of popular violence 517–18
history and historiography 257–62
military competition for imperial office 261
moral condemnation of violence 519
pagan acts outlawed 515
and Persia 260, 269
and Rhine frontier 259, 269
warfare compared with Pax Romana 260, 274
see also Roman army; Rome, city of; Rome, republican
Roman navy 249, 551
Romano-Bosporan conflict (49 CE) 250
Rome, city of
Arch of Constantine 678–81, 679
Arch of Septimius Severus 676
Asylum (Capitoline Hill) 553
Baths of Caracalla, Farnese Bull sculpture 677
Christian catacombs 574
Circus Maximus 560
Flavian Amphitheatre (Colosseum) 506, 554, 557
Horti Lamiani sculptures of Niobids 661
Horti Sallustiani sculptures of Niobids 661, 662
monumental buildings 554, 556
public monuments 671–81
sack by Goths (410) 268
Trajan’s Column 252, 672, 675, 676
Vandals at (455) 269
victory monuments 672
see also Latin; Roman Empire; Rome, republican
Rome, republican 550–70

agrarian laws 404, 406–7
animal sacrifice 475–90
aristocratic military virtues 533–4
brutality as exceptional 245, 250–1
chariot races 560–1
civil unrest 247, 563
client states 243
clientela relationship 401, 566
collegeria (local community associations) 401, 411–12, 413, 416
Conflict of the Orders 404
culture of militarism 551–7, 654, 681
gang violence 400–16
gladiatorial games 35, 557–60
human sacrifice 35
individual use of force 400
Late Republic 246–8
law on violence (lex de vi) 563
Middle Republic 242–6
and myths of Saturn’s Italy 34
neighbourhoods 401
open concept of community 552–3
paternalistic control 9, 566
provincial system of government 243
punishments 563–5
hierarchy of 563, 564
religious festivals 560
representations of war and violence 654–82
domestic depictions 655–65
rise of 29
sacking by Gauls (387 BCE) 241
self-help for maintenance of public order 400–1, 404–6, 562–3, 570
slaves in 565–6
social hierarchy 569
Social War (91–88 BCE) 247, 408
taxation 34
theatrical spectacles 561–2
tribunes’ use of popular violence 404–6, 407–8
triumphs (for victorious generals) 554, 560
Twelve Tables (law code) 563
use of private guards to disrupt public business 403, 414
violence against lower orders 566–9
and claim of powerlessness 567–8
violence of early Rome 239–42, 550, 552
war with Greek city-states (280 BCE) 242
wars of conquest 552
assimilation of conquered peoples as allies (socii) 241
Index

Rome, republican (cont.) and punitive actions 251
see also Roman army; Roman Empire; warfare, Rome
Romulus 550
Roymans, Nico 143
Ruffell, I. 541
Rufinus, account of the destruction of the Serapeion 520–2
Russell, Frank 251
sacrifice 7, 35, 512 battle as (India) 691–4 Christian view of pagan 521, 522, 528 of grain, incense and honey 484, 485 see also animal sacrifice; human sacrifice; ritual violence Saint-Césaire, Roche-à-Pierrot, France, Neanderthal remains 62, 63, 75 Sakaeiso, Hokkaido, Jōmon site 165 Saldanha Bay, South Africa, Later Stone Age remains 106
Sallust 553
Samaria, capital of ancient Israel 621 violence against women of 366 Samnites, Roman treatment of 247 Samudragupta, Gupta emperor 602 San Bartolo, Guatemala, Maya site 203 San hunter-gatherers, Kalahari 99 conflict with Nguni cattle herders 111, 113 disputes over women 100, 108, 115 ethnographical study of 100 and European colonists 110 historical reports of violence 110 reputation as peaceful 100 rock art 110, 111, 113 use of poisoned arrows 108 San Juan Ante Portam Latinam, Spain, Neolithic site 85
San Teodoro, Sicily, Late Palaeolithic burials 65
Sanctuaries, Iron Age Gaulish 449–50 weapon deposits 148 Sannai Maruyama, Japan, Jōmon settlement site 171 Sanskrit, negative compound words 589 Sānti Parvan 593–4, 684–6 rules of warfare 687 Santosuosso, Antonio 246 sarcophagi, Roman battle scenes 669–71, 670 depictions of violence on 667–71, 668, 670 mythological scenes 668, 668–9 Sargon, king of Akkad 28, 228, 229, 621 stele of 634, 636, 643 Sarmatians, invasion on Roman frontier 252 Saturninus, Gaius Sentius, consul 415 Saturninus, Lucius Appuleius, tribune 407 Scandinavia fortifications 135 Iron Age depositions 448 martial symbolism 137 Mesolithic sites 70 rock art 121, 129, 132 see also Denmark; Sweden scapegoats and doctrine of substitutions 471–2 substitute king ritual 460, 468–72 used in Mesopotamian medicine 460 Schela Cladovei, Romania, Late Mesolithic site 69 Schepers, Nancy and Lock, Margaret 691 Schmidt, Bettina 608 Schöneck-Kilianstädten, Neolithic mass grave evidence of mutilation 310, 313 Schröder, Ingo 608 Scipio Africanus 242 Scripture on Great Peace, China 293 Scullard, H. H. 238 Sculptor’s Cave, Scotland, evidence of decapitation 457 sculptures bas-reliefs, Mesopotamia 632, 639, 642, 646, 650, 651 colossal groups (Caracalla) 677 of Indian kings 602 monuments of war (Mesopotamia) 645, 646 Neolithic China 419 Roman 661, 662 see also inscriptions; statues Seleucids, defeat by Rome 243 self-help for maintenance of public order (Rome) 400–1, 404–6, 562–3, 570 and vigilantism in classical Athens 536, 537, 542, 545 self-inflicted violence to avoid conscription into Roman army 271 see also suicide Semonides, On Women (Greek poem) 389
Seneca, Lucius Annaeus 530, 570
Sennacherib, king of Assyria 235, 621, 641, 650
Sentium, Battle of (295 BCE) 241
Senwosret III, pharaoh 344
Septimius Severus, emperor 556
monuments 676–7
Serapeion, Alexandria, destruction of (391 CE) 513, 515, 520–2
Sertorius, Quintus 247
servants
ritual slaughter and burial with elites 227, 420, 460
see also slaves
Sestius, Publius 412
settlements
Bronze Age, Crete 135
China, fortified 291
Iron Age 151–3, 441, 446
Japan 161, 171–2
entrance gates 172
watchtowers 172
Maya 200, 202
defensible 203, 210
see also cities; fortifications
Sety I, pharaoh 195
Severus, bishop, on conversion of Jews of Minorca 525–7
sexual dimorphism, and male inter-group
conflict 51
sexual violence 5, 14
in Greek comedy 541, 542
within family in Athens 583, 594
shabti figurines, in Egyptian burials 465
Shalmaneser III, king of Assyria 650
shame, and honour cultures 10, 14, 384–6
Shang Yang, The Book of Lord Shang 429–30
Shanidar, Iraq, Neanderthal remains 62, 75
Sharples, Niall 143
Shenoute, Egyptian abbot 516
Sherwin-White, Adrian 579
Shield Jaguar III, Maya king of Yaxchilan 208
shields, Bronze Age 121–2
bronze 121
and fighting techniques 136
figure of eight 121
round 121
tower 121
wood and leather, Ireland 121, 122
shields, Iron Age see Battersea Shield
Shimizukaze, Japan, pictorial jar 172
Shimon ben Gamli’el, rabbi 574, 575
Shinmachi, Japan, Yayoi site 167
Shizukawa, Hokkaido, Jōmon settlement site 171
Shōgōrō Tsuboi 161
Shu-Suen, king of Ur 232
Shulgi, king of Ur 230
siege warfare
Assyrian 648
China 287, 291
Egypt 349
Persian 259, 265, 266, 269
see also siege warfare, Roman
siege warfare, Roman 246, 262, 275
Amida 266
barbarians and 268
Carthage 243
Edessa 267
food and logistics 267
killing of captives 241, 243, 268
Masada 250
pogrom of Jews in Constantina 267
Valentia 247
Sihyaj K’akh’, Maya king 204, 205
Sim de los Huesos, Atapuerca, Spain,
Pleistocene skulls 60, 74
Sima Qian 436
Historian’s Records (Shiji) 432, 434
Simeon, attack on Shechem 611
Situla Art, Iron Age 149
Skedemosse, Sweden, Iron Age massacre
deposit 448
skeletons, evidence from
Bronze Age weapon-inflicted trauma 132
carnivore gnawing 309, 310, 314, 325
disarticulated 326
Egyptian weapon trauma 189
of interpersonal violence 59, 325, 337
Iron Age weapon trauma 156, 324, 326
Later Stone Age forager violence 102–8
Neanderthal injuries 61
Neolithic violent trauma 81, 85–9, 86, 87
massacre sites 303, 307–8, 313
sharp force (arrows) 309, 313
parry fractures of ulna 68, 69
performative violence 326, 327, 329, 339
processing of sacrificial victims, Maya 210
trauma, Japan 163–8
trauma to long bones 313
traumatic bone lesions 101, 108
violence against women 55, 69
skeletons, evidence from (cont.)
war injuries 43, 54, 204
see also injuries; skeletons: evidence of health, healed lesions (below); skulls
skeletons, evidence of health and diet 323, 329
Iron Age Britain 329
and origin 310
Roman Britain 337–8
stress indicators 324, 337
skeletons, healed lesions 108, 307
Iron Age Britain 324
skull nests
Hohlenstein-Stadel 73
Ofnet, Bavaria 71–3, 82
skull racks, Maya 209, 214
skulls
blunt-force injuries
Japan 165, 165, 166
Neolithic massacres 308, 309, 310, 312
healed lesions 62, 63, 64, 66, 70
Maya 203
injury evidence 59, 72
Neolithic 85, 87
location of injuries 59, 72, 72
hat brimline, Neanderthal 61
Pleistocene 59
see also skeletons
Sky Witness, Kaanul Maya king 206
slaves
Athens 33, 539
‘culpable’ 482
enslavement after sieges 268
Iron Age Britain 328
mass enslavement by Rome 245, 250, 254
as part of Roman elite retinues 402
Roman Britain 337
Roman punishments for 564, 565–6
in Rome 565–6
status of 33, 565
see also servants
Snuifklip, South Africa, Later Stone Age remains 105
social hierarchy
and biblical civil legal codes 614
and Indian śiva heroic warrior 684, 700
Iron Age Britain 321, 324
punishment defined by 563, 564
Rome 569
violence against lower orders 10, 33, 566–9
social inequality, Neolithic increased 93–6, 300
social substitution 84
Social War (91–88 BCE), Italy 247
society
and acceptability of violence 4, 13
and norms of violence 17, 90–1
role of low-level violence 31
see also intra-societal violence; social hierarchy
Sogdianus, pretender to Persian throne 372
soldiers
billeting of Roman field armies 272–3, 275
hereditary (China) 290
and religion 273
and severed heads of enemies 639–40, 640
specialist 28
violence against civilians 272
see also Chinese army; Roman army; warriors
Solomon, king of Israel 620
Solon, on law on animals 483
South America
forager raiding warfare 42
see also Yanomamo people
Spain
increased Neolithic violence 93
and Maya peoples 212–15
Spartans 537, 574
spear throwers, Maya 204, 209
spears 119, 126–7
cutting edges 127
European styles 126
fighting styles 126
Roman 254
split socket (Aegean) 126
Sweden 127, 128
Upper Palaeolithic 65, 75
Spierenburg, Pieter 3
Spišský Štvrtok, Slovakia, Bronze Age fortifications 120
sport
Greek athletic games (agones) 35, 495, 499
Maya ball games 201
and violence with animals 15
wrestling (Mesopotamia) 494
see also sport, combat
sport, combat, Egypt
stick fighting 184
wrestling 184
sport, combat, Greece 496–504
boxing 496, 497–8, 500–1
Bronze Age depictions 496–7
funerary games 497
ideology of ‘victory or death’ 503–4
importance of spectators 497
Mycenaean sword fighting 496
Index

pancratium (wrestling/boxing) 494, 501–3
prizes 498
violence as ‘valuable’ 495
wrestling 500
sport, combat, Roman gladiatorial 494, 504–10, 557–60
Christian rejection of 522
depicted in domestic mosaics 661–5, 663, 664
depicted on funerary friezes 666, 667
given by local elites throughout empire 509–10, 558
in Greek world 508
lanista (trainer) 504
as munus (duty) 504, 505, 558
origins in aristocratic funerals 504–5, 558
as purposive violence 508
referees 506
role of the crowd 506
rules and conventions 507–8
signal of submission 506
types of armament 507
Staré Hradisko, Czech Republic, Iron Age oppidum 153
state violence 4
Egypt 342
modern state monopoly of 514
Stateira, wife of Artaxerxes II 375
and Parysatis 375–6
state(s), early
and control of violence 7
and defence 28, 30
Mesopotamia 219
and move to empires 27–9
political violence 9, 27
and rebellions 15
and religion 514
taxation and tribute 34
and warfare 28
statues, Iron Age
British figurines 149
depictions of weapons and warriors 148
stone monuments (Provence) 454–5, 456
see also sculptures
Ste Croix, Geoffrey de 579
steles see inscriptions
Stephen, Saint 578
Stephens, John Lloyd 198
Stoics, on animal sacrifice 485
Storax, Lusius, funerary frieze 666, 667
Story of Sinuhe, Egyptian fiction 194
Strabo, on Gaulish human sacrifice 453
Stradonice, Czech Republic, hill fort 151
Strasbourg, battle of (357 CE) 265
Strauss, Barry 392
substitute king ritual
apotropaic rites 470, 471
choice of substitute 469–70
Mesopotamia 460, 468–72
process of 470
sacrifice of substitute 471
substitutions, doctrine of 471–2
Suetonius 655
suicide
Jews 577
and martyrdom 576, 583–4
as punishment for elite Romans 564
Suku Okamoto, Japan, Yayoi site 173
Sulla, Lucius Cornelius 247, 409
Sulpicius, Publius, tribune
alliance with Marius 409–10
employment of gangs 408–10
Sumeria 28
culture 460, 465
myth composition 222
Sun En, Daoist rebel 293
Sund, Norway, Bronze Age remains 117, 133
Sunghir, Russia, Upper Palaeolithic burials 64, 75
Sunzi (Sun Tzu, Sun Wu), The Art of War 425–6
and avoidance of violence 425
śūra (heroic warrior) 698
Susa, Mesopotamian city 223
Sutta Piṭaka, Buddhist text 592
Suzuki, Hisashi 164
Sweden
Bronze Age 127, 128, 131
Iron Age 448
Mesolithic burial sites 70
rock art 129, 132
swords, Bronze Age 122–6
combat techniques 125–6
European 123
hammer and sabre grips 124, 126
hilted 123, 125
leaf-shape 123, 125
long, mid-rib 123
short 123, 125
spread of varying types 124
swords, Iron Age
in deposits 147–8
Hallstatt scabbard 145, 148, 149
and male status 145
ornamentation 145, 147, 150–1
swords, Roman, short (gladius) 242, 243, 555
symbolism
Egyptian animals 343
symbolism (cont.)
of hill forts 443, 445
Iron Age weaponry 143, 145, 157, 443
Japanese weaponry 173
Scandinavian martial 137
Syria 630
archaeology 629
elements of violence 632–7
extent 629
representations of violence 629–52
spectacularisation of violence 633, 637–46, 652
temples 645
violence as cultural element 631
violence in war 632, 637
visibility of representations of violence 646–50

Tacitus 564
Agricola 249
Annals 248
Germania, on bog burials 452
on Germans 143, 249
on Jewish War 250
on Nucerian riot 697
Taginae, Battle of (552 CE) 263
Takasago, Japan, Jōmon site 166
Tale of the Two Brothers, Egyptian story 368
Talheim, Germany, Neolithic mass grave 80, 88, 89, 307–8, 311
Tamatsu Tanaka, Japan, Yayoi site 168
Tanagra, Greece, sword fighting 496
tattooing
of Roman arsenal workers 271
Roman soldiers 270
tax collection, use of soldiers for, Rome 271
Thessalonica, riot (390 CE) 518
Thomas, Elizabeth Marshall 99
Thormarton, England, Bronze Age warrior remains 117
Thucydides
on Cleon 535
on coup in Athens (411 BCE) 537
on war 30, 538
Thutmose I, pharaoh 183, 186
Thutmose III, pharaoh 183, 195
Tiamat, murder of, Mesopotamian epic of creation 466
Tiberius, emperor, anti-pagan riots (580 CE) 518
Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria 367, 641, 649
Tikal, Guatemala, Maya site 204
and Dos Pilas 208
Tintignant, France, Iron Age weapons deposit 147
Tiryns, Greece, fortifications 134
Tollense Valley, northern Germany, Bronze Age battlefield 26, 130, 134, 137
Tollund Man, bog body (Jutland) 452
Tonina, Mexico, Maya site 207
tools
axes 128

Teutoburg Forest, Battle of (9 CE) 154, 249
texts
Chinese 431–2, 434, 435
classical
early Imperial Rome 248
on Iron Age peoples in Europe 142, 156, 454
on Late Republican Roman army 247
Indian 593, 595, 600, 601, 604
Japanese 32
Mesopotamia 219, 230
Spanish accounts of Maya colonisation 212
Third Dynasty of Ur 230
‘Triumph of Horus’ 354
see also inscriptions; literature;
Mahābhārata, Sanskrit text
theatre 35
Athenian 540–2
Rome 561–2
Theodosius I, emperor
executions in Thessalonica (390 CE) 518
legislation against paganism 515, 524
Theophrastus, vegetarian polemic against animal sacrifice 485–6
Thera, Greece, Minoan fresco 496
Thesmophoriazusae, play 542
Thessalonica, riot (390 CE) 518
Thomas, Elizabeth Marshall 99
Thorkild Jacobsen, England, Bronze Age warrior remains 117
Thucydides
on Cleon 535
on coup in Athens (411 BCE) 537
on war 30, 538
Thutmose I, pharaoh 183, 186
Thutmose III, pharaoh 183, 195
Tiamat, murder of, Mesopotamian epic of creation 466
Tiberius, emperor, anti-pagan riots (580 CE) 518
Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria 367, 641, 649
Tikal, Guatemala, Maya site 204
and Dos Pilas 208
Tintignant, France, Iron Age weapons deposit 147
Tiryns, Greece, fortifications 134
Tollense Valley, northern Germany, Bronze Age battlefield 26, 130, 134, 137
Tollund Man, bog body (Jutland) 452
Tonina, Mexico, Maya site 207
tools
axes 128
as weapons 92, 169, 303
see also weaponry
Toro, Japan, Yayoi site 162
torture
archaeological evidence of, Valentia 247
bog bodies 451, 452
China 434
of slaves in Rome 566
‘traditional’ cultures, modern, treatment of women 386–7, 394–6
Trajan, emperor 252, 556
and Christians 79
Column 252, 672, 675, 676
Great Frieze 672
victory games (107 CE) 557
tribute
annual 34
to kingdom of Ur 232
‘Triumph of Horus’ text 354
trophy body parts
display of 190
Mesopotamia 638–45, 640
Iron Age 454
Maya 201
Roman Britain 334
see also heads
trophy taking
Egypt 190
Maya 202
Trou de Han caves, Belgium 455
trumpets (carnyxes), Iron Age 145
Tulum, Mexico, Maya fortification 210
Turchin, Peter 46
Turkana, Lake see Nataruk
Tutankhamun, pharaoh, durbar scenes 184
tyrans, tyranny
Athens 537, 545–6
India 604
Tz’utujil, Maya kingdom 214
Uaxaclajuun Ub’aah K’awiil, Maya rule of Copan 208
Ulpian, Digest 482
Umm el-Qa’ab, Egypt, royal necropolis 464
Umma, Mesopotamia 224
wars with Lagash 224, 228
Upper Palaeolithic period 58
violence in hunter-gatherers 64–5
weapons 65, 75
see also Later Stone Age (Africa)
Ur, Mesopotamia 220
fall of 233
Royal Cemetery 227, 472
arrangement of bodies 462
and death pits 461–4
evidence of trauma 462
Standard of 228, 231
Third Dynasty (Ur III) 230–3
Ur-Namma, king of Ur 220, 222, 464
Urban Cohort, Rome 557
Uruk, Mesopotamian city 222
see also heads
Usipetes, German tribe 248
Uxelodunum, Gaulish oppidum 446
Vače, Slovenia, Iron Age belt plate 149
Valdivia, Pedro de 213
Valens, emperor 271
Valentia, siege of (75 BCE) 247
Valerian, emperor, and Christians 580–1
van der Merwe, Nikolaas 112
van der Post, Laurens 99
Van Straten, F., Hiera Kala: Images of Animal Sacrifice . . . 478
Vandals, pillaging of Rome (455 CE) 269
Vatin, Serbia, Bronze Age battle-axe 129
Vatinius, Publius, trial of 412
Vedbaek-Bøgebakken, Denmark, Mesolithic cemetery 70
vegetarianism, in classical literature 475, 477, 485–9
Veii, Roman conquest of 240, 241
Vekslø, Denmark, horned helmets 132
Velim, Czech Republic
arrowheads 129
Bronze Age remains 133
hill fort 135
Vergil (Publius Vergilius Maro), Aeneid 239, 557, 681
Vespasian, emperor 251
Victory, personification of 672
vigilantism
Athens 536, 537, 542, 545
Rome 562–3
Vindolanda, Northumberland, Roman fort 332, 334
Vinnecombe, Patricia 110
violence
in ancient world 29–36
benefits of 22–3
cultural variety 10
definitions 3–5
in early prehistory 23–6
etymology of Greek hia 533
evolution of 20–2
forms of 4, 40
violence (cont.)
as innate in humans 6, 19
and intention to cause harm 3
legitimate and illegitimate forms 14
as method of control 10
nature of 17
origins of 19
regional variations 26
social and economic contexts 19
and social norms 17, 90–1
society’s view of (acceptable and unacceptable forms) 4, 13
spectacularisation of 633, 637–46, 652
see also collective violence; domestic violence; gang violence; homicide; injuries; just war; raiding; siege warfare; warfare: China, Egypt, India, Maya, Mesopotamia, Rome (below); warriors; weaponry
warfare, China (early imperial) 277–94
and concept of just war 281–5
conquests as punitive 281
literary treatment of 425–32
need for preparation (Confucius) 426
and religious ritual 292–3
and ‘righteous armies’ 281
Shang dynasty 420
Zhou dynasty 423
warfare, Egypt 56, 185, 189–92
and hunting 195
in depictions 181, 182–3
military training 189
representations of 32, 179–95
rituals of 181, 188
scorched earth policies 191
siege warfare 349
women and 193
warfare, India
Buddhism and 599, 600
Jainism on 597–8
ritual of battle 691–4
rules of 687–8
use of force by kings 594–6
warfare, Maya 44, 198–217
colonial period 212–15
conquest and collapse 208, 216
late classic period 206–8
local rivalries 205, 206, 213
postclassic period 210–12
psychological 214
ritual motivations 215
and social changes 215
strategies of 215
terminal classic 208–10
warfare, Mesopotamia 219–36
growth of military elites 227, 231
representations of violence of 632
taking of captives and livestock 236
treatment of enemies 634–7
ubiquity of 220, 222–3, 230, 231
warfare, Rome 238–55
changing nature of in late antiquity 262–9
character of 238–9
cross-border raiding 269
culture of 253

Index

violence against women 366–7
and wealth acquisition 33
see also fortifications; injuries; just war;
raiding; siege warfare; warfare: China, Egypt, India, Maya, Mesopotamia, Rome (below); warriors; weaponry
Vix, France, Iron Age statues 148
Vultures, Stele of the 224, 228, 634, 635, 643, 644
Wandlebury, hill fort, Cambridgeshire, Iron Age burials 327
Wang, C. H. 419, 421, 429
War Scroll (1 QM) (Dead Sea Scroll) 624
Ward-Perkins, Bryan, The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization 258

warfare 24
as anarchic 41
and archaeology 43–4
Bronze Age 28, 117–39
size of armies 134
death rates 41–2
definitions 40
and elites 36
endemic in early Mediterranean world 352
future research on 55–6
genetic consequences of 50–1
impact on societies 46
and intra-societal violence 52–3
Mesopotamia 201
origins of 39–56
Palaeolithic era 6
as political control 209
reasons for 45, 47
regional variations 30
ritual 40
role in prehistory 21
scale of Iron Age 157
strategies against defences 28, 30

736
Index

impact of Christianity in late antiquity 273–4
increase in second century 254
mining 266
motivation for 244
reduction in early empire 249
textual evidence for 264, 265, 267
violence of close combat 243
see also siege warfare
warrior graves, Japan 168–9, 173
warrior ideology
emergence of 7
see also soldiers; warrior ideology, India;
warriors
warrior ideology, India 684–702
acceptance of pain and injury 689–91
application to actual martial groups 701
battle as ritual sacrifice 691–4
condemnation of cowards 694–7
death in battle, rewarded in heaven 689
heroism as transcendent ideal 699
justification for violence 688
and masculinity 690, 698–9
rewards for heroism 696, 698
sīn, heroic warrior 684, 688–91, 698
warriors, Bronze Age 136–8
archers 121
body modification 137
changing identity 137, 138
as elites 137
non-specialist 137
training 138
see also fighting; weaponry
warriors, Iron Age
‘Celtic’ mercenaries in Mediterranean 142, 156
pictorial representations 143, 148–50
weapons and identity 447
see also soldiers
warriors, Japan 172–3
representations 172
warriors, Maya 204
depictions 208
Way of Great Peace sect, Yellow Turban
Rebellion (184 CE) 292
Wayland’s Smithy, Oxfordshire 89
Wē-ila, Babylonian god 466
wealth
and social inequality 95
and warfare 33
weaponry
clubs 118, 119, 137
flint daggers 119
knobbed sticks, San 111
Neolithic 119, 303, 419
‘battle axes’ 92, 118, 119, 419
projectile 65, 66, 118
Mesolithic 68, 70
spears, Upper Palaeolithic 65, 75
see also arrows and arrowheads; bow and
arrow
tools used as 169, 302–3, 419
see also armour; bows and arrows; spears;
swords; weaponry: Bronze Age,
China, Iron Age, Japan, Maya, Roman
(below)
weaponry, Bronze Age 26–7
advantages of metal over stone 118–19
armour 130–2
daggers 119
halberds 119
shields 121–2
slings 130
spears 119, 126–7
swords 122–6
wooden clubs 137
see also armour; shields; swords
weaponry, China
Neolithic 419
Shang dynasty 420
weaponry, Egypt 349
weaponry, Iron Age 143–5
from battlefields 153–5
bronze 144
in burials 145–7
defensive 144
deposits 147–8, 158, 447–9
iron 28, 144
ornamentation 145, 147, 150–1, 157,
447
pictorial representations 148–50
symbolic 143, 145, 157, 443
weaponry, Japan 169–71
arrowheads 170
bronze 170
iron 170
Korean bronze 168
polished stone daggers 169
sling stones 170
stone ‘rods’ (sekibō) 169
symbolic 173
tools as weapons 169
wooden breastplates 170
weaponry, Maya
darts 209
spear throwers 204, 209
weaponry, Roman army
shortsword (gladius) 242, 243, 555
spears 254
Web of Violence model, Britain 320
Weerdinge, Netherlands, Bronze Age site 130
Wetwang Slack, Yorkshire, Iron Age burials 324, 327
Whitcher’s Cave, South Africa, Later Stone Age remains 106
Wiederstedt, Neolithic mass grave 80
Wiesehöfer, Josef 377
wife beating
Arab nomos of 386
Athens 383, 394
and class 393
Wilson, Edward O. 6
Winter, Irene 648
Wolpert, A. 545
women
in Achaemenid Persia 360–78
as agents of violence 12, 360–78
in depictions of war and violence 674
as Egyptian rulers 193
as heavenly reward for warriors 689
and honour 11
hypothetical case of wife protecting husband (in Deuteronomy) 614–15
and Indian warrior ideology 698, 700–1
Iron Age weapon graves 145
in modern ‘traditional’ cultures 386–7, 394–6
skeletal evidence of violence 55, 69
evidence of elder abuse 335
Iron Age Britain 325
Japan 164, 176
Roman Britain 335
slitting of wombs of pregnant status of 5, 32
in Roman Britain 338
as victims of violence 12, 176
and warfare 366–7
captured 55, 89, 96
Neolithic 308, 312
in Egypt 193
see also adultery; children; domestic violence; masculinity; men; sexual violence; wife beating; women, in Greece
women, in Greece
examples in literature 387–94
Greek vision of vengeful 360–1
and honour–shame nexus 384–6
male control of 386
violence against 14, 380–98
triggers for 396
Woolley, Sir Leonard, excavations at Ur 461, 462
wounds see injuries
Wrangham, Richard 6
Wu, emperor of Former Han 285, 287, 288–9
and Chi You warrior god 292
Wu, king, leader of Zhou conquest of Shang 423
Xenophon 538
animal sacrifice 480
Oeconomicus 394
on Persia 373
Xerxes, king of Persia 363
dispute with brother Masistes 365
Xiang Yu, rebellion against Qin empire 287
Xiaowen, emperor of Northern Wei 285
Xiongnu steppe confederation 284, 286
as threat to Former Han 287, 288
Xunzi, Chinese philosopher 282
on proper and improper violence 427–8
Yanomamo people, South America 48
intra-societal violence 52–3
Yax Nuun Ayiin I, king of Tikal 216
Yaxchilan, Mexico, rivalry with Piedras Negras 207
Yaxuna, Mexico, Maya site 205
destruction of 210
road to Coba 207
Yellow Emperor, myth, China 292
Yellow Turban Rebellion (184 CE), China 292
Yishma’el, rabbi 574, 575
Yokokuma Kitsunetsuka, Japan, Yayoi site 168
York, Driffield Terrace Roman British burial ground 336
Yose ben Kisma, rabbi 577
Yoshinogari, Japan, Yayoi defensive settlement 162, 163, 172
Yoshtake Takagi, Japan, Yayoi warrior coffin tomb 168, 170
Yu Rang, and revenge 435
Yucatan, Spanish encounter with Maya 213
Zacpetén, Guatemala, Maya site 210
Zakutu (Naquia), Neo-Assyrian queen 362
Zama, battle of (202 BCE) 243
Zámeček, Slovakia, Bronze Age fortifications 120
Zanker, Paul, and Björn Ewald 669
Index

Zeus
   animal sacrifice 488
   threats against Hera 388
Zevit, Ziony 612
Zheng of Qin, First Emperor 278, 283
   campaigns of conquest 278, 281, 286, 433

confiscation of private weapons 278
Zliten, Lepcis Magna, Roman mosaic 663, 664
Zoroastrianism, purity and impurity 372
Zuo Commentary, Chinese text 431, 435