Warfare in Cultural Context: Practice, Agency, and the Archaeology of Violence
Axel E. Nielsen and William H. Walker (editors)
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This book approaches warfare through the lens of practice theory, with case studies emphasizing relationships between war and other domains of social life. From this perspective, practice is social action shaped by culture and history. The actors are individuals who are knowledgeable, experienced participants in their own cultural settings and who may choose to follow rules and expectations, or to challenge them. Both cultural persistence and change are outcomes of social actions that can both reproduce and transform social patterns and structures. Social actions relevant here include participation in violent encounters, the development of ideology related to warfare and violence, and the development of mechanisms for making and maintaining peace.

Drawing upon oral history and ethnography, Polly Wiessner traces the development of Enga warfare and exchange in New Guinea. After intense warfare during the 1700s and 1800s, trade networks collapsed, large tracts of land were abandoned, and then regional ceremonial exchange networks developed. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, formalized battles known as the Great Ceremonial Wars set the stage for exchange, gift giving, and social interaction between villages. Across many areas of New Guinea, there developed practices connecting warfare (conflict resolution) with exchange (reconciliation and reparation). Despite deeply rooted egalitarianism in Enga culture, leaders did emerge during warfare—ceremonial exchange led to even more-pronounced status differences and leadership roles in Enga communities.

Archaeologists often identify scarcity of land and other resources as major causes of warfare, and hierarchy and centralization as major outcomes of it. There are cases in which those points apply, but also cases in which they do not, as Wiessner argues for New Guinea, and as Eduardo Neves demonstrates in his chapter on embankments, ditches, and stockades at prehistoric villages in Amazonia. Of course, war and war honors can be associated with hierarchy and elite ideology, as in the case of the ancient Maya and late prehistoric Mississippian societies of the American South. Charles Cobb and Bretton Giles relate depictions of Mississippian warriors and weaponry on shell gorgets and copper plates to a warrior ideology emphasizing success in warfare as a major dimension of power, status, and identity, and they identify temporal trends in these themes in Mississippian iconography during the early 2nd millennium A.D. Takeshi Inomata and Daniela Triadan note that war was commonly depicted in Maya iconography, although actual battles may have taken place relatively rarely. During the late 1st millennium A.D., the focus of Maya warfare changed from ritualized battles in fields, emphasizing status rivalry, to direct attacks on major Maya centers with the intent of sacking settlements and monuments.

War is not always conducted to acquire land, but warfare and violence do shape the built environment and cultural landscape. Elizabeth Arkush describes hilltop forts (pukaras) and mortuary towers (chullpas) that dotted the central Andean landscape from A.D. 1000 to 1400, after the collapse of the Tiwanaku and Wari empires, and before the spread of the Inka Empire. Arkush identifies concentrations of pukaras connected by lines of sight, corresponding to areas with distinct pottery types and to the locations of historically known ethnic groups, with buffer zones between them. Axel Nielsen notes evidence for widespread warfare in the southern Andes between A.D. 1200 and 1500, and he interprets evidence for feasting and other activities at pukaras and chullpas as evidence for the development of ancestor veneration, one means by which people anchored themselves to particular places in the midst of conflict and instability. Notably, Nielsen sees evidence for the persistence of exchange in the southern Andes alongside widespread warfare, comparable to connections between warfare and exchange in New Guinea.

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Taking a longer-term view of warfare in Andean prehistory, Theresa and John Topic consider changes in warfare in the Peruvian north coast region from 3500 B.C. through A.D. 1470. At the early end of this sequence are examples of coastal sites with piles of slingstones, reflecting threats of attack and the need for collective defense. By 1200 B.C., there are stone carvings depicting warriors and dismemberment of war captives. After 1000 B.C., many forts are placed on high ground above villages. From A.D. 200 to 650, warfare and human sacrifice dominate the iconography seen on Moche painted pottery—highly structured combat between elite warriors wielding clubs and shields seems to have been significant to Moche ideology, cosmology, and politics. From A.D. 650 to 750, as the power of the Moche state declines, the focus of Moche warfare shifts—stout fortifications and piles of slingstones at many Moche settlements reflect threats of attacks on settlements. From then on, hilltop forts are common, and warfare is one strategy by which the Inka Empire—and the Chimú Empire before it—attempted to dominate coastal Peru during the 1400s and 1500s.

Droughts contributed to increased warfare in the Andes during the early 2nd millennium A.D., to changes in Maya warfare during the late 1st millennium A.D., and to conflict and warfare in late prehistoric southwestern U.S. As William Walker notes, sedentary villages and farming became widespread in the Southwest during the late 1st millennium A.D. Droughts led to abandonment of many areas in the Southwest during the early 2nd millennium A.D., and cultural upheavals during this period led to migrations, settlements in cliff dwellings and in other defensible settings, and aggregations of different groups in large pueblos. These developments have parallels in Puebloan oral traditions, which refer to journeys, community strife, famine, floods, and warfare. Many myths blame witchcraft and other spiritual activity for the destruction and abandonment of pueblos, as punishment for misdeeds and moral shortcomings of residents. Abandoned and ruined pueblos—some of which were burned down—were and still are visible on the landscape, serving as reminders to people of the outcomes of moral shortcomings.

This book concentrates on cases of prehistoric warfare in the Americas, but it is relevant to historical archaeology for several reasons. First, chapters in the book consider the ways that warfare and violence shaped the societies encountered by European explorers and colonists, and the ways those practices shaped native responses to European contact. Second, as Timothy Pauketat comments, many European colonial regimes imposed and maintained peace, but in so doing, they often displaced conflict and warfare to borderland areas. Meanwhile, collapses of colonial regimes have sometimes contributed to the resurgence of conflict and warfare. Such developments have shaped the archaeological record at historical sites, and the prehistoric cases considered in this book (and elsewhere) offer points for comparison. As both Pauketat and Wiessner emphasize, conflict and violence can lead to efforts to form alliances—practices of “war” and “peace” both deserve consideration by prehistoric and historical archaeologists.

All archaeologists interested in warfare will find much to contemplate in this book, which would make good reading for graduate seminars and advanced undergraduate courses. It covers many world areas and periods of prehistory, arguments by authors are framed within broader archaeological and anthropological dialogues about warfare, and each chapter develops its own approach to practice theory as an interpretive framework. This book moves the archaeology of warfare and violence in provocative directions, primarily by relating warfare and violence to other domains of social life.

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