
Carneiro and the Archaeology of War: A Comment from a Prehistorian

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When Robert Carneiro wrote his ‘seminal’ work on the origin of the State, in 1970, the idea that many anthropologists and archaeologists had about the role of warfare in social evolution was very simple: peaceful farmers ‘discovered’ it only *after* an increase of social differentiation brought to power a new warrior élite.

Some exciting archaeological discoveries of the succeeding years caused a progressive denial of the prevailing neo-evolutionist historical reconstructions. The first, in the seventies, was Varna cemetery, a Bulgarian Copper Age necropolis of the fifth millennium BC with the first European gold and copper implements; the richest grave belonged to warriors. Even more impressive was the finding, in 1983, near the southern Germany city of Talheim, of an Early Neolithic grave containing a total of 34 skeletons, consisting of 16 children, 9 adult males, 7 adult women, and two more adults of indeterminate sex, several of which exhibited signs of repeated and healed-over trauma. This and other more or less contemporary mass graves discovered in Central Europe demonstrated that warfare, probably due to competition for good soil to cultivate was very frequent among the early farmers, destroying one of the foundation myths of our civilization, the Enlightenment ‘noble savage’ theory.

This situation deserved a new theoretical framework: in 1997 Lawrence Keeley published *War before Civilization*, a provocative booklet in which he demonstrated, with statistical data, how primitive wars were far more cruel and lethal than modern ones; the war, for Keeley is the norm, and not the exception, in primitive societies (Keeley 1997). In the same years, also under the growing impression of ‘ethnic’ wars in the heart of Europe, many archaeologists and physical anthropologists became deeply

involved in the study of warfare in antiquity. An example of this ever growing interest is the book by Jean Guilaine and Theodor Zammit, *Les Sentiers de la Guerre*, a careful and detailed reconstruction, through the archaeological evidence, of the prehistoric warfare in Europe between the Palaeolithic period and Bronze Age (Guilaine and Zammit 2001).

In the last ten years the 'archaeology of war' produced many articles, books, exhibitions and other types of specialized literature, including a specific review, the *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* (Guidi 2007).

Today, an important role of warfare for the triggering of social stratification seems unquestionable, demonstrating a sort of prophetic feature in Carneiro's theories.

A further point of interest in this article is the idea that social circumscription is often associated with resource concentration. This last concept reminds me strongly Antonio Gilman's theory of 'capital-intensive subsistence techniques' (plough agriculture, off-shore fishing, Mediterranean policulture and irrigation) as a cause for the emergence of social stratification in Bronze Age Europe (Gilman 1981). Gilman explained how a community engaged in these time-expensive economic strategies could not refuse the protection of the warrior élite, allowing the reinforcement and the perpetuation of social inequalities.

Again, notwithstanding the completely different theoretical perspective (functionalist for Carneiro, Marxist for Gilman), warfare (or the 'moral suasion' of the warrior élite) seems to be the key-factor of social evolution and a promising field of investigation for archaeologists and anthropologists.

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