

The Origins of War

Violence in Prehistory

Jean Guilaine and Jean Zammit

Translated by Melanie Hersey



Blackwell
Publishing

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Preface

Is it all just a sign of our times? War is breaking out again in Europe (Serbia, Chechnya, and Kosovo) following a prolonged spell of peace. At the same time violence, the result of economic inequality and social exclusion, is claiming our cities and, at times, our countryside too. Could this explain why prehistorians have recently turned their attention to analyzing and reanalyzing war and conflict? Political and economic factors have always shaped the discipline of archeology, and continue to do so. For some three-quarters of a century (1870–1945), Europe lived either through war or with the threat of war and experienced troop movements, displacements, and deportations. As a result, the focus of history has always been upon events and those involved, upon conflicts, territorial divisions, and dissolutions imposed by foreign intervention. During times of peace, history and archeology as disciplines have both endeavored to adopt a more peace-oriented approach, conducting detailed studies into the daily lives of ordinary people and focusing upon technical developments, changes in the indigenous culture, the progressive taming of nature, and, more recently, human beings as a species.

However, for a number of years, the issue of violence among prehistoric populations has been a popular topic of investigation. The steady increase in archeological evidence has doubtless played a crucial role in bettering our understanding of a field which has long remained inexact and unsubstantiated owing to a lack of documentation. Yet despite all the difficulties associated with this discipline (evidence becoming increasingly scarce the further back in time one goes, difficulty in interpreting certain documents), the view that prehistoric people did not always live in peace and solidarity with one another is still widely held. It is also important to note that prehistory is not a uniform whole but can be divided into periods of time varying in length and characterized by distinct differences in technical, cultural, and economic progress. This diversity is all the more marked at a global level as civilizations

flourished and diversified, adapting to the broad range of physical and social environments. In assigning prehistory to the realms of a far-away and long-forgotten era, many a historian has committed the grave methodological error of equating the advent of writing with the onset of an organized world; a mistake not least because all of the oral cultures predating the introduction of writing systems (as well as those oral cultures that continued to exist long afterwards) were highly sophisticated in certain regards, a fact that often fails to be recognized. The archeology of the ancient Near East (where some of the earliest writing systems originated) is particularly revealing. Signs of progress date from well before the advent of writing: the “invention” of agriculture and cattle breeding in the eighth millennium before the common era (BCE), the existence of towns from the fourth millennium BCE onwards, the introduction of relatively stable governing powers maintained by elites or dynasties, social tensions, exchange systems operating over wide areas, and deities that were subsequently developed and elaborated by the rural and later urban populations. In order to arrive at such a high degree of social stratification, it would be difficult to comprehend how prehistoric societies would not have encountered inevitable force, tension, and conflict along the way.

The problem becomes all the more complex when we turn our attention to the earliest prehistoric populations which, over a period of 2.5 million years, never developed agriculture, relying instead upon nature by hunting wild animals, fishing, collecting molluscs, and gathering leaves, roots, and fruit. These societies had very low populations which increased only very slightly over thousands of years. Thus, it is tempting to dismiss them as fraternal, calm, and altruistic societies, feasting on the bountiful fruits of nature: a real Garden of Eden. Conclusive archeological evidence is scarce, making such assumptions impossible to prove or disprove at times. In this work we shall endeavor to present a somewhat less peace-oriented impression of *Homo sapiens*, drawing examples from the most recent hunter-gatherer societies (“Epipaleolithic-Mesolithic”). It is important to bear in mind that, even if the presence of violent behavior in the Upper Paleolithic era can be confirmed, all interpretations of this behavior remain speculative, particularly where the earliest periods of human existence are concerned. For this reason, this work will focus primarily upon the most advanced stages of prehistoric society: the Neolithic and the Bronze Age.

The role of prehistoric warfare has often been underestimated and labeled a minor and very sporadic activity; prehistoric societies are often perceived to have been largely peaceful. Without wishing to relabel prehistoric man as a war-loving monster, we aim rather to challenge this peaceful image somewhat. Ethnography invites us to do just this by highlighting the importance of war in pre-state societies at a social, political, and economic level.

Traditional archeological approaches, which tend to focus upon fortifications, weaponry, and executions, have only been able to identify certain aspects of this social phenomenon which, like violence, is an inherent part of human behavior. Ancient warfare and, in particular, short-lived battles and conflicts rarely left any trace in terms of material evidence. Former battlefields are now anonymous and have often since been transformed into peaceful landscapes. Open spaces, once dotted with shell-craters, have become tranquil golf courses. Graves can only survive under good conditions and thus a great deal of evidence is destroyed over time. Archeologists are well aware that the number of finds relating to a particular period or culture is always very low in relation to the original size of the population. This accounts for the difficulties experts face when piecing together demographic reconstructions and explains why lengthy controversies may follow.

Archeologists rarely have the opportunity to interpret evidence relating to conflict since, for this to happen, delicate conditions need to be maintained over time in order to preserve both human remains and material artifacts. Yet prehistorians cannot fail to acknowledge that violent, if not murderous, encounters must have occurred in prehistory. This is more evident today than ever before, since reconstructing social contexts and mapping their progressive complexity over time has now become more than just an objective of archeology: it is a legitimate exercise in its own right. Essential evidence of violence in oral cultures, hunter-gatherer societies, and tribal populations is also well documented in anthropology, thus adding credibility to the theory that warring factions existed in prehistory. Keeley's excellent work entitled *War Before Civilization* adopts a similar comparative approach, focusing upon prehistoric, ethnographic, and state societies. This is substantiated with statistical evidence which leaves little doubt that violence and warfare featured in pre-state societies.

"Primitive" warfare is not a new topic of investigation, having first been tackled by Hobbes and Rousseau – the bibliography of related works is now endless. This book aims neither to be scholarly nor exhaustive. Aimed at a broad readership and written by a prehistorian and a medical doctor specialized in ancient pathology, the primary aim of this work is to outline certain problems, to discuss particular pieces of archeological evidence, and to raise questions: in short, to present rather than to prove. At no point does this work aim to make generalizations, preferring instead to focus upon a handful of the many issues relating to this complex field – a field made all the more complex by the vast range of cultures that have characterized human society over time and space. The pitfalls of basing this work upon a few select issues are clear; for this reason, it was necessary to delimit the subject matter. Mediterranean and European prehistory and protohistory form the main

emphasis of discussion, although examples are occasionally taken from other parts of the world. The main subject for discussion can be summarized in two simple questions: What do we know about the violence and first conflicts of the Mediterranean and Europe? How should we interpret existing evidence? Answering the latter question is far from easy. One view is that confrontations are rooted in a long and distant history. The ideological construction of the warrior thus evolved over time and, once established, led to the emergence and widespread acceptance of an ideal: the hero.

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Introduction

Bloodshed at the Beginning of History

Before delving into the depths of prehistory, it is useful to gain an initial overview of the beginning of history, a time when the first states and earliest towns, in their thirst for domination, became locked in an endless cycle of conflict. Such instability characterized the cities of Sumer in Mesopotamia from around 3000 to 2500 BCE. At this time, Sumerian city-states were already at war and destroying one another, disputing territories, seizing each others' troops, and employing force to rob neighboring towns of their riches.¹ Treasures from the royal tombs of Ur reveal the full splendor of these riches: gold, silver, and bronze vessels, sophisticated weaponry, and jewelry made from precious metals and exotic stones which include lapis lazuli imported all the way from mines in Afghanistan. One burial ground dating from around 2,500 years ago was found to contain the "Standard of Ur," a double-sided panel decorated with scenes of figures. The panel is made of a mosaic of shells inlaid with carnelian and lapis lazuli and set in bitumen (see plate 1). One side shows battle scenes and prisoners being captured. Chariots, laden with projectiles and pulled by onagers, charge over fallen enemies while prisoners file, stripped of their clothing, before the king and his dignitaries. The central section shows yet more defeated prisoners, again stripped of their clothing, being escorted by a victorious army of infantrymen all wearing helmets and protected by heavy capes. This indicates that there was a real army with infantrymen and chariots of war. Sumerian soldiers actually had a range of weapons at their disposal – pikes, axes, clubs, daggers – and were able to defend themselves with their shields. Their weaponry also included a ceremonial dagger which was a kind of sword with a crescent-shaped blade, resembling a saber. The bow, though less widely used at this time, soon reappeared on the battlefield.

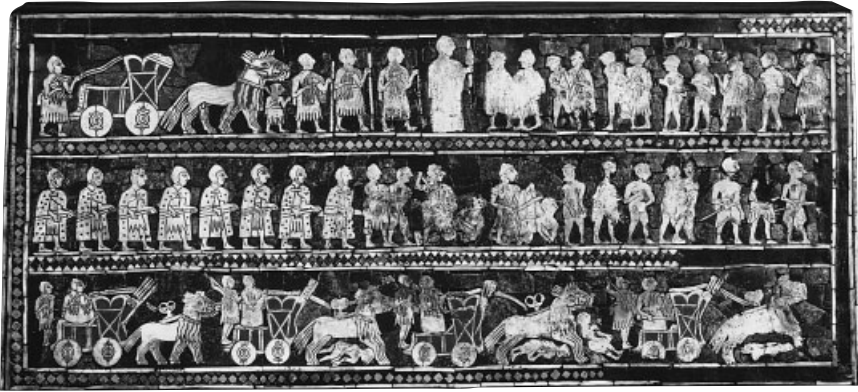


Plate 1 Standard of Ur from one of the “royal” tombs, Mesopotamia, ca. 2500 BCE. Double-sided panel decorated with a mosaic of shells set in bitumen and inlaid with lapis lazuli and carnelian, known as the “war” panel. Top row: prisoners, stripped of their clothing, file before the king and his dignitaries. Middle row: prisoners followed by an army of infantrymen. Bottom row: chariots in action, crushing the bodies of fallen enemies. British Museum, London.
© The Bridgeman Art Library.

It is easy to see why, given the uncertain climate at that time, towns defended themselves by erecting high walls, both as a symbol of their strength and to provide effective protection for the population and their property. Urban communities were guarded by high walls. The Uruk wall was the most spectacular; it surrounded an area of 400 to 500 hectares, was more than 10 km in length, and comprised no fewer than 900 towers.

Art tends to favor the stronger side. The so-called “Stele of the Vultures,” for example, marks the victory of the sovereign of Lagash over the sovereign of the neighboring town of Umma in approximately 2450 BCE – it shows the king and his infantrymen trampling over their fallen enemy.

These internal disputes were brought to an end with the founding of the first Mesopotamian empire: in 2300 BCE, a Semite by the name of Sargon, officer to the king of Kish, founded the kingdom of Akkad before embarking upon a series of military campaigns which took him as far afield as Elam and the outermost bounds of the Mediterranean.

There is every reason to believe that war dates back even further in Mesopotamia. Scenes depicted on Uruk “cylinder seals,” known to be one thousand years older than the Akkad empire and several centuries older than the graves at Ur, confirm the sovereigns’ cruelty beyond all doubt; they are

depicted assisting in the cold-blooded execution of defeated prisoners. The execution of prisoners is a commonly recurring theme. Figurines often represent prisoners crouching down with their hands tied behind their backs, awaiting the ultimate punishment.

The Egyptians, generally portrayed as calm and peaceful, occasionally came under the rule of aggressive leaders who had no hesitation in enrolling mercenaries into their armies. Here too, acts of violence are known to have occurred well before the unification of the kingdom. Warfare was a common theme even then, judging by the fresco paintings decorating the plaster walls of tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis, in the region of Edfu; this mudbrick-lined tomb formed a kind of chamber for a notable individual during the second half of the fourth millennium BCE. The paintings decorating the tomb show curved, Gerzian-style boats, perhaps intended to represent a naval battle. There are also scenes of war and hunting: one figure is shown battling with two animals, perhaps lions. Elsewhere two figures confront each other, as if fighting a duel. In another painting, one figure is shown beating three enemies with a club.²

Another well-documented piece of evidence dating from this pre-dynastic era is the Gebel el-Arak dagger, which has a sculpted ivory handle (figure 1): on one side, there are scenes of fighting between various individuals and images of sea battles; the reverse side depicts an individual confronting wild animals. Both sides of the dagger show scenes of domination – over man and over wild animals.

These scenes of violence date from a time when Egypt was pursuing a series of conquests and was “manufacturing” power, resulting in the unification of

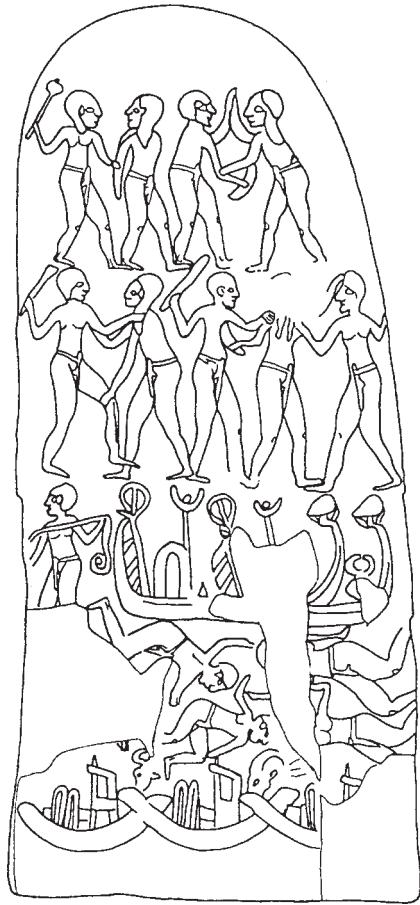


Figure 1 Gebel el-Arak dagger (Egypt). Enlarged detail of the ivory handle. Battle scenes are depicted on one side. After Sievertsen, cited in Midant-Reynes, 1999.

the country under the pharaoh. In each of the various regions, rivalry led representatives from powerful families to assert themselves as leaders – there can be little doubt that such improper seizing of authority did not pass without upset. Tensions must have remained high both between influential towns, still defended by substantial fortifications, and between small kingdoms with their numerous extensions and ever-growing appetites for expansion. Force seems to have played an essential part in aims and interventions, in protecting populations and their possessions, and in subordination. Whether the unification of the country under the pharaoh was triggered by a successful conquest, as is often claimed, or whether, as seems more likely, it occurred in stages alongside the powerful acculturation movements of the day (led by the Nagadian elites and directed at the Delta lands), the image of the sovereign was nevertheless based upon his power and ability to defeat the enemy. War is an element of royal rule and contributes to the institutionalization of the post.³

The theme of victory in battle is clearly depicted upon the Narmer palette, which is said to tell the story of the unification of Egypt: the victory of the South over the North (figure 2). The king, wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt, is shown executing one of his subjects who kneels before him, held down by a Horus falcon which is perching upon papyrus. At the bottom, two “swimmers” seem to signify naval combat. On the reverse side, the king is shown wearing a red crown to symbolize conquered land; preceded by his standard bearers, he can be seen observing the full extent of the battle – rows of decapitated bodies. This work is far more than just a depiction of tragedy, it is also allegorical: it symbolizes the omnipotent sovereign overpowering all who challenge him. Massacre is shown to be a symbol of authority. Raids were carried out by Egypt upon Nubia, Libya, and the Near East throughout the duration of the empire.

Briefly, the long succession of wars, invasions, and destruction which characterized the Eastern Mediterranean region during the second millennium BCE include: the destruction of the Babylonian empire by the Kassites and Hittites; raids carried out by the Kingdom of Hatti across the whole of the Anatolian periphery; nomad invasions which shook the Assyrian empire; successful invasions by the pharaohs as far afield as Nubia and Syria; and wars directed by the Ramessides against the Hittites and Sea Peoples.

Greek history seems to have been equally violent. In the third millennium BCE, eyries were built in the Cyclades islands and in Kastro (Syros) and concealed behind fortified walls in order to prevent piracy in the surrounding area. In Asia Minor, the second city of Troy erected fortified walls, flanked by towers, on a hilltop; other cities in Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine had similar defenses in place. In the second millennium BCE, the Mycenaean cities of



Figure 2 Narmer palette (Egypt), ca. 3000 BCE. On one side (left), the king raises his club to strike his enemy, shown kneeling. The other side (right) shows the king, greatly enlarged in comparison with the other figures, preceded by his standard bearers and observing the battlefield where the bodies of his enemies are laid out. After B. Midant-Reynes.

Mycenae, Tiryns, and Pylos barricaded themselves in behind heavily fortified city walls and set about going to war.

War: An Ongoing Feature of Literature and Religion

Homer, the earliest of the Greek poets, set the tone in praising the virtues of warfare. In the *Iliad*, he describes how the Greeks and Trojans became enraged, thirsting for blood. Even the gods took sides, supporting their heroes. Homer refers repeatedly to the heroes' relentless efforts and describes scenes of horrific fatal injuries and decapitated bodies as the war continued to rage. Such sickeningly morbid details frequently form the focus of his descriptions. The *Odyssey* is just as violent: upon his return to Ithaca, Ulysses

massacres Penelope's suitors in cold blood, leading to all-out carnage. So it seems that the Greeks, experts in the writings of Homer, were also schooled in violence and severity.

The works of the three great ancient Greek historians – Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon – are largely devoted to warfare. Herodotus, the “father of history” renowned for having documented many well-known events, describes the battles that took place in the Aegean, Persia, Egypt, and the land of the Scythians. Thucydides devoted himself entirely to his one work, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, which recounts the bloody confrontations that occurred between Sparta and Athens during the fifth century BCE. Xenophon picks up where this narrative left off in 411 BCE, describing the final stages of this encounter. Later, in *Anabasis*, he describes the fate of those Greek mercenaries who were in the pay of Cyrus, king of Persia, in the battle which brought Cyrus head to head with his brother and tells of their retreat through Anatolia back toward their motherland.

The Tragedians (Aeschylus, Euripides) alternate between accounts of war and family dispute. The works of the Sophists (Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicus) all refer to the advantages and disadvantages of war, some references being more obvious than others. Philosophers often discuss combat in an attempt to assign an ethical and existential value to the individual, enabling him to fight against fate. Even Plato's philosophical writings are scattered with accounts of warfare as, for example, in the *Symposium* in which the troublemaker, Alcibiades (himself a defeated war leader), describes Socrates's exploits at the battle of Potidaea.

The sacred texts of the great monotheistic religions are no more peace-oriented. The Bible is a collection of military exploits: its exegesis reveals that retaliation, war, revenge, deportations, and the capturing of prisoners were common events. If we recognize that a large proportion of the verses are derived from even older legends, as in the case of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, then the same glorification of violence can also be identified. Established in the seventh century of the common era (CE), the Qur'an makes no attempts to conceal its tendencies toward holy war or jihad as a way of subjugating or destroying infidels, although the majority of its suras do preach tolerance.

Violent warfare also forms an integral part of India's oldest religions. The most ancient sacred texts, such as the Bhagavad-Gita, declare war to be essential for any would-be hero. The Mahabharata, a Sanskrit epic of more than 200,000 verses, is devoted entirely to the never-ending confrontations between the Kaurava and the Pandava.

But what of ancient China, home of Confucianism and Taoism? Even here, it is said that the king of Qin (from which the European name for China is derived) had 240,000 people decapitated in 293 BCE in an attempt to

end the war between Han and Wei. The reign of Huang Di, who brought unity to China in the third century BCE, followed a period of extensive bloodshed.⁴ In around 500 BCE, Chinese polemic expert Sun Tzu wrote *The Art of War*, which was apparently considered to be an authoritative work by Japanese military institutions right up to the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

In Central America, Cortez's conquistadors were appalled by the human sacrifices made during Aztec religious ceremonies, in which thousands of people were put to death in just one day. However, under the protection of the Cross, these very same Catholic conquistadors in turn slaughtered the Mexican populations.

How should we interpret this global barbarity which has infiltrated history from the very beginning? Has violent behavior been glorified and exaggerated over time in the interests of a few omnipotent leaders? Was history written primarily by the victorious and then manipulated for their own gain? Although exaggerations may have been made at times, war is nevertheless present throughout the earliest written works, both literary and religious. However, rather than looking at such written evidence, this study will focus primarily upon prehistoric archeology, exploring civilization before the advent of writing systems. The main objective is to define the behavior of humans before the emergence of the first states – this is essentially an archeological enterprise.

Archeology: Tracking Down History

If this analysis of conflict is to be based upon archeological finds, how can we be sure that this evidence is reliable? Is it really possible to piece together accurate reconstructions of battle scenes and invasions through archeology alone? Where certain styles of ceramics or metal tools have spread over a wide area, this is most likely due to acculturation or even a social exchange system. Yet experts often came to very different conclusions in the past. The wide-ranging distribution of certain objects has often been attributed to conflict and to the movement of people and objects this entails. As a social science, archeology has always been influenced by the prevailing historical and intellectual climate of the time. The popular notion that history revolves around fact and conflict has greatly shaped many of its conclusions over the years. The western world has been defined over time in terms of its invasions: pillaging throughout Europe carried out by bands of Celts, Germanic uprisings against the Roman empire, barbarian invasions, Arab raids, Norman incursions, the Hundred Years' War, and so on. The notion that conflict has

regularly ravaged societies, either driving out inhabitants or reducing them to slavery, has long been accepted. The history of France, and similarly that of its neighboring countries, has long centered upon battles; it is often assumed that new geopolitical structures only emerge as a result of conflict. It is this somewhat “military” climate that has prompted archeologists in the past to focus upon the issue of defense mechanisms as symbols of resistance and security, instead of examining the more subtle evidence relating to everyday life.

Furthermore, archeologists have often tended to look to the past when contextualizing the present, even when contextualizing their world view. European archeology, such as it was during the first half of the twentieth century (a half-century ravaged by two world wars with intervals of cautious peace, during which there was little attempt to disarm), attributed changes in civilization to violent splits within a group. Changes in material culture were put down to one culture infiltrating another – it was thought that migration was responsible and that “outsiders” had erased all signs of the previous culture, replacing them with their own knowledge and ways of life. Each phase was thought to last anything from years to centuries, basically until newcomers invaded again, bringing with them a new set of cultural norms. Thus, the emergence of both the first agricultural civilizations and later the first protohistoric civilizations in Western Europe has long been regarded as the end result of a series of migratory movements, originating in the Eastern Mediterranean region and spreading outwards as each population gradually drove out or defeated the local population.

This version of history has since been greatly revised. Theories concerning the significance of invasions, the strength of the troops deployed, the extent of the distances covered, and the resultant upheavals have all since been greatly modified. Archeology began to focus instead upon domestic objects and everyday life. As a result, from the 1950s and 1960s, archeologists began to propose other reasons for changes in material culture, instead of assuming warfare to be the cause. Shifts from one stage in civilization to another were attributed to developments in the local population rather than to nearby or distant groups invading. In short, violent intervention and warfare were no longer considered responsible for such changes; instead indigenous development and progress alone were thought to be the cause.

There can be little doubt that this shift in viewpoint was not entirely “natural.” It may well be that the decades of peace that followed World War II in Europe contributed to this more peace-oriented impression of how societies have evolved. Archeologists are also inevitably influenced by their own experiences. Despite their best attempts at remaining objective, their individual insights into the modern world and their own cultures may

nevertheless affect their interpretation of the subject matter. The result of this mirroring effect will, of course, vary depending on factors such as the author's experience, age, material and cultural background, and opinions. During periods of migratory movements sparked by warfare, a peaceful vision of the past has tended to prevail, with the widespread assumption that early societies lived side by side in harmony and solidarity. Thus, it seems that present-day circumstances do have some bearing upon the prevailing theories of the time. This notion of prehistoric harmony may well be contested in the near future. Indeed, the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo may well lead some European archeologists to portray the past in less idyllic terms. Without wishing to cast doubt upon the integrity of researchers, it is nevertheless clear that archeological interpretations can never be entirely objective.

War in Prehistory: From the Garrigues of Languedoc to the Temples of Malta

Two examples will serve to back up these assumptions. In the south of France in the third millennium BCE, a Copper Age culture referred to as the Fontbouisse culture (named after a site in the French region of Gard) covered the area from Hérault in the west to the Rhone in the east, and from the Cévennes mountains to the sea. At times groups lived here in open dwellings with no means of defense (no moat, palisade, or walls), and at other times they lived in small communities protected by stone walls, reinforced in places with protruding circular structures. The latter type of site was first discovered during the excavation of the Lébous “castle” in Trévières (Hérault). The sites were initially thought to have been fortresses, with bastions for further protection. Yet context is just as relevant as architectural evidence. This culture which once flourished upon the garrigues of Languedoc disappeared suddenly in around 2300–2200 BCE, having been replaced by a new population with an entirely different culture: new types of pottery appeared, bronze replaced copper, and material objects began to resemble those found in Northern Italy and the upper basin of the Rhone. Lifestyles also showed marked changes: very little stone was used in construction, unlike the preceding era when stone was the main building material – populations became more mobile again. These transformations were initially thought to be the direct result of a violent challenge from outside the group. It was proposed that the early Bronze Age populations, which inhabited the outer Alps, descended upon Languedoc, burning the fortified settlements to the ground and driving out the inhabitants. As a mark of extreme degradation, some of the dead were buried in the disused turrets.⁵

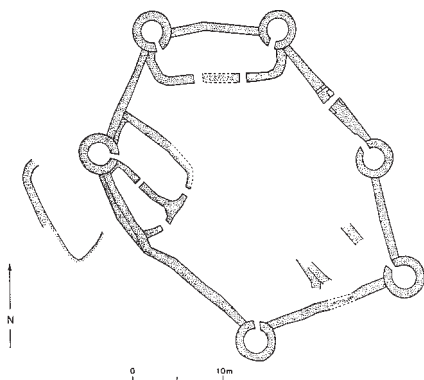


Figure 3 Boussargues (Argelliers, Hérault, France). Layout of the dry stone wall, which surrounded several dwellings, with circular structures built in at intervals, ca. 2500 BCE. After Colomer, Coularou, and Gutherz, 1990.

When a new generation of archeologists in Languedoc excavated the nearby site of Boussargues, another wall-enclosed site, their interpretation of the evidence had little to do with warfare. Despite being surrounded by walls, they thought this small settlement to be a farm rather than a fortress, with the outer buildings opening onto an inner courtyard (figure 3). The small towers in each corner were not thought to be bastions. Instead, it was presumed that they were small drystone, corbelled huts, perhaps for domestic use. Since no loopholes had been built into the wall, there was no clear evidence that the wall was erected for defense purposes.⁶ As for the theory that early

Bronze Age populations invaded the site, no conclusive evidence was found to this effect. Bronze Age settlers are known to have inhabited a site at Rocher-du-Causse in Claret (Hérault), another walled settlement. However, even here there is no evidence that the site was violently destroyed by these newcomers – in fact, they occupied the settlement themselves. It is even possible that these two groups were not contemporaries and thus never come into contact with each other. In this case, the original inhabitants could not have been forced out of their settlement.

These examples reveal how evidence relating to the history of one type of settlement can produce two entirely different interpretations.

The Maltese archipelago is a similar example in many ways. From 3500 to 2500 BCE, an innovative civilization prospered here, renowned for both its megalithic temples and its hypogea. Over this thousand-year period, Maltese sanctuaries began to exhibit specific, original design features, such as concave facades, trefoil floor plans, small loggias, and altars. Over this same period, rock faces were hollowed out to form artificial caves, each with several chambers. They served the island's farming communities as burial chambers with rooms set aside specifically for burial rituals. This highly distinctive and innovative culture, reflected by their architectural and artistic creations, disappeared suddenly in around 2500 BCE. Many different theories have been proposed as to why this should be, although it was long thought that violent attacks, sparked by jealousy and greed and intended to destroy this resourceful,

insular civilization, were to blame. Opinions differed as to where these invaders came from – some thought from Sicily or Italy, whilst others proposed the Aegean or even Anatolia. Whatever the case, it was thought that these outsiders were oblivious to the sacred significance of the Maltese temples and so destroyed them, at times building new settlements in amongst the rubble. They even committed the sacrilegious act of constructing a cemetery for cremating their dead among the ruins of the Tarxien, the largest sanctuary upon the Maltese archipelago.⁷

Unfortunately this theory, which had long convinced experts, began to come apart at the seams when more detailed archeological investigations were carried out. Fresh investigations revealed a significant lapse in time between the temples being abandoned and the arrival of early Bronze Age settlers. In fact, by the time these “outsiders” first set foot upon the island, the Maltese civilization would already have been in significant decline – indeed, it may even have disappeared completely. Thus, it seems that internal ructions rather than violent attacks were to blame for the downfall of the golden age of Maltese temples. What sparked these internal disruptions is not known, though an economic crisis or social unrest are both possibilities. There can be little doubt that more detailed archeological studies have stripped the “military” theory of any credibility.

Corsica: Conquered and Reconquered

When it comes to linking events in protohistory with conflict, Corsica deserves further consideration. Over the years, much debate has centered around evidence of Bronze Age life on the island, raising the question of whether there was an invasion from the Mediterranean. Everything began after World War II when a number of small dwellings, possibly even simple monuments, were identified; these are composed of large blocks generally built up into a point and raised in relation to the surrounding land. The main feature of these small structures is usually a circular tower – a *torre* – surrounded by walled defenses (figure 4). The *torres* form the strong point of these structures and, though they are of more modest proportions, they are not unlike some of the *nuraghes* of Sardinia and the *talayots* found on the Balearic Islands. This type of architecture, developed during the Bronze Age, was thought to have appeared following the arrival of settlers from outside the area who came equipped with technical know-how previously unknown on the island. Evidence seemed to indicate that Corsican civilizations during the Neolithic and during the initial stages of the “metal” ages showed no marked differences in terms of their structural developments. Indeed, dolmens seem to have

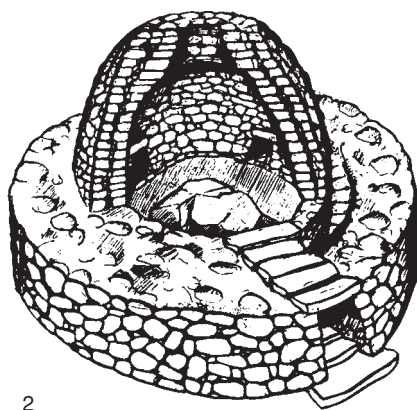


Figure 4 Examples of torres, vaulted structures that were a prominent feature of many Bronze Age sites in Corsica, 2nd millennium BCE: (1) Balestra; (2) Tappa. After Grosjean, 1966.

been their most significant architectural achievement. For this reason, these indigenous populations of the island are termed “Megalithic,” whilst the new settlers, having brought new methods of construction to the island, are referred to as “Torreans” (from “torre”). The differences between these two populations were so vast that one can only assume that they must have been involved in disputes with each other. But in attempting to substantiate this theory, the situation becomes all the more complex.

Ever since Prosper Mérimée, Inspector-General of Historic Monuments under the July Monarchy, identified the first Corsican menhir-statues, a number of these unusual stone-sculpted monuments have been discovered. These upright stone statues were clearly a long-standing tradition on the island. Examples range from simple menhirs with vaguely human features to magnificent statues bearing elaborate anatomical detail. The “Megalithic” civilizations on the island became expert stonecutters, constructing dolmens and sculpting menhirs.

However, during the second millennium BCE, this indigenous and peaceful population was suddenly attacked by invaders who seized the south of the island where they landed. It seems that even when confronted by violent hordes of invaders armed with swords and bronze daggers, the islanders still relied primarily upon their bows and stone-headed arrows. With no choice left but to hand over their land, the “Megalithic” population withdrew to the north of the island and waited for more stable times to arrive. The Torreans, by contrast, settled in the south and set about erecting their trademark citadels complete with torres throughout the area, demonstrating their superior strength, architecturally speaking.

Warfare and ambush between the two groups were common occurrences. Whenever the indigenous islanders killed one of the Torrean leaders in battle, they sculpted a stone statue bearing his features (figure 5). It is thanks to these humble sculptors that we have an idea of how these brutal Torreans would have dressed, looking fearsome in their horned helmets and breastplates or leather vests and carrying long swords. The Torreans themselves showed few artistic tendencies. They seem to have shown no interest at all in these statues, either smashing them or using them as crude stone tools to construct their fortresses. It seems that this is what occurred at Filitosa, a Torrean site in Southern Corsica where many of these statues, crushed into pieces, were re-used as building materials in the walls of some of the dwellings. So the Torreans, unlike the indigenous islanders, seem to have had no aesthetic appreciation.

These formidable newcomers were undoubtedly pirates. Disruption and destruction were not uncommon in the Eastern Mediterranean at this time owing to the displacement of populations over land and sea. Some of these communities have been christened the “Sea Peoples” and spread such great disruption and confusion as to trouble even some of the most powerful pharaohs of the time. In around 1179 BCE, Ramses III put a stop to the situation by inflicting a crushing defeat upon the Sea Peoples. The walls of Ramses’s temple in Medinet-Habu, close to Thebes, were adorned with images of this victory, upon his command. The pharaoh’s enemies, as they appear in these scenes of naval combat, have some features in common with the Torrean figures depicted upon the menhir-statues – both are shown wearing protective vests and, in particular, two-horned helmets (figure 6 and plate 2). The reasons for these similarities are clear: the “Sea Peoples” who fought against the pharaoh were the exact same “Sea Peoples” who invaded Corsica just a few centuries earlier; they were undoubtedly the Shardana referred to in many texts. It seems likely that they settled initially in Sardinia (the name of the island is thought to be derived from these settlers – the similarities between the words “Shardana” and “Sardinia” are evident); from here, they were naturally tempted to try their luck at conquering neighboring Corsica.

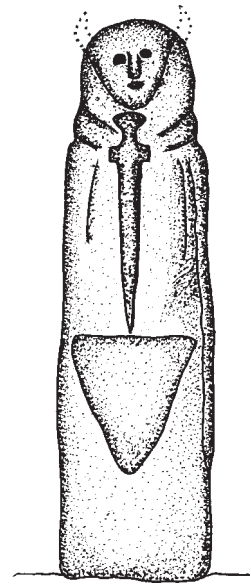


Figure 5 Cauria 2. Sculpted monolith (figure armed with a sword, a helmet with horns, and a loincloth (?)), intended to represent a Torrean “invader.” After Grosjean, 1966.

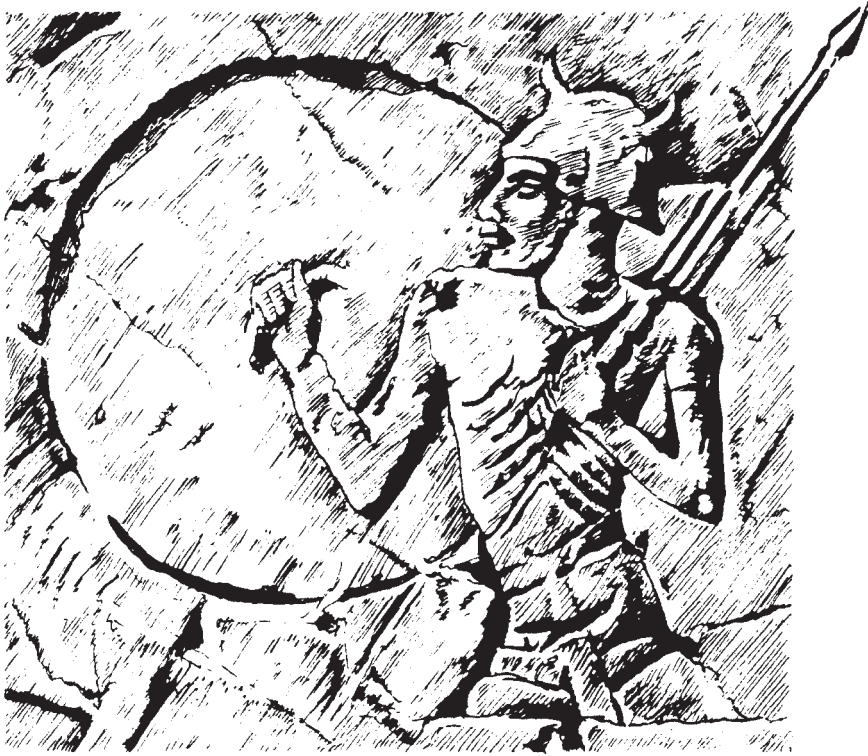


Figure 6 Detail of a fresco from the Medinet-Habu temple (Egypt), showing a scene from the battle between Ramses III and the Sea Peoples (ca. 1179 BCE). The image shows a warrior, one of the “Shardana.” After Arnal, 1976.

Following several hundred years of prosperity, the Torrean civilization finally collapsed. The indigenous descendants of the “Megalithic” civilization, occupying the north of the island, had little sympathy for these “intruders” and eventually reconquered the island, bringing to an end this lengthy period of foreign occupation.⁸

This is a fascinating history, even if warfare does have a frequent part to play. Unfortunately, it is entirely speculative. The lack of written accounts means that experts must rely upon inadequate material evidence to reconstruct this sequence of events. In attempting to fill the gaps in history with speculation, in this case concerning migratory movements, archeological theories often come unstuck. Indeed, archeology as a discipline will begin to lose credibility if it is forced to rely entirely upon such unsubstantiated theories.



Plate 2 Filitosa (Corsica), armed Bronze Age statue, second millennium BCE. The figure is equipped with a sword complete with cruciform hilt and a bronze dagger. © AKE-Images/Eric Lessing.