

The Archaeology of War

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Reviewed by Andrea Malaya Ragraio

A 5,000-year-old murder victim is found frozen in the Alps. The ghostly remains of the warship *Mary Rose* is raised from the depths. And the gargantuan craters of the central Nevada nuclear test site make the landscape seem as barren as the moon. All these bespeak the human capacity for, and our long history of, violence and warfare.

As archaeologists, we study how people in the past lived – how they got their sustenance, created crafts, exchanged goods, built their homes, worshiped their deities, buried their dead, and related with each other. As we study how they lived, why not how they killed each other as well?

Warfare may seem to the layperson to be as blunt as that last statement, but a new book, *The Archaeology of War*, seeks to reveal the subtleties and nuances behind some of the worst acts committed by human beings through archaeology. Wars and battles, after all, were traditionally seen as the realm of the historian rather than the archaeologist. However, this usually results in incomplete interpretations skewed in the favor of groups and individuals who were able to leave behind written documentation. It is only quite recently that archaeology, with its focus on material culture and landscapes, has jumped into the fray.

The Archaeology of War is a compilation of various short articles that explore the phenomena of human conflict from the distant past to recent times. It features contributions from archaeologists working around the world and is edited by the editors of *Archaeology* magazine.

The book is divided into five parts, roughly in chronological order. Part One, *The Roots of War*, brings us to the earliest instances of mass violence and organized attacks. Included here are the 1325 CE Crow Creek Massacre and the beginnings of state-level warfare in 3rd millennium BCE Sumer. Part Two, *Ancient Warfare*, deals with warfare in the so-called Classical world, from Egypt's New Kingdom warrior kings to Greek soldier burials to Octavian and Antony's fateful naval encounter at Actium. Part Three, *From the Middle Ages to the Age of Exploration and Conquest*, tackles European medieval warfare and the start of empire-building throughout the world. Some of the famous examples discussed here are the Battle of Towton, the remains of Napoleon's army in Vilnius, and the defeat of Kublai

Khan's navy in Japan. In Part Four, *The Wars of North America*, we enter the battles fought on United States soil. This includes conflicts such as the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, as well as The Indian Wars and the war with Mexico. Part Five, *War in Modern Times*, deals with the wars of recent memory: World Wars One and Two and the Cold War. Part Six, *Archaeology and War*, takes us around the world to sites of contemporary conflict like Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkan states, where archaeological work is conducted in active war zones. Because of the real threats faced by the archaeology in these areas and the urgency of these situations, this part of the book acquires a heritage management dimension to it.

The scope of the archaeology of war, as we can see from these collated articles, is truly impressive. Some of the articles in the book deal with specific sites like Fort William Henry, or battle events like Palo Alto. Others focus on the evolution of military strategies like trench warfare in Ypres, or technological advances and weaponry like medieval trebuchets and Civil War ironclads. Another important topic is the social impact of warfare, violence and conflict, like De Soto's disastrous New World campaign.

To supplement the articles written in the present, the book is interspersed with *Eyewitness* Chapters, which contain excerpts of first-hand accounts of leaders and foot soldiers, even historians and poets, who witnessed battle events. Here, the biases and motivations of participants are recorded. These accounts are presented without much commentary or judgment, allowing the witnesses to speak for themselves as much as possible. We get a sense of the emotions and sensations these people felt while on the battleground. These chapters provide an interesting counterpoint to the accounts produced today by archaeologists, which are based more on material evidence than written documentation. Their versions are juxtaposed with the archaeological interpretations, in a way giving readers both emic and etic points of view of a single event. They also serve to remind us that archaeological evidence and written and oral documentation can and should be used together in coming up with new insights and a holistic view of warfare.

The editors clearly tried their best to encompass as much as they can in a vast (and relatively young) field that is anything but clearly defined at this stage of its development. The inclusion of prominent examples, such as Ötzi the Iceman, Hesarlik, Towton, the Mary Rose, Flanders Field and Iraq is commendable. However, some equally important archaeological discoveries, especially from Asia and Africa, seem to be missing. Shih Huang-ti's terra cotta warriors and other Chinese examples come to mind. And the pioneering battlefield studies in Zululand are not even mentioned.

In the same vein, one might question the devotion of an ample part of the book solely to North American wars. But perhaps we can look at it as a testament to

the massive amount of work done in that area, with American archaeologists producing such landmark studies like the Battle of the Little Bighorn site and contributing substantially to theoretical discussions on the subject. Therefore, rather than seeing this shortcoming as an affront, I see this as a challenge to archaeologists working in Asia and Africa to expound more on this theme and further expand present studies on conflict in past Asian and African societies.

A word must be said about the book's style as well. Being a compilation of short articles by different authors, it is understandable that the style and depth with which each topic is tackled would vary, too. For example, some articles reported findings objectively, like Alexander Benenson's contribution about prehistoric village warfare. Others opted for a more personal touch – like David Bush's piece on a Confederate POW camp – by speaking in the first person. Some are highly detailed and thorough, while others read like news briefs with only the most basic facts.

What is consistent, though, is the simplicity and straightforwardness with which all these articles were written. This book was created clearly with the lay reader in mind. As a whole, the book rarely dives into theoretical problems such as causation, patterns of behaviour, power relations and so forth. In the few instances that some articles do touch on these matters, they are only cursory and tentative.

It is easy to toy with the idea that in-depth analysis has been sacrificed for this lighter format. But such a "trade-off" need not be an issue if one keeps in mind that this publication is from *Archaeology*, a popular magazine that is directed primarily at the general public. It works as an accessible introduction to conflict archaeology for the ordinary reader, so its somewhat informal style would be expected and even appropriate.

Therefore, we should look at the book *The Archaeology of War* as an introductory text and popular publication on conflict archaeology. In terms of presenting the latest archaeological discoveries, experiments, and reassessments on human conflict, it does a satisfactory job. While it has its limitations especially in the realm of theory, it nonetheless successfully whets our archaeological taste buds with what this field can potentially contribute to our discipline.

As for the Philippines, *The Archaeology of War* serves to remind us that we have a dearth of similar studies. Despite good beginnings such as Junker's study on Philippine chiefdoms and the National Museum's work with the San Diego shipwreck, many more sites that can potentially yield this sort of data are neglected. For example, the Old Bilibid Prison in Manila, utilized since the Spanish colonial period and where many Filipino patriots were executed and many more incarcerated, is currently overrun by informal settlers. And the Zapote Bridge, site of one of the largest battles in the Filipino-America War has been irreparably damaged by urban

expansion. If anything, the examples contained in this book provides useful insights and can encourage us to preserve such sites and explore this theme in our current and future projects.

Conflict-focused archaeological research, whether in historical periods or in prehistory, is still in its youth. For too long we have depended too much on the written record in studying these explosive events. *The Archaeology of War* tells us that the frontlines have shifted.