
Unearthing a Violent Past

ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE FOUND EVIDENCE
OF WARFARE BETWEEN PREHISTORIC
VILLAGES AROUND THE WORLD.

by ALEXANDER BENENSON

Two of the most graphic examples of prehistoric village warfare are the mass graves excavated at Crow Creek, South Dakota, and Talheim, Germany. The remains found at these sites bespeak brutal strife and call into question modern idealized images of prehistoric people as noble savages or pacifists.

Uncovered in 1978, the Crow Creek mass grave held nearly 500 men, women, and children. (See page 1 of the photo insert.) The largest Native American mass burial site ever, it was discovered by archaeologists working to stabilize a portion of the river bank eroded by waves long a Missouri River reservoir in central South Dakota. Many of the bones, dated to around A.D. 1325, bore traces of fatal wounds or mutilation after death. Who were the killers? What had provoked them to such violence?

Those interred at Crow Creek were members of a group of Native Americans that scholars call the Initial Coalescent



Courtesy Larry J. Zimmerman

Many of the remains from Crow Creek show evidence of trauma such as this skull fracture.

tradition peoples, ancestors of today's Arikara people. In the face of frequent droughts and scarce resources, they had migrated from what is now Iowa, Nebraska, and northern Kansas. The Missouri offered a steady source of water and rich soil to grow corn, squash, and beans. Excavations of sites in this area show a population boom throughout the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. As many as 8,000 people are thought to have settled along the 80 miles of river upstream from Crow Creek around this time. By 1325, there were probably close to 15 villages established in the area, but the new prosperity would prove to be a double-edged sword for the villagers at Crow Creek.

The people depended on agriculture for survival, but the explosive population growth led to increased competition, for access to

water and arable land, and perhaps even warfare. The Crow Creek village, situated between two streams, was prime real estate. Archaeological evidence and aerial photography show its residents had begun work on an extensive fortification system, including a six-foot-wide, six-foot-deep, 1,250-foot-long trench that guarded the one approach to their village not protected by natural obstacles. Archaeologists believe that the need for resources eventually prompted a neighboring tribe village to attack Crow Creek. It probably took place in late fall or early winter, just as concerns about the availability of food would have reached their height. Archaeologists think the attackers crossed the village's unfinished trench and, once inside, set fire to the earthlodges. A close examination of the bones paints a grisly picture of what happened next.

Some skulls have fractures from blows. Other marks indicate that the attackers mutilated the bodies, cutting off hands and feet, and in some cases the head. Scalping marks were also found on the frontal bones of several skulls. Tooth marks from scavenging animals show that the bodies were not buried right away, although remnants of an earthen burial covering and ceremonial fire were found on top of the grave. The mass grave contains fewer female remains than would be expected, indicating that many of the younger women were probably taken by the killers.

Evidence of pathology on the bones provides a window into the lives of the Crow Creek villagers. Many of the bones show growth-check lines, caused by malnutrition or even starvation. In addition some 100

bones exhibit a honeycomb pattern typically associated with scurvy, which could have been caused by a deficiency in vitamin C. Other pathologies on the bones are consistent with iron and protein deficiencies. About half of the upper jawbones found show signs of some kind of inflammation, often the result of a starchy, corn-rich diet. The evidence suggests that maintaining a reliable source of quality nutrition was a lifelong struggle for people in and around Crow Creek, a struggle that would have only been made more difficult by the rapid population growth. Malnourished, and possibly on the verge of starvation it is easy to see how a desperate nearby village could have been driven to turn on its neighbors.

The burial site, along with the remains of the settlement, all sit on what is now the Crow Creek Sioux Reservation. The Sioux (Lakota/Dakota) people were extremely concerned about the excavation of the remains. To ease their worries, archaeologists hired several Sioux excavators and sought the advice of a Lakota holy man, who built a sweatlodge near the burial site. The excavation proceeded only after he had received spiritual confirmation from the *wanagi* guardian spirits that disturbing these dead was permitted. The reburial of the remains on the site involved several traditional Lakota ceremonies and Christian rituals. The next day, an Arikara holy woman conducted a small, private ceremony at the site in honor of her ancestors.

IN 1983, A MAN IN TALHEIM, southern Germany, inadvertently dug up bones while gardening. The bones turned out to be human,

and in the vicinity of 7,000 years old. A weeklong excavation ensued, revealing a small ten-by-five-foot chamber filled with the remains of at least 34 Middle Neolithic farmers. But what was most surprising was the story that their fractured skulls and scattered arms and legs told. These villagers had been viciously murdered. Some of their bones had breaks that had healed—suggesting the people were no strangers to violence.

The skeletal evidence indicates the inhabitants of Talheim, who belonged to the Linear Pottery culture, were killed in a variety of ways. Some skulls had oval-shaped holes punched out of them, the size and shape of which match precisely with that of the sharpened edge of the polished stone axes associated with the Linear Pottery culture. Other skulls have deep, rounded depressions. These men and women had been bludgeoned to death. Two skulls showed injury from flint arrowheads.

The bodies had been thrown hastily into the grave, some face first, some lying sprawled out on their backs, their arms and legs intertwined. This is in stark contrast to the normal Linear Pottery graves that usually contain only one person carefully arranged in a crouching position.

The motivation for the massacre is difficult to discern. Evidence such as the use of polished, stone axes suggests that the killers might have been other Linear Pottery farmers rather than the indigenous forest-dwelling foragers, often cited as the farmer's greatest threat. The attack was probably prompted by competition for local resources.

Murder Or War?

In 2001, an X-ray revealed that Ötzi, the 5,000-year-old "Iceman" found near the Italian-Austrian border a decade earlier, had been shot in his left shoulder with a flint arrowhead. (See page 1 of the photo insert.) Though it stopped short of any major organs, the small arrowhead probably severed nerves in his shoulder, making his left arm useless and limiting his chance of survival. But bruises on his torso and a gash on his hand indicate that the arrowhead was only part of the story. Blood identified as coming from four other men was found on his clothing and tools, suggesting multiple attackers had assailed him from several different sides.

Even earlier examples of attacks, likely with the intent to kill, have been found. In 1997, researchers found a small fragment of flint in the 13,000-year-old pelvis of a woman found in a cave in San Teodoro, Sicily. The fragment's size and shape indicate it was

from an arrowhead rather than a spear. The bone showed signs of having healed around the fragment suggesting that the woman survived the attack. Ancient violence was not limited to the Old World. The 9,300-year-old Kennewick Man, discovered in eastern Washington in 1996, appears to have suffered an injury similar to the woman in Sicily. He was hit in the pelvis with a stone-tipped dart launched from an atlatl or spearthrower. His wound also seems to have healed completely, though it would have caused a significant amount of pain and inflammation and would have limited his mobility.

It is impossible to know whether Ötzi or the others were isolated victims or casualties in larger conflicts. However, all three discoveries indicate that prehistoric humans used technology not just for hunting animals, but also for engaging in combat with each other.

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The Archaeology of War

from the editors of

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With an Introduction by
Mark Rose

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