Introduction: Towards a Social Archaeology of Warfare

Roberta Gilchrist

World Archaeology, Vol. 35, No. 1, The Social Commemoration of Warfare. (Jun., 2003), pp. 1-6.

Stable URL:

http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0043-8243%28200306%2935%3A1%3C1%3AITASAO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J

World Archaeology is currently published by Taylor & Francis, Ltd..

Introduction: towards a social archaeology of warfare

Roberta Gilchrist

Abstract

The recent explosion of interest in the archaeology of warfare is examined, and some possible reasons behind this trend are explored. Characteristics in the archaeology of warfare are identified in relation to prehistoric and historical archaeology and their contrasting sources of evidence. The androcentric tendency of the archaeology of warfare is discussed, and the major themes of the volume are introduced, including memorial landscapes, commemorative monuments and their conflicting meanings, and the social context of warfare.

The theme of this volume is timely in a number of respects. It responds to the recent proliferation of cross-cultural and prehistoric studies devoted to warfare, and to the growing popular interest in the material remains of twentieth-century military conflicts. The volume engages critically with existing approaches to warfare, and many contributors explore alternative, social archaeologies of war. Distinctive themes arising from these studies include memorial landscapes, commemorative monuments and their conflicting meanings, the social context of warfare, and post-colonial, somatic and gendered perspectives on warfare.

Warfare has emerged as a major topic in prehistoric and theoretical archaeology only since the mid-1990s. This lacuna contrasts markedly with the large corpus of work devoted to the anthropology of warfare, and with the long-standing tradition of military history (and corresponding branches of classical, medieval and historical military archaeology). Why has this intense interest in warfare emerged only recently? One catalyst was a critical work by Keeley, *War Before Civilization* (1996). Keeley argued that the past had been artificially 'pacified' by the interpretations of anthropologists and archaeologists, which adhered to 'the myth of the peaceful savage'. Certainly Keeley's critique prompted a shift in the tenor of warfare studies, with a deluge of grittier works promoting 'the archaeology

of violence', 'the archaeology of aggression' and so on (e.g. Carman 1997, 1999). It seems that the discipline had been ripe for a change of paradigm, and that Keeley had tapped into a broader social momentum. Helle Vankilde (this volume) argues that this breakthrough in war studies was a social response to the many ethnic wars of the 1990s. The vivid and gruesome depictions of atrocities arising from such conflicts forced us to confront the myth of the peaceful savage. The myth was shattered by the reality of human violence, coupled with the actual misery and suffering of war.

But there is a parallel, and equally emotive, contemporary concern with warfare. Academic study of warfare has grown in tandem with a more popular interest in the history and archaeology of twentieth-century military conflicts: the First World War, the Second World War and the Cold War (Schofield et al. 2002). With the increasing age of veterans of both world wars, an urgency surrounds our desire to understand these global conflicts. The war veterans themselves have been a living form of commemoration of war. As their generations disappear, we feel the need to formally monumentalize the Second World War, and to treat the Western Front of the First World War as a landscape of pilgrimage. The dwindling numbers of physical remains associated with these conflicts has also spurred a conservation movement (see http://www.english-heritage.org.uk). In Britain, the Council for British Archaeology has led 'The Defence of Britain Project', in which classes of site are first defined (such as airfields, anti-aircraft artillery, etc.), followed by the recording of each surviving example by groups of volunteers (www.britarch.ac.uk/projects/dob). This contemporary engagement with recent war has fostered 'a depth of feeling rarely seen on other types of [archaeological] site' (Schofield 1999: 173). This emotion is apparent particularly in relation to the physical spaces of violent conflict, for example the battlefields of the First World War and the Holocaust concentration camps of the Second World War, such as Auschwitz, which is designated a World Heritage Site. The emotional connection is sometimes more personal: many of the key proponents of the archaeology of twentieth-century conflict had fathers or grandfathers who fought in the war. This particular strand of warfare studies offers a personal commemoration and catharsis, comparable perhaps to the pursuit of family history, and is connected more to contemporary social currents than to theoretical narratives.

Two contrasting approaches to the archaeology of warfare have characterized recent prehistoric and historical archaeology, resulting in part from the nature of the sources of evidence. Prehistorians recover *indirect* evidence of warfare, comprising violent injuries detected on human skeletons and weapons accompanying burials as grave goods. The study of weapon burials has an august lineage, and in recent decades research has concentrated on the social identity of the warrior (e.g. Kristiansen 1999; Treherne 1995), rather than their physical engagement in warfare. Since the mid-1990s, effort has shifted more towards cataloguing evidence for the presence and intensity of prehistoric violence, with the broader objectives of considering the social advantages and risks of warfare, and its place in emerging social complexity (Carman and Harding 1999). This approach is taken up by Nick Thorpe in a study of the origins of warfare (this volume). He tests the main theories of evolutionary psychology in explaining the role of warfare – territorial, reproductive, and status competition – against the archaeological record of the European Palaeolithic and Mesolithic. He argues that a biological origin for warfare is refuted by

archaeological evidence, which shows great variability in levels of violence both chrono-logically and regionally.

   Historical archaeology has the more *direct* evidence of documentation that frequently allows the identification of specific battle sites. Research therefore concentrates on the actual arena of violent confrontation, often aiming to reconstruct the military technolo-gies and strategies employed in particular battles. This more site-based approach harnesses artefactual, skeletal and landscape evidence. At the American site of Little Big Horn (1876), for example, the distribution of ammunition was studied to reconstruct the movement of opposing forces across the landscape (Scott et al. 1989). More often, the physical terrain is studied to consider how the landscape was exploited for strategic purpose (Carman 1997: 237–8; Hill and Wileman 2002). A more integrated approach was taken at Towton (N. Yorks), the site of the definitive battle of the Wars of the Roses (1461) (Fiorato et al. 2000). Chance discovery of a mass grave pit was followed by its excavation and the bioarchaeological analysis of the tangled remains of thirty-eight individuals. The mutilated bodies of these men had been stripped of their belongings, before being tightly packed into a rectangular pit, deposited in a variety of orientations and positions that would have been incongruous to medieval Christian burial practices.

   In discussing the treatment of war dead in ancient Greece and Rome, Polly Low and Valerie Hope (this volume) reveal that practices were followed comparable to those that prevailed on the medieval battlefield. Indeed, mass burial near the field of battle was common until the late nineteenth century, with designated war cemeteries, and the practice of marking the graves of individual soldiers, being a modern phenomenon (King 1998: 184–7). The earlier practice of mass interment of war dead in unmarked graves may explain the contemporary reverence directed toward battlefields. As Nicholas Saunders observes, battlefields are 'sacrificial landscapes' that become commemorative monuments in themselves (this volume). A collective sense of pathos lends these sites a sacred quality: places of battle have witnessed the sacrifice of human blood. Only this collective compassion, and regret for sacrifice of life, can account for the public demand to conserve such sites intact (English Heritage 1995), when little concern is raised at the destruction of relatively recent European burial grounds.

   The papers in this volume offer a distinctive perspective in comparison with the prevailing traditions outlined above, and Vankilde (this volume) offers her own critique of recent approaches to prehistoric warfare. An illuminating contrast is the way in which the topic of the landscape is treated. Rather than focusing on the landscape as a means of elucidating military strategies and technologies, papers by Nicholas Saunders, Nayanjot Lahiri, and Rafael Curtoni et al. address the role of landscapes in representing memory. Saunders concentrates on the imagery of the cross, showing how prehistoric, medieval and First World War imagery of the cross in the landscape overlapped to forge a collective social memory of war. The poignancy of this imagery was extended to bodily adornment and domestic ornament, continuing long after the conflict. Rafael Curtoni, Axel Lazzari and Marisa Lazzari are concerned with non-Western forms of representation in their study of the commemoration of the ancient capital of the Rankülche Indians of Argen-tina. Rather than the encoding of memory *on to* the landscape, they consider the conflicting perceptual engagements with a landscape that represents the ancestral past: landscape is regarded as the *process of remembering*. Lahiri considers evidence of the

1857 revolt against British rule in India, and the memorial landscape created by the British in Delhi. She is concerned with the 'reception history' of the landscape, culminating in the vandalism to British graveyards following independence in 1947. She offers an important post-colonial perspective, contrasting the tangible memorial landscape created by the victors with the negative evidence for the resistance offered by Delhi's residents: 'A populace that has been brutally suppressed cannot be expected either to commemorate sites of resistance or to set up memorials'.

The overarching theme of this volume is social commemoration, seeking a broader interpretation of the impact and meaning of war than studies that have focused on violence and battlefields. The latter prioritize the experience of the soldier or warrior in battle, neglecting wider social and family networks and rendering the archaeology of warfare an exclusively male preserve. Cross-cultural comparison of the commemoration of war reveals important distinctions in national traditions. Annette Becker's (1988) study of French war memorials, for instance, showed that French memorials included marching soldiers and dead ones, women grieving and ploughing, and even ten pacifist memorials. British war memorials are more restricted in their subjects of representation: it was finally announced in the year 2000 that there would be a monument commissioned to commemorate women who had died in the war. Paul Rainbird (this volume) examines the reception of one particular war monument within the context of Australian commemoration of the First World War. Such monuments were central to emerging nationhood, representing the first occasion on which Australians had fought as an independent nation. They were unashamedly masculinist in their representation of the war through the promotion of the 'Anzac myth', the idealized characteristics of the Australian outback or pioneer male. Significantly, the Australian monuments commemorated the names of all those who had served, in contrast with British war memorials that commemorated only those who had died, and were linked more to the bereavement of local communities.

In the ancient world, there were also public monuments to the war dead. Valerie Hope notes the ample evidence for public monuments to victory in Rome, which contrasts with the absence of evidence of how private loss was expressed (this volume). The large corpus of Roman tombstones of soldiers commemorates only those who died in military forts, rather than those who were lost in the field of battle. She contrasts the Roman situation with that of ancient Athens, where the war-dead were given a decent burial and some form of commemoration. Polly Low takes up this theme in her study of the anti-democratic Greek city-states of Megara, Tanagra and Thespiae (this volume). She demonstrates that commemoration of the war-dead was important outside democratic Athens, but that soldiers were commemorated as citizens rather than as individuals. They were commemorated for their sacrifice to the city-state, and as a representation of the *polis,* rather than in relation to their own personal identity.

Helle Vankilde notes that studies of prehistoric warfare 'mostly pacify the past and populate it with idealized figures of male identity' (this volume). The promotion of a timeless, homogeneous warrior fails to tackle the issue of masculinity contextually. It is clear that an engagement between gender and the archaeology of warfare is long overdue, and that archaeology could benefit from examining the connection between representations of masculinity and war (e.g. Sherman 1996; Dressler 1999). Notions of masculinity are often constructed through the imagery of weapons, creating a naturalized equation of

maleness with power (Gilchrist 1999: 64–71). In archaeology there is generally an assumption that weapons convey the symbolism of power, and of the warrior, only when they are associated with an adult male. There is marked reluctance to confront the possibilities of

Derevenski, J. S. 2000. Material culture shock: confronting expectations in the material culture of children. In *Children and Material Culture* (ed. J. S. Derevenski). London: Routledge, pp. 3–16.

Dressler, R. 1999. Steel corpse: imaging the knight in death. In *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (ed. J. Murray). New York: Garland, pp. 135–68.

English Heritage 1995. *Register of Historic Battlefields*. London: English Heritage.

Fiorato, V., Boylston, A. and Knüsel, C. 2000. *Blood Red Roses: The Archaeology of a Mass Grave from the Battle of Towton AD 1461*. Oxford: Oxbow.

Gilchrist, R. 1999. *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past*. London: Routledge.

Gimbutas, M. 1982. *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 6500–3500 BC: Myths and Cult Images*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Hill, P. and Wileman, J. 2002. *Landscapes of War: The Archaeology of Aggression and Defence*. Oxford: Tempus.

Keeley, L. H. 1996. *War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

King, A. 1998. *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance*. Oxford: Berg.

Kristiansen, K. 1999. The emergence of warrior aristocracies in later European prehistory and their long-term history. In *Ancient Warfare: Archaeological Perspectives* (eds J. Carman and A. Harding). Stroud: Sutton, pp. 175–89.

Meskell, L. 1995. Goddesses, Gimbutus and the 'New Age' archaeology. *Antiquity*, 69(262): 74–86.

Schofield, J. 1999. Conserving recent military remains: choices and challenges for the twenty-first century. In *Managing Historic Sites and Buildings* (eds G. Chitty and D. Baker). London: Routledge, pp. 173–86.

Schofield, J., Gray Johnson, W. and Beck, C. M. (eds) 2002. *Matériel Culture: The Archaeology of Twentieth Century Conflict*. London: Routledge.

Scott, D. D., Fox, R. A. Jr., Connor, M. A. and Harmon, D. 1989. *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Sherman, D. J. 1996. Monuments, mourning and masculinity in France after World War I. *Gender and History*, 8(1): 82–107.

Treherne, P. 1995. The warrior's beauty: the masculine body and self-identity in Bronze-Age Europe. *Journal of European Archaeology*, 3(1): 105–44.