

## Warfare and Violence in the Americas

*North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence.* RICHARD J. CHACON and RUBÉN G. MENDOZA, editors, 2007. University of Arizona Press, Tucson. ix + 283 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2532-4.

*Latin American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence.* RICHARD J. CHACON and RUBÉN G. MENDOZA, editors, 2007. University of Arizona Press, Tucson. ix + 293 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2527-0.

*The Taking and Displaying of Human Body Parts as Trophies by Amerindians.* RICHARD J. CHACON and DAVID H. DYE, editors, 2008. Springer, New York. xvii + 680 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-387-76983-7.

*Reviewed by* Elizabeth Arkush, University of Virginia.

In the intellectual battlefield framed by Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, archaeologists and other social scientists spar over basic questions about war. Is it a normal state of affairs for stateless societies, or an aberrant pathology? Are the seeds of war woven into our evolutionary past, locking us into an inevitable rehearsal of violence, or did war arise, or intensify, at some distinct threshold in human history – perhaps the shift to segmentary forms of social organization (Kelly 2000), the transition to sedentary lifeways (Ferguson 2006), the rise of stratified societies, or the advent of imperial expansion (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992)? Meanwhile, other questions, of more recent vintage but no less compelling, dun us: To what extent are the practices of war shaped by their unique cultural milieus? How is warfare interwoven with the rest of society and culture?

Such questions used to be the domain of a few, almost exclusively male scholars, who were both pioneers and mavericks in the field. But urged on by Lawrence Keeley's 1996 *War Before Civilization*, and influenced by two bloody decades of civil and factional conflicts, a remarkable spate of books on the archaeology of war has amassed enough evidence to decisively lift these issues out of the realm of theorizing. These works testify to the presence and importance of war in human histories all over the globe. Furthermore, they allow us to move beyond establishing the presence of war, and characterizing its practice, to saying something meaningful about its causes, its effects, and its relationship with society and culture over time. To them are now added three important edited volumes. The two books edited by Richard Chacon and Rubén Mendoza document the presence and practice of war throughout the Americas, expressly to refute the last shreds of illusions about a peaceful pre-contact past. The volume edited by Richard Chacon and David Dye is a comprehensive source-book on trophy-taking in the Americas. These fine books are carefully produced, thoroughly researched, and thoughtfully written, drawing on ethnohistory and archaeology in about equal measure. They balance out the uneven field, in which debate has centered disproportionately on the first inklings of violence in the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic of the circum-Mediterranean, and they constitute essential reading for anyone interested in the

archaeology of war and violence. These books and their recent forebears reposition warfare front and center in investigations of past human society.

Still, the study of war, especially the war of indigenous non-Western peoples, is fraught with problems methodological and political. How to assess accounts of the violence of Amerindians by their Euroamerican colonizers, exploiters, slaughterers, and gun-runners? How to discuss atrocities by the ancestors of those who have been dispossessed of nearly everything except a cherished history? How to envision violence as culturally conditioned, and bloodshed as meaningful, without papering over the horror at the heart of war, and doing further violence to the victims?

### **Writing about war**

Chacon and Mendoza explicitly position the books on North American and Latin American warfare as a rebuttal to revisionist versions of a peaceful Amerindian past that circulate in the popular culture, particularly those by Native activists. Considering the works that precede them, this is something of a straw man. The fact that significant levels of warfare existed in the pre-contact Americas will come as no great surprise to any archaeologist who has kept his or her eyes open over the last two decades. That battle has been decided.

Even so, reading these books is bitter work. Here, in measured prose, is a weight of human misery and brutality to equal any Gettysburg or Hiroshima: grim and difficult deaths, traumatized lives, and the consuming fear that dogged people into fortified refuges. From Western Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, Amerindian societies of all shapes and sizes made frequent war. Even among those supposedly peaceful peoples, mobile forager bands, vicious wars left long, bloody wakes of vengeance with little apparent gain for anyone. As Rousseau's noble savage takes his place alongside Piltdown Man and other figments, some might fear we are back at the plain old savage savages of European colonial justifications.

The editors of these books are acutely aware of such fears, and they try to allay them by invoking the universality of trophy-taking (Chacon and Dye) or the positive-sounding examples of Amerindian warrior traditions and violent resistance to colonialism (Chacon and Mendoza). The contributors mostly dodge politics by employing a dispassionate style and sticking close to the evidence. But it is a delicate tone to maintain, as seen in Rubén Mendoza's chapter in the Latin America volume, which marshals evidence for Aztec sacrifice with the express aim of refuting revisionist / nationalist claims. The chapter certainly accomplishes this. But the gruesome details (heart excision, dismemberment, possible cannibalism), the scale of the violence, and the sometimes lurid prose, give a cumulative impression of horrific Mesoamerican savagery that makes one sympathize a bit with the poor revisionists.

Over the last century, anthropologists and archaeologists have gotten into all sorts of contortions as they navigate between their moral repugnance at violence and their loyalty to the people they study (Otterbein 1999). Earlier scholars, appalled by the carnage of the World Wars, envisioned peaceful primitives desporting themselves in game-like, inconsequential battles, a view which eventually crumbled under the weight of war-filled ethnographies of Amazonia and Melanesia. Since the 60s, anthropologists have avoided portraying their subjects as bloodthirsty barbarians by recasting indigenous warfare as a sensible response to conditions: either a functionalist system-wide solution

to population pressure and resource scarcity, or a rational pursuit by groups and individuals of material goals and/or political advantage (e.g., Vayda 1976, Rappaport 1968, Harris 1974, Ferguson 1990). As these approaches came to seem overly mechanistic, scholars of the last few years have instead started to stress the cultural context surrounding violence, particularly highly ritualized violence like human sacrifice. This approach emphasizes, quite rightly, that violence was not mayhem but profoundly meaningful action, propitiating spirits, channeling fear or bereavement in culturally appropriate ways, and maintaining the fabric of society and the cosmos. Yet such an approach can stress the regulatory and meaningful aspect of violence so much that its inherent conflict is nearly forgotten. For instance, Arthur Demarest's concluding chapter in the trophy volume, an otherwise insightful meditation on the Western repulsion at death and corporeality, redefines trophy taking as "simply a difference in mortuary practice" (609) – as if the violent death that preceded it were not intimately tied to the trophy's meaning and purpose. Violence was politically and ritually potent *precisely* because it was horrific, extraordinary, and entailed terrible suffering, and because some, the powerful, inflicted it on others, the victims, those who were perfectly powerless at the moment of their extinction. This ultimate power asymmetry was vividly represented in the display of trophies or the iconography of violence. While sensationalizing violence is distasteful, and casting it as completely rational is problematic, let us not empty it of pain and conflict in the name of getting at cultural-religious meaning, and write the victims out of prehistory in the process.

Talking responsibly about violence remains a challenge (Dentan 2008), one that goes to the heart of anthropology's strained commitment to cultural relativism. We must keep three fundamental aspects of violence firmly in focus: its material and political aims, its cultural and ideological significance, and the suffering and terror that are essential to both aims and significance.

### **Understanding war**

The two volumes on warfare in the Americas draw on a wealth of new evidence to not only demonstrate the presence of pre-contact warfare, but more compellingly, to offer insights on the causes of war and its varied practice. Here, the disjuncture is striking between those chapters drawing mainly on ethnohistory and those drawing on archaeology, particularly in the North American volume, where there are no pre-Columbian written histories to inform archaeology. Ethnohistory chapters tend to be close-grained, nuanced case studies of particular peoples and regions at the beginning of the contact period. These chapters stress "emic" motivations for warfare: revenge, ethnic hatred, fear and mistrust, the seizure of women and sometimes children, and retaliation for hostile sorcery. Archaeology chapters take a longer view, tracing fluctuating patterns of war and peace recorded in skeletal trauma, fortifications, and destruction episodes. These authors tend to emphasize material factors (population pressure and climate change) and the rise of complex polities waging new kinds of war. Among them, the most exciting contributions synthesize an impressive range of archaeological data to chart the variable nature and intensity of war over space and time: George Milner's chapter on warfare in the Eastern U.S., Patricia Lambert's on osteological evidence across North America, and Matt O'Mansky and Arthur Demarest's treatment of warfare over the sequence in the Maya lowlands. A minority of the archaeological contributions focus on

iconography or ritual to reveal the evolving cultural traditions that informed warfare (David Dye and Adam King on the sacking of Mississippian ancestor temples, Polly Schaafsma on Southwestern rock art, and Donald McVicker on Mesoamerican iconography).

What can be concluded from this diverse body of work? First, it is clear that at least low to moderate levels of raiding were present nearly everywhere on both continents for much of the archaeological sequence. However, even among decentralized, small-scale societies, there was a great deal of local and regional variation in the incidence of violence, perhaps depending on localized factors of population pressure or social scale (this variation is deftly captured in Lambert's review). It is also clear that as societies grew bigger and more complex, they engaged in warfare that was larger in scale (as Milner demonstrates for eastern North America), and imbued with new aspects of hierarchy: elite status competition, as in the Maya area (O'Mansky and Demarest) and Mississippian region (Dye and King); competition for the control of trade routes for prestige goods, as in the Maya Petexbatun region (O'Mansky and Demarest); and territorial conquest, pursued by Monte Albán (Charles Spencer), Chimor (John Verano), and other states.

Beyond these patterns, a few times and places exhibit particularly intense and brutal warfare: among them the Late and Terminal Classic in the Maya region, the era of intensified warfare and migration, perhaps related to Little Ice Age cooling, between AD 1100 to 1400 in North America, and the initial stages of Western contact almost everywhere. These were tumultuous times of famine, devastating epidemics, mass migrations, and collapsing social networks. They must have seemed like the end of the world to those who saw them, and they were accompanied by vicious, unrelenting, desperate warfare. For instance, O'Mansky and Demarest detail the downward spiral of the Late and Terminal Classic in the Petexbatun region of the Maya lowlands. As the trade system collapsed and major political centers were abandoned, the previous pattern of war as status competition between nobles gave way to far more frequent and destructive warfare in which even the rural peasantry fled to fortified ridgetops. Here, as in some other cases of intensified warfare, the result was depopulation, and eventually, complete abandonment. Elsewhere, ethnohistoric sources in the early contact period record genocidal wars that wiped out enemies wholesale.

Cultural attitudes about war seem to have played a big part in how different societies responded to crisis times. Dean Snow eloquently argues that the devastation of smallpox intersected with the preexisting Iroquois belief that nearly any death was the result of hostile sorcery, to underpin the escalated warfare the Iroquois waged on their traditional enemies. Stephen Beckerman and James Yost's excellent chapter on upper Amazonian warfare makes a parallel argument about cultural understandings of the deaths sown on a vast scale by European-introduced disease. Since warfare had been present in lower levels almost everywhere, such attitudes and meanings about it did not need to be invented from whole cloth. Nor did the other ingredients of war: weapons, tactics, defenses, alliances. Enemies too, real or potential, lay ready to hand, often on the other side of ethnic and linguistic divides – divides sometimes created by population displacements in times of upheaval. As warfare escalated, it was directed preferentially at these socially distant peoples who were easier to mistrust and dehumanize. So, although internecine warfare was common, some of the harshest violence appears at

major ethnic frontiers, both archaeologically and ethnohistorically: at Norris Farms and Crow Creek (discussed in chapters by Thomas Emerson, Milner, and Lambert), between Cree and Inuit (Charles Bishop and Victor Lytwyn), Iroquois and Huron (Snow), or linguistically distinct “tribes” of the South American Chaco (Marcela Mendoza). What are we to make of this? Social scientists of modern ethnic conflicts vehemently reject the idea that ethnic divisions in themselves cause conflict, arguing instead that stress from other factors is expressed as violence along ethnic lines (e.g., Allen and Eade 1996, Eller 1999). Here, it is striking how deeply ethnic divisions were imbued with fear and hatred, so that a few of the chapters based on ethnohistory (e.g., Bishop and Lytwyn) point to these divisions as the *cause* of indigenous warfare, while many refer to Carol and Melvin Ember’s (1992) finding that across cultures, frequent warfare correlates with mistrust of outsiders. From the long-term perspective of archaeology, this causal argument is less compelling. Why should social mistrust pertain in some times and places and not others? However, it seems clear that ethnic and linguistic distinctions strongly encouraged warfare and made reconciliation much more difficult. In turn, warfare surely contributed to the sharpening of ethnic difference, the regionalization of styles, and the restriction of networks of interaction (Haas 1990).

The shock of Western contact reverberates in the chapters that draw on ethnohistory. But for the participants, warfare was *not* primarily experienced or understood as a response to major social change, resource stress, population displacement, or destabilizing Western contact. War was about revenge. It was fresh violence between old enemies. Most analyses of war’s ultimate causes quickly jettison revenge, but it is inescapable for those working at a close scale of analysis, documenting the traumatic abductions, mutilations, and massacres that are the stuff of war. These chapters show how warfare, for both attackers and victims, is understood through the wrenching emotions of rage, grief, and fear (as Beckerman and Yost explore for the Waorani of Ecuador; see also Rosaldo 1989). In some sense, to the aggressors, these powerful emotions render meaningless the question of deeper causes.

Is it possible to reconcile these divergent perspectives on war’s causes, drawn from different sources and scales of analysis? Again, Ember and Ember’s frequently cited article hints at a possible solution by correlating frequent war with both fear of unpredictable natural disasters and fear of outsiders. Resource scarcity and unpredictability do indeed align with intensified warfare in the archaeological sequence (e.g., Bamforth 2006) and even in the historical sequence (Zhang et al. 2007). But for the people involved, these crises were experienced as more social than ecological. And as enmities deepened and children were socialized to hate and fear, cycles of vengeance became bloodier and harder to break.

### **Relics of war**

Perhaps nowhere is the cultural matrix that surrounds warfare so evident as in the taking and treatment of human trophies: body parts from slain enemies, processed, curated, and used in rituals. This topic is explored in great depth and range in the third book. Trophy taking involves a fascinating paradox. Though not universal, it is an extremely widespread practice. This volume demonstrates that it was present in nearly every geographic region of the Americas, and in some parts appears to have great antiquity (as shown in particular in the chapters by Robert Mensforth and Nancy Ross-

Stallings). Trophy taking is also found outside the Americas in all major world regions and in many eras, including the recent past in Europe and the United States, as Chacon and Dye detail in their introductory chapter. Across the globe, including the Americas, heads and scalps are overwhelmingly the focus of trophy-taking. (Possibly, as both Lambert and Ross-Stallings propose, this is partly because the widespread patterns of scalping and decapitation in the continental US owe more to diffusion than independent invention.) On the other hand, the cultural meanings of trophy-taking are manifold and distinctive. Different traditions integrated trophy-taking into their unique cosmologies, often tracing the practice to deities or culture heroes such as the hero twins of the Popul Vuh (as Carrie Anne Berryman's chapter discusses). A conceptual link between trophy-taking and regeneration or fertility was present in several regions, but expressed very differently, from rainmaking scalps of the Southwest (Schaafsma) to mythological renewal in the Mississippian area (James Brown and David Dye). The treatment of trophies varied widely: in some places scalps were taken, danced with, then discarded, while in others, individual trophies such as finger-bone necklaces or preserved heads were carefully processed, worn and used in ceremonies, and handed down as heirlooms.

Nevertheless, certain common themes suggest why trophies were so common in war, and why heads and scalps were uniquely suited to the purpose. Trophy-taking is a violation of the body, forming a blatant insult to the defeated (hence, the fact that it is more common at greater social distance, and more common in wars of revenge, as numerous chapters indicate). Trophies are displayable, and constitute a dramatic proof of victory, proclaiming the warrior prowess of their takers and owners. Staked outside a Northwest Coast village, trophy heads made an intimidating warning to enemies (Joan Lovisek); displayed among the central monuments of the Aztecs (R. Mendoza), Wari (Tiffany Tung), or Incas (Dennis Ogburn), they literally embodied state dominance. Taking an essential body part, particularly the head, could thwart a harmonious afterlife and inhibit the deceased from returning to attack his or her killers (this motive appears in several chapters on North America). Finally, the victim's life force might inhere in a trophy, a source of potent magic for curing (John Hoopes, in Costa Rica), hunting and fighting (M. Mendoza, in the South American Chaco), and bringing rain (Schaafsma, in the Southwest). A number of other motives, discussed in the chapters and conveniently summarized by the editors, illuminate both the variety and the starkly simple logic of trophy-taking. This detailed volume will be the essential sourcebook on the practice for a long time to come.

### **Glimpses of Peace**

Two kinds of peace are apparent in these works, though rarely addressed directly. The first is state-imposed peace, created by conquest and the violent suppression of rebellions, and often accompanied by the public spectacle of ritual violence. These casualties of the state order, visible in the archaeological record, remind us that state peace is based on the threat of violence. Nevertheless, it is peace. That European colonial regimes fit this description is evident in these books. While the first wave of Western explorers and conquerors often escalated native warfare patterns, "pacification" did come in the second wave of colonists and traders, for internecine war interfered vexingly with Western exploitation. Despite the costs of domination, most inhabitants of state systems were not in physical peril from others to the same extent as many non-state

peoples. So perhaps we may depart for a moment from the perennially popular critique of the state, to acknowledge the plight of the stateless.

Still, among the stateless, sometimes peace or quite low conflict did exist for centuries, and these times seem all the more remarkable, and understanding them the more important, for the dominant pattern of frequent warfare in these volumes. In particular, Milner identifies a period of peace in the Middle Woodland (though Mark Seeman's chapter in the trophy volume questions whether possible Hopewell trophies might not cloud this apparent idyll). He links it to reduced demographic pressure as native cultigens became widely used, and notes it was accompanied by remarkable long-distance journeys to procure valued materials - journeys that would become impossible in times of frequent war. These journeys underscore the fact that peace is not merely an absence of war but a different way of living with its own distinctive signatures and practices (a point that peace scholars have made for years). As they augment the literature on war, these books implicitly call out for a new kind of work: the archaeology of peace.

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