



**WAR**

**BEFORE**

**CIVILIZATION**

THE MYTH OF  
THE PEACEFUL  
SAVAGE

Lawrence H. Keeley

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Before

Civilization

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*Lawrence H. Keeley*

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To my mother, Ruth; my son, Pete;  
and the memory of my father, Lawrence

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## PREFACE

This book had its genesis in two personal failures – one of a practical academic sort, the other intellectual. As a result of these, I realized that archaeologists of the Neowar period had artificially “pacified the past” and shared a pervasive bias against the possibility of prehistoric warfare.

My practical failure involved two unsuccessful research proposals requesting funds to investigate the functions of recently discovered fortifications surrounding some Early Neolithic (ca. 5000 B.C.) villages in northeastern Belgium. Such sites represented the settlements of the first farmers to colonize central and northwestern Europe. These two proposals to the U.S. National Science Foundation (which had supported my previous research) requested funds to excavate several Early Neolithic village sites near to the already excavated “frontier” site of Daron. My Belgian colleague Daniel Collet, had found that Daron had been surrounded by an obvious fortification consisting of a 3-foot-deep ditch backed by a palisade. My research proposal claimed that Daron’s defenses indicated that this Neolithic frontier was a hostile one and predicted that excavations at nearby sites would reveal similar fortifications. The archaeologists who reviewed these proposals could not accept the defensive nature of the Daron “enclosure” and therefore could not recommend funding a project predicated on what they regarded as an erroneous interpretation. A third proposal was successful only after I rewrote it to be neutral about the function of the Daron ditch/palisade, which was referred to as an “enclosure” rather than as a fortification. In other words, only when the proposal was cleansed of references to that archaeological phenomena, warfare, was it acceptable to my colleagues.



With our new funding, our excavations at four other Early Neolithic sites soon documented that two of them had also been fortified. We had been right after all: on the Early Neolithic frontier, at least when it reached Belgium, fortified villages were rather common; one just had to know how to look for them. Despite having normally inflated academic egos, Daniël and I were shocked by this realization. I recall that as we drove home on the day our excavations at the site of Waremmé-Longchamps had revealed a deep ditch and palisade, our conversation was very limited. It consisted of a staccato silence periodically punctuated by one or the other of us stating, in an amazed tone, "We have a ditch and palisade!" Our mutual amazement was based on the prejudices we shared with the very colleagues who had given my early, unsuccessful proposals a skeptical review. Subconsciously, we had not really believed our own arguments: we only had assumed that Daniël's fortifications were an aberration and had used them only as an excuse to satisfy our curiosity about the other sites in its vicinity. This realization about our own expectations later led to a series of conversations among Daniël, Anne-Catherine Delhaye (a specialist in later Bronze and Iron Age archaeology), and me about the difficulty archaeologists of our generation had in accepting evidence of prehistoric warfare. Later, reflecting on my own education and career, I realized that I was as guilty as anyone of pacifying the past by ignoring or dismissing evidence of prehistoric warfare – even evidence I had seen with my own eyes.

My first excavations, as a college freshman, were on a prehistoric "shell-mound" village site on San Francisco Bay, where we uncovered many piles of unperforated homicide victims. It never occurred to me or my fellow students that the skeletons with embedded projectile points we excavated evidenced a homicide rate that was extraordinarily high. This brutal physical evidence we were uncovering never challenged our acceptance of the traditional view that the native peoples of California had been exceptionally peaceable.

Even more tellingly, in my senior thesis, I used all the rhetorical tricks I could to accuse my colleagues of here to deny the obvious importance of warfare in early Mesoamerican civilizations. Since grammar school, I had been fascinated by military history and avidly read every book on the subject I could get my hands on. For my B.A. thesis at the end of the 1960s, I chose a topic—the role of militarism in the rise of Mesoamerican civilizations—that seemed to unite my personal interest in military history with my developing academic interest in prehistory. In fact, it was a final degree of divorce, since I concluded (defiantly following the current consensus of archaeological opinion) that the first civilization in Mesoamerica had developed in especially peaceful circumstances. In other words, I argued that militarism and warfare had no role in the evolution of the Olmec, Teotihuacan, and Classic Maya civilizations and that warfare and

soldiers had become important only when these more or less "theocratic" civilizations collapsed.

A quarter-century later, it is abundantly clear that this prevailing view was quite wrong. The percentage of violent deaths at the prehistoric California Indian village I had helped excavate has recently been tabulated by my college classmate, Bob Juncos, and it is at least four times the percentage of violent deaths suffered by inhabitants of the United States and Europe in the bloody century. The Classic Maya city-states, one of the subjects of my senior thesis, clearly were at war very frequently and were ruled by particularly militant kings. Ironically, the *archaeological* evidence that all was not peaceful in the Mayan world was readily available when I wrote my senior thesis (gravesome skulls at Bonampak, fortifications at Becan and Tikal, countless Mayan depictions of war captives and their armed captors, and so on). But like the archaeologists whose work I relied on, I dismissed this data as either unrepresentative, ambiguous, or insignificant. Only as more and more Mayan hieroglyphic writing has been deciphered during the last decade has archaeological opinion shifted from its erroneous conception of the peaceful Maya.

Like most archaeologists trained in the post-war period, I emerged from the first stage of my education so inoculated with the assumption that warfare and prehistory did not mix that I was willing to dismiss unambiguous physical evidence to the contrary. If my initial lack of success in obtaining funding for my own research made me aware of the prejudices of most of my colleagues, my own reactions and memories stimulated by my subsequent success drove home the fact that I had worn the same blinders.

A few years later, I learned another important lesson. Archaeological opinion quickly became much more open-minded about the probability of armed conflicts in the Early Neolithic of western Europe. In 1989, when Cahen and I published a report in an international journal on our first full field seasons, the prepublication reviewers (some of whom were almost certainly the same referees who had skeptically reviewed my unsuccessful NSF proposals) were uniformly favorable. This is not to say that these colleagues were completely convinced that the enclosures we had found were fortifications, but, by then, they were more than willing to entertain the possibility. Other information published in the late 1980s was also challenging archaeologists' bias on this issue. Some German publications during this period documented that Early Neolithic enclosures were actually common—more than fifty enclosed sites had already been discovered during the past fifty years—but these findings had been published in such obscure local journals that they were not widely known. In addition, a very thorough report was published in 1987 (again, in a local journal) on an Early Neolithic mass grave found near Stuttgart that contained the remains

of thirty-four men, women, and children killed by blows to the head inflicted by characteristically Early Neolithic axes. By the beginning of this decade, few Early Neolithic specialists would deny that war existed in what had previously been regarded as a peaceful golden age. The resistance that we archaeologists showed to the notion of prehistoric war, and the ease with which it was overcome when the relevant evidence was recognized, impressed me and convinced me that a book on this subject would be worthwhile. Physical circumstantial evidence has an extraordinary ability to overcome even the most ingrained ideas.

Indeed, archaeology is a peculiarly robust social science. Like all fields, it has unacknowledged blind spots, unconscious prejudices, and declared theoretical biases, but the extremely physical and material nature of the things it studies provides a constant basis for correcting erroneous intellectual notions. Unlike scholars whose evidence consists of the spoken or written word, archaeologists lack the license to describe any facts unobjectional to their prejudices by selective ad hominem skepticism, clever sophistry, or the currently fashionable denial that there is any "real past" (that is, that the past is merely an ideological construction, and as many myths exist as there are conceptions of it). For archaeologists, the human past is unequivocally real: it has mass, solid form, color, and even occasionally odor and flavor. Millions of pieces of it—bones, seeds, stones, metal, and pottery—sit on lab tables and in museum drawers all over the world. The phrase "the weight of evidence" has a literal meaning for archaeologists because their basic evidence is material; and because it is circumstantial, only repeated occurrences of it can be interpreted convincingly. Archaeology is the study of patterns of *effects*, repetitions of human behaviors that leave enduring marks on the physical world. Warfare—the armed conflict between societies—whatever its scale is large or small, is such a pattern and leaves very enduring effects. In this work, I have tried to master a mass of evidence to convince not just archaeologists and historians but also the educated public that the notion of prehistoric and primitive warfare is not an invention.

Chicago  
May 1994

L. FLK.

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This project began when the chairman of my department, Jack Prost, encouraged me in the strongest possible terms to apply for a fellowship at the University of Illinois at Chicago's Institute for the Humanities to write a book on this subject. I was granted the fellowship and enjoyed a year free of teaching and departmental duties in the company of a superb group of scholars: Bruce Calder, Judy Enders, Peter Hale, Mac Henderson, and Jim Schultz from UIC's departments of history, French, art history, English/African-American studies, and German, respectively. They helped me enlarge my view of my subject, suggested changes in my presentation of material, and raised issues I had not considered. Their good-humored tolerance in debate, devotion to scholarship, and mutual encouragement rebuffed all of the popular hand-wringing about the state of the humanities in our nation's universities. I also owe much to the director of the Institute, Gene Ruoff, a distinguished scholar of English Romanticism, for extraordinary encouragement, assistance (yes, even financial!), and astute advice. I am most grateful both to him for sustaining the Institute administratively and to him and his executive board for accepting a "naïve realist" natural scientist into their midst. I hope that this book somehow repays the trouble taken on my behalf by everyone concerned with the UIC's Institute for the Humanities.

No one is his or her own best critic. Some friends and colleagues have read partial drafts of this book, offering advice and counsel: Jack Prost, Gene Ruoff, Jim Phillips, Bob Hall, Quentin Gilkins, Brian Hayden, and my wife, Lesley. A number of colleagues have also provided information, references, and reprints

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## ONE

# The Pacified Past

## The Anthropology of War

**W**ar has long been a sensational topic. Warfare concentrates and intensifies some of our strongest emotions: courage and fear, resignation and panic, selfishness and self-sacrifice, greed and generosity, patriotism and xenophobia. The grip of war has incited human beings to prodigies of ingenuity, improvisation, cooperation, vandalism, and cruelty. It is the riskiest field on which to match wits and luck; no peaceful endeavor can equal its penalties for failure, and few can exceed its rewards for success. It combines the most theatrical of human activities, combining tragedy, high drama, melodrama, spectacle, action, farce, and even low comedy. War displays the human condition in extremes.

It is thus not surprising that the first recorded histories, the first written accounts of the exploits of mortals, are military histories. The earliest Egyptian hieroglyphs record the victories of Egypt's first pharaohs, the Scorpion King and Narmer. The first written literature or history recorded in cuneiform recounts the adventures of the Sumerian warrior-

king Gilgamesh. The earliest written parts of the Books of Moses, the "J-stand" (called so because in its passages the name given God is Yahweh or, corruptly, Jehovah), culminate in the brutal Hebrew conquest of Canaan. The earliest annals of the Chinese, Greeks, and Romans are concerned with wars and warrior kings. Most Mayan hieroglyphic texts are devoted to the genealogies, triumphs, and military exploits of Mayan kings. The folklore and legends of preliterate cultures, the epic oral traditions that are the precursors to history, are equally bellicose. Indeed, until this century, historiography was dominated by accounts of wars and the political intrigues that led up to them. Because history, strictly speaking, consists of written accounts and because writing is confined to civilized societies, civilized warfare is the subject of a long-standing and voluminous literature. For example, more than 50,000 complete books have been devoted to the American Civil War alone, and scores more are published each year. What the literate world knows as warfare is therefore civilized warfare.

But recorded history represents less than half of 1 percent of the more than 2 million years that humans have existed. In fact, prehistory ended in some areas of the world a mere thirty years ago. At the dawn of the European expansion (A.D. 1500), only a third of the inhabited world was civilized: all of Australia and Oceania, most of the Americas, and much of Africa and north Asia remained preliterate and tribal. These long chapters in humanity's story and all the recent "peoples without history" are the special focus or orthodoxy of the archaeologists who study the former and of the ethnographers who have observed the latter.

What, then, has anthropology said about the warfare conducted by prehistoric and "primitive" societies? The simple answer is: very little. By recent count, only three complete books (and a handful of anthologies and ethnographies) devoted exclusively to primitive warfare have been published in this century, far fewer than are published on the American Civil War each year. Information on the topic is not lacking, but it is tucked away in technical journals or scattered as brief passages in ethnographic and archaeological reports. Compared with the tens of thousands of volumes and countless articles on civilized military history, however, this imbalance is striking, considering how much of humanity prehistoric and primitive peoples represent. The subject of war among ancient and modern tribal peoples remains prone to glib speculation, the caprices of intellectual fashion, and the deeper currents of secular mythology.

Even today, most views concerning prehistoric (and tribal) war and peace reflect two ancient and enduring myths: progress and the golden age. The myth of progress depicts the original state of mankind as ignorant, miserable, brutal, and violent. Any artificial complexities introduced by human invention or helpful gods have only served to increase human bliss, comfort, and peace, lifting

Humans out of their ugly and hostile state of nature. The consoling myth even that civilized humans have fallen from grace—from a simple and peaceful happiness, a peaceful golden age. All the accretions of progress merely multiply violence and suffering; civilization is the sorry condition that our selfishness, greed, and technological hubris have earned us. In the modern period, these ancient mythic themes were elaborated by Hobbes and Rousseau into enduring, philosophical attitudes toward primitive and prehistoric peoples.

#### HOBBS AND ROUSSEAU

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) reached his conclusions about warfare and society via a series of logical arguments. In his great work, *Leviathan*, he first established that, in practical terms, all men were equals because no one was so superior in strength or intelligence that he could not be overcome by treachery or the conspiracy of others. He found humans equally endowed with *will* (desires) and *power* (the capacity to learn from experience). But when two such equals desired what only one could enjoy, one eventually subdued or destroyed the other in pursuit of it. Once this happened, all hell broke loose. The similar desires of others tempted them to emulate the winner, and their intelligence required them to guard themselves against the fate of the loser. When no power existed to "overawe" these equals, prudent self-preservation forced every individual to struggle to preserve his *liberty* (the absence of impediments to his will) by trying to subdue others and by resisting their attempts to subdue him. Hobbes thus envisioned the original or natural condition of humanity as being "the war of every man against every man." In this general state of "warre," men lived in "continual fear and danger of violent death"; and, in Hobbes's most famous phrase, their lives were therefore "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." He claimed vaguely that "savage people in many places in America" still lived in this violent primitive condition but gave no particulars and never pursued the point further.

Humans escaped this state of war only by agreeing to *covenants* in which they surrendered much of their liberty and accepted rule by a central authority (which, for Hobbes, meant a king). And since "Covenants, without the sword, are but words," the king (or state) had to be granted a monopoly over the use of force to punish criminals and defend against external enemies. Without the state to "overawe humans' intelligence by force, mediate their selfish passions, and deprive them of some of their natural liberty, anarchy reigned. Civilized countries returned to this condition when central authority was widely defied or deprived of its power, as during rebellions. All civilized "industry" and the humane enjoyment of its fruits depended on a peace maintained by central government; the "humanity" of humans was thus a product of civilization.

Hobbes acknowledged that nation-states between themselves remained in a "posture of war." But because they thereby protected the industry of their subjects, "there does not follow from it that misery which accompanies the liberty of particular men." In other words, a world of states necessarily tolerated some wars and much preparation for war, but these preserved havens of peace within each state. In the primitive condition, there was no peace anywhere.

Hobbes never claimed that humans were innately cruel, or violent or biologically driven to dominate others. The condition of war was a purely social condition—the logical consequence of human equality in needs, desires, and intelligence. It could be eliminated by social innovations: a covenant and coercive institutions of enforcement. War would recur only if these covenants were broken, or if the police powers of the central state waned. His argument was certainly intended as an apology for absolute monarchy, but later, yielding to circumstance, he admitted that it applied equally well to other forms of strong central government, even republics. Whatever his views on the ideal form of the state, the point of central relevance here is that Hobbes considered the natural "natural" state of humanity to be war, not peace.

For the past two centuries, the most influential critic of Hobbes's view of primitive society and "man in a state of nature" has been Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Rousseau devalued the logical rigor of the philosopher, the gladdening empiricism of the historian and the scientist, and the unbridled invention of the romancer, but he combined a semblance of all three with an assertive style to become an intellectual sensation. Like Hobbes, he constructed an origin myth to explain the human condition, but his denied civilization its humanity while proclaiming the divinity of the primitive.

Rousseau, like Hobbes, asserted the natural equality of mankind but saw humans in their natural state as being (fairly) ruled by their passions, not their intellects. He argued that these passions could be easily and peaceably satisfied in a world without the "unnatural" institutions of monarchy and private property. Any tendency toward violence in the natural condition would be suppressed by humans' innate pity or compassion. This natural compassion was overwhelmed only when art was created by the origins of marriage, property, education, social inequality, and "civil" society. He claimed that the savage, *l'homme sauvage*, was the friend of all creation and the enemy of none. He directly attacked Hobbes for having "hastily concluded that man is naturally cruel" when in fact "nothing could be more gentle" than man in his natural state.<sup>1</sup> Rousseau's Noble Savage lived in that peaceful golden age "that mankind was formed ever to remain in." War only became general and terrible when people organized themselves into separate societies with artificial rather than natural laws. Compassion, an emotion peculiar to individuals, gradually lost its influence over societies as they grew in size and proliferated. When artificial

passionless states fought, they committed more murders and 'horrible disorders' in a single engagement than were ever perpetrated in all the ages that men had lived in a state of nature.

Unlike Hobbes, Rousseau seemed genuinely interested in whether his contentions were confirmed in the observations of real "savages" then being encountered by European explorers. His disciples accompanied French explorations and brought back mixed reports.<sup>6</sup> The explorer Louis de Bougainville reported that Tahitians exactly fulfilled Rousseau's predictions, although to reach this conclusion Bougainville had to ignore their rigid class stratification, their arrogant chiefs, and some of the most horrific warfare or ritual (chapters 4–7). On another explorer told Rousseau of a sudden unprovoked attack on French explorers by the very simple and previously uncontacted Aboriginal Tasmanians, despite the most peaceful gestures by the completely naked French emissaries. Rousseau was shocked: "Is it possible that the good Children of Nature can really be so wicked?" Of course, Noble Savage apologists then and since have remarked that such fracasos were only the result of the natives' misunderstanding of the emissaries' intentions or anxiety that the explorers meant to steal. Even so, what had happened to the savages' natural compassion and lack of jealousy? Similar cases of violence at first contact "shooting first and asking questions later" (which with hindsight seems present on their part) did not trouble Rousseau or his disciples to the point of reconsidering their assumptions. They were too thoroughly convinced that the natural state of human society was a peaceful combination of free love and primitive communism to see these violent first encounters as anything but rare aberrations.

Despite Rousseau's influence, Hobbes's view of primitive life held the upper hand during the nineteenth century, which not coincidentally was the heyday of European imperialism and colonization. One of the principal apologies for Western imperialism was the pacification of ever-warring savages by European conquest, missionary activity, and administration. The natives, living in Hobbesian turbulence, could enjoy the comforts of Christianity and the benefits of civilization only after they were pacified and controlled by Europeans. Europeans also awarded their own the highest ranking among the few civilizations they recognized (such as those of Asia and the Near East) because they reckoned that theirs had progressed further than any other from the violent and impoverished state of nature. Not surprisingly, the soldiers, missionaries, and colonial functionaries sent out to establish Western dominion brought back accounts that emphasized the Hobbesian features of societies they sought to conquer and transform. These portraits were the only information available to the first anthropologists as the discipline emerged during the 1850s. Only a handful of anti-imperialists, reformers, and self-consciously xenoclastic

artists—few of whom had ever directly observed real primitives—clung to Roussseau's naive view of uncivilized life.

### THE CONCEPT OF PRIMITIVE WAR

In the early part of the twentieth century, the mass of unsystematic observations of primitive societies that had accumulated during European expansion was superseded by the new data of ethnography. Trained in the new technique of participant observation, anthropologists went out to live with the subjects of their studies for months and even years, learned their language, and made observations of their customs and behavior with their own eyes. The young science of anthropology had left its armchair.

All of this data, old and new, indicated that with only rare exceptions primitive life was not particularly peaceful. It was no longer possible to declare, as the eminent sociologist William Sumner did at the turn of the century, that primitive man "might be described as a peaceful animal" who "dreads" war.<sup>5</sup> In 1911, the great ethnographer Bronisław Malinowski could argue that "anthropology has done more harm than good in confusing the issue by . . . depicting human necessity as long as the golden age of perpetual peace." Yet it was also clear that, contrary to Hobbes, life in small-scale societies was not "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Anthropologists who actually lived among such people got to know them as individuals and as friends, and participated in their daily affairs found it very difficult to envision a Hobbesian disdain for their way of life. Ethnography exposed primitive cultures as perfectly valid and satisfying ways of being human and found that they often possessed features that were preferable to comparable aspects of Western civilized life.

Few of these ethnographers were explorers, however, and they usually lived with people who had already been pacified by Western administration.<sup>6</sup> Thus they had to rely on their informants' memories of precontact warfare and had little opportunity to observe it directly. But such accounts tended to idealize or bureaucratize behavior. While informants' descriptions of many aspects of social life could be enhanced or corrected by the anthropologists' direct observations, independent checks on their descriptions of warfare were usually impossible. For example, an ethnographer studying the Samis of New Guinea found that Sarabia warriors "unconsciously repress the very parts of war tales, transforming the once traumatic into drama" when recounting their war experiences.<sup>7</sup> When such idealized native accounts were filtered, by the questions asked, through the intense interest of anthropologists in customary rules and rituals, the images of primitive combat that emerged had a very civilized, ritualistic slant.

In *The Face of Battle*, historian John Keegan notes an exactly corresponding tendency in military historians' accounts of civilized battles.<sup>8</sup> Some of these

make bloody combat between groups of frightened, overexcited men seem no more hurtful than a harmless brawl or a gross Romantic thunderstorm. In these accounts, individuals and groups are motivated by a hunger for glory or revenge for previous defeats, by a desire to maintain the reputation of the regiment, retain the good opinion of their comrades, or gain the notice of superiors. The soldiers are very rarely depicted as driven by hatred of the enemy and never as fighting for the base motives of material gain or fear of punishment. Were such accounts our only source of information, we could easily conclude that modern Western warfare has been highly ritualized, psychologically motivated, and not particularly deadly. Only actual casualty statistics and rare unedited eyewitness memoirs by front-line soldiers challenge such impressions. But anthropologists, with very few exceptions, have had information of only the historiographic type to guide them in generalizing about uncivilized warfare.

In some rare instances, ethnographers were able to observe actual primitive combat. But even these observations showed a marked bias toward pitched or formal battles.<sup>9</sup> Because such battles are the primary goal and most dramatic events of *modern* warfare, the eyes of ethnographers were drawn to comparable clashes in the tribal societies they studied. They noticed that these primitive battles were often suspended after only a few deaths, and—even if they were renewed after a brief interval—the total number killed in a series of battles was usually small. The ethnographers seldom analysed casualties in relation to the small numbers who fought and thus could not compare them on this basis to larger-scale civilized battles. The raids, ambushes, and surprise attacks on villages that constitute a major component of tribal warfare were seldom observed and paid little notice. The general impression drawn from rare glimpses of formal battles was that primitive warfare was not very risky.

By accident, it became possible to save the Rousseauian notion of the Noble Savage, not by making him peaceful (as this was clearly contrary to fact), but by arguing that tribesmen conducted a more stylized, less horrible form of warfare than their civilized counterparts waged. This view was systematized and elaborated into the theory that there existed a special type of "primitive war" very different from "real," "true," or "civilized" war.

The architects of this concept of *primitive war*, Quincy Wright and Harry Tuttle-High, were academics of vastly different character and experience. Despite the essential similarity of their views, neither of them ever acknowledged in print the existence of the other's work.

Quincy Wright (1890–1970) was professor of international law at the University of Chicago. He directed that university's long-term study of the causes of war, which began in 1926. This project essentially involved a large number of faculty members and graduate students from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology. The study of war by primitive societies was but a small part of this



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