

Bronze Age Warfare in Temperate Europe

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What was the nature, scale and significance of warfare in European pre-state societies of the Bronze Age? In order to provide some possible answers to this broad question, this article consults archaeological sources from the period c. 2500–700 BC, attempting in a non-comprehensive manner to reveal the actual position and significance of warfare and warriorhood.

1 Theorising Warfare and Warriorhood

Throughout most of the history of archaeology, war has been ignored as relevant to our understanding of prehistoric societies, but the many recent studies of prehistoric war² are turning the tide, hence tending through outspoken argumentation, or through the sheer focus upon warfare, to pinpoint prehistory as an innately violent place. From around 1995 a veritable eruption has occurred in the number of publications about warfare in the past, and the body of data on war-related violence has grown noticeably, as the Bronze Age examples below amply testify. Does this, however, mean that the Hobbesian stance of *bellum omnium contra omnes*³ has been right all along?

Reflecting theoretically on warfare and its agents is essential inasmuch as abundant data is not the only prerequisite of ‘striving to see the past as it was’⁴. Ethnographical cases, though excellent to think with, should not overrule the archaeological sources, as occurred with the so-called ‘tribal zone theory’⁵. Stereotypical understandings of the past can possibly best be counteracted through the use of theories that project from the basic view that human agents interact both routinely and strategically in the world. Hence, warfare can be defined as collective, violent social interaction which is built upon a cultural logic and waged against other groups. Historically, war is waged mostly by men, but women may often be seen to orally and effectively defend the family’s and society’s honour: They may contribute by rousing to war and by variously assisting in the actions of war.

Actions of war vary from raiding to large-scale military actions; its precise form and content depending on the specific societal setting. Categorisation of warfare as sport or ritual practice sometimes occurs when it is supposed that societies without centralised political power are mostly peaceful as opposed to more complex societal developments. The earlier Bronze Age is, for example, often described in terms of person-to-person combats – a prestigious and theatrical kind of warfare – as opposed to the later Bronze Age, which arguably has a much sharper military profile⁶. While we may accept that war can sometimes be ritualised and sport-like, such ‘ritual war’ will merely be one facet of a broader warlike reality that also implies violence and death. Conversely, war in itself often relates to various rituals carried out before, during and after interactions of violence. Quite possibly, sacrificial depositions of weapons and people in watery places in prehistory can be regarded as part of a series of actions that included war.

If war is always synonymous (with varying degrees of) deadliness and human suffering, the question may arise how precisely warfare in non-state societies differs from warfare in state societies. We tend to put great emphasis on distinguishing between states and societies without the state, but in regard to war and its relative frequency and social organisation, the difference is not necessarily very great. In state societies, the military sector is always a major source of social power that can be readily employed to back up the state apparatus. In stateless societies – our main concern here – power (leadership) and warfare may occur quite separately from each other, or they may go hand in hand. Stateless warfare in a cross-cultural perspective can deliver many examples of both these scenarios.

Since war inspires identification, warriorhood can be considered an adjacent social identity, a double being and boundary-crosser engaging in violent encounters with other groups while also holding representational roles in rituals and every-day sociality. These real and ideal sides are very much motivated by cultural myths of men and war.

Cross-culturally, warriors do not necessarily create organisations, but when they do, they organise themselves in a limited number of ways. This insight can be used to further theorise warriorhood, hence with relevance for prehistory. Warrior clubs

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² e.g. Keeley 1996; LeBlanc/Register 2003; Harrison 2004; Hårde 2006; Schulting 2006; Harding 2007; Jockenhövel 2004/05.

³ Hobbes 1651.

⁴ cf. Trigger 1989, 411.

⁵ cf. Ferguson/Whitehead 1992.

⁶ Osgood 1998; Harding 1999; Harding 2007.

may have several social objectives, a primary one being of military character, and their members are usually of male gender. Such warrior institutions occur in three varieties⁷ based upon whether access to them is regulated through the criterion of age, status/prestige or social rank. All three categories contain elements of *Gefolgschaft*, defined as reciprocal relations between a war leader and the group of warrior-followers. This relationship of mutual dependence in a band is defined by economics, in addition to a number of ethical, social, and moral rules uniting the warriors. Gender is a relevant element to study, since warriorhood, like any other identity, is relational as well as changeable. The border between soldier and warrior is hard to define, but the latter of these is characterised by a more individualistic mode of organisation and belief. Warrior bands can live their lives on the periphery of society or, alternatively, can place themselves at the very centre of power and authority⁸.

Material culture mediates, translates and transforms distinctions in society: age, gender, social status, profession, and so forth; warriorhood combines such distinctions in various culture-specific ways. Objects, and indeed bodily appearances, are intricately used in strategies of identification, among these warrior identities as they exist in many prehistoric, historical and ethnographic contexts⁹. Weapons, particular dresses and bodily postures can materialise and manipulate the image of the warrior as an identity and ideal within the warrior group, between warrior groups, and in respect to the outside world, but at the same time have an effect on the individual warrior by stimulating, in turn, self-understanding and personhood¹⁰. In addition, advances in warfare and weapon technologies can escalate conflicts and perhaps (*e.g.* through horses and swords) enable societal change.

Weaponry makes warfare and warriors in a manner of speaking. Weapons, just like the warrior, have several use potentials in both violent and peaceful forms of sociality. They are implements of war while also having potential applications in the greater domain of identification, prestige enhancement and rituals. This firm material link renders it realistic to study warfare and warriors from archaeological sources. Interpretations must take into consideration that function is largely independent of material form and potentially changeable within the broad range of active weapons and objects with other or additional uses. Whilst in all likelihood produced to serve warlike purposes, a sword, for instance, can become mostly

a token of social position and conclude its life cycle as a heirloom. Material culture can nevertheless be summarised as a substantial ingredient in our understanding of prehistoric war and warriors; weapons in particular assume key roles in both the real and the ideal sides of bellicose interaction and identification.

2 The Archaeological Data

Selected archaeological data from the European Bronze Age, in particular southern Scandinavia in the period 2000–500 BC, are examined below from an interpretive perspective concentrating on the following groupings: the weaponry in itself, weaponry in burials and votive deposits, weapon combinations and technology, fortifications, iconographic representations, and skeletal trauma. The intention is more broadly to clarify the significance of war and associated identities in the Bronze Age of temperate Europe.

2.1 Weaponry as Itself

Weaponry may be divided, somewhat arbitrarily, into implements with a warlike potential and genuine weapons made for offensive and/or defensive purposes¹¹. Bows and arrows, points, axe blades, knives, daggers and the like of organic or non-organic materials, belong to the first category whereas the second category comprises mainly swords, spearheads, shields, and body armour, but also mace heads and battle axes. The typology roughly suggests that most weapons have potential uses outside warfare, notably hunting. Bone assemblages from Final Neolithic and Bronze Age settlements normally show little inclusion of wild animals, and it can thus be presumed that hunting in these periods, and most certainly in the Bronze Age, was more a matter of prestige than economic necessity for at least the privileged part of the population. The line between prestige hunter and warrior can be blurred, as famously illustrated by the lion-hunt dagger from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae, *c.* 1600–1500 BC, showing warfare against the lion, which is likely a metaphor for bravery in combat and for the princely warrior chieftain in early Mycenaean society. In the 13th century BC, this symbol was appropriated by the royal house of Mycenae as their ‘coat of arms’, visualised so vividly by the Lion Gate to the citadel.

North of the Alps, in the Final Neolithic (Copper Age) of the 3rd millennium BC and particularly in the Bronze Age, the group of genuine weapons grew markedly in numbers and in technical and ornamental elaboration. This seems tied to the general inventiveness of the period, but almost certainly also to the formation of institutions of

⁷ Vandkilde 2006b.

⁸ Steuer 2006; Vandkilde 2006b.

⁹ Otto et al. 2006.

¹⁰ Vandkilde 2006b.

¹¹ *e.g.* Chapman 1999.

war and new ideologies to support them. Although the presence of warrior clubs is rather strongly indicated from around 2800 BC¹², their more precise position, central or marginal, in the societal meshwork is unknown, but could have varied enormously in the period 3000–500 BC.

From the Bronze Age of temperate Europe numerous weapons exist, the sheer quantity being ample testimony to warfare as an option that could be acted upon and indeed to the presence of warriorhood as an identity feeding on bellicose interaction. Macro- and microwear analyses of swords confirm that many have indeed been put to use¹³. It is often maintained that some of the most spectacular weaponry – shields, helmets, giant axes, and body armour (for reasons of construction) – cannot have been very suitable for warfare. Such weapons may have had ritual functions in funerary games, religious performances and/or were parade armour intended to impress and scare: this may be supported by the pictorial slabs from the Kivik tomb, rock carving scenes, and Patroklos' funeral in Homer's *Iliad*. By contrast, a substantial series of other weapons exists that were surely meant to wound and kill other human beings: spears and arrows definitely belong here, as do swords. Especially the swords are central to our understanding of the Bronze Age as a phenomenon and an era.

The exquisite and highly specialised craftsmanship of many of these weapons further supports the above suggestion of organised warriorhood (**Figs. 1–2**) and would also support the suggestion that such warrior groups in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Bronze Age Europe were recruited and organised internally according to hierarchical principles, thus not unlike the system that can be deduced from the *Iliad*, from Tacitus' *Germania*, and from a large number of ethnographically studied cases¹⁴. A material hierarchy of weapons arguably existed which was differently constituted in different periods, in the later Bronze Age likely with metal-hilted swords and body armour in the top part, followed by organic-hilted swords, axes, spearheads and arching equipment lower down, and wooden clubs and similar items in the bottom part. Such hierarchies of weaponry may faintly reflect social divisions within the warrior institutions.

Weapons can be highly individualised objects – swords usually are – and thus invested with personalised names and meanings while simultaneously mediating in variable measure gender, status, rank, kinship, ethnicity, profession, etc. Weapons may have whole biographies and stories

attached to them, which could have been invoked on special occasions. The already famed boar's tusk helmet which Odysseus puts on for a nightly spying expedition is a case in point¹⁵. Attachments of rich oral histories could very well generally apply when looking at the finest weapons from the Bronze Age. Such weapons may be inalienable possessions kept in the family as tokens of memory and inheritance or ritually exchanged with the gods in sacred places or with very particular ancestors in monumental tombs. The potential multi-functionality of material culture thus implies that weapons cannot be reduced merely to war implements, as also suggested by contextual evidence.

In later European prehistory the cultural biographies of weapons typically ended with a ritual deposition either in burials or in votive offerings. Such depositions may comprise one item or a combination of several items depending on cultural and social factors. The archaeologist thus obtains intimate knowledge mostly of the concluding activities, the ritual death of things, which may have had complex life cycles prior to the final deposition. These final destinations of weaponry, however, may still be able to deliver information about the living society.

2.2 Weaponry in Burials

Numerous graves with weapons are known, but their direct or indirect relationship with warriorhood is still not well studied. From the Final Neolithic – the Corded Ware and Bell Beaker periods – good cases can be made for warrior identities and institutions although allowing for cultural variations¹⁶. From the Bronze Age one can easily pick conspicuous individual graves with rich weaponry attached to mature males, such as at Gemeinlebarn F in Austria from the 17th century BC or Haguenau and Asenkofen in Alsace and Bavaria from the 13th century BC (**Fig. 3**). Similar weapon graves occur all over Europe throughout the Bronze Age although not equally frequently, but it seems clear – and still allowing for cultural variations across time and space – that the dead warrior was commemorated in the Bronze Age by kin and community in the same way as warriors and soldiers have been celebrated and remembered throughout history and in our own time. Such presentations are always strongly ideologically coloured, even persuasive, especially considering the knowledge that the warrior is an identity also maintained by violence. Grooming items such as razors, combs, awls, and tweezers, in addition to ornaments for dress and body, very often accompany elaborate weaponry in so-called war-

¹² Vandkilde 2006b.

¹³ e.g. Kristiansen 1984; Bridgford 1997; Kristiansen 2002.

¹⁴ Vandkilde 2006b; Vandkilde 2006d; cf. also Schweizer 1990.

¹⁵ cf. Vandkilde 2006d.

¹⁶ Vandkilde 2006b.

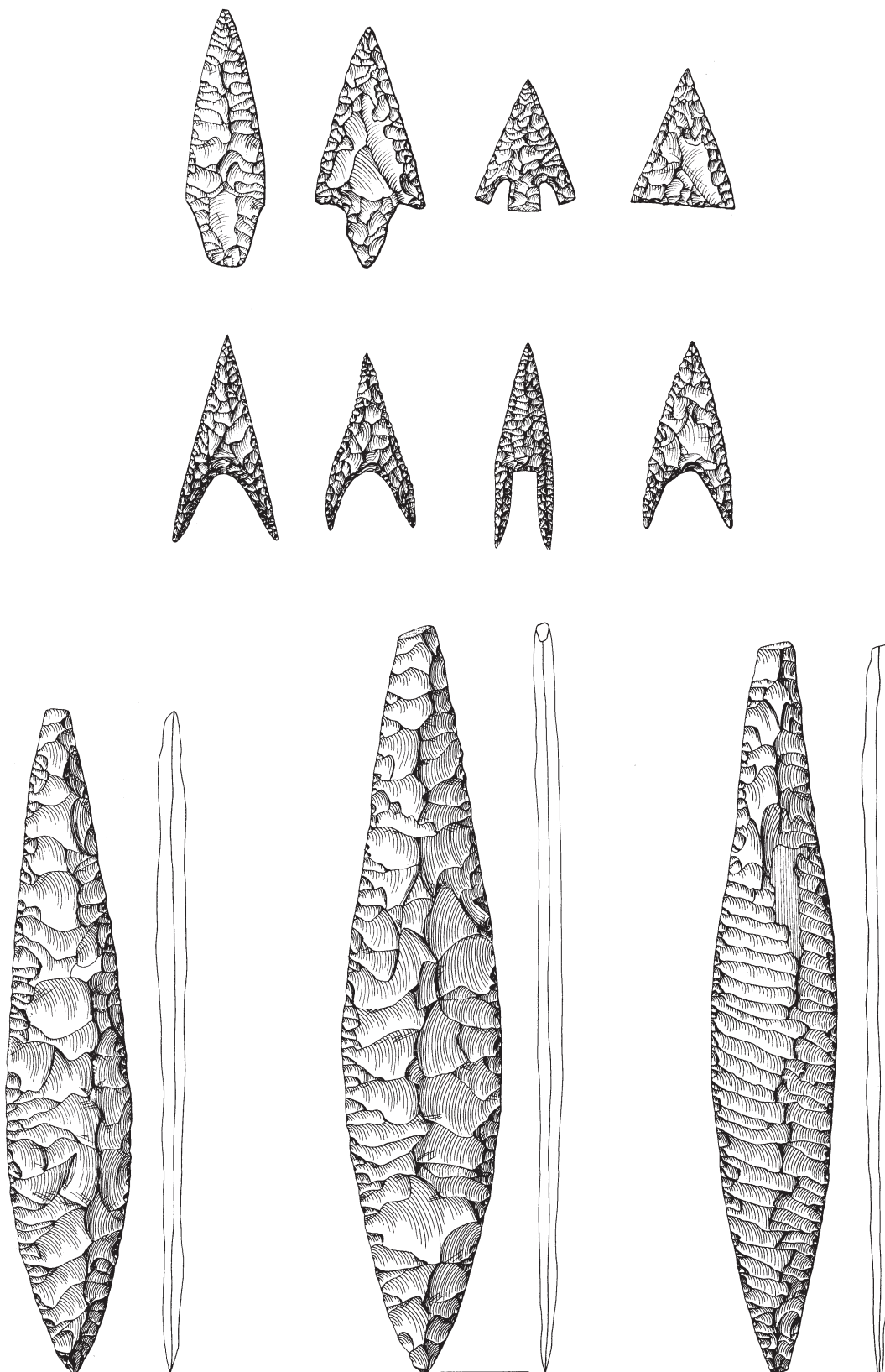


Fig. 1A. Parallel-retouched lanceolate flint daggers up to 44 cm long and of exquisite craftsmanship repeatedly occur in combination with sets of specialised flint arrowheads in burials of the early Late Neolithic period in northwestern Jutland. This might suggest warrior institutions framing the warfare rather than Yanomami-style bellicose masculinities performing ad hoc raiding (after Vang Petersen 1993). Arrowheads scale 3 : 4; daggers scale 2 : 5.

rior burials, hence tallying with a cross-cultural inclination of warriors to be almost obsessed with their personal appearance. Clear-cut visual representations of warrior identities are normally rooted in myths and narratives of war and

its heroes, but are also underpinned by social strategies of distancing 'us' from 'them'.

As argued above, based on weapons alone, warriors of the Bronze Age were organised in warrior

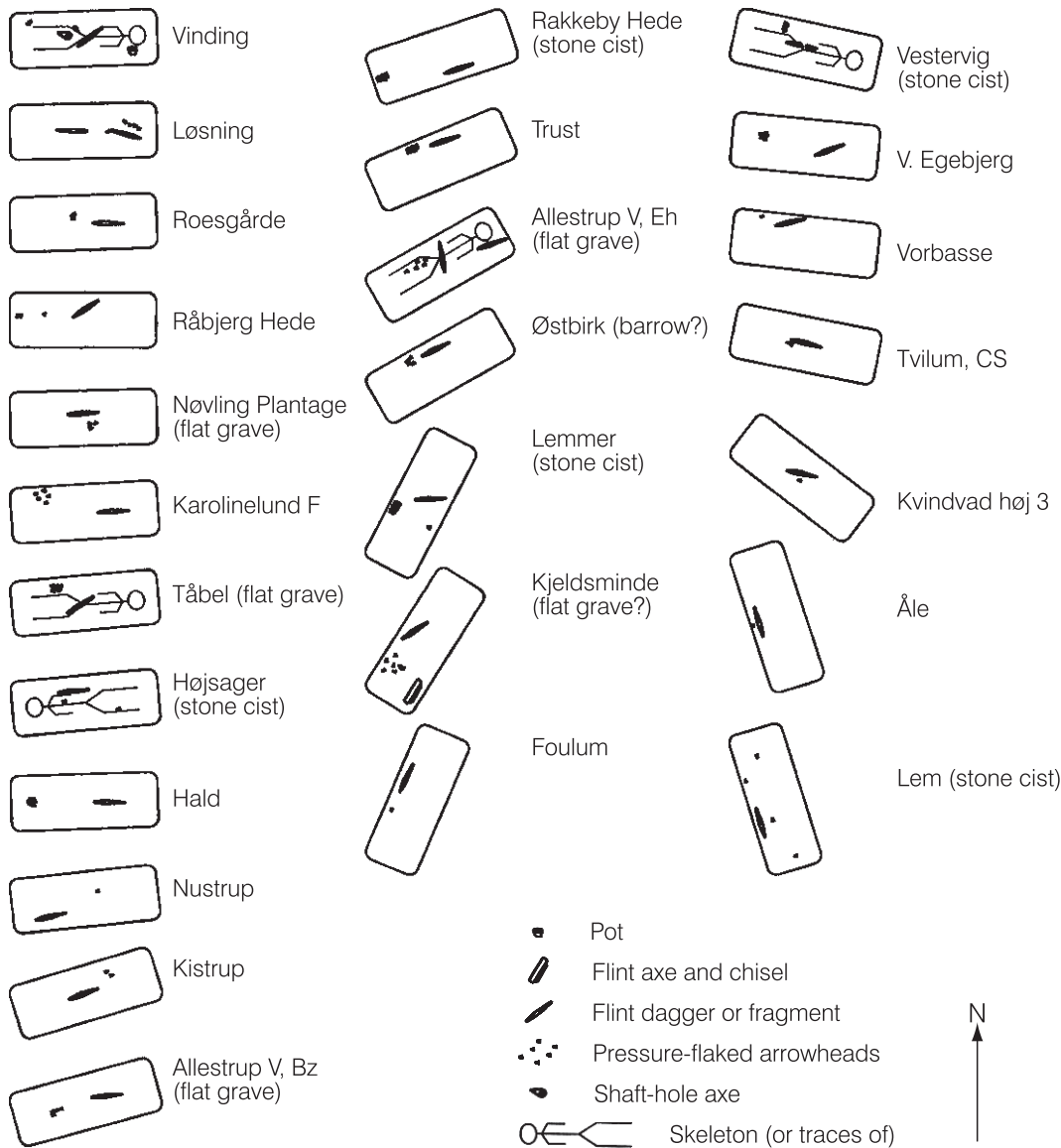


Fig. 1 B. Burials of the early Late Neolithic period in north-western Jutland in which parallel-retouched lanceolate flint daggers repeatedly occur in combination with sets of specialised flint arrowheads (after Sarauw 2007).

institutions consisting of members recruited on the basis of rank, age and gender. This may seem in general harmony with the funerary evidence, which is however also a very complex data source. Weapons and dress accessories in burials may be a specific metonymic statement of the roles played by the dead individual in life. In the Bronze Age swords seem very rarely associated with child or female interments, and sword burials would then be generally suggestive of male warriorhood. However, weapons and dress accessories may additionally be used to make more general metaphoric statements and thus have a less direct bearing on the lived identities of the deceased. If a small, exclusive group of mature males are interred with rich weaponry, this is likely to reflect symbolic warriorhood in the sense of an earlier warrior identity, heroic status or ambition, political authority or high social rank, all of it possibly in combination (Fig. 3). Likewise, weapons accompanying

small male children and young adolescents, such as found in some Corded Ware communities¹⁷, are likely to be metaphors originating in warrior values rather than signs of active warriorhood.

The newly discovered inhumation cemetery at Neckarsulm in Baden-Württemberg, dating to the earliest Urnfield period, c. 1300 BC (Bronze Age D), is very interesting in this respect because of its unequivocal association with warriorhood *per se*. The majority of the 51 bodies turned out to be adult males of excellent health and physique, most of them with standard equipment of fine pottery and body accessories; however, they were surpassed materially by three sword graves situated close together at the eastern edge of the cemetery. Many burials contained several interments of males who apparently died on the same

¹⁷ Vandkilde 2006b.

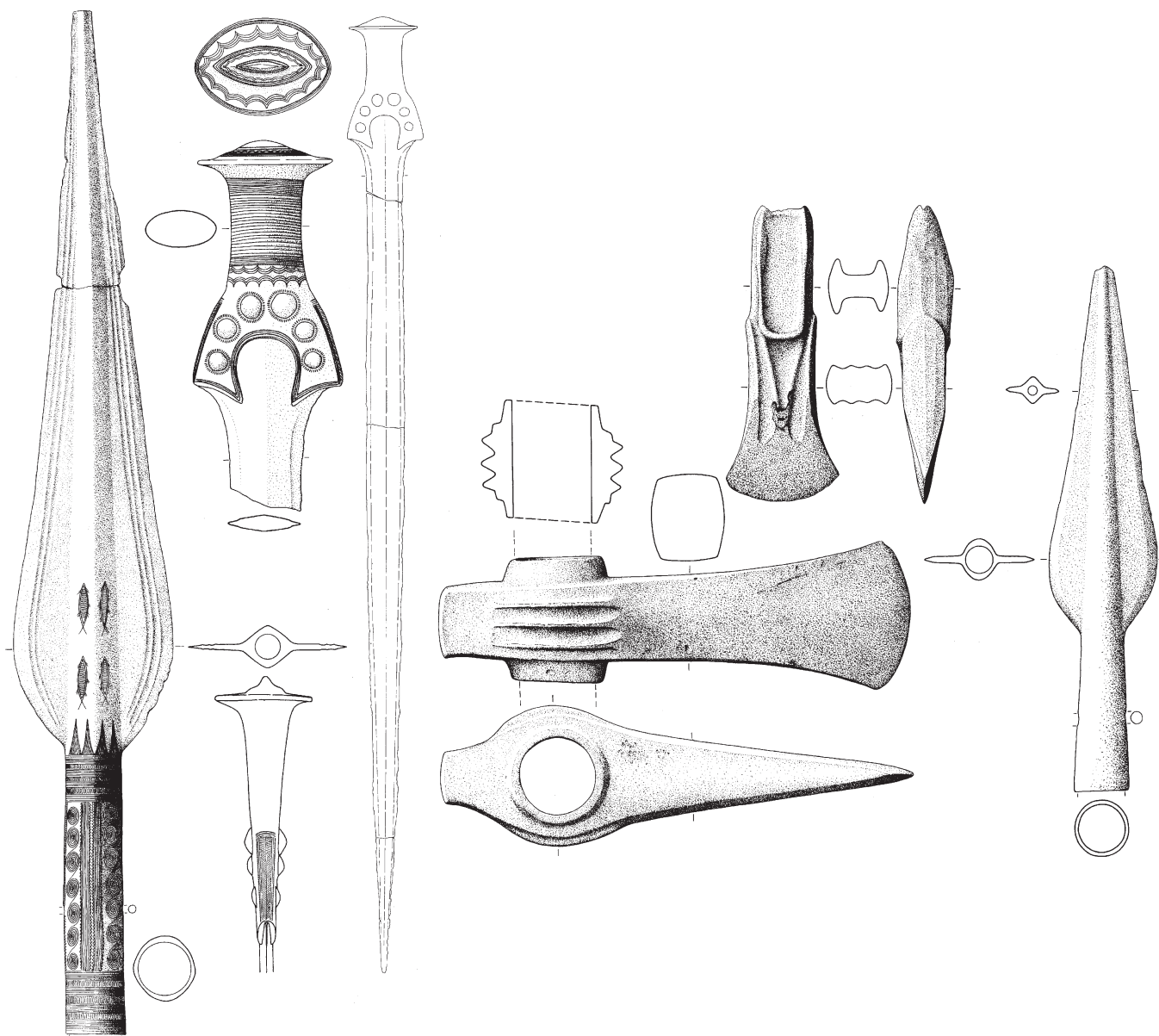


Fig. 2A. Magnificent swords, axes and spearheads of bronze from wetland depositions at Valsømagle and Fårdrup (see Fig. 2B) in Denmark, c. 1600 BC. Such weapons, found throughout the Bronze Age, hint, in themselves, of the existence of war leaders, probably with followers organised in warrior institutions (after Aner/Kersten 1976, plate 79–80 no. 1098).

occasion¹⁸. It is fairly clear from this case that the cemetery was for warriors mainly, that the buried males were active warriors who died and were buried companion-wise, and finally that the warrior institution(s) had an internal ranking defined by those with swords and those without.

In future studies based on burial practices, warriorhood in the Bronze Age should preferably be analysed as a relational and changeable social identity, incorporating the fact that objects can be deposited in burials for a variety of overlapping reasons depending on the culture and society, such as emotion, social ambition, social rivalry and social identity, cultural values and norms, and religion. This series of parameters is not necessarily related to warfare.

¹⁸ Neth 2001.

2.3 Weaponry in Votive Deposits

A large number of weapons are known from sacrificial deposits all over northern and central Europe, and many of them have been retrieved from wetlands (Fig. 2). This specific ritual practice has been explained with reference to several overall purposes: rites of passage, commemorating the past, gifts to the gods, and ‘potlatches’ to promote the importance of particular persons or social institutions and to legitimise or question power and authority¹⁹. These social and religious motives need not exclude each other, but could warfare also be involved? A proportion of Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual depositions of weaponry might, at least hypothetically, be considered the commencement, culmination or conclusion of warfare, which even today is intertwined with rituals.

¹⁹ Bradley 1990; Vandkilde 1996; Vandkilde 1999.

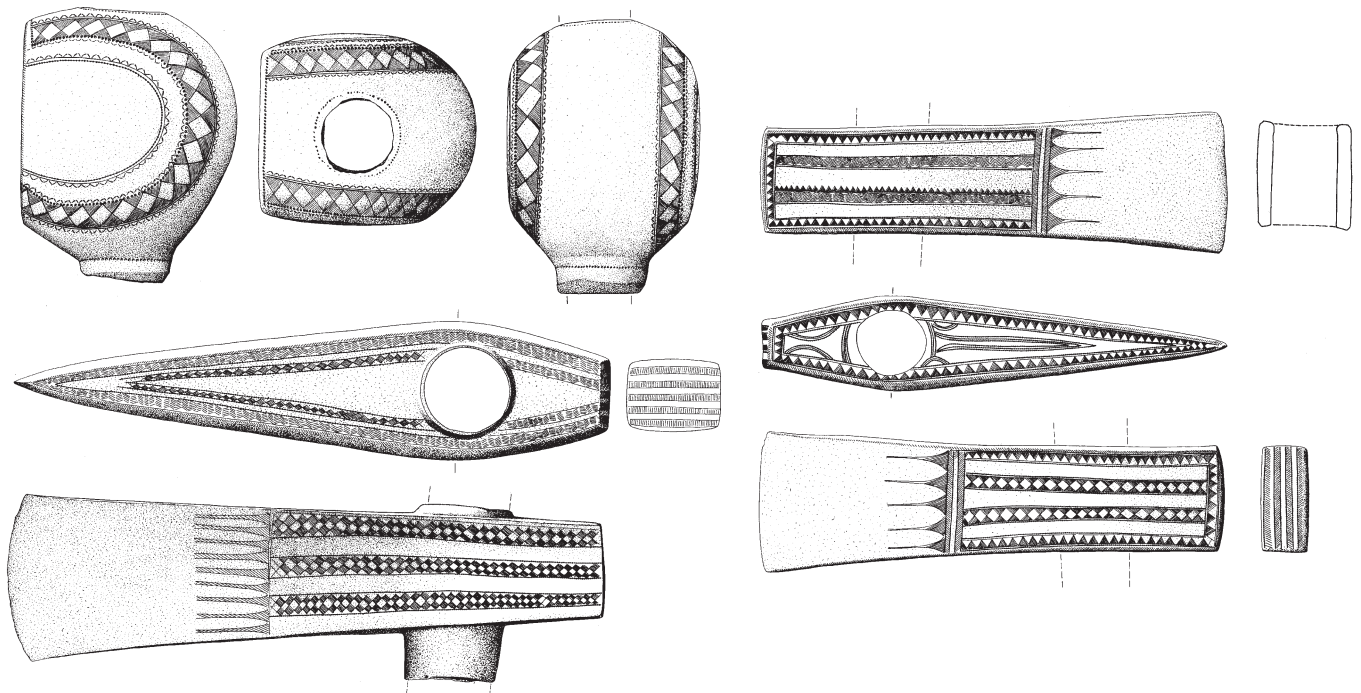


Fig. 2B. Axes from wetland deposition at Fårdrup in Denmark, c. 1600 BC (after Aner/Kersten 1976, plate 96–97 no. 1178).

Neolithic depositions mainly contain implements with the potential for war, while the more mono-functional weapons in depositions from the Bronze Age make an association with warfare more obvious. War booty offerings, a generally accepted find category in Iron Age Europe sustained by written sources, could well be rooted in the Neolithic and especially the Bronze Age²⁰. A newly discovered site in a swampy river valley at Altentreptow in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern reportedly contains bronze and wooden weapons, dress and body accessories and some fifty traumatised skeletons of mainly young adult males, all datable to between 1300 and 1200 BC at the transition to the Urnfield period. Is this a huge war booty offering, leftovers at the battlefield, or maybe both?²¹ Whichever the correct explanation, the association to warfare is unequivocal in this case.

As warfare is defined as a flow of social interactions, it needs to be somehow initiated and concluded, and rituals on individual and group level present themselves as obvious choices. Depositions of bronze weapons in watery places could then in general be seen from such a perspective of war. Weapon offerings, such as those from Fårdrup and Valsømagle (Fig. 2), may then be interpreted as metonymic statements of concluded warfare in terms of victory, peace-making, and alliance maintenance, or perhaps as an offering made by the warrior band or the war leader to ensure luck in an impending war. Hypothetically, then, the number of weapon offerings would increase in periods with intensified warfare.

Weapon offerings may however also be metaphorical statements which more distantly relate to the waging of war. It can be argued that the institutionalisation of warriors and war – arguably an increasing trend during the Bronze Age – implies that these two scenarios of metaphor and metonym were carried more symbolically into other social fields of the Bronze Age world, as part of processes of signification and legitimation. Finally, a wide variety of other bronze objects than weapons occur in votive depositions, and these are pervaded by other intentions indirectly or not at all associated with war-related violence.

2.4 Weapon Combinations

Weapon combinations in wetland depositions and in cemeteries can, if interpreted with caution, provide information about the internal organisation of the warrior bands and the equipment and fighting methods of the Bronze Age warrior. It is, however, also necessary to note – and this tallies with what has already been noted above – that the warrior may not be interred with his full equipment but rather only those parts of the equipment that had a certain symbolic meaning. Particular weapons may have been curated, rather than deposited, for any number of reasons, perhaps kept as inalienable objects to be used on special occasions or transmitted from father to son as insignia of rank and warrior status. Close combat armament is absolutely predominant in burials and hoarded depositions, which should not lead us to conclude that archery was unimportant during fighting, as the continued occurrence of arrows of flint and metal shows.

²⁰ Randsborg 1995.

²¹ Battlefield Altentreptow.

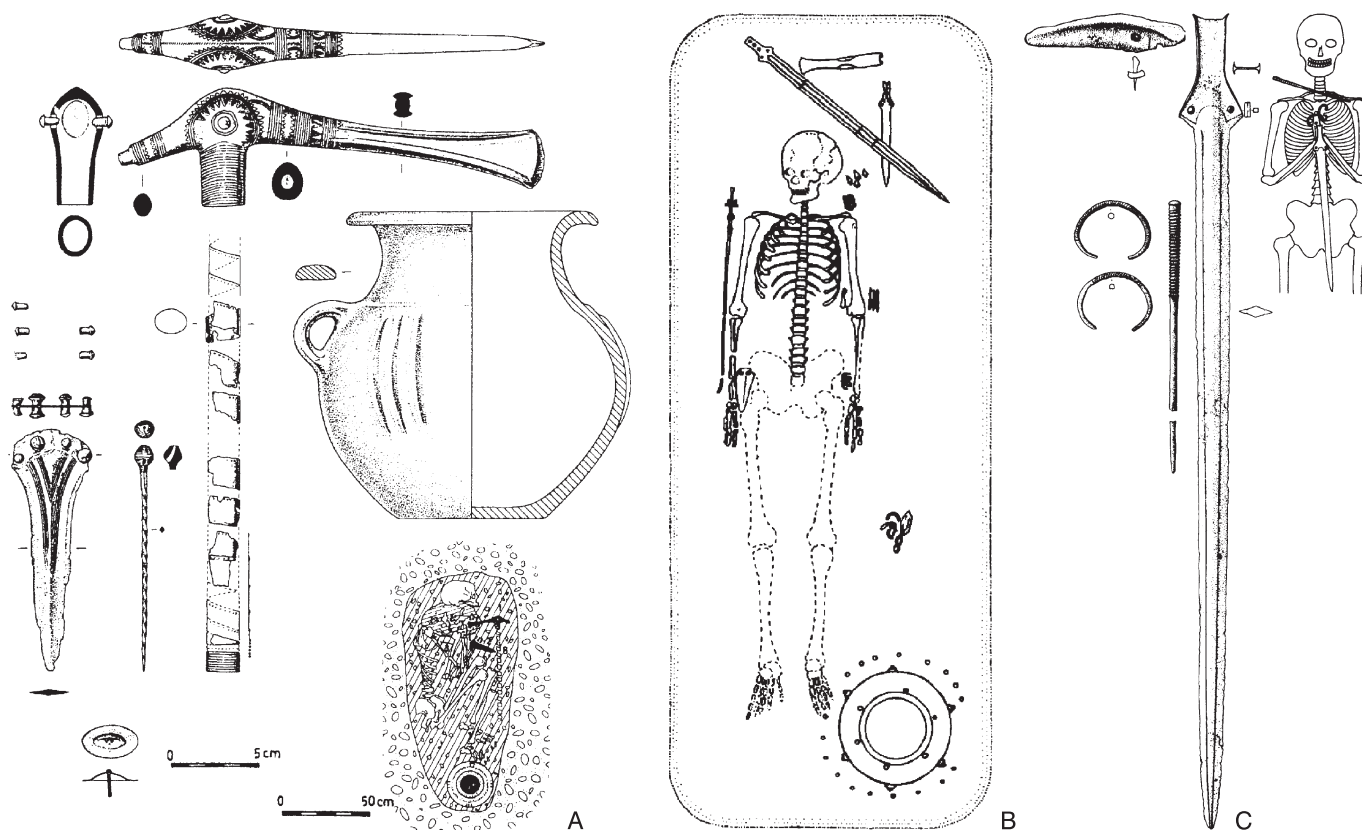


Fig. 3. Conspicuous weapon graves often commemorate certain warriors. A Gemeinlebarn in Austria from the Early Bronze Age; B Haguenau in Alsace; C Asenkofen in Bavaria from the latest Middle Bronze Age. Objects are carefully placed around and on the body of the deceased male. Warrior celebrations continue in the Late Bronze Age, although they are somewhat blurred by the new funerary practice of cremation. Quite exceptional 'war lord burials' below mounds, however, stand out from common graves – for example, at the Moravian and Slovakian sites of Čaka, Velatice, Očkov, Dedinka, and Kolta, in addition to Hart an der Alz and Poing in Bavaria (after Vandkilde 2007).

The social presentation of the warrior in funerary contexts varied systematically through time, indicating that fighting methods also changed: In the mid 3rd millennium BC, the battle axe-wielding warrior gave way to the dagger-carrying archer, who became a sword and spear fighter with several fine toilet articles to groom hair and body in the mid 2nd millennium at the threshold of the Tumulus culture of the Middle Bronze Age. Battle axes and other axes of potential use in war were still available especially in the earlier Bronze Age, and it is possible that body armour and shields of organic materials existed. Wheeled horse-pulled vehicles were also in use. From around 1300 BC in the Urnfield Period of the Late Bronze Age, weapons look increasingly effective and standardised with elite warrior equipment consisting of the whole suit: sheet bronze armour, helmet, round shield, sword, and spear (Fig. 4), in addition to toilet implements for grooming and frequently a four-wheeled cart or a two-wheeled chariot. The wheeled vehicle was used to bring the war chieftain to and from battle and to present him as a superior being on social and religious occasions. This impressive assortment of weaponry showed regional differences as well as developments over time from the beginning of the Urnfield period around 1300 BC to its conclusion prior to 700 BC²².

²² Schauer 1975.

Recent studies often identify the sword-wearer as the aristocratic war chieftain who had a particular territory under his command from which the companions of the warrior band were assumedly recruited, at least in the Late Bronze Age²³. In the Tyrolean cemetery of Volders, the sword-wearer of that region, presumably the war chieftain, can be followed through as many as thirteen generations²⁴. It is not always clear, however, whether it was only the leader of the warrior band, all of the companions or only some of them who carried a sword. Some hoards hold several swords, several spearheads, or several shields and were perhaps the collective offerings of a whole warrior band. In Clausen's recent examinations of weapon burials of the Urnfield period north of the Alps²⁵, both sword and spear occur alone, in combination with each other and sometimes with arrowheads. This may reflect fighting methods, status differences and division of labour among the companions of warrior clubs, and even cultural differences in funerary consumption.

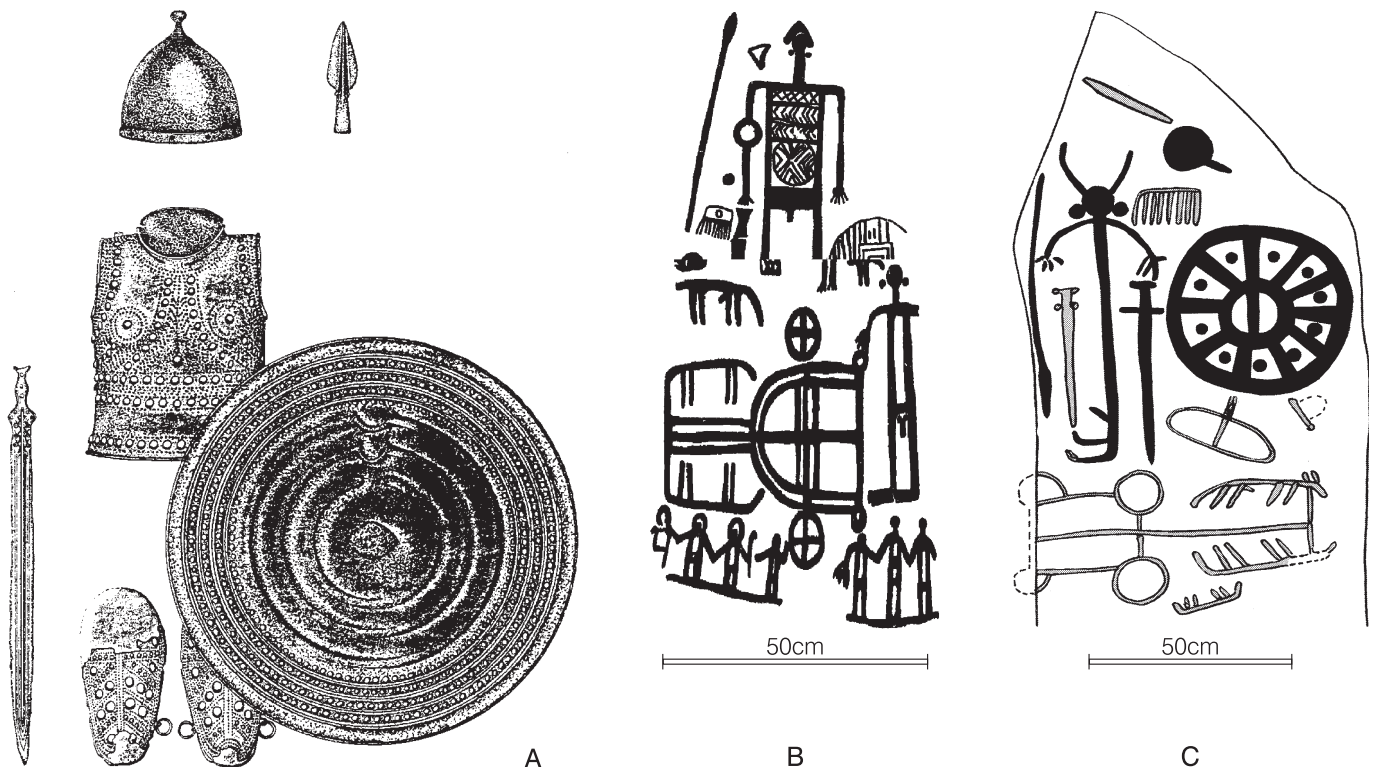
2.5 Weapon Technologies

A comparison of weapons over time can give clues to significant changes in weapon technol-

²³ Sperber 1999; cf. Kristiansen 1984a; Kristiansen 1998; Kristiansen 2002; also Neth 2001.

²⁴ Sperber 1999.

²⁵ Clausen 2005.



ogy, understood as styles of fighting and the functionality of weapons in warfare, but also in transport or other technologies that improved the logistics of bellicose interactions. Weapon technology is certainly not unimportant for the outcome of war, and improvements have been known to escalate the extent and viciousness of warfare in numerous ethnographic cases, even causing radical social change such as documented among the Grand Chaco Abipón in South America during the 18th century when horses were adopted for riding²⁶.

It is consequently possible that innovations in the technology of war could have increased the speed of social change in the Bronze Age, and it is interesting that some of the great turning points in central and northern Europe are associated, quite possibly in a quasi-causal manner, with new arrivals in weaponry and with evidence of increased warfare such as trauma and fortifications. A case in point is the change from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age. The appearance of bronze spearheads around 1700 BC and slightly later the first swords is likely to have had considerable social, physical and cognitive impact on conventional warfare, ways of socially interacting with others, and thus the entire societal habitat. The contemporaneous introduction of chariots and carts with four-spoked wheels and horses as draught animals could have further contributed to changing the conditions of interaction. Shortly after

1600 BC and as possible result of previous events, a new macro-regional ‘culture of contact’, the so-called Tumulus culture, had its breakthrough over large parts of central and northern Europe²⁷, introducing and dispersing new forms and frameworks for socialising violently and non-violently. Warriorhood now occurred in a transformed form equally suitable for warfare and social representation. Conjunctural change of an even larger scale took place between 1300 and 1200 BC with the emergence of a new European ‘culture of contact’, namely the Urnfield culture, also associated with improved weaponry and seemingly intensified warfare. The above-mentioned recently discovered sites of Altentreptow and Neckarsulm from the earliest Urnfield period (Bronze Age D), for example, point in this direction, together with an increase in the number of fortifications.

2.6 Fortifications

In central Europe, including the Alpine region and the Balkans, fortified settlements occur from early on and progressively more frequently²⁸, while in southern Scandinavia and elsewhere they remain more or less absent throughout prehistory. Bronze Age Scandinavians were hardly more peaceful than central Europeans during this period, as also suggested by the large number of deposited weapons. Clearly the presence or absence

Fig. 4. Warrior equipment of the Urnfield period, c. 1300–750 BC. A Elite warrior equipment ideally with the whole bronze suit of body armour, helmet, round shield, sword, and spear in Schauer’s interpretation based on assemblages from the broader Alpine region (after Schauer 1975). This can be compared to roughly contemporaneous Iberian stelae shown in (B) and (C). B Warrior hero clad in his corselet and helmet and surrounded by the panoply of sword, round shield, spear, fibula, comb, and chariot in addition to dead enemies, a mourning wife (?), and lowest down possibly the companions holding hands. C Phallic warrior with horned helmet and holding two swords. He is surrounded by comb, mirror, brooch, spear, bow and arrow and round shield, a four-wheeled cart pulled by two horses, obviously a stallion and a mare, who is accompanied by her foal (B.C after Harrison 2004).

²⁶ Lacroix 1990.

²⁷ Vandkilde 2007.

²⁸ Czebreszuk et al. 2008.

of fortified settlements cannot be used as evidence of war and peace, but might be rooted in different cultural ways of handling hostilities and of presenting power. Cultural tradition, topography of the landscape, settlement organisation, and social and inter-societal structure are factors that might be relevant in pursuing the question why settlements are sometimes fortified in central Europe and rarely so in southern Scandinavia.

Fortified sites demonstrate considerable variation in size, permanency, landscape setting, period of use, and construction of defence works. Independently of their date, most sites are comparatively moderate in size while others are larger and some are really huge, encircling 30–70 ha or more. The techniques of ramparts, ditches and palisades also vary quite a lot over time and geographical space²⁹. The utilization of the potentials present in the local terrain for defence and surveillance is universal, hence accounting for the frequent association between fortifications and hill tops. Fortifications and territorial marking go well together, but distinct territoriality can exist without fortifications.

Although many sites are practically unexplored and thus not easily datable, many do seem to belong to a broad time zone between the Early and Middle Bronze Age while the majority are of Urnfield date. Early examples are Nitriansky Hrádok in Slovakia, the huge and high-lying Spišský Štvrtok, also in Slovakia, Bruszczewo on low ground in central Poland, and the stone-walled citadel of Monkodonja at the Adriatic coast of Istria. Many fortified tell sites in the Carpathian Basin are roughly of the same date, for instance Otomani and Sălăcea. Later examples include the Czech site of Blučina, and the enormous-sized southern German hillforts of Houbirg and Bullenheimer Berg, and many others³⁰. The largest of these hillforts in both the earlier and the later group suggest that at these particular points in time the military sector was a social source of power that could supplement other power sources, be it economy, ideology or even politics³¹.

Fortifications such as the above-mentioned may have had several functions dependent on their cultural context: providing daily security for and defending the inhabitants in addition to serving as centres of trade, of crafts, and of rituals. Of course, fortified sites may in certain cases also be or become a visualisation of authority, and some fortifications were evidently also the residential site of one or more leading families. Territoriality is a related aspect which has been studied over the last decades based on the regular

spacing of fortified sites in many regions³², and it can quite often be shown that each fortified site was in a relationship of interdependence with a surrounding territory. This may well have included aspects of control and power. In the Late Bronze Age larger, sometimes proto-urban, sites emerged more systematically enclosed by complex systems of ramparts, palisades and ditches, each one amidst a well-defined territory, and many of them constituting nodal points in a super-regional network of commerce. undefended villages and hamlets tend to be attached as satellites to the fortified central site, perhaps particularly in times of peace³³. In other cases, fortifications are marginal phenomena placed at the boundaries of settled areas to scare off the enemy and to protect against intruders. These may not have been permanently settled, or they may have served as a potential refuge site should the need arise, only accommodating certain specialised personnel³⁴.

It may be hypothesised that the construction of defence work intensified in periods of social transition, notably from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age, c. 1800–1500 BC, and from the Middle to the Late Bronze Age, c. 1300–1200 BC. It is not surprising that in times of war people fled to protected ground and/or made efforts to protect their settlement by fortifying it. Some of these sites, however, continued to be used for generations and attracted additional and much less war-related functions.

2.7 Iconographic Images

Scandinavian rock art images are oral tales carved in stone. The stories on rock are comparable to orally recited epics in that certain easily recognisable traits recur, that the actions of mortals, gods, and other unworldly creatures occur intertwined, and that the narrative and its interpretation easily diverge into new versions. The Homeric poems are narratives of an ideal and heroic nature maintaining the interests and ideology of a particular social group, the long life of the epics beginning in an elitist Late Bronze Age setting developing within aristocratic circles until c. 750–600 BC when writing was re-established in the early Greek city-state³⁵. The rock carvings could well have had a similar background. It is worthy of note – and depressing – that images and words can enrich and depend on each other to such a degree that if the epic narrative is lost, the images will henceforth only be partially understood. The rock carvings nevertheless reveal – in contrast to the thematic focus upon men and war in Homer's Iliad – that warfare and warriorhood were rarely at the very

²⁹ cf. Vandkilde 2007, fig. 49,B; Nowacki 2008, fig. 9.

³⁰ e. g. Czebreszuk et al. 2008; Primas 2002; Harding 2007.

³¹ cf. Mann 1986; Vandkilde 2007, figs. 30; 49.

³² e. g. Jockenhövel 1990; Primas 2002.

³³ Ivanova 2008.

³⁴ cf. Primas 2002.

³⁵ Vandkilde 2006d with references.

centre of the depicted narratives. Ships and maritime travelling are rather the key issues of the rock carvings³⁶, hence actually making them much more in line with Homer's *Odyssey*. The religious-ritual component³⁷, moreover, seems stronger in the Scandinavian epic imagery than in the roughly contemporaneous Greek oral epics.

Rock carvings with warlike motifs (Fig. 5) are in fact remarkably few in numbers measured against the considerable number of known carvings from Scandinavia. The whole series with warlike, less warlike and non-warlike motifs are relevant to the interpretation of Bronze Age warfare, its ideal forms and broader societal significance. Jarl Nordbladh³⁸ has analysed patterns of fighting at the rock art site of Kville in Bohuslän. Person-to-person combat predominates, the combatants being of equal size, and weapons never touch. When fighting occurs on ships, only a few crew members, made larger than the rest, carry weapons, and some ships have more than 135 crew members. Nordbladh finds this number much overrated, and therefore hints at the idealised character of the narrative. This corresponds with what is suggested above, but he proceeds to suggest that the images of combat at Kville provide a fairly accurate description of how fighting was actually carried out in Bronze Age society. Richard Osgood³⁹ presents a similar view: Fighting supposedly took place as heavily ritualised action or performances of a sport-like character⁴⁰ – that is, as a rule with a non-deadly outcome.

Exquisite weaponry inserted into the specialised ritual settings of outstanding burials and votive offerings – like heroic poetry – overemphasises the ideals of war combat, leadership and companionship, and underrates the violence also involved: Scandinavian rock carvings with bellicose motifs hold some of the same idealistic qualities. In a comparative vein, the *Iliad* is about the obviously militaristic Trojan War, but the narrative nevertheless highlights fighting as sporty duels between high-ranking warrior heroes. Similarly, war scenes in rock carvings reduce fighting to the demonstration of potency among high-ranking warrior heroes, who fight as equals and according to certain aristocratic rules and ethics. The scene from Fossum in Sweden with two men fighting on a boat from the 15th century, and a series of similar pictures, illustrates this point clearly (Fig. 5). Whilst the *Iliad* has traces of other kinds of warfare, much more vicious and much less heroic – like raids on settlements to obtain slaves, women and portable wealth⁴¹ – this more

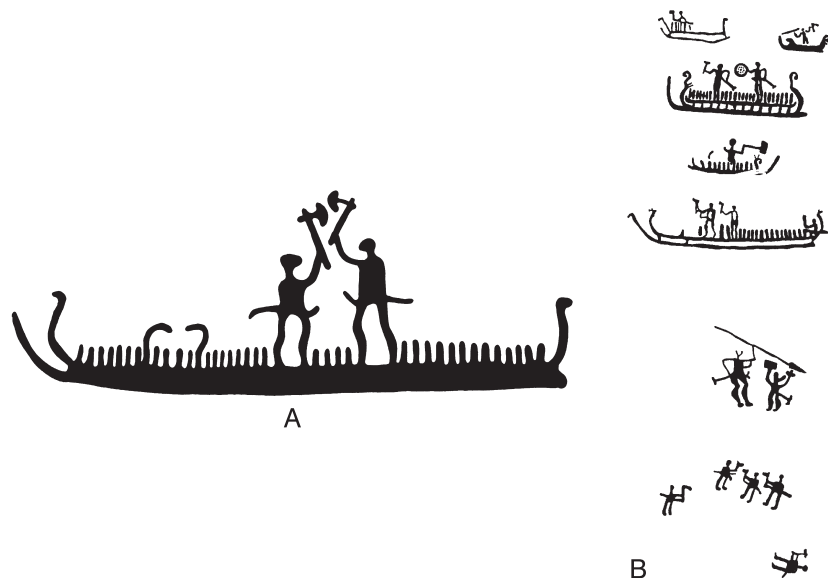


Fig. 5. Bellicose motifs with a strong heroic hint, all from Bohuslän in Sweden. A Fossum (through the courtesy of J. Goldhahn). B Kville (after Nordbladh 1989).

real face of war is completely absent from the rock carvings, most likely because the words that should accompany the imagery are lost to us. However, sufficient cases of skeletal trauma (see below), damaged swords and sharpening traces on swords⁴², as well as other evidence, demonstrate that Bronze Age warfare in pre-state temperate Europe included more violent and deadly forms.

It is probably significant that rock carvings with warlike motifs are rare. The vast majority have other motives, particularly fleets of ships, but also religiously motivated images related to sun rituals⁴³. Although this iconographic choice might also be ideologically coloured, it does hint at aspects of Bronze Age life little concerned with war, warfare and warriors.

2.8 Skeletal Trauma

Traumata on skeletons are caused by various forms of interpersonal violence like warfare, homicide, gang aggression, intra-family fights, feuding among fraternal interest groups, and forceful kinds of sport. The boundary between these forms of violence can be quite subtle, but ethnographic examples suggest that a high occurrence of interpersonal violence other than strictly warfare quite often coincides with periods of intensified war⁴⁴. Abnormal mass graves with several injured individuals as well as normal single interments with an injured individual occur throughout the Neolithic and the Bronze Age all over Europe. The injuries vary from projectile wounds to marks and cuts from weapons. Some wounds are healed up, while other wounds were the cause of death.

³⁶ Ling 2008.

³⁷ Kaul 1998.

³⁸ Nordbladh 1989.

³⁹ Osgood 1998; Osgood et al. 2000, 34.

⁴⁰ Osgood et al. 2000, 34.

⁴¹ Vandkilde 2006d.

⁴² Kristiansen 1984; Bridgford 1997.

⁴³ Ling 2008; Kaul 1998.

⁴⁴ e.g. Chagnon 1968.



Fig. 6. An Early Bronze Age mass grave with five disordered skeletons was located on the fortified central site of Nižná Myšľa in east Slovakia.

Forensic evidence points in the direction of a sequence of killings taking place at intervals and ending with the body being thrown carelessly into a pit. The repetition suggests some sort of ritual practice, which could well have a war-related background that concluded with the sacrifice of captives. Such human sacrifices may have been used by the political elite as a means to consolidate their control over life and death and to frighten outer and inner enemies (after Hårde 2006).

Skeletal traumas are, in fact, relatively frequent in European prehistory, considering that in some areas skeletons are not well preserved, that they are not routinely examined for marks of violence, and that much physical violence does not leave visible traces on the skeleton. Looking at the known examples, it is probably significant that spears and arrows are often involved. This is exemplified by the burial at Over-Vindinge on Zealand dating to c. 1600 BC: A 50-year-old man had been hit from behind with a bronze spearhead, the tip still sitting in his pelvis⁴⁵. There are several other examples, such as the contemporaneous mass burial at Wassenaar in the Netherlands where a flint arrowhead was found embedded in one of the victims of a raid on a small community⁴⁶, and the Middle Bronze Age dead at Tomarton in England, also with spearheads involved⁴⁷.

In studies of warfare, skeletal trauma is a valuable source of additional information, which should also remind us that war produces victims. A number of mass graves shed light on the more sinister sides of Bronze Age communities, but the circumstances that created these particular graves varied quite a lot. A small number of anomalous graves with several individuals exist in eastern central Europe, and studies of forensic data indicate a succession of ritual killings, each immediately followed by abnormal interment in a storage pit on, or adjacent to, a settlement area (Fig. 6)⁴⁸. These Early Bronze Age cases may especially exemplify the political potential of ritual violence and victimisation, and it may be argued that it was the political elite who used the public humili-

liation of defeated enemies to maintain their power⁴⁹.

At the two Czech fortified sites of Blučina and Velim from a later period, c. 1400–1300 BC, human skeletons and skeletal parts were frequent in ditches and pits. It remains unclear whether they were the remains of ritual killings or from hostile attacks, or maybe both⁵⁰, but there is clear evidence that the two sites suffered several instances of attack⁵¹. Quite another scenario is apparent at the above-mentioned Wassenaar site from c. 1700–1600 BC. Twelve individuals of all ages, some with trauma, were carefully placed side by side in the mass grave, obviously put there by surviving kin who cared for their dead relatives, and thus mediating to us the empathy and emotions involved. A deviating tale is mediated by a mass grave from Sund in Norway, showing a much more chaotic and un-caring situation: Swords had undoubtedly been in action, killing a number of people in a small local community around 1400 BC, and afterwards the dead were only very provisionally cared for⁵².

It seems to the present reviewer that skeletal trauma occurs in most periods, but that the transitional periods to the Middle and to the Late Bronze Age offer especially many cases. The new battlefield or war booty site of Altentreptow in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern from 1300–1200 BC⁵³ supports this emerging pattern.

3 Conclusions and Perspectives

The above examination has explored both the ideal and the real face of Bronze Age warfare and warriors, and has also pointed to areas of life little affected by violence and war. This result deviates from research carried out prior to 1995, which roughly followed two opposing and stereotypical myths of the Other, both of them neglecting archaeological sources of evidence relating to violence and war. Since 1995, the scholarly interest in prehistoric warfare has literally exploded, revealing a clear and increasing tendency to make prehistoric societies militaristic and violent in their very foundations. Above, this latter view has been challenged and nuanced. Warfare and warriors undoubtedly formed a significant part of Bronze Age social life, with everything this implied in terms of cultural meanings, heroic tales, violent interaction, victims, and human suffering. This conclusion is in accordance with the existing archaeological evidence, which simultaneously indicates that peaceful activities also formed part of life at home

⁴⁵ Kjær 1912; Vandkilde 2000.

⁴⁶ Louwe Kooijmans 1993.

⁴⁷ Osgood 2006.

⁴⁸ Hårde 2006; cf. also Rittershofer 1997; Harding 2007.

⁴⁹ Hårde 2006; Aldhouse-Green 2006.

⁵⁰ Harding 2007, 87 ff.

⁵¹ Harding 2007, 87 ff.

⁵² Fyllingen 2006.

⁵³ Battlefield Altentreptow.

and at public events. Both violent and non-violent interactions appear firmly sustained by cosmologies and religion, as suggested by votive offerings, funerary rituals and iconographies.

Societies of the Bronze Age probably experienced – just like the Neolithic societies before them – a variable presence of war. War never seems to have had a genuinely permanent character in the Hobbesian sense of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, everybody's war against everybody⁵⁴. Rather, the sources of evidence of later Neolithic and Bronze Age warfare in temperate Europe suggest that war occurred most frequently in periods with macro-regional socio-cultural shifts. Conjunctural change with the emergence of a new 'culture of contact' occurred at the transition to the Middle Bronze Age around 1700–1600 BC – ending with the establishment of the Tumulus culture – and again at the transition to the Late Bronze Age, between 1300 and 1200 BC – concluding with the formation of the Urnfield culture⁵⁵. In their broadest sense, both these temporal zones of transition had rather intense data on warfare and warriorhood, both ideal and very real. Interestingly, this variable occurrence of warfare⁵⁶ may confirm that war-related violence is culturally constructed much more than it is rooted in human psychology and biology.

A challenging aspect for the future is of course to pursue the question of the more precise role of war, warfare, and warrior organisations in bringing about socio-cultural change of macro-regional magnitude. The relationship between war and social change has historically and sociologically been argued to be of a complex, often indirect nature: War is waged with particular purposes in mind, but tends instead to produce unintentional effects, notably more war⁵⁷. At least it seems beyond debate that war inspires new forms and frames of identification, and this is in accordance with the above observations of a greater cultural and social spotlight on warriorhood and warfare in periods of radical transition. As other authors have noted⁵⁸, a quantitative and qualitative development in the culture of war seems to take place from the earlier to the later Bronze Age. Early examples of military-based authority can be pinpointed, but the tendency through time is clearly that the relationship between leadership and warfare as a potential power source grew tighter. Warrior bands may have lived their life mostly on the margins of societal leadership earlier on, whereas they made themselves more regularly available to the centres of power and authority in the Urnfield period.

⁵⁴ Otto et al. 2006.

⁵⁵ Vandkilde 2007.

⁵⁶ See also Robb 1997; Thorpe 2006.

⁵⁷ Otto et al. 2006.

⁵⁸ e. g. Harding 2007.

Warfare was a fairly widespread form of social interaction in the Bronze Age, just as it continues to be today. One reason for this remarkable consistency through time may be that war easily constitutes a particular social environment to which actors and local groups have to adapt for the sake of survival. Warfare is not usually a form of interaction people engage in because they cannot live without it. Rather, people in non-state settings wage war because it is a less risky strategy than is peace, inasmuch as allies can never be fully trusted⁵⁹. Another reason is the persistency and persuasiveness of heroic tales of war as inspirational material in strategies of identification, and still another reason is the fact that warfare and warrior bands hold a vast potential in the maintenance and expansion of political power. The realisation of this potential in the context of the non-state is normally effectively countered by the norms and rules of society⁶⁰, but in the general chaos and challenges of social transition this constraint may be overcome.

Abstract

The article suggests that both the ideal and real sides of war and warriors in prehistory should be studied, and that interpretative stereotypes can be avoided through the use of theories that view human agents as interacting both routinely and strategically in the world. The article attempts to examine selected Bronze Age data from such a perspective: weaponry in itself, weaponry in burials and in votive deposits, weapon technologies, fortifications, iconographic presentations, and skeletal trauma. It is tentatively concluded that war was variably present in the Bronze Age: even if war was often present, it was not endemic in the Hobbesian sense.

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⁵⁹ Helbling 2006.

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Zusammenfassung

Um mehr über die Kriegsführung im bronzezeitlichen Mitteleuropa zu erfahren, sollten nach Meinung der Autorin sowohl die ideellen als auch die realen Bereiche von Krieg und Kriegern in der Vorgeschichte untersucht werden. Durch die Nutzung von Theorien, die den Menschen sowohl als traditionell wie auch als strategisch agierendes Wesen betrachten, können stereotype Interpretationen vermieden werden. Unter diesen Gesichtspunkten untersucht der Artikel ausgewähltes Material der Bronzezeit: die Waffen selbst, ihr Vorkommen in Bestattungen und Hortfunden, Waffentechnologie, befestigte Siedlungen, Ikonografie und Hinweise auf Verletzungen an Skeletten. Nach dem jetzigen Stand der Forschung zeigt sich, dass Krieg in der Bronzezeit in verschiedenen Formen auftrat: Selbst wenn oft Krieg herrschte, war er nicht in dem Hobbes'schen Sinn allgegenwärtig.

Резюме

В статье рассматриваются идеалистические и реалистические аспекты таких феноменов, как «война» и «воин», характерных для эпохи бронзы. Обсуждая теории, объясняющие поведение человека как «стандартное» или «стратегическое», авторы ставили перед собой цель дистанцироваться от подобных стереотипных трактовок. Исходя из этого, в статье анализируется археологический материал эпохи бронзы, такой как: типы оружия, его присутствие в погребениях икладах и различные технологии его изготовления. Сюда же относятся и оборонные сооружения на поселениях, изображения оружия, а также следы повреждения на скелетном материале. Предварительные результаты исследований свидетельствуют о том, что хотя для всей эпохи бронзы характерны различные способы ведения войн, авторы, в отличие от Томаса Гоббса, не рассматривают состояние общества на тот период как *Bellum omnium contra omnes*.

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