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For Peaceable Humans, Don't Look to Prehistory

Archaeology has finally laid to rest the idea that earlier human societies were completely peaceful. Melvin Konner on new evidence

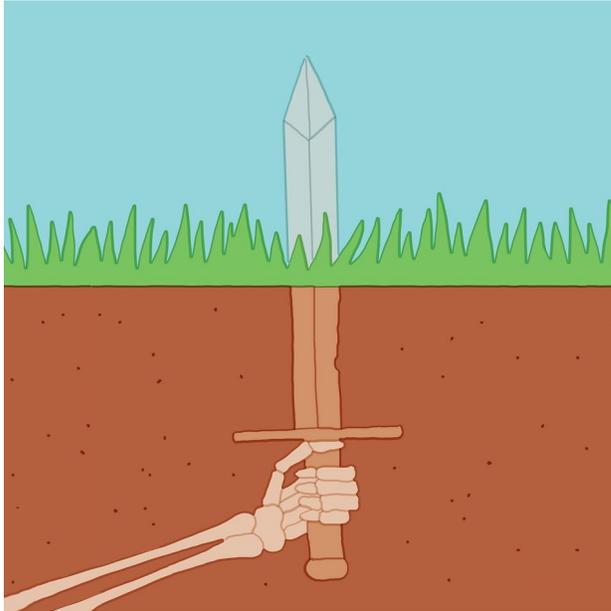


ILLUSTRATION: TIM LAHAN

By **MELVIN KONNER**

June 30, 2016 5:38 p.m. ET

Along a river in northern Germany, thousands of men lined up for a pitched battle. Some had come great distances, determined to seize or hold this modest waterway. They went at it mercilessly, leaving hundreds dead, many shot in the back while fleeing. Victory was decisive.

World War II? Perhaps the Napoleonic Wars? The 30 Years' War?

Actually, you won't find this battle in any history book. It happened around 1250 B.C., roughly the era of the Trojan War and the biblical war of Deborah. The weapons and tactics were similar to those famous conflicts, the numbers mobilized equally impressive.

But in illiterate Northern Europe, no one chronicled the German battle in song and saga, with heroes' names echoing down the centuries, and no one knew of the event until very recently.

Twenty years ago, an amateur archaeologist found an arm bone poking out of the bank of the River Tollense, an arrow point in one end. Since then the accumulated bones and weapons reveal violent death on an astonishing scale. As described in 2011 in the journal *Antiquity*, archaeologists used a range of techniques to study the excavation: forensics, X-rays, CT scans, 3-D reconstruction, metal detectors, geomagnetic surveys and mathematical models originally developed to predict stresses on aircraft parts.

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Scientific archaeology at its best revealed human nature at its worst. With only 3% to 10% of the likely battlefield unearthed, researchers have found at least 130 dead, almost all men in their 20s. Tooth composition and genes show that they came from distant parts of Europe. A wooden causeway of about 400 feet across the valley may have had strategic significance.

Healed fractures show that these were warriors hardened in battle. Some appear to have been nobles on horseback, wearing heavy armor, which only the well-trained can wear while fighting. All this typified the Bronze Age, when warfare increased. Stone arrow and spear points among the bronze ones show that this was a transitional time.

Now let us jump back in time an additional 7,000 years and fly 4,000 miles to Nataruk, Kenya, west of Lake Turkana, another scene of armed strife. No bronze here—we are squarely in the Stone Age—but there are still important parallels, as reported in January in the journal *Nature* by M. Mirazón Lahr and colleagues.

This was a massacre not a battle: 27 dead, including eight women—one very pregnant—and six children. Of 10 complete skeletons, eight showed violent deaths—blunt trauma or blade penetration. Some may have had bound hands. Bodies had fallen or were dumped in a lagoon, just as many of the dead in Germany were found in the river. Obsidian blades, rare locally, suggest the perpetrators came from elsewhere.

These were hunter-gatherers, once thought to be free of war. (The 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, writing of “savages,” cited “the peacefulness of their passions and their ignorance of vice.”) Violence has been detected earlier in the fossil record, but not on this scale. Some archaeologists think that populations reached a critical mass 10,000 years ago, causing violence to spike. Battles began to increase in number and scale.

Over the past few decades, archaeologists have begun to question the idea that early humans were peaceable. Having unearthed a range of impressive weapons and fortifications, many now refer to earlier studies as “interpretive pacifications.” Today there is no doubt about the violence in human nature, with war going back at least 10,000 years and homicide much longer.

The good news, as the psychologist Steven Pinker and others have shown, is that violence rates in our species—hard as it is to believe—have fallen for centuries. To Dr. Pinker’s explanations for this trend—state power, commerce, “feminization,” cosmopolitanism and reason—I would add increasing longevity. If disease cuts fewer lives short, life is no longer cheap for a society as a whole, and war grows too expensive.

We can applaud the decline but not our early history—which still seems too much with us.