Warriors and Weapons in Bronze Age Europe


Reviewed by Nick Thorpe

Within the archaeological debate over the meaning, causes, extent, and significance of prehistoric warfare, it is vital that we seek to move beyond simple yes/no approaches to human conflict in the past. This is one of the aims of this important book—to focus explicitly on variation, rather than to cherry-pick selected examples to support a predetermined general argument. Following scene-setting chapters on the definition and suggested causes of warfare, the nature of the evidence for prehistoric warfare (weaponry, trauma, defenses, artistic representations, and the "warrior"), and warfare in the Neolithic (mostly Beaker) period, Harding provides a significant review of Bronze Age warfare in Europe (excluding the Aegean).

Bronze Age warfare is important in European prehistory because it marks the point when what Chapman termed "tool-weapons" or "weapon-tools" (e.g., axes, maceheads) are replaced by actual weapons without unrelated uses—most notably the sword—and by defensive armor (esp. the shield). This is also the primary reason why the period never suffered significantly in scholarship from what Keeley (War Before Civilization [Oxford 1996]) has dubbed the "pacification of the past."

Harding’s book is well structured, clearly argued, and well illustrated by line drawings, mainly of weaponry and distribution maps, with a small number of photographs of excavations and objects. The focus of the book is mainly on weapons, and to a lesser extent warriors, especially the notion of the “warrior’s beauty,” following Treherne (“The Warrior’s Beauty: The Masculine Body and Self-Identity in Bronze-Age Europe,” Journal of European Archaeology 3 [1995] 105–44). The most impressive sections are chapters dealing with weapons and changes through time, and the martial implications of these changes, and on regional variation, for example, in the numbers of swords and their modes of deposition. Harding draws out some clear contrasts. For instance, there are far more swords per km² in Ireland than in Hungary or Romania. In Germany, significant numbers of swords are found as grave goods and few occur in hoards, while in Romania, the majority comes from hoards. He also notes some local patterns, for example, in the number of swords in different parts of Denmark. Harding does not speculate at length on the possible meanings behind these differences. Indeed, one needs to set them against the more general background of metalwork production and depositional practices in the areas concerned.

Harding concludes by suggesting that warfare in the Bronze Age was a regular part of life for some people, that it was a pervasive social factor, and that times of environmental and economic stress may have led to higher levels of conflict. He does not really draw out the data on variations in weapon presence and depositional patterns to argue for differences in warfare in Europe—either in the intensity or the pattern of conflict—although this does not seem an unreasonable conclusion from the evidence provided.

In comparison with the level of analysis relating to weaponry, there is relatively little consideration of sites and the lengthy debates over defense vs. display as motives for enclosure. In terms of sites with traces of having been attacked, only those of Velim and Blučina in the Czech Republic and Zauschwitz in Germany are discussed in any detail. It would have been interesting to attempt to tabulate sites with evidence for violent assault against the relative numbers of enclosures and the numbers of contemporary weapons and their modes of deposition. In this way, we might have achieved a clearer picture of the varying patterns of defensive architecture across and through the European Bronze Age.

There is also little discussion of the evidence provided by traumatic injuries (other than Hårde’s useful collection of data from the Nitra culture of Slovakia), although it has to be said that this type of data has hardly ever been collected at a national level,
let alone across Europe. Peter-Röcher’s discussion and catalogue of evidence from central Europe (Gewalt und Krieg im prähistorischen Europa [Bonn 2007]) doubtless appeared too late for consideration. It would certainly be enlightening to set the evidence for weaponry against the evidence for weapon injuries.

Harding could also usefully have discussed the small number of suggested massacre sites, such as Sund in Norway or Wassenaar in Holland. The particular significance of these sites is that they bring us closer to one category of those involved in prehistoric warfare but who rarely feature in the study of the subject—the victims of conflict. Violent death was not just the fate of the (assumed) young male warriors, as is clear both from Sund, where half the victims were children and nearly all the adults were aged over 40, and Wassenaar, where two of the victims were children. When we consider the beauty of Bronze Age warriors and their weapons, we must not forget the terror of the victims and the effects of war on their communities.

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Anthony Harding. The Bronze Age of Europe was a time of major changes in society, economy and technology. One of these was the emergence of a warrior class, equipped with a new set of artefacts that can for the first time be called weapons. This book discusses the evidence for the existence of
these warriors, and the stages by which they emerged from the Neolithic and Copper Ages, when farming was the main means of subsistence but hunting was also a prestige activity. From beginnings when dagger graves were the norm, in the Early Bronze Age, to the appearance of lavishly equipped sword graves, Bronze Age warfare is important in European prehistory because it marks the point when what Chapman termed “tool-weapons” or “weapon-tools” (e.g., axes, maceheads) are replaced by actual weapons without unrelated uses—most notably the sword—and by defensive armor (esp. the shield). This is also the primary reason why the period never suffered significantly in scholarship from what Keeley (War Before Civilization [Oxford 1996]) has dubbed the “pacification of the past.”

Book Review of Warriors and Weapons in Bronze Age Europe, by Anthony Harding. Reviewed by Nick Thorpe. American Journal of Archaeology Vol. 114, No. 2 (April 2010). Bronze Age Mycenaean technology was capable of producing highly effective plate and scale armours for the Warriors in massive numbers, as Mycenaean and Minoan logistics documents reveal. It is a safe guess to assume that Kanellopoulos Museum artifact was a weapon with the necessary shape and mass to deliver effective crushing blows and perforate the composite panoplies of the era. A few people worldwide have rebuild quality bronze age armour and weapons and got significant practical expertise in the field.