
REVIEWS

ON PREHISTORIC WARFARE: A VIEW FROM RUSSIAN ETHNOGRAPHY

V. A. Schnirelman, *Voyna i mir v ranney istorii chelovechestva*, (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, 1994, vol. 1, 176 pp., vol. 2, 240 pp., ISBN 5-201-00949-2, \$10.00).

Prehistoric warfare has not been frequently studied as a theoretical problem, in spite of the fact that the potential is clearly promising. The literature on prehistoric archaeology of Europe is still full of naive narratives on Neolithic and/or Bronze Age wars, often in connection with assumed migrations. They are modelled on wars of the Late Iron Age or the early Middle Ages of Europe, frequently in the form taken over from romantic historiography; this seems to be an 'obvious' approach to many. But is there any alternative to explain the archaeological record? I would like to draw attention to this well written book by Victor Schnirelman, adding a few remarks of my own. The author is attached to the Moscow Institute of Ethnography.

The first volume of this work has the heading 'At the sources of war and peace', and is entirely devoted to ethnographic groups that the author claims correspond structurally to prehistoric times in Europe. The second volume, compiled by Y. I. Semenov and A. I. Pershits, has no direct relevance for prehistoric archaeology and, consequently, I shall not discuss it here.

The first part of the first volume discusses previous theories on early wars. The introductory chapter is divided into five parts: on psychological, ethological, cultural, neo-evolutionist, and functionalist approaches. The text is concise and compiled on the basis of Western literature. Although most references relate to works published in the 1970s and earlier, this does not

appear to represent any major drawback.

Chapter II deals with problems of the sources of evidence for prehistoric warfare. Developing Vencl's (1984) ideas, Schnirelman classifies the record into archaeological, iconographical, palaeoanthropological, ethnographical (plus ethno-historical), linguistic, and folkloristic. The archaeological record itself consists of weapons, armour, fortifications, graves of warriors, hoards containing weapons etc. Schnirelman assumes, however, that the absence of such evidences for warfare does not prove that the population lived a peaceful life. The first specialised weapons were manufactured of metals, which means that they belong ('with the most rare exceptions') to the Bronze and Iron Ages (clearly, the author does not take into consideration weapons of the Eneolithic period such as stone battle-axes and daggers). Many weapons and especially many pieces of armour have not survived, being manufactured of perishable materials. Some fortifications (fences, stockades) may have had a practical function but, in Schnirelman's view, the presence of skeletons in ditches proves that others were military defenses. Rock carvings and small statuettes are often informative, but there are difficulties in recognising the true meaning of their stylisation in many instances. Moreover, the carvings are difficult to date.

Schnirelman is rather critical in respect of many suggestions by physical anthropologists concerning proofs of violence. Theoretically, practices such as killing people with a heavy club, taking scalps, head-hunting and cannibalism, all connected with ancient warring, should be detectable on skeletal remains, but they occur rarely in the record. The author approves the idea that ethno-

graphy and ethno-history are important sources of knowledge on ancient warfare as only they are able to supply a complex picture of the phenomenon. At the same time, he draws attention to the fact that the records, as collected by ethnographers in recent years, are often biased, being based on the information of persons who never waged any war personally and who, talking about the 'original' situation, have other interests than giving an exact account of facts. The author also believes that the character of the original warfare of the communities described by ethnography may have changed considerably as a result of their contact with Europeans. Especially the fur trade, slave trade, and alliances with Europeans waging wars among themselves and with local tribes may have been important in this context. Contact situations became common from the seventeenth century; they resulted in new kinds of economic warfare. Wars became not only more frequent but also more cruel, being sometimes waged by means of new weapons acquired from Europeans. For example, iron arrow-heads, iron armour, and true defences got to north-western Siberia through the contact with Russians penetrating that region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Folklore must be used carefully: it is full of ethnocentric judgement, emotional accents and sometimes boasting. In Schnirelman's view, linguistics could help historians of war by means of reconstructing ancient military terminology, but so far this remains an unrealised possibility.

Chapter III is devoted to the definition of war. There are three possible approaches to the problem. The first one is based on the criterion of organisation structure, a typical definition of this kind saying that war is an organised armed conflict between groups of population. Another group of definitions is connected with the causes and/or the purpose of wars. Either economical or political determinants are assumed in such definitions. The third approach is connected with the technical aspect of war (for example, 'war is an open hostility including fighting with the use of a bow and arrows'). Schnirelman believes that prehistoric wars can be delimited by means of both their dif-

ference from contemporary wars (dimensions, organisation, goals) and their difference from other kinds of prehistoric fighting (caused by blood vengeance, within-group reprisal for sorcery, etc.). His own definition integrates the organisational, causal, and technical principles. He notes that prehistoric wars were characterised mainly by the following features: small dimensions, short duration, the identification of fighting groups with family organisation, a nearly complete absence of any specific military organisation, lack of hierarchical submission and of any central system of commanding, and the predominance of social, ritual, and psychological stimuli over economical goals.

The second part of the volume is devoted to the 'Dawn of War and Peace'. It discusses the character of war in individual instances of ethnographic groups that, for the author, structurally correspond to prehistoric times. In chapter I, apparently meant to deal with the earliest period not covered by ethnographic parallels, Schnirelman starts from the 'agonistic behaviour of animals' as discussed by evolutionary biology. Aggressiveness, frequently combined with territoriality, is often assumed to be a highly adaptive sort of behaviour in the world of animals, but Schnirelman does not believe in its universality. It cannot be proved to appear with all groups of primates, its intensity and forms depending on the environment. Yet, Schnirelman finds striking similarities between the behaviour of men and that of animals, especially of apes. Apes practise inter-group fights, they attack individuals of other groups, there is a well attested xenophobia and suspicion in relation to individuals of foreign groups. All this seems to occur on the basis of individual experience; it is not transmitted by inheritance. According to Schnirelman, these features represent a behavioural pattern which is not specific for humans, but already appears in the animal world, more specifically with primates.

Chapter II deals with 'armed conflicts with migrating hunters and gatherers'. Such conflicts are often believed to be connected with human territoriality (attempts at seizing important resources) on the one side and the defence of territoriality on the

other side. Schnirelman is certainly right in suggesting that territoriality is a highly differentiated concept as there are many forms of 'ownership' of a territory (tribe, community, family ownership, possibly based on mythological and religious experience), and the willingness of the 'owners' to accept foreigners is connected with the density of resources. The ethnographical record contains many descriptions of violence among hunters and gatherers, but there was no seizure of land, and no looting. Only the abduction of women was a serious problem that became a frequent cause of belligerence, otherwise group fighting originated on what seems to us to be trifling grounds. The infringement of the principle of the inviolability of an individual or collective status lead to anger which may have ended with violence, itself provoking vengeance. This principle also ruled the cases of the breach of territorial rights. The situation could develop into a full-scale war with battles in which some 1300 people might take part. The violence was directed against members of a group (not necessarily against the culprits) on the basis of collective responsibility. There were two kinds of war activities: unexpected raids, and formal battles waged according to strict rules. No specialised weapons serving exclusively in war-like conflicts occurred on this stage. The most common means of fighting were sticks and clubs, but spears and boomerangs were frequently used, as well as shields for personal defence.

Schnirelman discusses the role of cannibalism, the ways of concluding peace, the services of heralds and, generally, of persons who were blood relatives of both sides in a conflict, and the role of women, who were not only peace-keepers, but apparently fulfilled any possible role in wars. Peacemaking was usually the work of elders, and both sides were often willing to end quarrels at least temporarily. There were infrequent cases of a more or less constant inter-group hostility which lead to a more or less permanent war.

The greater part of chapter II is devoted to Australia because of the wealth of evidence. At the end of the chapter, however, Schnirelman discusses the evidence available from other parts of the world. He finds

no substantial regional divergence among the migratory hunters and gatherers.

Chapter III deals with 'armed conflicts with settled and semi-sedentary hunters, fishermen and gatherers'. The groups of such peoples, in spite of having a non-productive economy, were able to accumulate considerable stores of food, to stay at one place for a long time, and to develop a complicated social structure reminiscent of early agriculturalists. Schnirelman discusses the Alaskan and Siberian Eskimos, especially those living around the Bering Sea. Their warring was characterised by many special roles regularly assumed by individual persons who took part in the conflicts (not only heralds, but also spies, instigators of hatred, defenders of boats), partly specialised as to their equipment (warriors with armour, clubs, spears). The bow and arrow became the standard weapon. There were incipient fortifications. The tactics again included both raids (often accomplished by means of boats) and open battles consisting of individual duels. Children underwent physical training. There was little fear of death, as people who died violently were believed to live a happy after-life. Peace was fostered not only by means of marriage and partnership, but mainly by means of trade relations: markets were visited by thousands of people of different ethnic origin and speaking different languages. Trading was a counter-balance to war.

The social relations, and consequently warfare, were even more developed on the north-western coast of America. There were many reasons for personal conflicts, and any conflict became the matter of the whole community and/or the whole clan, something that often provoked armed quarrels and wars. The institute of serfdom and the stratification of the society complicated the vengeance in case of killing, leading to definite rules of punishment: the status of both the killed and the killer must have been taken into account. Consanguinal relations across ethnical border were valued more than ethnical relationship. Incursions into personal rights as the reason for war were supplemented by the seizure of land containing natural resources and the taking of female prisoners and sometimes children

to be turned into serfs. However, it was not only the resources that were at stake: to gain prestige by seizing the heraldic devices, names, songs, etc. of the enemy was equally rewarding. The set of tools used for fighting was broadened, including bow and arrows, the sling, the spear, clubs of wood and bone, stone daggers, and battle-axes. Armour made of leather and wooden helmets were mainly worn by military leaders. There was a tendency to build settlements in inaccessible places and sometimes to defend them by means of stockades. There are no reliable reports as to the number of casualties; some authors believe that they were negligible while others speak of the extermination of whole communities. Schnirelman suggests that there may have been regional differences in this respect. The intensity of warring may have increased in the nineteenth century as a result of trade relations with Europeans, but the archaeological records prove that it was present long before the period of the first contact. In contrast to the conflicts of the nineteenth century, which often had economic roots, the earlier wars had a strong ritual aspect.

The heading of chapter IV is 'Head hunting as a special kind of armed fighting'. Schnirelman assumes that head-hunting was a socio-ritual complex that needed constant warring. He quotes archaeological examples but, being more competent in the case of ethnographic societies, he apparently has no first-hand knowledge of archaeological literature. While head-hunting was common with many early agriculturalists, it is also attested in the case of hunters, fishermen and gatherers. The latter group of people, however, only practised head-hunting if they possessed a highly effective non-productive economy and a sufficiently developed social structure. It also required a certain set of spiritual ideas. According to the examples given by Schnirelman, there were many reasons for the cruel practice. The most abstract idea behind it was that the head of an enemy was endowed with a special mighty power.

To evade retaliation the head-hunters sometimes organised long-distance expeditions, up to 500 or 1000 miles away from their own villages. This required good geographical knowledge, and reliable food

supplies during the expedition must have been ensured. To carry food and to take care of the warriors was sometimes the role of women accompanying men. An effective leadership was a necessity with the head-hunting groups.

Schnirelman discusses the possible reasons given by various authors for the phenomenon of head-hunting. He concludes that it was neither the acquisition of new lands, nor the acquisition of precious movables, and the taking of prisoners was against the logic of head-hunting. Schnirelman favours the explanation that the reason was in ideological concepts about the collective soul etc.

The last, and the shortest, chapter (V) deals with the 'development of military art with the early agriculturalists and pastoralists'. In Schnirelman's view, this theme is interesting because of the problem of the origin of looting wars in connection with higher levels of economic development. In this chapter Schnirelman discusses exclusively the case of New Guinea, where warfare has been most extensively studied.

Simple agriculturalists, while destroying the enemy villages and sacred places, felling their trees, killing pigs and so on, did not take any booty home because the enemy territory was inhabited by dangerous hostile ghosts present in everything; it was dangerous to use things made by the enemy and even to eat food from their territory. There is some evidence for gaining new territories by means of war, but this was sometimes a side-effect of conflicts originating for other reasons. In some instances land was only seized by military force because of stiff regulations making it difficult to redistribute free land within the clan. Schnirelman concludes that the seizure of foreign lands was not, with very few exceptions, the reason for waging wars. In some cases, however, remnants of communities decimated in a war had to leave their lands and sought asylum with their relatives. Having regenerated, they may have returned to their previous seats, unless their former territory had been occupied by their friends or relatives. On the whole, the origin of productive economy started regular warfare for conflicts over propriety, and such conflicts became com-

mon even within one's own society. Vengeance for any offense could be non-equivalent: several people were killed in response to one own dead. Vengeance could be postponed and cumulated; this created permanently tense hostile relations between groups of population. Wars with groups belonging to other tribes were more violent than wars within tribes (which apparently prevailed). As elsewhere, there were two basic kinds of warfare: raids and formal battles. The latter were usually bloodless; up to several hundred persons could take part, but very few people really fought: this was a ritual war. A devastating raid might follow if one of the parties lost the battle. Mortality resulting from warfare was rather high in New Guinea: 20 to 30 per cent with males and 6 to 16 per cent with females. In the eastern part of the island, where there were larger villages, sites might be surrounded by stockades and/or other defences, while in the west, with population dispersed into isolated households, it would not have had any sense. But the western tribes dug ditches in the most dangerous parts of their frontier (*sic!*), and many built underground tunnels to escape from houses in the case of a raid. Any infringement, including human death, could be compensated for under certain circumstances, but compensations were high (up to three times the 'value' of the damage, for example 30 to 150 pigs in the case of a human death).

Thus far Schnirelman. Clearly, his book is not about archaeology, but books like this are indispensable for archaeologists. I have argued elsewhere (Neustupný 1967; 1993; 1995) that the archaeological record consists of dead contemporary objects which can only be returned to life by means of modelling. To achieve this, models are derived theoretically from the observation of living societies, or from the description of living societies by means of a natural language. The people described by ethnography are one possible source of models for archaeologists. Modelling, however, cannot be identified with the use of so-called ethnographic parallels, as models are theories, not just narratives based on events; to build models, it is mostly necessary to derive theoretical generalisations from the ethno-

graphic descriptions. The problem with ethnography is that too often it speaks a language other than archaeology, and this makes it difficult for archaeologists to use it effectively. To derive a theory useful for archaeologists as a model, it is often necessary to start an ethnographical research. This is a time-consuming job and few archaeologists are methodologically equipped to do the work properly. No wonder that the use of ethnography often ends in using ethnographic parallels, something duly criticised during much of this century. Schnirelman's book is extraordinary in this respect, as it derives theoretical knowledge on primitive warfare in a form almost ready for archaeologists to use.

The comparisons between prehistoric and 'ethnographic' societies rely on the idea that these two kinds of societies are structurally similar in some respects. They are certainly not identical, as their environment (both social and natural) and their time trajectory are different. To create a viable model, it is necessary to filter off what is conditioned by the specific environment and time trajectory. Only then can the comparison succeed. Those who use ethnographic parallels, however, often do not care: two societies are assumed by them to be analogical in any respect because of some observed similarities. Sometimes, in the case of a more critical approach towards ethnographic parallels, a prehistoric and an ethnographic society is assumed to coincide in some selected spheres of culture whose possible specific conditioning by environment and/or time trajectory is not discussed.

Schnirelman's ethnography ends with the New Guinea agriculturalists who are structurally on the level of the Central European Neolithic period. I am saying central European, as in northern and western Europe the word 'Neolithic' is also used to describe finds contemporaneous with the central-European Eneolithic period or Copper Age (Lichardus 1991), which is very different. It is surprising that both the European Eneolithic period and the Bronze Age are matched by very few groups, if any, in the ethnographic record, and this seems to be no chance. There are many ethnographic groups that correspond to the Neolithic and then to the Iron Age, but nearly nothing in

between. This may be caused by the fact that the Eneolithic and the Bronze Age of Europe are periods based on plough agriculture of the temperate zone originally covered by deciduous forests and, at the same time, on the dependence on rare metals such as copper and tin (Neustupný 1967). This requires not only definite natural conditions that do not appear very frequently, but also cultural conditions such as the taming of cattle (the main traction power), and the creation of specific types of specialisation leading to strong exchange networks. Where these conditions were met in prehistoric times at the end of the true Neolithic period, further developments lead inevitably to the central/northern/western European type of prehistoric society. Therefore, there are no recent ethnographic groups corresponding to the Central European Eneolithic and Bronze Age. It appears to be for this reason that Schnirelman does not discuss warfare corresponding to the Central European Eneolithic and Bronze Age; clearly, ethnography has no record of its own for these periods. At the same time, it was just this time that seems to have brought much new in the history of warfare. There appear the earliest specialised weapons - the stone battle-axes, first in the Michelsberg and the TRB cultures, then in the Corded Ware (Battle-axe) groups. The first daggers make their appearance at the beginning of the Eneolithic period, at its end (Bell Beakers), and in the Early Bronze Age. Many of these weapons could never be used for fighting, as they are either too small or produced in such a way that they could not withstand real blows. In some sub-periods of the Eneolithic and the Bronze Age, there appear large scale elaborate 'fortifications', and even these could hardly serve for real defense against human enemy (Neustupný 1995). There is evidence of widely spread violence possibly within neighbouring communities, and there may have been an even harsher violence directed against foreigners. All this requires serious study which has not yet begun on any larger scale. The methodological problem is how to build a theoretical model appropriate for the situation.

There are two groups of problems that have been often discussed in Western Euro-

pean archaeology in recent years but which have found almost no attention in Schnirelman's book. These are the problems of power and of the (possible) symbolic significance of ancient warfare. Both these developments have originated in connection with the so-called post-processual archaeology (Hodder 1991; Shanks and Tilley 1987; etc.), and they would certainly be very fruitful for the theoretical explanation of ethnographic findings. Schnirelman quite often mentions the principle of the inviolability of personal status, 'religious' aspects of wars etc.; the productivity of such approaches appears very likely. At the same time, it is clear that the questions about the meanings of ancient wars in terms of power and symbolic significance were not questions of the paradigms ruling ethnography at the times when most of the field observations were made. Therefore, it would be necessary to extrapolate from meager textual evidence of ethnographic descriptions; however, it might be extremely productive for both ethnography and archaeology.

The evolutionary narrative produced by Schnirelman is unusual both in processual and post-processual archaeology. It was not common in the traditional paradigm either. Intellectually, it goes back to evolutionism of the nineteenth century which survived in the former Soviet Union because of its state ideology. The ultimate source was L. H. Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1963, first published 1877), replicated and partly adjusted to Marxist ideas by F. Engels in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* originally published in 1884. It is interesting to note that Soviet ethnographers never gave up attempts at reconstructing the universal history of what they described as the pre-class period of mankind on the basis of the ethnographic record alone, very much like their great master F. Engels. In a way, Schnirelman's book is a prolongation of this effort by mentioning, but not using, the archaeological record. As Schnirelman does not pretend that his conclusions have universal validity and he very much stresses the factual evidence, he can hardly be accused of being dogmatic. Is his book to be put aside because it is based on certain evolutionist premises? Is the

evolutionist perspective, which the book is based upon, something as bad as assumed by most archaeological paradigms of this century? Evolutionism is certainly no generally valid explanation of the time trajectory of human society, as there is too much social that simply changes in time without there being any directionality, which evolution presupposes. At the same time, however, there are some parts of the social world that can be considered to change directionally, or at least such that can be approximated by means of directional changes in one part of their time trajectory. Let me quote the ever widening transformation of the surface of the earth into artefacts and ecofacts, some demographic processes (such as the diminishing mortality rate and the prolongation of individual life) etc. Warfare is another phenomenon whose changes may be explainable in a series of steps such that one part of the series is directional.

The explanation of directional changes is tempting as it usually leads to attempts at answering great questions asked by a self-conscious humanity. In my view, such queries are legitimate, and archaeology should try to contribute to their elucidation. If the current paradigms do not include such questions into their programme, the paradigms will be changed.

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- Evžen Neustupný
Institute of Archaeology, Prague

THERE IS NO THERE THERE: THE ART OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FLANERIE IN A CD-ROM?

'The World of the Vikings' (CD - ROM), York: Archaeological Trust, England and the National Museum of Denmark. Production by Past Forward Ltd and Multimedia Management

'Just as sailing ships are stuck in a bottle, just as blossoming trees, and snow-covered towers seem enclosed and kept safe in those toy glass spheres that can be turned over, so philosophical assertions of the world are stuck here beneath the glass. . . . A physically near dream-street with shops in which taste of the times, with houses in which mixed contents of the times are condensed - this is or could be the landscape of this experiment. That is why there is not merely a new opening of business of philosophy (which formerly did not have any shops), but an orgy of flotsam and jetsam as well, a fragment of sur-realism of lost glances, of the most familiar things.' (Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Time*. Polity Press, 1991:336.)

New technologies are changing the world of publication. The enormous storage capacity of computer laser-disks, including CD-ROM, offers new possibilities for archiving, for reporting bodies of multimedia data (statistics, text, images, video) such as produced in archaeological fieldwork, and at very little cost to the reader or user. Laser-disk technology is also at the centre of new entertainment and education products ranging from adventure games to encyclopaedias to interactive learning programmes. These products are not substitute books. Whatever is stored upon such a medium can be made accessible in many flexible ways, with an infinite number of pathways