



## **The New Ideology of ‘Eternal War’ in Archaeology. Critical Reflections on Early History**

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### **Abstract**

*Nowadays the vocabulary of war dominates everyday language, just as violence and war dominate the media. This way of thinking, in which war predominates, sees peace as nothing more than the absence of war, and sees it as the result of rules of conflict – just as if peace and peace building did not follow their own rules. Even among scholars, the current fashion is to look everywhere for violence and war. This applies to both Indigenous societies and early epochs of human history, which until recently were considered peaceful. Instead of an appropriately meticulous analysis of ethnographic records and archaeological findings, articles of belief are formulated. The result is an extreme devaluation of peace.*

*The idea of ‘peaceable’ societies is just as imprecise as the notion of ‘warlike’ societies, and it is just as ideologically charged. One can directly experience how this involves emotions rather than knowledge by noticing how some contemporaries become downright aggressive whenever anyone speaks of earlier peaceable societies. The spiteful tone intensifies especially when one speaks of peaceable societies in connection with matriarchy. It is worth taking a closer look at this problem and to find clear definitions, which will be done in my paper.*



**Keywords:** Organized War, Feud, Peaceful societies, Ideology, Archaeology.

### **Résumé**

*De nos jours, le vocabulaire de la guerre domine le langage courant, tout comme la violence et la guerre dominent les médias. Cette façon de penser, dans laquelle la guerre prédomine, considère la paix comme rien d'autre que l'absence de guerre et la considère comme le résultat de règles de conflit – tout comme si la paix et la consolidation de la paix ne suivaient pas leurs propres règles. Cela s'applique à la fois aux sociétés autochtones et aux premières époques de l'histoire humaine, qui jusqu'à récemment étaient considérées comme pacifiques. Au lieu d'une analyse méticuleuse des documents ethnographiques et des découvertes archéologiques, des articles de croyance sont formulés. Le résultat est une dévaluation extrême de la paix.*

*L'idée de sociétés « pacifiques » est tout aussi imprécise que la notion de sociétés « guerrières », et elle est tout aussi imprégnée d'idéologie. On peut directement constater à quel point cette question implique des émotions plutôt que des connaissances en remarquant comment certains contemporains deviennent carrément agressifs chaque fois que l'on parle de sociétés pacifiques antérieures. Il vaut la peine d'examiner ce problème de plus près et de trouver des définitions claires, ce qui sera fait dans mon article.*

**Mots-clés :** Guerre organisée, querelle, sociétés pacifiques, idéologie, archéologie.

### **Introduction**

Nowadays the vocabulary of war dominates everyday language, just as violence and war dominate the media. When there is no hot war, 'cold war' holds sway, meaning that in principle people speak of war without consideration of peace. This way of thinking, in which war predominates, sees peace as nothing more than the absence of war and sees it as the result of rules of conflict – just as if peace and peace building do not follow their own rules. The outcome is an extreme devaluation of peace, as if it were nothing but the consequence of weakness, retreat, and defeat. Even among scholars, the current fashion is to look everywhere for violence and war. This applies to both Indigenous societies and early epochs of human history such as the Paleolithic and Neolithic Ages, which until recently were considered peaceful.

## The Talk of 'Eternal War'

We now turn to the experts in primeval and early history, the archaeologists, who uncover the material findings from those epochs. They adhere to the discoveries they make in their excavations: the human skeletal remains, ruins of built structures, and cultural artifacts, which they use to support their theories and avoid overstated interpretations. This, at least, is what they claim. But we soon see that there is plenty of audacious interpretation; it emerges from a background of the social environment one already knows, which is, of course, one's own patriarchal form of society. So, it happens that certain archaeologists interpret 'eternal patriarchy' with all its manifestations into human history, especially 'eternal war.' Lately, Laurence Keeley's theory of war has played an important role in archaeological discourse, since his overly simple definition of war allows him to claim that war is a widespread phenomenon, dominant since the earliest times.<sup>1</sup> But we easily can see that the idea of 'eternal war' is the pillar of 'eternal patriarchy,' therefore it is so necessary to them to claim it!

Now, let us look at some examples:

The claim is made that war was already notorious in the Paleolithic Age and demonstrated with the case of Krapina in northern Croatia. In this region, under an outcropping of Hušnjakovo Hill, the remains of around 70 Neanderthals were found; the age of the remains was dated at 130,000 years before the present time. The bones show traces of cuts and scraping, as well as further signs of violence, leading immediately to the hypothesis that here a group of Cro-Magnon people, early modern humans, encountered Neanderthals, defeated them, and then ate them. This is the gruesome but ever-popular cannibalism hypothesis, which denigrates the supposedly-primitive very early humans as eaters of human flesh. This hypothesis long haunted the field of archaeology.

But this scenario can have a completely different interpretation: it points to a death ritual common in the Paleolithic Age and the millennia thereafter, the custom of secondary burial. Here the dead were first buried individually, and after a period of decay, the bones were exhumed, cleaned, and separated, then gathered together at a sacred place for a second burial with a distinct ceremony. This custom is well documented in ethnology; it expresses the loving care which kin exhibited for their dead. Further so-called 'indications of violence' of this case likely resulted from the use of dynamite, employed at that time (1899) to blast the bones from the hard ground – a very special recovery method!<sup>2</sup>

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1 Lawrence H. Keeley: *War before Civilization. The Myth of the Peaceful Savage*, Oxford-New York 1996, Oxford University Press.

2 Heidi Peter-Röcher: *Gewalt und Krieg im prähistorischen Europa. Beiträge zur Konfliktforschung auf der Grundlage archäologischer, anthropologischer und ethnologischer Quellen*, Series: *Universitätsforschungen zur Prähistorischen Archäologie*, vol. 143, Bonn 2007, Verlag Dr. Rudolf Habelt, 45. See also Peter-Röcher: personal interview on August 14, 2014, at the University of Würzburg, where she is Professor of Archaeology for Pre- and Early History.

Human sacrifice and cannibalism were also attributed to the Neolithic people; this scenario supposedly played out in an especially horrifying way in the Jungfernhöhle (Virgin's Cave) bei Tiefernellen, near Bamberg in Bavaria, an archaeological discovery dated to about 5000 BCE. Here skeleton parts of 49 individuals were found, most of them young women and girls. Once again, traces of scrapes and cuts on the bones and crushed skulls gave rise to the hypothesis of gruesome feasts. In 1990, the Virgin's Cave was still infamous among experts as the Cannibal Cave. Meanwhile, the interpretation of the finds of the Virgin's Cave has changed so that it is now also seen as a Neolithic cultic cave, where no traces of cannibalism can be found. The new viewpoint is that ceremonial secondary burials of the female bones were celebrated, which proves that for millennia the cave was a cultic site of exceptional significance.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, no indications of human violence can be found. Instead, falling stones damaged the skulls long after their burial.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the hypothesis of a broad distribution of human sacrifice and cannibalism, which made early humans appear to be bloodthirsty savages, is considered passé. But it has been replaced by the hypothesis of war and massacre, where another kind of slaughter is projected backward into the earliest epochs of humanity. Since, due to the absence of evidence, the war hypothesis cannot be upheld for the Paleolithic Age, now it is the Neolithic Age that is made responsible for war and massacre.

Let us now look at how that proposition holds up:

The earthwork at Herxheim an der Weinstraße in Germany (ca. 5000 BCE), for example, was long misconstrued as a site of massacre because hundreds of skeletons were found there. Nowadays a contrary view has prevailed, one where this large complex is understood to have served as an important supra-regional burial ground with sequentially excavated ditches arising from overlapping long pits. They never represented warlike fortifications.<sup>5</sup> Before that, the Herxheim Earthworks were called on to serve as proof for the hypothesis of human sacrifice and cannibalism; human flesh eating was thought to be at work here because the bones of at least 500 individuals had been disaggregated and the skulls cleaned and processed. But indications of violent death within a short time span are lacking, and the exceptionally beautiful ceramic pots placed among the skeletons speak for burials. This time, too, the custom of secondary burial was at work – as was often the case in these early epochs.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. citing the scientist Timo Seregély.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 52n41.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 144. See also Ibid., 144n74 for the earthworks of Rosheim (Bas-Rhin) and Middle-Bronze-Age Velim.

Another example of war and massacre during the Neolithic is, supposedly, at Schletz-Asparn in Austria (ca. 5000 BCE), because a number of skeletons and pieces of stone mace-heads were found in the ditches at this village complex. But otherwise, these graves contained no weapons, and whether the stone mace-heads represented weapons is questionable. In addition, ceramics, fragments of figurines, and burnt domestic plants were found with the dead, which here also speaks for burial. At this site, too – as with Herxheim – the ditches were not all dug at the same time, but at short intervals apart, meaning that here, too, there was no continuous fortification. The dead were not buried altogether, but at intervals, with grave goods. This situation can hardly be interpreted as a massacre, but more likely as the successive burial of people who died of a rapidly spreading sickness.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, the late Neolithic causewayed camp of Altheim in Bavaria (c. 3500 BCE) fell under the massacre hypothesis, because broken arrowheads, a chaotic assortment of bone fragments, and many pottery shards were found in the ditches of this farmstead. This led to the odd assertion that here, in desperate a defense, even pots were thrown at the attacking enemy – perhaps by the courageous farm women? Later this assertion was corrected, and the causewayed camp is now seen as a mass grave due to an epidemic. The kin had thrown the dead into the ditches, but they provided them with gifts of arrowheads that could no longer be used and plenty of food in the many containers.<sup>7</sup>

These examples show that the earthworks as enclosures had a primarily religious-ritual function, not a profane warlike one – at least as far as Europe is concerned. This recognition naturally is submerged when every wall and ditch is seen as a military fortification, and one sees violence between the villages everywhere. Anyway, the number of massacres cited to prove constant warfare in the Neolithic Age is very low. For Central Europe, only two unambiguous examples remain, namely the attacks on a village near Talheim and on another near Eulau, both in Germany.

What should we think of this? How do the proofs of war stack up? First it is important to separate the automatic linking of massacre and war. It is true that in civilized state-based societies massacres often occur in the setting of organized war, but in early history we are not dealing with war at all. We are dealing with small-scale armed conflicts, which are brief and spontaneous, and have no institutional military organization behind them. They arise from personal motives like revenge for injured honor, retaliation for theft, or disputes over resources. Only a few men carry out the attack; in no way does the entire tribe or clan take part. In short, these are feuds. Even if there were many more of these than actually have left traces, these feuds do not amount to war. If we also consider the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 105-6.

great length of time between these two instances, the attack at Talheim around 5000 BCE and the one at Eulau around 2500 BCE, they do not suffice to constitute a warlike epoch.

For the Paleolithic Age, the concept of warlike times is completely inappropriate, because there are hundreds of millennia without attacks and massacres. The same is true for the Neolithic Age, where, after all, there are thousands of massacre-free years. It is obvious that in these very long-lasting epochs people lived peacefully – which is especially clear in comparison with the situation today!

### **The Talk of ‘Peaceable Societies’**

Today, the most common idea of peaceable societies is just as imprecise as the notion of warlike societies, and it is just as ideologically charged. One can directly experience how this involves emotions rather than knowledge by noticing how some contemporaries become downright aggressive whenever anyone speaks of earlier peaceable societies. Does it not suit their worldview to think that the development of humanity might not be a linear progression toward ever nobler, more rational and violence-free behavior? The spiteful tone intensifies especially when one speaks of peaceable societies in connection with matriarchy. Thus, peaceable matriarchy is declared unequivocally and without any evidence to be a myth. The assertion of eternal war in early history is parroted with the following result: because matriarchy researchers use the criterion of non-violence or peacefulness as evidence of matriarchy, this proves there was no matriarchy in the Neolithic Age.<sup>8</sup> But no definition of what these authors understand as matriarchy and as peaceable societies is forthcoming.

Here and elsewhere one sees the unspoken ideological tendency to set the bar for peaceable societies too high, with unrealistic expectations for human collective life. An ethnologist’s attempt at a definition reflects this very problem. According to him, peaceable societies are supposed to have values and sanctions that do not allow for any violence, even if it is personal and spontaneous; all their conflicts should be resolved in a violence-free manner; they should have no special role for fighters – which might lead one to conclude that they should allow themselves to be conquered and dominated.<sup>9</sup>

There are other broadly held, diffuse notions applied especially to matriarchal peaceable societies, such as: all their members should mother and love one another, hence no guidelines and social rules are necessary; but, if rules are accepted, no infractions of them should lead to even the mildest punishments; also, no animal should be eaten, no tree

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 37-40, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Thomas Gregor, "Uneasy Peace: Intertribal Relations in Brazil's Upper Xingu," in *The Anthropology of War*, ed. Jonathan Haas (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 106.

should be cut down, etc. On the whole, they are based on an assumption that humans are angels, but not humans. It is an illusionary position arising from purely wishful thinking and is based, in this case, on positive projection – which is no improvement.

How the range of human possibilities takes shape in the world depends on the cultural and social structures within which they live. It is these cultural values and social patterns that constitute a peaceable or non-peaceable society. Matriarchal societies have a number of strategies for conflict resolution and peacemaking unknown in patriarchal societies, due to the fact that in matriarchal societies violence is proscribed and not glorified. An example from the Hopi living in the southwest of North America: they had a case of internal collective violence, but this was followed by ritual resolution of the conflict performed by two champions of the two struggling parties – a perfectly working strategy without bloodshed.<sup>10</sup>

There are indeed feuds leading to homicides against members of other groups. But these can lead to tribal alliances to end such feuds – as the Iroquois of North America did in founding their historical league from five tribes, which ended fighting between these tribes.<sup>11</sup> Another possibility is marriage policies between tribes which can ensure that fighting does not occur in the first place, as we can see from the history of the Akan peoples in West Africa. These peoples constituted their tribes from marriage alliances between different groups.<sup>12</sup> In some matriarchal societies, particularly in those that have come under patriarchal pressure, there are special roles for fighters, but these serve to defend, not to conquer, seeing that not all these societies were immediately ready to submit to patriarchal invasions. See, for example, the Iroquois who defended their independence for two hundred years against the invasion of the Europeans.<sup>13</sup>

Factors that make matriarchal societies so different are cultural values and societal structures whose basic aim is to create an egalitarian society and to secure peace. In matriarchal societies, mothers are at the center, but they do not dominate. Instead, they foster maternal values which are derived from prototypical maternal behavior and maternal work. At first, these include nurturing and care of what is small and weak, so that it might grow. Furthermore, they emphasize equality between the sexes and between the generations in the sense of complementary equality. That is, where diversity is respected and is not misused to construct hierarchies. Their social and economic patterns aim to create perfect reciprocity as a system of mutual help that excludes no one. In politics, they foster conflict resolution through negotiation, reciprocal marriage, or ritual arrangements. These values and patterns are valid for everyone, for mothers and non-

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<sup>10</sup> See Heide Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies. Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe*, New York 2013, Peter Lang Publishing, Chapter 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Chapter 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Chapter 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Chapter 14.

mothers, for women and men alike. In this way, they create a way of living that is, in any case, more life affirming than what one finds in patriarchal societies.

So, it is of the greatest importance to become familiar in detail with the matriarchal values, customs, patterns, and structures that guide matriarchal ways of life. This knowledge has been gained from societies of this type worldwide that still survive today – as I have done in my own research by which I created modern Matriarchal Studies.<sup>14</sup> These studies can show us a way to view and understand early history from a completely different perspective than the usual one. Without this familiarity with matriarchal societal forms, the result would be a continued patriarchal projection onto the past – as we can see with the new ideology of Eternal War.

(You will find a more elaborated version of this criticism in Heide Goettner-Abendroth, *Matriarchal Societies of the Past and the Rise of Patriarchy in West Asia and Europe*, New York 2022, Peter Lang, Chapter 1.)

## About the Author

Heide Goettner-Abendroth has published extensively on philosophy of science and matriarchal society and culture. She is the founder of Modern Matriarchal Studies and, in 1986, founded the International ACADEMY HAGIA for Matriarchal Studies. She has taught at the University of Munich, the University of Montreal, and the University of Innsbruck.

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<sup>14</sup> For the founding of modern Matriarchal Studies, see Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies*.