BOOKS: ARCHAEOLOGY

From Hobbes to Rousseau and Back Again

J. Andrew Darling

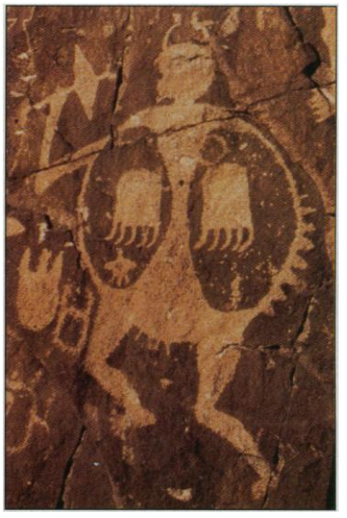
Steven A. LeBlanc's new work is the latest addition to the ranks of recent scientific books and popular articles that seek to come to terms with the evidence for violence, warfare, and cannibalism in the archaeological record of the Southwestern United States. Its appearance marks the end of a decade of simmering polemic beginning with publications on Southwestern warfare by Jonathan Haas, Winifred Creamer, and Tim White (*1*). LeBlanc's book will no doubt carry this discourse into the new millennium.

Prehistoric Warfare is unique for its general synthesis of Southwestern prehistory. In eight chapters, LeBlanc introduces the problem of studying warfare, reviews the evolution of warfare technology, and summarizes Southwestern prehistory. This history began with an Early Period (~0 to 900 A.D.), in which warfare was at a steady, endemic state. A Middle Period (900 to 1200 A.D.) followed, in which warfare declined as a result of environmental amelioration (warmer climate, increased carrying capacity) and population growth. Finally, during the Late Period (1200 to 1500+ A.D.), environmental deterioration led to virulent conflict and population decline. In LeBlanc's account, all change is attributed to a "climate-impelled materialist" explanation. Environmental change led the Anasazi from a period of quiescent simplicity, to a golden age cited as the "Pax Chaco," and finally to their ultimate collapse. Warfare followed suit as ecological hard times demanded appropriately violent solutions. LeBlanc's materialist approach serves to structure his explanation for the ultimate cause of Southwestern warfare.

Prehistoric Warfare in the American Southwest
by Steven A. LeBlanc
University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, UT, 1999. 414 pp. $34.95. ISBN 0-87480-581-3.

In contrast to approaches taken in previous studies, LeBlanc focuses on the distribution of warfare in time and space. This scale of analysis is his book's greatest strength. It brings new evidence to bear upon the overall significance of warfare in Southwestern prehistory and presents fresh, controversial questions.

The book's greatest strength is, however, also its greatest weakness. LeBlanc interprets the archaeological evidence almost exclusively in terms of conflict and warfare. Yet, in many instances his interpretations of the evidence are at best equivocal or unproven. Is a hilltop site a defensive fort, a settlement, or both? Is a projectile point a weapon or a tool for hunting? Is witch killing the result of intergroup warfare, conflict within groups, both, or neither? Is the practice of cannibalism real? If so, how does it relate to the practice of warfare? How might it relate to something else? Such uncertainties are not resolved, but they lie at the heart of any archaeological analysis of warfare.



Protection portrayed. Rock art showing shield bearer, from the Galisteo Basin, New Mexico.

CREDIT: FROM *PREHISTORIC WARFARE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST*

Still, this book will hold great appeal for an interested public drawn to revisions of romantic stereotypes of apollonian Pueblo Indians living in harmony with the environment. Scholars, too, will be drawn to its fresh approach to warfare and its rather classic, but always controversial, ecological explanations. Yet LeBlanc's assertions lack the sophistication of nuanced discussions of warfare and its complexities. In fact, his discussion of Puebloan warfare leaves out a significant portion of the basic ethnographic and ethnohistoric literature on conflict and conflict resolution in the American Southwest. Because his own methodology calls for the inclusion of these kinds of data, a more complete presentation might have strengthened his interpretations of the archaeological record.

Ultimately, *Prehistoric Warfare* is LeBlanc's response to what he describes as a tendency for modern anthropologists to ignore "primitive" warfare in their thinking. He contends that modern anthropology has accepted an incorrect, Rousseauean view of native North Americans as "noble savages" who lived in harmony and peace. I find this ironic because the anthropological literature on warfare is quite vast and varied. Although LeBlanc cites much of this literature, he persists in characterizing the approach of modern-day anthropologists as "Rousseauean."

This irony can be resolved without looking to the philosophical distinctions set by Rousseau and Hobbes. LeBlanc is actually responding to two very different perspectives. On one hand, he is criticizing a popular romantic stereotype of the "peaceful primitive," which developed during the Enlightenment. He is not effectively criticizing the discipline of anthropology, which—in my understanding—has never really ignored the existence of human conflict and warfare as LeBlanc suggests. On the other hand, LeBlanc is also responding to the archaeological approaches of the 1970s and 1980s, which often emphasized the environmental causes of social phenomena. In this work on warfare, LeBlanc shifts the focus but not the epistemology of these approaches. Despite his emphasis on warfare as social interaction, environmental determinism continues to underlie the book's ultimate explanation for prehistoric warfare.

After reading *Prehistoric Warfare*, some readers may wonder if the pendulum has swung back. Hobbes now reigns supreme and the lives of the ancestors of the native peoples of the Southwestern United States are once again savage, brutish, and short. This seems odd to me because neither Hobbes nor Rousseau supply an explanation for warfare's occurrence in the Southwest, past or present. Instead, I find that popular trends have a way of orienting anthropological research, and anthropology's recent preoccupation with the "dark side" of the Anasazi is a prime example. *Prehistoric Warfare* is clearly a product of this current fascination. In spite of its shortcomings, LeBlanc's book has much to offer scholars and the interested public, and it will certainly be a defining work on warfare in this part of the world.

The author is at the Mexico-North Research Network, 16 de Septiembre 402, Colonia Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, Chih. 31020, Mexico. E-mail: darling@chih1.telmex.net.mx

References

1. J. Haas, in *The Anthropology of War*, J. Haas, Ed. (Cambridge Univ. Press, New York, 1990), pp. 171–189; _____ and W. Creamer, *Fieldiana Anthropol.* **21**, 1 (1993); T. White, *Prehistoric Cannibalism at Mancos 5MTUMR–2346* (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, NJ, 1992).