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## Survey of Earliest Human Settlements Undermines Claim That War Has Deep Evolutionary Roots

PRINTER-FRIENDLY VERSION

*"War is very, very old. "But we can still see its beginnings, and there is no basis for concluding that a) humans have always fought because we are innately inclined to it, or b) that war could act as a selection mechanism over evolutionary time."*

John Horgan  
Scientific American  
August 2, 2013



My last two posts discuss two new studies that contradict the Deep Roots Theory of War, which holds that war is ancient and innate. [One study concludes](#) that modern-day mobile foragers (also called nomadic hunter gatherers) are far less warlike than Deep Rooters contend. [According to the other study](#), there is vanishingly little archaeological evidence of lethal group violence prior to 10,000 years ago.

Both of these reports support [the view of anthropologist Margaret Mead](#) that war, rather than being a "biological necessity," is a recent cultural innovation, or "invention." Now I'd like to present results from a new archaeological survey that further corroborates Mead's view of warfare.

The survey is by Rutgers anthropologist Brian Ferguson, an authority on the origins of warfare. In a 2003 *Natural History* article, "[The Birth of War](#)," Ferguson presented preliminary results

of his examination of early human settlements. He argued that “the global archaeological record contradicts the idea that war was always a feature of human existence; instead, the record shows that warfare is largely a development of the last 10,000 years.”

That conclusion has been corroborated by Ferguson’s new, in-depth survey, which he discusses in “[The Prehistory of War and Peace in Europe and the Near East](#),” a chapter in *War, Peace, and Human Nature*, a 2013 collection edited by Douglas Fry and published by Oxford University Press. (See also a [chapter](#) in which Ferguson critiques an interpretation of archaeological data by Deep Rooter Steven Pinker.)

Ferguson closely examines excavations of early human settlements in Europe and the Near East in the Neolithic era, when our ancestors started abandoning their nomadic ways and domesticating plants and animals. Ferguson shows that evidence of war in this era is quite variable.

In many regions of Europe, Neolithic settlements existed for 500-1,000 years without leaving signs of warfare. “As time goes on, more war signs are fixed in all potential lines of evidence—skeletons, settlements, weapons and sometimes art,” Ferguson writes. “But there is no simple line of increase.”

By the time Europeans started supplementing stone tools with metal ones roughly 5,500 years ago, “a culture of war was in place across all of Europe,” Ferguson writes. “After that,” Ferguson told me by email, “you see the growth of cultural militarism, culminating in the warrior societies of the Bronze Age.”

Ferguson finds even more variability in the Near East. He notes that “the Western world’s first widespread, enduring social system of war” emerged almost 8,000 years ago in Anatolia, which overlaps modern-day Turkey and includes the legendary city of Troy. “This is the start of a system of war that flows down in a river of blood to the present,” Ferguson asserts.

But excavations in the Southern Levant—a region that includes modern Jordan, Syria, Israel and Palestine—tell a dramatically different story. Ferguson notes that hunter-gatherers started settling in the Southern Levant 15,000 years ago, and populations surged after the emergence of agriculture there 11,000 years ago. But there is no significant evidence of warfare in the Southern Levant until about 5,500 years ago, when the region increasingly came under the influence of the emerging military empire of Egypt, according to Ferguson.

In other words, humans lived and thrived in the Southern Levant for roughly 10,000 years—a period that included population growth, climate shifts and environmental degradation, all of which are thought to be triggers of warfare—without waging war.

Ferguson notes that this conclusion is far from definitive; new excavations may reveal evidence of group violence in the Southern Levant. His research nonetheless contradicts simplistic arguments that war is the inevitable result of competition for resources or innate male aggression.

“War is very, very old,” Ferguson told me by email. “But we can still see its beginnings, and there is no basis for concluding that a) humans have always fought because we are innately inclined to it, or b) that war could act as a selection mechanism over evolutionary time.”

*Postscript:* In a new report in *Science*, researchers claim to have found “strong causal evidence linking climatic events to human conflict across a range of spatial and temporal scales and across all major regions of the world.” But as reported by [Keith Kloor on his blog](#) and [Lauren Morello in Scientific American](#), other researchers are treating the report skeptically, as they should. The *Science* report counts baseball pitchers hitting batters as conflict, according to Morello. She notes, moreover, that Halvard Buhaug, a political scientist at the Peace Research Institute Oslo in Norway, believes that “the climate–conflict link is weak and inconsistent.” See also my related columns: “[Are We Doomed to Wage Wars Over Water?](#),” “[Why Bill McKibben’s Global Warming Fear Mongering Isn’t Helpful](#),” and “[Margaret Mead’s war theory kicks butt of Darwinian and neo-Malthusian models](#).” I understand why many greens and lefties are attracted to the notion that global warming may lead to war. But the evidence for this thesis is weak, and uncritical acceptance of it may lead not to a phase-out of fossil fuels but to a bigger military budget.

**About the Author:** Every week, hockey-playing science writer John Horgan takes a puckish, provocative look at breaking science. A teacher at Stevens Institute of Technology, Horgan is the author of four books, including *The End of Science* (Addison Wesley, 1996) and *The End of War* (McSweeney’s, 2012). Follow on Twitter [@Horganism](#).

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