



# Archaeological Perspectives *on Warfare on the Great Plains*

— EDITED BY —  
ANDREW J. CLARK      DOUGLAS B. BAMFORTH



## Contents

### PART 1. INTRODUCTION

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1. What Do We Know about Warfare on the  
Great Plains?  
*Douglas B. Bamforth* 3

### PART 2. EMIC VIEWS: WARFARE IN PLAINS ROCK ART

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2. Northwestern Plains Contact-Era Warfare as  
Reflected in Ethnohistory and Rock Art Studies  
*Mavis Greer and John Greer* 37
3. Warriors and Weapons: Late Prehistoric/  
Protohistoric-Period Warfare in Bear Gulch  
Rock Art  
*James D. Keyser* 66
4. Coup Counts and Corn Caches: Contact-Era  
Plains Indian Accounts of Warfare  
*Linea Sundstrom* 120

### PART 3. FORTIFICATIONS AS EVIDENCE FOR VIOLENCE

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5. Rotten Palisade Posts and Rickety Baffle  
Gates: Repairing Native Eastern North  
American Fortifications  
*David H. Dye* 145

6. Ditches or Earthworks: A Reexamination of Fortified Villages on the Upper Missouri River	<i>Albert M. LeBeau III</i>	177
7. Why Fortify? Force-to-Force Ratios and Fortification on the Southern Plains	<i>Susan C. Vehik</i>	190
8. Digging Ditches: Archaeological Investigations of Historically Reported Fortifications at Bryson-Paddock (34KA5) and Other Southern Plains Village Sites	<i>Richard R. Drass, Stephen M. Perkins, and Susan C. Vehik</i>	211
9. The Alcova Redoubt: A Refuge Fortification in Central Wyoming	<i>Bryon Schroeder</i>	237
PART 4. WARFARE IN SOCIETY AND PLAINS HISTORY		
10. Conflict and Culture Change on the Plains: The Oneota Example	<i>R. Eric Hollinger</i>	267
11. Modeling Middle Missouri Warfare	<i>Mark D. Mitchell</i>	275
12. Alliances, Clusters, and Spatial Analysis: A Multiscalar Approach to Studying Warfare in the Middle Missouri	<i>Andrew J. Clark</i>	295
13. The Crow Creek Massacre: The Role of Sex in Native American Scalping Practices	<i>Ashley Kendell</i>	318



14	Contexts for Conflict: Conceptual Tools for Interpreting Archaeological Reflections of the North Platte Campaign of February 1865	
	<i>Peter Bleed and Douglas Scott</i>	336
15	Afterword: War, Peace, and Plains Archaeology	
	<i>Douglas B. Bamforth</i> <i>and Andrew J. Clark</i>	355
	<i>References Cited</i>	363
	<i>List of Contributors</i>	423
	<i>Index</i>	425

"Truly impressive, this book will generate tremendous interest."

—MARK W. ALLEN, CALIFORNIA  
STATE POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY

"The best book-length coverage of conflict among small-scale societies within a regional (cultural) context that has been published for a number of years.

... [A]ny archaeologist interested in the role of warfare in prehistoric North American societies should buy a copy."

—GEORGE MILNER, PENNSYLVANIA  
STATE UNIVERSITY

The Great Plains region has been central to academic and popular visions of Native American warfare, largely because the region's well-documented violence was so central to the expansion of Euroamerican settlement. However, social violence has deep roots on the Plains beyond this post-Contact perception, and these roots have not been systematically examined through archaeology before. War was part, and perhaps an important part, of the process of ethnogenesis that helped to define tribal societies in the region, and it affected many other aspects of human lives there. In *Archaeological Perspectives on Warfare on the Great Plains*, anthropologists who study sites across the Plains critically examine regional themes of warfare from pre-Contact and post-Contact periods and assess how war shaped human societies of the region.

Contributors to this volume offer a bird's-eye view of warfare on the Great Plains, consider artistic evidence of the role of war in the lives of indigenous hunter-gatherers on the Plains prior to and during the period of Euroamerican expansion, provide archaeological discussions of fortification design and its implications, and offer archaeological and other information on the larger implications of war in human history. Bringing together research from across the region, this volume provides unprecedented evidence of the effects of war on tribal societies. *Archaeological Perspectives on Warfare on the Great Plains* is a valuable primer for regional warfare studies and the archaeology of the Great Plains as a whole.

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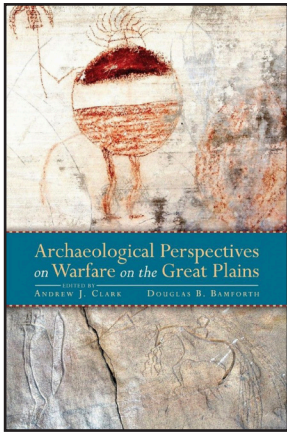
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Mavis Greer, R. Eric Hollinger, Ashley Kendell, James D. Keyser,  
Albert M. LeBeau III, Mark D. Mitchell, Stephen M. Perkins,  
Byron Schroeder, Douglas Scott, Linea Sundstrom, Susan C. Vehik

Cover illustrations: Shield warrior with lance at Bear Gulch site  
(24FR2), photograph by John Greer (top); rock art battle scene (No  
Water Petroglyphs, 48WA2066), photograph by John Greer (bottom).

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## Archaeological Perspectives on Warfare on the Great Plains

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*Reviewed by Thomas E. Emerson, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, Prairie Research Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

In 1996, Lawrence Keeley's *War before Civilization* shattered anthropologists' Rousseauian vision of a pacified past where cooperation and collegiality ruled among societies prior to their being contaminated by Western contact. This volume documents a past with violence, one that has increasingly resonated with a generation of scholars who are daily surrounded by news of societies at war. The last several decades have produced an ever-increasing number of edited volumes and articles exploring the phenomena of war (however that it is defined). Clark and Bamforth's *Warfare on the Great Plains* adds another volume to that genre.

In terms of full disclosure, since my undergraduate days in sociology and political science, I have been interested in how the mechanisms of intrasocietal and intersocietal violence have played themselves out in societies—an interest that was accentuated by two tours of duty in Vietnam. My perspectives were further honed by excavating the Crow Creek Massacre mass burial. Outside of those who have been involved in the exposure of recent genocides in Africa and Europe, few people actually come face to face with the human aftermath of genocide. My crew and I did at Crow Creek. This was war at its most brutal, at its most unforgiving. It still has the power to affect me 40 years later when I look at those stark images. Crow Creek drove home that the pacified past was a mirage crafted by academics.

Given this history, I was very interested in seeing what the “state of war” was among researchers of the Great Plains. Bamforth's (Ch. 1) introductory essay suggests that such studies are on the right track but also that there are as yet many unanswered questions. He provides a short primer on the archaeological study of war that contextualizes it within the broader scale of the discipline as well as within a concentration on the Great Plains. This overview helps place the following essays in a regionally specific setting that is important to fully understanding their value. More importantly, he reminds us that both war and peace are complex social constructs influenced by multiple cultural dynamics (e.g., also see Bamforth and Clark, Ch. 15, this volume).

Bamforth reminds us that researchers of Great Plains societies have a long tradition of incorporating war into regional cultural histories. The nineteenth-century images of the Plains Indian wars are too well established to ignore even by those pacifying the past. In addition to the documentation of native warfare in European records, the region has other readily interpreted lines of evidence that support a long-established pattern of intergroup

conflict—an extremely rich rock art of warrior iconography in the northwest Plains and the presence of large ditched and palisaded fortified villages on the Missouri River.

Scholars have long documented the prolific rock art clustered in the rocky landscapes of Montana and Wyoming of the northwestern Plains. Almost one-third of this volume is dedicated to exploring this record. An all-encompassing analysis of over 1,000 examples of rock art depictions from Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon in Montana by long-time researcher James Keyser (Ch. 3) not only quantifies new information but also summarizes the value and shortfalls of Plains rock art. This study is supplemented by more tightly circumscribed examinations by Greer and Greer (Ch. 2) of the rock art of the Musselman area of Montana, while Sundstrom (Ch. 4) explores the relationship of rock art to both native and Euro-American historical records.

Essentially, rock art iconography is placed into three broad periods: precontact, protohistoric, and historic. Despite this chronological challenge, rock art still provides key information on the weaponry, dress, tactics, and goals of war. Researchers have been able to observe changes from early corporate battle encounters to individuals' seeking war honors; have noted shifting patterns in the use of shields, bows and arrows, clubs, bow spears, and armor; as well as have remarked on discrepancies between historic accounts stressing the capturing of horses and women versus rock art iconography focusing on war honors. These studies reaffirm Sundstrom's point that multiple lines of evidence are critical to interpreting the past.

Five contributions (Ch. 5–9) deal with the other manifestation of Plains violence—fortifications. David Dye (Ch. 5) brings his long experience studying Eastern Woodland warfare to the review of Plains fortifications. He challenges us to consider such building projects as both material and social “constructions.” Dye observes that fortification construction equates with other communal efforts (e.g., mound construction) with regard to social, political, and labor inputs and with similar internal effects on community relations. There is more to fortifications than simply recognizing them as barometers of regional violence. In contrast to Dye, LeBeau (Ch. 6) plays provocateur, questioning whether ditches are actually landscapes of violence or if they have a more diverse and complex meaning.

Susan Vehik (Ch. 7), accepting the prevalence of violence, inquires why fortifications are so seldom present in the central and southern Plains. After detailing the history of Wichita settlements and fortifications and the use of fortifications in general in the northern and southern Plains, she suggests the difference in the timing and intensity of fortification might be tied to the differential distribution of fertile farmland. In the northern Plains, agricultural land was confined to narrow strips along the river, creating limited zones of opportunity for the Plains village farmers, while in the southern Plains, agricultural land was widely available. Drass and his coauthors (Ch. 8) complement Vehik's discussions by summarizing geophysical attributes and excavations of an unusually complex Wichita fortification design combined with protective dugouts. Schroeder (Ch. 9) documents the unusual rock-walled Alcova Redoubt on a sandstone butte in central Wyoming that appears to have been built by a late prehis-

toric hunting-and-gathering group prior to the rise of large-scale endemic warfare on the northern Plains.

Having myself carried out archaeological research in the late prehistory of the Midwest for many decades, Eric Hollinger's (Ch. 10) account of Oneota expansion and possible involvement as participants in the Crow Creek attack fascinated me. There is much I agree with in his historical reconstruction, and I am intrigued by the possibilities that Oneota groups were significant players in the middle Missouri River valley. One variable that Hollinger brings to the forefront is that distance is no barrier to warriors. For example, most discussions assume that propinquity is a necessary ingredient for violence. This can be true, but the historic records in the Midwest and Northeast demonstrate that war parties (most famously those of the Iroquois) traveled many hundreds of miles.

Chapter 11 by Mark Mitchell epitomizes the point (also Chs. 1 and 15) that warfare is a sociohistorical construct. He crafts an intricate reconstruction of the impacts of war, trade, and productivity among Initial Middle Missouri groups and Heart River communities contrasted with records of nineteenth-century conflicts. No discussions in this volume more conclusively depict the tremendous complexity of factors that are intrinsic to creating, promoting, and eliminating warfare (or peace for that matter). Cultural historical taxonomies, chronologies, and spatial parameters form the basis for Clark's (Ch. 12) modeling of native relationships in the Middle Missouri region. His statistical analyses track interesting patterns of settlement expansions and contractions and differential scheduling of fortification construction in the region, suggesting they may link to alliance building as well as identify warring groups. Ashley Kendell (Ch. 13) examines the collected data on scalping practices at Crow Creek and distinguishes some variation by sex and age. Peter Bleed and Doug Scott (Ch. 14) employ a military levels-of-war model to interpret the actions of the Cheyenne and U.S. cavalry in the battles along the North Platte in 1865. Using detailed metal-detector survey techniques, Scott and Bleed, among others, have transformed our understanding of nineteenth-century military engagements on the Great Plains, adding an important perspective to existing historical accounts.

The place of the Great Plains societies within a regional theater of war in late prehistory and history is well documented. But such studies of the war-peace process require a better contextualization of these societies in time and space and in terms of their social histories. Such a goal is hard to achieve based on the limited excavations that form much of the record, especially when, as the editors remark, many of these legacy collections remain unanalyzed. But it is also apparent that, especially in the Missouri River region, many of the challenging issues of chronology and context will only be resolved by returning to focused, large-scale field projects that concentrate on unraveling the history of these complex societies. I, for one, would like to see a better understanding of the Initial Coalescent Crow Creek occupations and the place of the massacre within that framework.

This volume has value both to those who study the Great Plains and those who wish to understand war and peace at a broader level. The potential for understanding



### *Book Review*

warfare at a larger interregional scale linking the Southwest, Great Plains, and Eastern Woodlands seems especially interesting. At an international level, I expect that any scholars who study group conflicts would find these analyses important sources of inspiration in reexamining such processes in their own region.