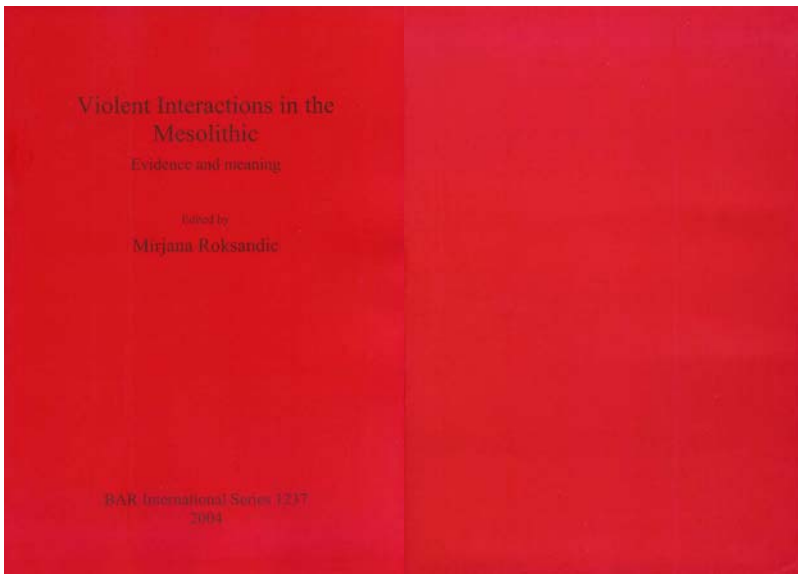
Roksandic, M. Ed. 2004. Violent interactions in the Mesolithic. Evidence and meaning. – Oxford, Archaeopress (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1237)

Book review by L. Larsson



The volume starts with a very adequate question: why another book on violence in prehistory? The Mesolithic is said to be the period when the evidence for violence becomes far more common than in earlier periods. The editor of the book, Roksandic, questions that statement. However, she accepts that we can demonstrate higher levels of conflict in this period than in previous periods.

Other questions of importance are: How to relate an individual's violent interaction and death to the interpretation of organised violence? Is all organised violence warfare? Can all violence be interpreted as warfare? Do we need to draw a line between warfare and feuding? The last two questions are related to how we define war. If war is related to higher levels of political organisation, then conflict between groups should be described as something else. Another aspect is the importance of war, whether it is an interactive part in the shaping and organisation of a society or episodic events without further impact on the society.

In this presentation much argumentation is derived from Kelly's book 'Warless societies and the origin of war (2000). His view (p. 21) that war is to be grounded "in application of the principle of social substitutability", the interrelated concept of injury to the group, group responsibility for injury and group liability with respect to retribution, is accepted.

The remainder of the first article is a critical analysis of the other contributions. This should have been included in a conclusion to the book, and I will therefore return to it later.

The contributors to the publication mainly take their examples from southern Europe but also from eastern Europe, South America and eastern Asia. The 'Mesolithic nature' in this case is based on a combination of hunter–gatherer practice and semi–sedentary or sedentary mobility patterns. The aim is to show whether or not we have evidence for conflicts in archaeological and anthropological records.

It is important to discuss violence and its organised form as war in a theoretical perspective. However, we have to consider the factual situation in order to accept whether violence is evident and how it is interpreted as a part of organised activities.

In her paper Rogers presents a modern forensic perspective on inter–personal violence. It is essential to differentiate between injuries caused by accidents and violence, and also to identify post–mortem changes to bones in relation to those caused later. Rogers makes an attempt to distinguish wounds from individual attacks from these caused during organised violence. However, one example is taken from Argentina, where modern methods of killing were used and the victims selected. Of more interest, however horrible, for the study of prehistoric violence are the findings from the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s, when the whole Tutsi population was attacked and few modern weapons were used. Sixty per cent of almost five hundred buried in a mass grave had blunt force trauma as cause of death and just 14% showed sharp force trauma. The grave contained an almost completely representative sample of the age groups in Rwanda.

Comparison with other modern events like the civil war in Croatia shows that injuries and mode of death among soldiers do not differ significantly from those among civilians. The modes of death among victims of homicide and war are very similar but differ from suicides and accidental causes. Traces of torture seem to be an

indication of warfare that is rare among homicide victims. Young males are over–represented among victims of war, as among homicides, but if the war actions involve civilians, as is the case in most modern wars, the victims may be representative of the entire population.

Jackes initiates her study by presenting the results of analyses of Portuguese skeletal remains. Fractures on some bodies were identified, but in most cases it was not possible to distinguish between accidents, acts of violence or the fatal consequences of a particular activity. It is important for the interpretation of the existence or absence of violence that Jackes has experience from the analysis of victims from the Mau Mau emergency in Kenya. Furthermore, she exemplifies the problem of identifying war actions by the few cases of violence identified among Canadian Iroquoian skeletons from a period when warlike action is recorded. One explanation could be that the raids were carried out at a great distance and that those severely wounded or killed were not taken back to their homeland. Or they might have been buried at special places, as proved by a small number of young males at a cemetery in central Ontario.

Finally, Jackes has analysed interred from a cemetery from the early Neolithic Yangshao culture in central China. Most of the skeletons have been reburied but the remainder present an extraordinarily wide range of trauma. Most fractures cannot be connected to effects of accidents but reflect a society with a great deal of violence. The question is whether the finds are the effects of intra– or inter–group violence. To answer this Jackes refers to the written sources about the Iroquoian societies. Most raids were not mounted in order to kill members of other groups but to take prisoners. Death in battle was not glorious and peace was prized above war. The increase of violence in the early 17th century was mainly due to interaction with Europeans.

From New Guinea and Australia we have anthropological records of societies with a main intra–group violence, mainly directed towards women, while other violence are directed towards inter–group activities.

We have to be very careful when interpreting osteological material. The hypotheses are, in some cases, such as the examples from Canada and China, not only based upon the factual material but also have political and judgmental overtones.

Cunha, Umbelino & Cardoso have been studying the interred on shell midden sites related to the Tagus and Sado rivers in western Portugal, with almost three hundred individuals. This is partly the same material as studied by Jackes but with seemingly no overlapping examples. Just 4.5% of the individuals have traces of trauma. The authors present the few finds with careful references to alternative interpretations of their trauma. The fragmented skeletons in particular caused difficulties in distinguishing between pre– and post–mortem damage to bones. The traumatic lesions all seem to represent accidental injuries.

In the Morocco context of Iberomaurusien, Ben–Ncer presents an example of decapitation and dismembering of a child with some additional evidence of non–lethal conflicts. Ben–Ncer examines whether the child was killed by decapitation or if this act was included in the burial process.

The second article by the editor of the publication, Roksandic considers the evidence of violent trauma in the Iron Gate Gorge Mesolithic and Early Neolithic. The pre– and post–mortem aspect of bone damage is exemplified by the information that at least two weeks are needed before any signs of healing are traceable. Bones keep their plasticity for about two months after the death of a person. More problematic to distinguish are the perimortem traumatic changes. A careful documentation of bone positions during excavation is of importance. Out of 263 adult individuals examined, 6% show evidence of trauma but just six (2%) can be attributed to violence as the most probable cause, of which two cases could have been lethal. There is no indication that any of the individuals with evidence of violent trauma enjoyed a special status as regards burial ritual. Roksandic ends the presentation of the material of the Gorge by concluding that evidence of violent interaction indicating warfare is minimal. Further downstream excavations have revealed cemeteries with a much higher percentage of evidence of violence, such as 33% for one of the sites, dated to the contact period with Neolithic societies. These finds might represent a single episode or a series of related events. In contrast, other sites show no indications of violence.

Choyke & Bartosiewicz approach the question of violence from a quite different point of view. They study the projectile points of a Late Neolithic site in Switzerland. Points made of bone or antler seems to be less frequent in warfare as they are rarely found embedded in human skeletal parts. Some slight diachronic changes from antler to bone points can be noted. The uniformity among the shape of the arrowheads is interpreted as marking a well–defined group of hunters within the settlement. The article includes some interesting information about hunting but it does not give any perspective on the main subject in the title of the book.

Lillie outlines the evidences for violence at three Ukrainian cemeteries dated to the Late Upper Palaeolithic and Early Mesolithic. At all three sites flint points were found embedded in the bodies or found close to the body, which might indicate flesh wounds. These examples of violence are thought to reflect inter–group competition for access to resources related to the nearby rapids of Dnieper river. However, no traces of resource stress have been identified despite intensive diet studies. Dismemberment is also said to have occurred, but whether it was done before or after death is not recorded. The specific material has not been available for further study. The considerable amount of evidence of violence might be related to a relatively short period

before territorial rights were established. Violence does not seem to have been practised in order to maintain territories.

Pintos Blanco bases his study on finds from burial mounds from the coastal area of Uruguay. Indications of violence on the human remains are related to space monumentalisation from about 5000 BP, changes in diet, and variation in lithic and ceramic technology. Pintos Blanco proposes a positive correlation between evidence of violence and mound construction and increased production. However, the indications of trauma caused by violence could as easily be actions involved in the mortuary practice.

The papers here give a variety of perspectives on evidence and indications of violence. Most have an acceptable level of source criticism. The title of the publication, with the Mesolithic as an important chronological–economic phase, is not well chosen, not even in relation to the rather wide definition set in the initial chapter. However, it is quite evident from the examples referring to the Mesolithic that it does not seem to have been a time of more violence than the periods before and after. But major differences appear from one cemetery to another. Inter–group actions would be a more preferable term in this case rather than war, which was probably not an ordinary state of affairs during most of prehistory. In certain cases, however, for a variety of reasons, actions that could entail serious violence between groups occurred. In such actions a large part of a group might have been exterminated.

In the publication different examples of peaceful and also violent social stages are presented. It is extremely important that most authors adopt a cautious standpoint towards the explanation of different human traumas. In some cases, if not many, skeleton damage is interpreted as the consequences of living in a world that included a great many dangerous situations, mainly in the physical environment, much less in the social milieu.

Roksandic M. Ed. 2004. Violent interactions in the Mesolithic. Evidence and meaning. – Oxford, Archaeopress (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1237. 112 pp. ISBN 1841715964. Price £27.00 (paperback).

Cited literature

Kelly, R.C. 2000. Warless societies and the origin of war. – Michigan, University of Michigan Press.

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