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A Brutal Hunger

Viewed from today, war in the distant past seems almost tidy: Armies clashed, the victors marched into history and the losers faded from memory. A new collection of studies edited by a pair of UC Santa Barbara anthropologists, however, for the first time illuminates the grim and often catastrophic role of food shortages in ancient warfare.

“The Archaeology of Food and Warfare: Food Insecurity in Prehistory” (Springer, 2015), edited by Amber M. VanDerwarker and Gregory D. Wilson, takes a deep and wide-ranging archaeological look at how food shaped warfare and the broader impacts of shortages on societies around the world.

“This is a new perspective,” said VanDerwarker, a professor in UCSB’s Department of Anthropology. “Nobody has joined food and warfare studies before. You can’t even think about warfare without thinking about food. Not only provisioning armies, but what happens when you decimate an area — how are those families going to keep feeding themselves?”

Traditional study of ancient warfare has focused on what would have been the “news” of the day — big battles, violence and body counts. VanDerwarker and Wilson decided to look beyond the prehistoric headlines and examine the impacts of war on the rest of society.

“The questions we decided to ask were, what are the impacts of long-term chronic violence on day-to-day life?” explained Wilson, an associate professor of

anthropology. “You need to make a living in a time of war. How does the fear of somebody always being there, coming over the horizon, impact your ability to make a living?”

“It also expands the focus beyond men and warriors,” added VanDerwarker. “What about women? What about children? What about families? What about the elderly? What about everybody else in this demographic?”

To answer those questions, the book presents 11 studies of food and ancient warfare in societies from New Zealand to the Peruvian Andes, from the Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula to the villages of the Central Illinois River Valley. The studies examine disparate aspects of food and war, but they all reveal a central fact: Life in wartime — and in its aftermath — was a brutal slog through a gauntlet of violence, deprivation, dislocation and death.

Indeed, chronic warfare wasn’t merely a bloody threat; it changed how and what people ate, and how they acquired and stored food. In VanDerwarker and Wilson’s area of study, the Central Illinois River Valley in the 13th century, constant war forced communities to shift from a subsistence based on foraging for native foods to cultivating crops.

“What this means is that it’s a less diverse diet, which is going to lead to more chronic nutritional issues,” VanDerwarker noted. “Demographic data from a bio-archaeologist in the region has shown that women of child-bearing age were affected most by these nutritional deficits. They have to ovulate, carry babies to term and lactate to feed them. And so they were most affected.”

Although the book’s research focuses on prehistory, current events make the work timely. Climate change, especially prolonged drought, spurred horrific warfare in the American Southwest. Amid crop failure, starvation and violence, whole populations would flee for a better life. They often found little more than new conflict and death. Today, with global climate change threatening profound environmental and social disruption, the past offers a mirror into our potential future.

“One of the most challenging parts for archaeology is to make our research relevant to the modern day, and I think this does get at that in a way that a lot of traditional archaeology does not,” Wilson said. “Food insecurity, violence, structural violence are all topical issues to plague the modern world.”

“Often in the academy there’s a lot of esoteric research that takes place,” VanDerwarker added. “Then you get to archaeology, where people ask, ‘Who cares? Why is that relevant?’ So the task that we set for ourselves and that we set for our students is, we need to study topics that have some relevance to the world. Not just because it’s our responsibility, let’s be citizens of today’s world.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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