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Weapons, Warrior Burials and Agency in the Intermediate Bronze Age Southern Levant: Some Theoretical Observations

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The Intermediate Bronze Age (c. 2500–2000 BCE) is known for its abundance of formal cemeteries and various other types of burial sites. These comprise a substantial number of internments that contain metal artifacts, identified as weaponry and associated with warfare, and typically defined 'warrior burials.' In this paper, we discuss some theoretical issues concerning the identification and role of the so-called weapons, the ideology of warriors and warriorhood, and the mutual agency of objects and society during the Intermediate Bronze Age. Reference is made to examples and research in Europe, where similar patterns have been extensively studied. Through this examination, weapons will be addressed as 'agents', allowing a more holistic discussion of the 'network' that produced and used them and a clearer image of 'warrior burials' and the reason for their gradual disappearance in the Middle Bronze Age.

Keywords: Intermediate Bronze Age, weapons, warrior burials, warriorhood, agency

Introduction

Seminal studies of the Intermediate Bronze Age (IBA; c. 2500–2000 BCE, Regev et al. 2012)[2] associated the agro-pastoral people of this period with Amorite tribes who invaded from the north (Kenyon 1951; 1966) and even with the Beaker Folk of Europe (Lapp 1966), understood as representing waves of violent invaders. Thus, when hundreds of weapons were found in various IBA tombs they were reflexively associated with 'warrior burials' (Yadin 1963; Prag 1971; Amiran and Kochavi 1985). The studies of the Beaker Folk in Europe and the Neolithic–Bronze Age transition in Scandinavia, also greatly influenced these views (e.g., Childe 1941; 1958, Brøndsted 1957). Following Childe's initial publication (1941), warriors were conceptualized as a social class of a professional militaristic institution

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[2] The chronological nomenclature of EB I–III, IBA and MB I–III are used in this paper.

from which war heroes emerged (Horn and Kristiansen 2018:4). This notion gained much popularity, especially by structural Marxists of the 1970s and 1980s. However, much like Childe, these scholars negated or offered few attempts to address the actual violence and bloodshed in which these warriors had been engaged (Vandkilde 2006; Horn and Kristiansen 2018; Fontijn 2021). The nature of the Bronze Age petroglyphs and burial grounds in Scandinavia led some scholars to present 'warrior burials' as relating to war heroes of a much-ritualized war (Nordbladh 1989), which has been described as a "bloodless theater kind of war" (Vandkilde 2006:60). Similarly, the post-processual studies of the late 1980s and early 1990s saw power to be central to social life on the one hand (Shanks and Tilley 1987), but hardly ever addressed the violence itself. In contrast, other studies stressed that warfare, when it took place, was never ritualized, but was lethal and brutal. For example, Fontijn (2021:29–40) defined the Bronze Age in Europe as a "warlike period," providing evidence of violence and warfare in death-pits where skeletons bearing traumatic signs were found, and from the abundance of specialized weapons. Thus, he suggested that tens of thousands of warriors were living in Europe during the Bronze Age, where they participated in combat between armies rather than village communities—as has been argued for earlier periods (e.g., Fontijn 2021:29–40).

Today, although paradigms have changed and the IBA Southern Levant is no longer viewed as a period of great migration and invasion, 'warrior burials' are still considered a part of the period's character. The lack of death-pits, the paucity of fortified settlements and the overall rather scanty evidence for actual warfare thus calls for another explanation of the relationship between weapons, 'warrior burials' and society.

WEAPONS, WARRIORS, BURIALS AND SOCIAL THEORIES

According to Berger (1967), when an individual dies, the collective of which he is a member is in danger of entering a state of 'anomy'. For this reason, almost all societies create funerary rituals, which aid the deceased in transitioning to the realm of the dead. By doing this, the individual can continue to be a member of society, albeit a deceased one (Berger 1967; Davies 2000; Weiss-Krejci 2011). Thus, the funerary cycle is crucial for society as a whole.

The funerary assemblage, which is a product of the funerary cycle, is a unique archaeological context. Unlike most other contexts, the artifacts in this assemblage were deliberately removed from their "systemic context" (Schiffer 1972) by the same culture that produced them. Furthermore, it is a symbolic deposition in a location that was intentionally chosen to reflect cultural perceptions of the final stage of the funerary cycle. Using Latour's vocabulary, the artifacts are 'agents' of many facets of a single 'network' which in turn is made up of various 'actors' and 'actants' (Latour 1994).

The Southern Levantine Intermediate Bronze Age has often been characterized, among other things, by its varied burial types, a subject that has been thoroughly discussed (see, e.g., Greenhut 1995). These vary sub-regionally and include tumuli and cist tombs, typically in

the southern part of the region; dolmens and built tombs, generally in the northern regions; and various types of shaft tombs, which are widely distributed (see Greenhut 1995: Fig. 1). Greener (2006:18–26) noted that most tombs, especially tumuli and dolmens, are very difficult to date, owing to having been reused or robbed in antiquity, and are generally very poor in finds; thus, they can be of very limited value when trying to reconstruct aspects of material culture and society. On the other hand, sealed shaft tombs can be more easily dated and contain both artifacts and skeletal evidence from which burial customs and their social implications can be discerned. Thus, it should come as no surprise that most male burials and related weaponry, have come from shaft tombs. These largely primary burials often contained articulated skeletons that, along with burial gifts, can aid in reconstructing burial customs. As discussed by Greenhut (1995:26–29), shaft tomb burials present greater consistency in funerary customs, and many skeletal remains were found in flexed positions, which may reflect high social rank (see, e.g., Palumbo 1987:45), especially when accompanied by metal weapons.

During this period, which otherwise lacks evidence for accumulated societal wealth, the assumed cost of production of the metal artifacts found in the mortuary assemblages has been attributed great symbolic meaning. As placing them within the tombs meant their removal from circulation, these possessions were understood as an expression of the economic/social status of the deceased (Cohen 2012:310).

In this context, it is crucial to determine whether the weapons found in mortuary contexts—daggers, javelins and axes—were actually used in combat, or served as 'ritual' objects. In the case of the Southern Levant, certain axe types seem to have been ceremonial rather than utilitarian. For example, Montanari (2021:62) tends to accept that fenestrated 'eye'-socketed axes had only limited use as real weapons based on their shape and technical specifications. It has been suggested that they were used as prestige objects and status items, and that they had an eminently ritual-ceremonial function. Their successors, the elongated 'duckbill' and chisel-shaped axes became the common gear of Middle Bronze Age warriors (Montanari 2021:68).

Daggers and javelins, on the other hand, are considered highly functional weapons, and their bearers seem to have possessed a high social status. Daggers became prestigious cultural objects, often comprising the only offerings in tombs, as there was usually no social 'need' to add other items to accompany the deceased. The deceased status was therefore expressed in his body treatment and by the daggers (Greener 2012:43). These 'warriors' acted as social agents that took part in shaping their society's beliefs and values, their burial with daggers and javelins making a powerful statement regarding the ownership of portable wealth and an emphasis on male ancestors (Greenhut 1995:30–31; Greener 2012:44).

In their respective studies, both Garfinkel and Cohen (2007), and Kletter and Levi (2016), addressed the abundance of 'warrior burials' in the IBA and early Middle Bronze Age. They considered whether these burials and weapons belonged to practicing warriors: how the biography of the artifacts (Kopytoff 1986) related to that of the deceased. As weapons are in

fact such a significant part of the mortuary assemblages of this period, they may be regarded as 'agents' of a desired social status.

The transformation of the meaning of an object from one realm to another was termed by Latour (reference?) as 'translation', and by Osborne (2004:2–4) as 'dedication' or 'dedicated object'. Within the funerary cycle, 'translation' occurs between a social hierarchy that existed in the realm of the living and that transferred to the dead. As noted above, if it is assumed that a 'warrior burial' is a desired and prestigious form of burial for the dead, then a desired and prestigious comparable social institution for the living must also exist. This will be referred to as 'warriorhood'.

Kletter and Levi (2016:23) claim that the large number of graves where weapons were found in IBA/MB IIA contexts exceed the logical proportion of warriors in the population and thus, they suggest that 'warrior graves' are in fact typical adult male burials in which the weapons (daggers and axes) are personal belongings of the deceased, but these weapons were of secondary importance in the battlefield compared to lances, bows and shields. Nevertheless, these weapons were important markers of adult masculinity and, at the same time, of status and wealth. Furthermore, some of the graves contained other paraphernalia, such as belts and long-range weapons like arrows, and are thought to belong to elite warriors (Kletter and Levi 2016:10).

Horn and Kristiansen (2018:4) point toward the emergence of two institutions that complemented each other: the ideological construction of the heroic warrior (the 'hero', as known from sagas and other ancient texts) and the social construction of semi-professional warriors organized in military retinues when needed. They offer examples of prehistoric halberds, one of the first specialized weapons that have long been interpreted as ritual objects for people with high status, based on their presence in ritual deposits and burials in the Danish isles. (Horn and Kristiansen 2018:6). Recent research on use-wear analysis (Horn 2017) has demonstrated that they were also deadly, efficient and widely used weapons.

The 'warrior burials' in the IBA and their gradual disappearance over the course of the Middle Bronze Age draw a link between warriorhood and the decline and rise in urbanism (Hallote 1994; Cohen 2012). However, urbanism, or the lack thereof, is most likely not the direct cause for the establishment of warriorhood, but rather it was the existence of a central authority, whether centered in an urban settlement or not, which established and idealized warriorhood. It is plausible that something in the IBA agro-pastoral society had created a need, or the space, to allow for warriorhood to emerge. A society with a form of central authority, which establishes itself in an urban network, could prohibit individuals from carrying personal weapons, while at the same time choosing others to serve as armed warriors.

One of the main differences between these two forms of social structure is the greater range of ability that the urban central power possesses. The form of control the central urban political unit had upon the collective was such that they were able to demand the latter's participation in any endeavor the former desired. Through this sovereignty, the urban elite was able to construct large scale architectural monuments, to have sole dominion over

wealth and agricultural surplus, and to create an army at its disposal. Otterbein (2004:182–183) states that in tribes and bands there is no supervision of weaponry, and each person can own one, but in urban and organized political entities, the central authority supervises weaponry and enables only authorized personnel (military, police, etc.) to carry weapons. A 'Wild West' situation in which everyone can carry weapons may reflect a situation in which there is no central authority to enforce law, and in a state of disintegrating socio-political systems, the need for individuals to defend themselves increases. In discussing third millennium BCE Sumerian warfare, Watkins (1983) distinguishes between two different groups of combatants: 'soldiers' and 'warriors.' Soldiers or militia members are recruited from the population and equipped with standard, generally low-level and non-prestigious gear, such as spears, bows and arrows; they were protected by shields and thick garments, which was probably provided ad hoc by a central authority. Kletter and Levi (2016:8) refer to these recruited individuals as "part-time warriors". Thus, the soldier is part of a collective of mindlike individuals who are often discouraged from creating a sense of individuality. Hence, the dialectic relationship is no longer between the individual and the rest of society. Rather, the soldier is an 'agent' of the army which is in a dialectic relationship within society acting as an 'agent' of the central power.

On the other hand, professional warriors were full-time combatants who probably served as the main military force in cities in peacetime and as elite troops in wartime (see also Gat 2006:222). Being professional warriors, they carried personal weapons of a high level, such as daggers, swords and battle axes. These weapons accompanied them in life and death, as they were buried with them and are thus found in mortuary contexts. Warriors could gain power through military service and personal bravery, and could thereby bypass lineage and kin ties (Gat 2006:210). Thus, it may be suggested that the warrior is an 'agent' of a warrior class, an elite group of military personnel.

The Bronze Age in Europe saw the emergence of specialized weapons, mainly swords and spears, which required careful training that was conducted by the warriors, who were authorized to wield these weapons. As swords are less common than spears, sword fighting may have held an even more specialized role. The fact that swords figure in the more elaborate burial settings in some European regions suggests that sword-bearers had a different, probably more elevated, elite role (Fontijn 2021:37).

Fontijn (2021:33–39) goes further and discusses 'warriorhood' as an idealized, ideological concept according to which Bronze Age males lived. Weapon-wielding warriors were depicted in rock art, in some cases wearing nothing but weapons, which implies weaponry was crucial in the constitution of personhood. In his opinion, being a warrior was not only about carrying weapons but about accepting the rules that governed fighting (Fontijn 2021:36).

The evidence from Bronze Age Europe, however, also provides additional indications that in order to become a person who has the potential to kill, appearances had to be transformed (e.g., specific ornaments and specific hair styles), and warriors were probably taught to follow specific codes during their practical training (Fontijn 2021:38). Another

phenomenon observed in Bronze Age Europe is the separation of weapons from those who used them, by depositing them in inaccessible places such as bogs or rivers. Such acts were possibly perceived as gifts or sacrifices made to the landscape and/or the entities who were believed to reside therein. These acts also demonstrate that these communities had procedures to remove weaponry from their society, both physically and symbolically. These may have been acts that served to resolve tensions, or ritually mark the end of cycles of conflict (Fontijn 2021:41).

In the same manner, when looking at IBA burial rites, it may be suggested that the placement of weapons with the deceased could signify the acknowledgement of society immersed in violence, but at the same time the attempt to regulate it. As abovementioned, the IBA Southern Levant (west of the Jordan River) seems, as far as current archaeology can demonstrate, to lack a central power or powers. In her study of the Jericho cemetery, Shay (1983:36) concluded that IBA society seems egalitarian, where social affiliation was much more important than social status. A different view of that cemetery was stressed by Palumbo (1991:120), who analyzed burial customs and reached the notion of apparent social differences amongst the burials of each tomb type. On the other hand, Baxevani (1995) points to the difference between EB III and IBA societies as reflected in mortuary practices: while the former period possessed a complex and stratified society, which masked this trait by employing communal burials that show little or no status difference, during the IBA, the differentiation between high and low status burials does reflect a society that maintained a certain degree of complexity, and a prevailing elite ruled small groups who had differential access to resources (Baxevani 1995:94–95). It may be suggested that what Baxevani relates to as an 'elite group' may include individuals or groups that were buried with their weapons, i.e., the warriors.

Thus, the armed individual may engage in a less mediated form of dialectic relationship with the rest of society, and his set of weapons and gear is more clearly understood by the collective. Hence, while the symbolic distance of weapons from the collective is only once removed from a society that is not governed by a central authority, those of a soldier within an army are twice removed from the symbolic spheres of the remainder of society. In turn, that will determine the individual's ability to gain prestige within the collective as an armed person. The ability to understand and integrate the symbology and insignia of another as one's own is what was previously explained as Latour's 'translation', which ultimately brings this theory full circle. For only in a society that can reliably 'translate' war-related symbology into the collective will make use of weaponry within their mortuary assemblages. Only in such a case will these artifacts be considered as credible 'agents' that can 'translate' from the sphere of the living into that of the dead.

Summary and Discussion

The use of the term 'warrior burials' to describe IBA tombs containing weapons, is a product of its time. With our ever-changing perception of this period, a need has arisen to reevaluate what the continued use of this term connotes. Through the means of social theories, an attempt was made to discuss the presence of these mortuary assemblages. The conclusion reached here is that the archaeological record does not necessarily represent a change in actual violence and warfare, but rather that the IBA social framework was most probably more receptive to the symbology of warriorhood used on a wide scale. That said, it was not just the fact that the 'translation' of warriorhood was successful, but also the availability of weapons to be used by the collective. While it is relatively common to attribute social status to the deceased, one that may be higher than the interred possessed, the form of this social promotion will be dictated by the existing social hierarchy. A society governed by a central power may not be willing to allocate its symbols of power. However, in order to corroborate the theoretical framework presented thus far, a more diligent exploration of the archaeological record is needed. Suggested follow-up research that may be utilized is in the field of osteology, which may show signs of battlefield injuries, use-ware analysis of the weapons such as those which were conducted on halberds from the Danish Isles, dating between 2500–1800 BCE, yielding evidence of use for both combat and ritual practices (Horn 2017). Another research project conducted on daggers from Italy, dated to the second millennium BCE, involved organic residue analysis in which traces of bone, muscle and tendons were evidence for the utilitarian nature of the daggers (Caricola et. al 2022). It is hoped that in the future these promising research approaches will be employed in Southern Levantine contexts as well.

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