



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK

**Aalborg Universitet**

## **VIOLENCE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD**

†Fagan (G.G.), Fibiger (L.), Hudson (M.), †Trundle (M.) (edd.) The Cambridge World History of Violence. Volume I: the Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Lange, Carsten Hjort

*Published in:*  
Classical Review

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1017/S0009840X23000318](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X23000318)

*Publication date:*  
2023

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lange, C. H. (2023). VIOLENCE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: †Fagan (G.G.), Fibiger (L.), Hudson (M.), †Trundle (M.) (edd.) The Cambridge World History of Violence. Volume I: the Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. *Classical Review*, 73(2), 552-555.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X23000318>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

†Fagan (G.G.), Fibiger (L.), Hudson (M.), †Trundle (M.) (edd.) **The Cambridge World History of Violence. Volume I: the Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-107-12012-9.

The book under review is volume I of *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, a series of four volumes. The book contains six parts and thirty-three articles as well as a general introduction and an introduction to volume I. Both ancient history editors sadly passed away before the volume went into print, with Matthew Trundle initially taking over from Garrett Fagan.

Historicising violence as a shared experience across time makes perfect sense (1, 17), but it should be added that this particular approach is often – as becomes highly visible when reading this volume – related to the study of warfare. We might talk of the nature of (permanent features) and the character (context dependant features) of war. The manner in which wars are fought change, not the nature of war itself (famously so M. Howard, ‘The Use and Abuse of Military History (lecture)’, *Royal United Service Institution, Journal*, 107 [1962], pp. 4-8). The volume has one obvious drawback which may be a consequence of the fact that Cambridge has a related four-volume series entitled *The Cambridge History of War* (with its sister volume on the ancient world appearing in 2012). Neither the series editors nor the volume editors define warfare. Consequently, there is no agreement on *when a war is a war*. A simple definition of violence is presented (“Intentional encroachment upon a person’s physical integrity”) (3), but at the same time the series editors point to the “huge diversity of meanings of violence across time and across cultures.” (4). In missing out on describing violence as a spectrum, with war as the most extreme, definitions were left to each author. Having said that, the editors of the volume under review are clearly aware of the issue. Mentioning Lawrence Keeley’s much celebrated *War Before Civilization* [1996] they comment on his broad definition of warfare, including small-scale raiding and ambushes, but even if this would have been implemented in the volume, which it is not, the question of *when a war is a war* is simple left unanswered. A context-based definition may at first seem acceptable, but even so, there are the implications. The volume focuses on a large period, from the first human communities to the fifth century CE. At its most extreme, it will make it even more difficult to compare conflicts over time and historicising becomes difficult or even impossible. The introduction also contains a critique of the likes of Steven Pinker (6; see also the introduction to this volume, 20; Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature A History of Violence and Humanity* [2011]), who with a statistical approach has tried to convince us that the last past five hundred years has seen a decline in violence. Computer scientist Aaron Clauset has shown that the long peace after the Second World War would have (had) to endure for at least another century for Pinker’s claims to be right (“Trends and fluctuations in the severity of interstate wars”, *Sci. Adv.* [2018]).

The articles of the volume focus on several core themes such as organised violence (warfare), ritualised violence, and violence within communities (which upheld social relationships) (23-24). Violence as a driving force of civilisation and community integration (24). Typically for books like the one under review, Thucydides famous “war was the most violent teacher” (3.82.2) is mentioned in connection with state warfare and state formation (esp. 30). This unfortunately ignores that the quotation is found in the famous Corcyra narrative. This was a *stasis* (civil war, one even including foreign intervention). The concept of *bellum civile* was most likely invented by Sulla. See C.H. Lange & F.J. Vervaeke, ‘Sulla and the Origins of the Concept of *Bellum Civile*’, in Lange & Vervaeke, eds., *The Historiography of Late Republican Civil War* [2019]). Even if we accept that civil war is a subcategory of war, there surely are differences. Knowing your enemy is part of it (S.N. Kalyvas, *The*

*Logic of Violence in Civil War* [2006]) and, with McCurry (*Woman's War. Fighting and Surviving the American Civil War* [2019], p.126), writing about her youth in Belfast, "it is one of the traumatic features of civil war that even after the enemy is defeated he remains in place; and with him the memory of the conflict." Staying briefly with civil war, the introduction ends with praise for Peter Brown and the Late Antiquity movement (36). This as it may be, but whether they like it or not, Rome fell – as has superbly been shown by Henning Börm – because of civil wars (*Westrom. Von Honorius bis Justinian* [2018]). It speaks volumes that no separate civil war entry is found in the index.

The editors (of volume I) are quite right to emphasise that "[w]omen were considered weak because they did not fight, but women were not allowed to fight because they were weak" (32). Staying with McCurry, she emphasises that women are not just witnesses of war, they were "actors and makers" ([2019], 203). She concludes that "the writing out of women from histories of war reflects a deep investment in the gender order itself and a desire to limit the destructiveness of war." ([2019], 205).

Turning to the articles in the volume, the numbers alone make it impossible for me to comment on everything. In part one, *The Origins of Warfare and Violence*, Steven Leblanc starts of the volume proper with an insightful chapter on the origins of warfare and violence. For me two comments must stand out. 1) "[T]he level of collective action involved in warfare probably exceeds that of any other human endeavour." (39), and 2) "We spend considerable time and thought trying to get to grips with the violence and warfare of the last couple of centuries, yet we give comparatively very little thought to these matters in the deep past." (39). At times we forget that the First and the Second World War has had serious implications in our understanding of warfare (they were anomalies) and adding to this, we need to remember that before the First World War, war was widely understood as a productive force, as something that should be used for the purposes of creating peace (J. Bartelson, *War in International Thought* [2017]). In the debate about *when a war is a war*, he rightly argues that comparing the battle of Verdun and intra-village club fight makes little sense (40). But we should always consider warfare's potential role (40), and, adding to this, "[t]hose who claim peace are under just as strong a requirement to demonstrate that peace existed as those who claim ancient warfare existed" (46). Who would disagree. Focusing on violence, he is also right, in principle, to emphasises that raiding was "every bit as deadly as 'true warfare'" (40). A broad definition of warfare is once again applied. The question arises what the implications are? That periods are distinct and have their own context? The notion that, "[g]iven these high death rates, the term 'warfare' is appropriate because of the consequences, not the methods." (42). At least to this reviewer this seems problematic. Perhaps in the end a comparison between prehistory and history is the issue here. Whatever we do with this, I can only agree with L, that we need to get beyond arguments whether or not there was warfare (56). The question remains if we can, with any kind of logic, compare the "warfare" of the deep past with what of let's say the ancient world?

Related to the debate about a pre-war(fare) vs. warfare, chapter five (Barry Molloy & Christian Horn) *Weapons, Warriors and Warfare in Bronze Age Europe*, begins as follows: "The Transformation of warfare in the Bronze Age was perhaps the most profound transformation in human history" (117; paradigm shift, 138). It was over the course of the second millennium BCE that weapons such as swords, shields, helmets, body armour etc. became common on the battlefield, however small or not they were. Skeletons with weapon-inflicted trauma is relatively common (132). We can perhaps acknowledge that a definition of *when war is a war* at least needs to be part of the reckoning. The thirteenth century BCE battlefield at Tollense (northern Germany) is an undoubtedly important

discovery. Perhaps thousands of warriors. This seems an unambiguous war-related pointing to a high level of sophistication (esp. 134).

In chapter six on the Iron Age, Peter Wells emphasises that the archaeological evidence and symbolic representation of violence is abundant (142). Outsider's views on people such as Gauls and Germans are mentioned (143: Caesar and Tacitus; cf. 156), but Wells adds that they are just that, the views of outsiders (143). He also suggests that at least during some of the period, warfare was conducted by small elite warrior units not substantial armies (144). On page 157 there is talk of large-scale military confrontations. It can only be large scale when compared to something else, something not large-scale. The basic idea is that, according to W there was little warfare before the Romans came (or evidence of such), but with the Romans it all changed. Direct evidence of battlefield violence is relatively sparse (153). One might indeed claim the same for much of the Greco-Roman period. Kalkriese and Teutoburg Forest are mentioned (9 CE) (154). Caesars' war in Gaul and the Augustan wars in Spain could also be mentioned. The Cantabrian Wars according to Cassius Dio (53.29.2) resulted in devastation of land. Battlefield archaeology seems to support what the ancient historiography writes. The oppidum of Monte Bernorio – a large hilltop fortification – was all but destroyed in connection with a Roman attack, most likely after battle (Fernández-Götz *et al.*, “The Battle at Monte Bernorio and the Augustan Conquest of Cantabrian Spain”, in Fernández-Götz & N. Roymans, eds., *Conflict Archaeology. Materialities of Collective Violence from Prehistory to Late Antiquity* [2018]). Even when accepting that Caesar and Tacitus were outsiders, W's sense of scale rests on them. He is looking for wars as described by Caesar and Tacitus and does not find them. But if the large-scale invasion of Caesar is an anomaly, where does that leave us?

Part 2, *Prehistoric and Ancient Warfare*, most inexplicably has two chapters on ancient Rome and no chapter on ancient Greece. Stanley Serafin claims that the Maya during the early classic period advertised their military success, “whether they themselves fought in actual battles or not” (204). This is most fascinating, but what does it in the end say about warfare? Chapter 10 by Steven Garfinkle is a fine chapter on Early Mesopotamia. It offers early evidence for some of the trends that are highly visible during the whole of the ancient world. Writing – such as royal inscriptions – is used to track the success in war (220). This is naturally also a question about legitimisation of the use of violence, a “divine mandate to eliminate violence at home and carry war abroad.” (224). Violence was concentrated in the hands of the leadership, the king (225). There were very few years of peace (235). The Assyrians, and later the Babylonians and Persians, created empires which helped support the system of patronage on which their powers rested (236).

Jonathan Roth in chapter 11 on the Roman way of warfare starts out of by describing the way scholars have approached Roman warfare from Mommsen and Frank, over Scullard, to Harris and later Eckstein. John Rich is strangely absent from the chapter even though *Fear, Greed and Glory: the Causes of the Roman War-making in the Middle Republic* (1993) is one of the most important and influential modern accounts on Roman imperialism. According to Roth, “[s]tories of warfare relating to the Early Republic must also be viewed critically” (240), and Livy is almost certainly inventing details of battles (241). What are the implications? If one aspect in Livy is wrong or the numbers are inflated, does that imply that the whole story is wrong. Whether Delbrück or Tarn, number games are never ever the whole story. R counters by emphasising that the rhetorical elements of battle descriptions (244). Historiography has for a long time been under the spell of the ‘literary turn’. It should indeed not surprise us that our sources controlled their narratives and tried to tell a story in a

specific way, but these texts must also be placed within their context. These works were indeed obviously the creations of their authors, but they were also produced at deliberate and usually significant historical moments. Historians could not merely rewrite the past, or episodes of it, as they saw fit and without any regard for evidence or verisimilitude (Roth, 249, accepts that rhetoric does not automatically mean false). The question as to whether Rome was different to other states and empires of the ancient world is always interesting (245), but what is the answer? “Historians frankly cannot state that Rome was excessively bellicose or less warlike, or indeed the same as the other societies of the time, or indeed, our own”. That is a slightly disappointing conclusion. As a postscript, the Late Republic is hastily brought to an end, without any real comments on its civil war nature. And there are sadly no naval battles neither here nor there. The same goes for the triumph.

Doug Lee – chapter 12 – on Late Antiquity begins, similar to Roth, by placing the discussions in a modern historiographical setting. He might also have included Henning Börm’s civil war approach, (civil war is briefly mentioned on page 261). With Peter Brown he sees normality more often than not. He concludes, “Military violence was endemic throughout Roman history, and so it would be unwise to try to draw too sharp a distinction between late antiquity and earlier periods” (274). This perhaps might have been much more firmly grounded in debates about internal struggles and civil war. Adding to this, we must accept that a relatively functioning political system and systemic breakdown at the same time was always a possibility (J. Freeman, *Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War* [2018]).

Part III, *Intimate and Collective Violence*, includes an article on gendered violence by Rebecca Redfern (chapter 15). She claims that whilst the military colonisation of Britain is often debated, other forms of violence are under-explored (329). This is of course to no small part due to our evidence. She also claims that “in the Roman world women’s bodies were considered to be less valuable” (332). This may however be slightly off the mark. McCurry thoughtfully concludes, “The writing out of women from histories of war reflects a deep investment in the gender order itself and a desire to limit the destructiveness of war.” ([2019], 205). The idea of women’s innocence and consequent need of protection is part of an inherent longstanding problem in the way scholars approach women in war, in ancient times and today. And adding to this, basically, the women of Rome’s enemies were of lesser value. The Boudican rebellion seems to similarly show that everybody committed atrocities (334). As Jörg Rüpke (*Domi Militiae. Die religiöse Konstruktion des Krieges in Rom* [1999], p.83) notes, the fundamental modern distinction in international law between combatants and the civilian population was of little importance when it came to booty.

Adding to what at least seem to be strange editorial decisions, the next two chapters are both written by Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, on Greek authors and the construction of the image of the powerful female barbarian (361). First, an interesting article on harem politicking at the Achaemenid court. Chapter 18 on violence against women in ancient Greece follows. There is indeed no reason for trying to make the Greeks nice (380) and the fact that there was no community intervention in violence against wives. “[D]efinitions of masculinity positively promote aggressive behaviour and dominance over women” (387). Challenging male authority (may often have) led to violence (396). The issue is both simple and disturbing for most of us. Domestic violence against women was so routine that it was not mentioned in the evidence (397).

Next Jefferey Tatum offers an overview of gang violence during the Late Republic. “In republican Rome the deployment of violence by private individuals was often necessary and routinely regarded

as respectable – so long as its frequency and intensity remained within socially manageable proportions.” (400). It is easy to agree, but having said that, what is *ante bellum* civil war violence and what is institutionalized violence? According to T, “[p]opular violence, and the use of gangs, persisted throughout the republic.” (410). I agree, but does our evidence? Certainly not always, or not when it came to political violence (see Lange, “Cassius Dio on Violence, Stasis, and Civil War: the Early Years”, in Burden-Strevens & Lindholmer, eds., *Cassius Dio’s Forgotten History of Early Rome: the Roman History Books 1-21* [2019]). 133 BCE becomes a false turning point (?). According to T our sources are more interested in civil war battles/combat and less so civilian struggles at home (415). This as may be, but if the Late Republic is portrayed as one civil war period, there is plenty of *ante bellum* or *stasis*-related violence throughout. In the end the idea of a spectrum of violence might have helped.

Part IV, *Religion, Ritual and Violence*, starts off with Ian Armit’s article on ritual violence and headhunting in Iron Age Europe. It discusses the (many!) problems of using Roman evidence in trying to understand the period. It seems that severed heads is a recurring phenomenon (454), and certainly one that gained traction during the civil war period of the Late Republic (severed heads on the Rostra of course were “common” during the Late Republic). As a brief personal afterthought, it is remarkable how much of the archaeological material from the period comes from Denmark (ships at Hjortspring and Nydam Mose, Roman military equipment at Illerup Ådal, the remains of warriors at Alken Enge, Grauballemanden and Tollundmanden with a noose around his neck, and so forth).

In the last article of part IV, Peter van Nuffelen offers an account on *Religious Violence in Late Antiquity*. Religious violence was nothing new during this period as duly noted by van N, highlighting the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BCE (512f). This involved the suppression of the cult—for religious or political reasons—but also, importantly, an interference in local allied affairs. There need of course not be a schism between politics and religion. Adding to this, van N challenges the ‘Constantinian turn’ as the moment when violence entered the church (514). This takes away from an understanding of religious violence in a wider history of violence (517).

Part 5 on *Violence, Crime and the State* begins with Matthew Trundle’s article on Athens. Violence on his account, “in whatever form, whether murder or ‘just’ verbal abuse, remains an enigmatic concept.” (546). Not everybody will agree that this is a helpful approach. Garrett Fagan follows up with Rome. He concludes that whilst warfare was endemic to the ancient world (552), one of their “signal achievements” was the several centuries of relative peace and security, “no mean achievement” (569). This however ignores the “dark side” of Roman expansion (M. Fernández-Götz, D. Maschek & N. Roymans, “The dark side of the Empire: Roman expansionism between object agency and predatory regime”, *Antiquity* 94 [2020]). *Res Gestae* 13 nicely sums up the basic Roman idea: “Our ancestors wanted Janus Quirinus to be closed when *peace had been achieved by victories* on land and sea throughout the whole empire of the Roman people”. F it should be said, nicely points out that where Rome was altogether different was their attitude to what constituted the community (552).

Part 6, *Representations and Constructions of Violence*, offers an article on the representations of war and violence in Rome by Susann S. Lusnia, but sadly not one on ancient Greece. L emphasises that violent images were intended to commemorate, moralise and even entertain (654). Enemy spoils were also often displayed in Roman houses (655-665). Looking at a public monument, “[v]iolent battles scenes did not adorn public monuments until the second century CE” (671) according to L. This is

however wrong. The Actium relief, recently identified as such by Thomas Schäfer, is a very conspicuous civil war monument (the Casa di Pilatos Relief/Medinaceli Relief) and has a battle scene including a sinking ship. Schäfer's much awaited publication is due soon. L also suggests that the Romans avoided to the direct commemoration of civil war and refrained from representing such battles on public monuments. The Arch of Constantine broke that custom (678). Again, this is I fear wrong. The Rome and Paris exhibitions showing the the Casa di Pilatos Relief/Medinaceli Relief took place in 2014, I write about the monument in 2016 (*Triumphs in the Age of Civil War*, epilogue). Adding to this, what about celebrations of civil war triumphs such as the famous joint ovation from 40 BCE, or monuments erected to remember civil war conflicts such as the Temple of Concord (Lucius Opimius, *cos.* 121 BCE), severed heads on the Rostra, the Temple of Clementia, the commemoration of the War dead after Mutina, the Mars Ultor temple, and so forth, did that all have nothing to do with commemorating civil war? Or what about the *Res Gestae*, an inscription set up in front of the Mausoleum of Augustus. An inscription that mentions *bellum civile* twice (3.1; 34.1). The begs the question, *when is a civil war monument a civil war monument.*

There is a lot of positives to take away from this volume, but conceptual vagueness is as so often a hindrance. Having said that, the idea of the volume and indeed the series is to be commended with its multiple perspectives and wide-ranging thematic treatments.