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THE MUNDANENESS OF WARRIORHOOD AND THE WARRIOR NARRATIVE



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Abstract. – The socialization process of the youth as warriors within communities is crucial in the construction of warriorhood and the subsequent social grouping of these individuals. However, most of these processes are tied to the everyday activities in the community, such as hunting, herding, scouting, inter-community feuds, and many other activities that serve as a doorway into warriorhood. These are often entangled with ideas of manhood, a sense of belonging, as well as events that push a community into conflict, or the threat of it. The point where these activities converge, and warriorhood is being moulded, are context-specific. However certain overarching principles emerge from archaeological, historical, and ethnographic sources. Notably, social groups serve as hubs for the construction, perpetuation, and legitimization of warrior identities and the socialization of individuals into violence. This paper will look at these mechanisms in the context of the Archaic Period in Macedonia, and will utilize historical texts on the matter, as well as studies carried out on warriors and weaponry in the area; in addition, it will bring forward comparisons with ethnographic studies on the subject, as well as archaeological studies conducted on northern and central European warriorhood. These comparisons are expected to shed light certain similarities in the practice of warriorhood, as well as to point out important context-driven particularities that can help in our understanding of warriorhood, and the socialization of warriors.

Key words. – warriorhood, weaponry, social groups, construction of identities, burial rituals, socialization.

The interpretation favoured in this study is not a warfare-centric one, nor is it a warrior-centric one. It will be argued that warriorhood was just a complementary part of people's lives, and, although at times definitive, this was not the general situation. Nonetheless, it was potent enough to remain an integral part, as will be shown below.

Warriorhood is not a monolith, and warriors are not a homogeneous group.¹ A distinction can be made between warriorhood as a social category, understood generally in the societies we study as a distinctive feature of people who engage in war and take on the role when necessary; and social groups that are a point of reference for warriors who use their group membership to further their own and their group's goals, while also understanding that the types of such groups and their membership dynamics can vary. Concerning the latter, it should be recognized that warriorhood can be a constituent part of the group's existence (e.g. restricted groups of men who hold political power and exercise it partly through participation in war), and a foundational part of that existence (e.g. warbands that recruit members for whom warfare is the primary concern).

In addition, the problematic understanding of funerary data as biography needs to be considered.² An approach looking at representations and what they can reveal about the place of warriorhood in the community instead of the lived experiences of particular buried individuals should generally be taken as the driving principle in warrior studies, especially those looking into "burials as warriors".³ Therefore, "warriorhood" becomes the analytical category, and not the individual warriors themselves.

"Warrior" is an umbrella term for those who engage in warlike activities and was defined as those who are "enfranchised to engage in war",⁴ have access to weaponry, and are categorized by others and among themselves as such.⁵ Warriorhood has many faces and depends on organizational (soldier, mercenary) and cultural practices (Spartan hoplites, Macedonian Companions), as well as different contexts on the ground (state armies, royal retinues, rebel fighters, territorial militias). At particular spatio-temporal instances, these can become entangled.

In addition, symbolic representations of warriorhood, both during life and in death/burial, are also closely related to gender⁶ and status expressions. A good point of reference can be taken from classical studies of Ancient Greece, such as the work of Hans van Wees, who proposes that the decline of the custom of "bearing iron" led to the alterations in the performance of masculinity in Athens, which, prior to that, was tightly knit

¹ For a wider discussion on definitions of warriorhood and warfare, based on examples from the Iron Age and the Archaic period in Macedonia, see: Stefanovski 2023.

² The problem of using weaponry as proof of warriorhood is well researched: Whitley 2002, 219; Georganas 2018, 195. An approach that recognises that not only practicing warriors were buried as such, and looking at representations instead of biography is encouraged.

³ Molloy 2010, 412

⁴ Molloy 2012, 88.

⁵ Stefanovski 2023, 187.

⁶ Weaponry is often used by archaeologists as a gender identifier, which can sometimes be misleading. Thus, when we discuss models of burial rituals and assign gender based on the few overlaps between anthropological and archaeological evidence, we probably miss cases where the norms were not followed.

with weaponry.⁷ While in Athens the change meant attitudes toward the public display of weaponry and burials as warriors may have declined as a consequence,⁸ in other parts of the Aegean there might have been a different development. Could it be that a similar custom prevailed in the northern Aegean and its northern hinterland? The custom itself is a very good depiction of the theoretical model of warriorhood as a social category. The bearing of arms is both a political statement by the person who has the right to bear them, and a performance of manhood, which, in this case, is interwoven with both warriorhood and political rights – with “citizenship”, for lack of a better word.

Van Wees argues that the increasing importance of wealth in Athens led to different symbols of status, switching to representations of leisure instead of military prowess.⁹ Still, warriorhood probably remained a tool for the legitimization of social groups ascribed status by birth.¹⁰ If we assume that similar attitudes toward “bearing iron” and manhood or political status existed in other areas of the Balkan Peninsula, then the continuation of “burials as warriors” and depictions of men with weaponry in art (most notably in Macedonian tombs from the Classical and Hellenistic period) would explain the tendency toward kingship in the northern Aegean, as well as the importance of aristocracy.¹¹

The mundaneness of warriorhood

In our efforts to better understand how this would look in practice, a comparison made by van Wees is a good start:

From c. 650–500 BC, the role of spears may have been roughly analogous to that of guns in the mountain villages of modern Crete: most of the time, men do not actually carry them, but these weapons are a source of pride and may therefore be taken out and displayed in public if the occasion seems to demand it. A cloaked man with a spear in Greek art, then, is no more (and no less) a symbolic figure than a Cretan shepherd with a machine gun or pistol posing to have his picture taken.¹²

⁷ “Bearing iron” is a custom described by Thucydides (1.5.3–6.3) of men carrying weapons (iron) in public. These weapons were mainly swords (fastened on the hip) or spears (used as walking sticks).

⁸ Wees 1998, 338.

⁹ Wees 1998, 352.

¹⁰ Wees 1998, 369.

¹¹ In his analysis of status in capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, Turner identifies several aspects of great interest to archaeological inquiries into warriorhood and “warrior” burial rituals. Status can be understood as having three dimensions: political, economic, and lifestyle, positioned horizontally, such as one’s standing and role in society, and vertically, such as social stratification. Another attribute of societies where birth-right plays a role is a tendency toward militaristic social organization. Turner 1988, 20.

¹² Wees 1998, 357.

The example points to the bearing of weapons as not only a marker of manhood, but as integral to its performance, and it also grounds the theoretical in the everyday and mundane. The Cretan with the machine gun has parallels all over the world, especially in other Balkan countries such as North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, etc. Using it as a model for the understanding of an ancient custom is appropriate, not because of cultural continuity but because of its universality.

Warriorhood is a combination of everyday activities and life practices related to inter-community combat, as well as other aspects of intra-community social life, such as feuding, political power dynamics and ritual, and it sometimes functions as a mechanism of coercion. These dynamics are also not static but may shift depending on local particularities and historical contexts. Here, it is important to note that the use of weaponry and warrior praxis exists outside of military conflict as well, especially in societies where self-help instead of state institutions is the way through which violent conflicts are resolved within communities.¹³ While dependent on particular contexts, it can be expected that a general lack of state control existed in the societies studied here, much like what is envisioned in the Greek city states. Therefore, weaponry, and its inclusion in everyday attire, serves as the means through which self-help is practised. Occasions where this would be required include the intra-group conflicts mentioned above.

The socialization of members of a community into warriorhood, with all its particularities in the expression and practice of it, is the process through which warriors are made. While this can be very context-specific, several guiding principles can be extracted from archaeological, historical and ethnographic sources. This is the existence of various forms of fraternities, or warrior brotherhoods, that become the assembly point where warriorhood is being constructed, maintained, displayed, and legitimized. Vandkilde's various studies of this matter outline the role of such "institutions" in the entire process of this violent socialization, or socialization into violence.¹⁴

While her work is predominantly concerned with the implications of such groups in Bronze Age Europe, the basic principles are translatable in other spatio-temporal contexts, as well. Her overview of sources that allude to the existence of such "institutions" (Gefolgsschaft, Männerbund), such as Tacitus' *Germania*, and epics, such as *Beowulf* and *The Iliad*, show similarities that span geographical and chronological boundaries. This cross-cultural aspect of society centres around reciprocal codes of conduct between a group of people and a war leader, and serves as a point of interaction that brings many members of a community (predominantly men)

¹³ Vlassopoulos, Xydopoulos 2017, 5.

¹⁴ Vandkilde 2018.

into close communication,¹⁵ out of which mechanisms of status acquisition and the legitimization of power are developed.

The importance of warrior social groups

Vandkilde recognizes three separate ways (although not always mutually exclusive, and always expected to have some connection to gender, as well) of determining eligibility for warriorhood: age, merit, and social status.¹⁶ The first corresponds with societies where males are expected to fulfil that role from a certain age, up to the point when they take over other roles as older men. These societies have a less visible separation of warriorhood and manhood. The second relates to societies where warrior institutions recruit their members from the population based on their expected contribution to it. Such warrior clubs¹⁷ regulate affairs through codes of conduct which bind their sub-community, and they are expected to have a type of hierarchy where the war leader and his followers negotiate their place in it by their interactions conducted in warfare. The third is more closely aligned with Turner's view of the militaristic societies that ascribe status on birth, and where the warriors are recruited from a restricted social group, which is separated from the rest of the population.

These observations can very easily be synchronised with the approach taken here. The first corresponds with the state of affairs recognized in most Iron Age communities in the area, and overlaps with warriorhood as a social category. The second is where warriorhood has a central and foundational place in the existence of the group, while the third can be understood along the lines of social groups where warriorhood is only one of the aspects that bind the group (i.e. a constituent part).¹⁸

In the case of the last two, we recognize social groups, as well as the steps in which categorization leads to group formation and the construction of warriorhood. Combat training and the shared martial experience leads to a natural clustering of the participants, which may or may not result in the formation of social groups, or even institutions to regulate these activities. The social capital due to engagement in military affairs is not restricted to the journeymen warriors who devoted their lives to warfare and who belonged to warrior clubs. It also extends to others, seasonal warriors who took part in warfare, when necessary, both out of their own initiative and in cases of coercion.

Additionally, looking at this division as a spectrum instead of as rigid categories would be beneficial, since there can be overlaps where features

¹⁵ Vandkilde 2018, 234.

¹⁶ Vandkilde, 2006, 399.

¹⁷ Vandkilde (2006, 398) defines warrior clubs as "institutionalised warbands, which are interest groups with a warlike aim."

¹⁸ Stefanovski 2023, 187.

are being shared. Finally, different groups with multiple expressions of warriorhood can be expected to coexist.

Previously, the detection of social categories in the archaeological record was outlined by looking at the Iron Age burials in Macedonia and the connections that are visible with manhood. The question then arises: How do we detect social groups? This is especially difficult to answer when we recall that group membership is rarely exclusive, and individuals can associate themselves with many collectives simultaneously.

While the current data available to us does not permit a very detailed overview of the various social groups that may have existed, the archaeological remains do reveal glimpses into the construction of an “elite social group”, which, in the region under question, was achieved by incorporating ideals of war and weaponry. This is nothing new and has been a feature of archaeological studies throughout the decades, and while an unbalanced amount of attention was given to these “elite” burials, it remains a topic where certain questions can be resolved.

A notable feature of some of these burials is the inclusion of feasting equipment and banquets, which represent a kind of “warrior barbecues”.¹⁹ This combination of weaponry, precious metals, drinking, and, in some cases, grooming tools, can be seen in other spatio-temporal contexts, as well, and is a familiar pattern of warrior representations.²⁰ We can confidently say that not all these burials depicted ones of actual practicing warriors, as some of them were simply too young.²¹

However, the social groups that produced these burials did infuse together symbolic representations of status (hereditary, kinship, and wealth-based). Even though not everyone buried participated in combat, the burial as a warrior indicates their belonging to a group, who is expected to and has the legitimate right to do so, and be represented in such a manner.²²

Construction of warriorhood

The body, attire and weaponry are the external markers of warriorhood,²³ woven together with ideological and practical aspects of a warrior’s lifeway. The representations of warriorhood we observe in the funerary data outline the difference between “warrior function” and “warrior identity”, the former attached to combatants, the latter to a social role or persona.²⁴ The presence of weapons in a grave may not always indicate a

¹⁹ Saripanidi 2017, 101; 2019, 188.

²⁰ Stefanovski 2024, 74.

²¹ Saripanidi 2019.

²² Stefanovski 2024, 75.

²³ Treherne 1995, 111; Molloy 2012, 89.

²⁴ Anderson 2018, 219.

combatant, but the constructed persona of a warrior,²⁵ thus making the weapon an indicator of a symbolic identity.²⁶

“Burials as warriors” are not only a source for archaeologists to understand warriorhood, but also one of the places where it was constructed and reproduced in past communities. Symbols of war are utilised with the intention of drawing a connection between it and the person buried, often because of, but sometimes despite the lived experience of the individual. This is done in a number of cases because of the strong gender associations of warriorhood and manhood. What we are left in the end is an assemblage that shows the social interactions of the people burying the individual, their coping mechanisms, glimpses into their ideology, and relationships formed through the material interred.²⁷

In this sense, burials are one of the events where the reproduction of warriorhood and the ensured continuity of traditions (or attitudes toward war) take place. The funeral can also serve as a medium for the legitimization of warriorhood as a valid aspect of human life, normalizing violence, and even venerating the use of weapons and notions of glory and warrior deeds.

During such events, narratives of war were constructed, binding the community²⁸ around the notions of its idealized protectors and reinforcing them by turning the graves into monuments, an idealized representation – a ‘re-presentation’ of the individual by the community. Furthermore, these events also serve as a focus for the socialization of new generations into the existing system. As a place where ideas of “us” against the “others” prevail (always very much present in narratives and memories of war), their potential for being used in propaganda in existing political dynamics should not be underestimated.

The burials of rulers, and, in some cases, members of closely related “elites”, have an added importance, as they sometimes serve as places where the community negotiates its own identity and relations to the “others”. The Trebenishte burials – and this can be extended to similar findings in the Ohrid area and beyond – have been interpreted as attempts by an elite to legitimize and assert itself within a network of interactions between communities.²⁹ Burials, in that sense, become one of the places and events where structures, relationships and institutions were built, transformed and negotiated.³⁰

²⁵ Härke 1990, 43.

²⁶ Anderson 2018, 220.

²⁷ Pitman, Doonan 2018, 122

²⁸ Verdery 1999, drawing on Hertz 1960, points to how burials reaffirm the political community of those who are oriented toward them, binding the audience of mourners through their connection to the deceased.

²⁹ Babić, Palavestra 2018, 189

³⁰ Oestigaard, Goldhahn 2006, 28.

The warrior narrative

Warriors are primarily expected to be able to fight with weaponry. Perhaps surprisingly, killing, an activity expected to be abundant in times of war, comes second. Previous research shows that warriors have a very difficult time killing other humans, and when they do, it takes a toll on their mental health.³¹ In order to increase their willingness and ability to kill, warriors are socialized into violence from childhood by legitimizing its use and tying it to other aspects of their identity.³² This is especially successful with the socializations of men, where war, violence and manhood are often tightly knit together from a young age.³³

Despite all this, killing remains difficult, and the actual deed is performed far less in war than expected. Molloy and Grossman remind us that during World War II soldiers showed a remarkably low willingness to kill (between 80 and 85% admitted to not shooting at actual targets) when seeing their opponent, and they argue that such statistics should be expected from ancient warriors as well.³⁴ Preparing humans to kill on demand, and with efficiency, is quite complex: physical training is required for the practical deed, and psychological preparation to make men perform the act repeatedly, and on orders.

While the former is straightforward – and much has been written regarding the possible training routines of ancient warriors, as well as the efficiency of their equipment – not much attention is paid to how young men were indoctrinated into the killers they were required to be in an era of combat characterized by close-range engagement.

One space that combines both the physical and the psychological needs of warriors and young men is the so-called “brotherhoods” or “warrior clubs”. These groups of people not only share a certain lifeway, or, in cases of a better organization of common goals, they represent a nexus in which mutual relationships shape identities. They are places where the practical aspects of warriorhood are learnt and performed; the symbolic vocabulary is negotiated and used in the process of social categorization and grouping, and the socio-economic relations among members, which spring from war, take place.

The sense of belonging these groups offer not only plays a role in the construction of warriorhood, manhood or other identities, but they also provide remedies for the troubles and horrors of war, as well. In a way, violence, and with it the horror of war, is perpetuated by the same structure that shields and alleviates the actors from such perils. Failing to consider this aspect of ancient warriorhood can be detrimental, since by

³¹ Molloy, Grossman 2007.

³² Vandkilde 2015, 608.

³³ Resic 2006, 424.

³⁴ Molloy, Grossman 2007, 196.

ignoring the suffering (of victims and perpetrators alike) we end up sterilizing warfare and warriorhood.³⁵

It should not be assumed that these remedies have always been successful, nor at all comparable to contemporary methods of dealing with aggression, PTSD, and other ailments of war. Rather, what can be recognized is an attempt to provide temporary relief from such interactions through feasting, drinking, sports, and camaraderie. Other features of these groups would be to prepare individuals for conflict and create a mechanism of punishment and reward regarding acceptable and non-acceptable modes of conduct.³⁶ Additionally, other activities, such as hunting, can also be made to serve a similar purpose by way of initiation and coming of age rituals.³⁷

“Burials as warriors” in the Lower Vardar area point to a practice of marking individuals as people enfranchised to bear weapons, but not setting them apart in any other way from the rest of the population. Nevertheless, the inclusion of weaponry, on the one hand, stands in contrast with its omission, on the other, often along gender lines.³⁸

Burials during the Late Archaic Period in the Haliakmon-Axios, Pelagonia-Ohrid, and, to a certain extent, the Lower Vardar and Upper Vardar regions were building on already established Iron Age traditions, ones where manhood and warriorhood were fused, and where the ideologies in question reached a certain everyday practical connotation and mundaneness.³⁹

However, existing wealth-based status differences enhanced the veneration of these war-related aspects. Not only was the enfranchisement to bear weapons important, but the role of the warrior started gaining increased relevance. Representations of warriorhood became more elaborate, and weapons became more than heraldic devices connected to warfare and were modified to present the wealth status of a part of the population. This was done by gilding weapons with gold and silver, paying increased attention to the decoration of helmets and swords, accentuating accompanying features of “men of war”, such as drinking, barbecues, and the overall iconography of a violent and war-centric past.

In the meantime, older practices continued to exist, and the disproportionate attention placed on the so-called “elite” burials comes from the increased attention placed on them during and after excavation. Regardless, a satisfying conclusion is possible: the available data shows the burials, and, out of that, the part of the population who were buried as

³⁵ Vandkilde, 2013, 41.

³⁶ Helbling 2006, 117.

³⁷ Chausidis 2005.

³⁸ Stefanovski 2023, 190.

³⁹ Stefanovski 2023, 106.

warriors, were not divided by stark lines. Instead, a gradual scale is visible, ranging from burials with only one spear to those in full gear.⁴⁰

Representations of warriorhood were not standalone but were integrated into an already established system of identities and mortuary rituals. Just as the inclusion of a single weapon into assemblages follows the community's general guidelines for a mortuary ritual, warriorhood was woven into already existing attitudes toward gender and access to weaponry. Therefore, a "warrior" was an organic part of the community, and this role was performed in accordance with practices established by the community, where it did not stand apart as a separate identity. The data do not allow us to go into too much detail regarding those practices, at least off the battlefield, since we lack an emic perspective.⁴¹

While the Late Archaic Period sees a rise in weaponry being used as a symbol of wealth-based status, this did not mean that warriors rose to the higher echelons of those societies. First, the representations of warriorhood seen in previous centuries are still seen to coexist with elite burials. Out of this comes the second observation: people who already had wealth and who subscribed to the same attitudes toward war, gender and access to weaponry enacted the same process in burials that reflected the rest of their community. In other words, burials which show signs of significant wealth, with or without weapons, follow the same patterns, with the weaponry being the only differentiating factor.

However, it must be stressed that it is perhaps at this time that those same so-called "elites" manipulated the symbols of war to legitimize their role in society and to further the goals of their social groups. This was achieved not only by infusing weaponry with wealth (high craftsmanship, imports, golden and silver gilding), but also by engaging in specific lifestyles and activities in real life that placed them at the heart of armed conflict. This was discussed previously through the historical sources and the mention of several special types of military units which we know were assembled from those higher echelons of society (e.g. the Macedonian Companions). In addition, evoking a "heroic past" is intrinsically a violent and war-centric activity.

There is no single warrior narrative, nor any one single universal warriorhood. Rather, it is a matter of different combinations and pieces used in the narrative's construction and its performance that can be recognized in the archaeological data from the area.⁴²

⁴⁰ Stefanovski 2023, 128.

⁴¹ For a broader discussion of emic perspectives in archaeology, in regard to research of ideologies, and especially concerning ethnicities, see Stefanovski 2024.

⁴² The weaponry from the area has been the subject of several cumulative works, both taking the wider region in consideration such as: Filipovic 2017, Angeolovski 2018, Verchik 2014; as well as catalogues of individual necropolises where weaponry is prominent: Mitrevski 1997, Kilian 1975, Bräuning, Kilian-Dirlmeier 2013. The regional division used in this paper

The argument presented here shows that the inclusion of weaponry in burials and the presence of war should not be seen as signs of a warrior-centric society, but rather of societies where war was normalized, performed and reproduced through its inclusion in the mundaneness of human life and death. In addition, burials were places where such an ideology was enacted, and warriorhood was reproduced and negotiated, even in cases where those being buried were not actual warriors themselves.

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comes from the author's previous meta-analysis Stefanovski 2023) of the geographical region of Macedonia, dividing it in four separate areas: Lower Vardar, Upper Vardar, Pelagonia-Ohrid and Haliacmon-Axios, each referring to the geographic landmarks that constitute their names. The research and arguments presented here is derived from the aforementioned analysis.

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