

War without battlefields: Investigating Violence and Conflict in Neolithic Europe

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Conflict and interpersonal violence are as old as humanity itself, but its nature and prevalence has undergone considerable changes over time. Well-known evidence of conflict within Neolithic society include the mass graves from Talheim in Baden-Württemberg, multiple burials from Eulau in Saxony-Anhalt and the mass-fatality site of Asparn-Schletz in Lower Austria. These high-profile cases document larger-scale violent events but do not tell us how common violent interaction during the Neolithic really was. Are we looking at something exceptional during a period otherwise characterised by relatively low levels of violence? Was violence only affecting those who happened to be caught up in these events or something that people experienced on a broader scale? To answer this question, a population-based, cross-regional analysis of non-accidental cranial trauma was carried out, analysing the remains of over 1000 individuals from Neolithic Germany, Denmark and Sweden. Results indicate interesting regional and temporal variations in the nature and severity of violent interaction and provide evidence for varying scales of conflict. Most importantly, violence during this period appears to have been endemic – although we do not find battlefields, violent conflict would have been very commonly experienced by both individuals and settlement groups living in Neolithic Europe.

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