On War on Board
– Introduction

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A sunken battlefield

On May 31, 1564, the Swedish king Erik XIV’s newly built flagship Mars sank to the northeast of the island of Öland in the southern Baltic Sea having taken part in a naval battle against a joint fleet of ships from Denmark and the town of Lubeck. Named after the Roman god of war, this huge warship was constructed with high fighting castles to the fore and aft and was armed with around 120 guns. During the battle, Mars became surrounded by two enemy ships and was subsequently boarded. During the hand-to-hand fighting on deck, the ship started to burn and exploded violently after a while. A witness’ testimony by the captured Swedish admiral Jakob Bagge describes how the foremost flew high up in the air, and the ship then quickly sank to the bottom, leaving just a large ghostly cloud of yellow-brown smoke and steam above the water.

Today, the remains of Erik XIV’s great warship lie in the dark of the sea bottom at a depth of 70 metres. More than 450 years have passed since the ship sank dramatically, but evidence of the violent battle is clearly distinguishable in the light of the dive lamps. The large oak timbers that held together the heavy hull are sooty and marked by fire. Between the gaping gun ports in the side, the damage from projectiles is visible. Most of the front section is missing due to an explosion that occurred when the fire reached the powder store causing the foremost to shoot up in the air.

Among the burned timber and objects are many guns of various sizes. A few of them are made of iron, rusted and corroded, but most are of bronze. Some have a serial number and the royal Vasa monogram engraved on the barrel. Several of the large guns are broken and appear to have exploded from the heat of the fire. There are also bone remnants of the approximately 800 sailors and soldiers who died in the battle. Their last hour at sea was clearly turbulent with overwhelming noise, smoke and flying splinters, besides the heat and fire (see Eriksson & Rönnby 2015).

The sight of the material traces gives rise to questions and reflections about warfare. In a battle situation such as this, how can people be moti-
vated to work and function practically? Why do the gunners remain at their posts in the smoke and the noise and continue to systematically handle the guns instead of running away to protect themselves? What is it that makes it possible for humans to jump aboard a burning enemy ship while the crew of that ship armed with knives, pikes and axes are doing their best to kill them? Why do these kinds of events seem to have followed us through history and keep on repeating themselves?

The ambition of this volume is to investigate questions that the encounter with sites like Mars creates. It concerns specific topics directly connected to battlefield situations. The anthology is perhaps most of all, however, about the human organization of and attitudes towards systematic violence and warfare. How to describe, analyse and understand the human experience of war?

The book is a cooperation between archaeologists and historians from several countries. The starting point for the study was a research project “Ships at War” financed by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies based at Södertörn University. Besides archaeological investigations of a handful of shipwrecks, the aim of the project was to raise some more general historical and humanistic questions related to old warships. Furthermore, a workshop with this theme was held at Västervik Museum during the spring of 2017 where the project research group was augmented by external researchers with similar interests.

The authors of the articles in this volume have selected different ways to discuss and explore subjects connected to warfare, based on their expertise and research interests. A common denomination in the papers is however the nautical context, the historical perspective and the time period in focus, the early modern period.

Why a historical perspective?

Using a historical and archaeological perspective for approach questions related to war in general, human behaviour on a battlefield or the ability to kill other humans, is truly not the easiest or most obvious way. Direct observations or talking to people with first-hand experience of conflict and violence, give insights and details that no historical document or archaeological remains can ever provide. In addition, if one wants to study the tools, the technology of war and the material conditions involved, there is certainly no lack of examples in our contemporary world.

However, what a historical perspective possibly can bring is an opportunity to compare our contemporary knowledge of systematic violence with
war equipment, behaviour and events from a completely different cultural context in history. Such a perspective allows both the specific and the general aspects of warfare to emerge more clearly. Cultural and social aspects can be made visible (compare so-called thick descriptions in anthropology, Geertz 1991).

A well-known problem in social sciences and humanities is that it is difficult to understand, or even recognise, behaviours and events just when they are part of our contemporary world. It is only afterwards that they can emerge and be understood as parts of more general structures and patterns. The Russian author Leo Tolstoy uses this argument in 1865, half a century after the Napoleonic Wars, when he analyses the mechanisms of war in his epilogue to *War and Peace* (Tolstoy 1959:80ff, 1968, see also Tingsten 1958:11–26, von Wright 1994:240ff). Tolstoy’s viewpoint on warfare is expressed in the novel by the Russian general Kutuzov’s fatalistic attitude to his own personal importance for the outcome of the bloody battle at Borodino 1812. Wars and battles are unpredictable for the people involved, including emperors, and are instead described to be determined by very complex historical circumstances. Also, according to Tolstoy, the further back in history we examine an event, the wider our perspective is, the less important single actors or “great men” turn out to be.

The specific historical perspective in this book, the early modern period, was also a time when there were unusually large dramatic changes in power structure, shipbuilding and war technology. The Renaissance led to new thoughts concerning many aspects of war, especially regarding societal organization and the importance of the individual. During this period, the Reformation changed the roll of Christian religion, and all over Europe there was a strong state-building process taking place. As far as naval ship development is concerned, this was also an unrivalled period. The warships at the end of the 15th century became bigger and more powerful and started to sail long distances all around the globe. During the 16th and 17th centuries the navies and the warships developed into the leading tool for most of the new states in Europe, used for exploration, conquest and power domination (see Glete 2000, 2002, but also for example Parker 1988). Therefore, the preconditions for discussing the role of maritime material culture and new naval technology in relation to power, ideology, war and violence is unusually good in relation to the early modern period, especially in a perspective where one considers the “social” to consist of a dialectical web of acting humans and material “pre-consequences” (see Adams & Rönby this volume).
Although, of course, we cannot today understand and reach all aspects of a past society, but we have from our 21st century perspective an opportunity to position both maritime battlefields, expressions of power and old ideological structures. We can put ships, weapons, clothes and various human attitudes associated with warfare during the early modern period in a wider historical as well as in a more general context. For example, regarding the wrecking of Mars the 31 May 1564, we can view the specific occasion in the past from our perspective in the present. We then know not only the historical context of the events, but we also know now how these events relate to King Erik’s ambition in general and not least what happened later.

On the study of war

War as a field of study is enormous and of course impossible to summarize in a just way. There are also various possible perspectives. War can be analysed from a strategic, historical, sociological, moral or other point of view. This makes the study of war a subject where one can find strict military theory but also anthropological conclusions and philosophic thoughts. This possible variation of perspectives is in fact also demonstrated in this book and the different authors’ choice of subject.

The interest in the topic of war is very old. An early example of a systematic analysis of warfare is found in texts which are usually interpreted as belonging to the Chinese general Sun Zi. His book “The Art of War” was probably written around 500 BC (Cleary 2005). The general’s almost rational analysis of the structure and the different aspects of war, to be used for practical warfare and strategy, have been a common way of dealing with the subject, used at military academies and by military thinkers throughout history (Widén & Ångström 2005:19ff).

Almost contemporary with Sun Zi, the Greek historian Herodotus’s (484–425 BC) work on the Persian War is another well-known example of early writing on warfare. It is from Herodotus that we best know the famous battles at Marathon in 490 BC, at Thermopylae in 480 BC and the sea battle of Salamis the same year. Herodotus claims that 300–400 Persians ships were lost in the battle of Salamis. Another classic, ancient study of historical war is by Thucydides (460–397 BC); his book is about the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens during the late 4th century BC.

In addition, more specific theoretical ideas regarding naval warfare have a long story going back to these ancient Chinese and Greek authors. A central theme regarding maritime warfare has been the concept of “sea power”.

This is mentioned by the Athens commander at Salamis, Themistocles (527–460 BC), but also later by Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and the famous naval historian Julian Corbett during the early 20th century. In brief, the doctrine can be said to stress the importance of controlling the sea. In that way one does not control just transport routes and the economy, but also the war as such (Widén & Ångström 2005:211–242, Speller 2014:1–11, Widen 2012).

The concept of having power over the sea and the actual state formed as a *thallasokratia* (“Sea based state”) is also highly relevant when discussing the role of the fleet and the warships in the Baltic area during the early modern period. Just as the Romans once regarded the Mediterranean as an important arena of dominion, so did the early states of Denmark and Sweden, by formulating their ambitions as “Dominium maris baltici”. This was also one of the reasons why Erik XIV, with his desire to expand the country, was building the great new ship *Mars Makalös* (“Matchless”) in 1563. During the 17th century and Sweden’s “Great Power Era,” the control of the Baltic was essential for keeping the empire together (see, for example, Glete 2000, Asker 2005).

The most well-known study regarding warfare of all time may, however be the Prussian, general Carl von Clausewitz’s (1780–1831) work, *On War* (Vom Kriege). Clausewitz’s work is complex and deals systematically with many aspects connected to warfare, combining philosophical, historical and strategic arguments. Perhaps his most widely known conclusion is that war is just a continuation of politics (von Clausewitz 1997, Johansson 1988:24–48).

Clausewitz was however, not the first to link war to politics. One of the most important political philosophers in the beginning of the early modern period was Niccole Machiavelli (1468–1527), and war is a central theme in his production. In his famous book *The Prince* written in 1513, he argues that a successful ruler’s first and most important mission is warfare and its organization (1993:73). How early modern warfare best should be organized is also discussed in his “Dell’arte della Guerra” (Art of War) from 1520 (2014).

Living in renaissance Florence it is not surprising that Machiavelli connected to practices in the prosperous old Roman legions both regarding organization and tactics. Machiavelli’s suggestion for the ruler is to organize a state militia and trust armed citizens instead of just paid mercenaries. This form of military organization can be seen in Sweden for example, in the recruitment of soldiers and seaman for King Gustav Vasa’s new army and fleet in the 1530s but also later, in the wars of the 17th century, in the young country’s development of an organized system for enlisting new soldiers in
the armed forces. To get this new system to work, however, was rather complicated and required negotiations and agreements with the public and their leaders (see Hallenberg & Holmberg 2017, Neudin Skoog 2019).

In a post-medieval Europe with growing armies and navy fleets which gathered men from very different strata, training, drilling and classification was becoming more and more necessary (see Sjöblom 2016). Kings and military innovators during this time could find theoretical arguments and justifications for their efforts and demands in Machiavelli’s work.

The face of battle

For people directly involved in battles or on-board ships involved in fighting, war of course is very different from military and political strategy, theoretical modelling and philosophical reflections about the nature of war.

From later warfare there are rather many books written by people who have personally taken part in the fighting. For example, in Erik Maria Remarque’s famous descriptions of being a soldier in the muddy trenches on the western front during WWI, and in Veinnö Linna’s novel about fighting in east Finland during the winter war of 1942, we meet the reflections, feelings and everyday life of war from a participant soldier’s perspective (Remarque 1972, Linna 1955). Historians, of course, are also able to collect stories from people involved and then organize and analyse them. Peter Englund, in The Beauty and the Sorrow of War, has sampled different short stories and destinies and edited them together. In this way he can give both an individual and a collective description of the Great War from 1913 to 1917 (Englund 2011).

The special insight that can emerge when this kind of individual experience is presented as part of larger collective is demonstrated in Nobel prize winner Svetlana Aleksijevitj’s books about World War II and the Soviet war in Afghanistan, The Unwomanly Face of War (2012) and Boys in Zink (2014). The first book also gives a unique presentation of the experiences of female soldiers on the front and in the Red army during 1939–1945. Their personal stories show that the bravery, fear and sorrow connected to fighting and killing were the same for them as for their male colleagues. The difference for the women soldiers was the attitudes and structures in the society around them. This was something they seem to have had in common with women taking part in other wars earlier in history (see also Larsdotter 2016, Bourke 2016 and last chapter this book).
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An interesting exception regarding older, first-hand sources from the early modern period is the mercenary Peter Hagendof’s diary from the 30 Years’ War. During more than two decades, 1625–1649, he served as a soldier, mostly in the Emperor’s army but also in the Swedish army for a period. His book describes marchers and field camps, but also how he got married, how new-born children died, how cities were plundered and, rather occasionally, also how some battles were fought. In comparison to Remarque and Linna, Peter Hagendorf is, however surprisingly short and neutral in his tone. It is hard to believe that this tone mirrors a totally different attitude to the horrors of war; most likely it is a result of another tradition of writing (Petters 2006).

Written descriptions about naval battles from the early modern period are in most cases rather short reports without any ambition to recount details from the actual fighting on board. One exception is however from Oliwa 1627, when the Admiral Nils Stiernsköld’s ship Tigern was boarded by Polish soldiers. The source describes how the Admiral himself was hit by several small shots, one in his back and one in his neck, and how after that a gunshot ripped his left arm from his body. A similar thing also happened to his servant Mats, whose arm bones were smashed by a shot, so his arm was just hanging on his body by the skin.

During the first half of the 17th century there is a transformation regarding the tactics of fighting on board. The old tactic of boarding the enemy ships is replaced by the tactic of firing the guns from a distance and sailing in a line formation. A description of the horror one could meet on board during such a fight exists from the battle of Hogland in 1788, related by Friedrich Hjerta Larssons. The battle lasted for hours. There is noise, smoke and confusion, and some of the iron shots kill several people, one after another, when they flee over the deck. The crew steps in blood and brain tissue and parts of skull bones are stuck in the sides of the ship. The bodies of the dead are continually thrown over the side (see Höglund forthcoming).

Visiting the battlefield

It is a challenge for a historian or archaeologist to make credible depictions of how people really experience war. There is, despite that, however several attempts to use a participant perspective when writing about historical warfare and battles. A work that is often mentioned in this context is John Keegan’s book Face of Battle (1978). He describes in this book three different battles, Somme in 1916, Waterloo in 1815 and Agincourt in 1415.
George Duby’s *Legend of Bouvines* (1990) is a similar study of a single event, even though the focus is on how the 1214 battle of Bouvines has been used in French national ideology. In his book about the knight and nobleman Wilhelm Marshal, the same author gives an interesting insight into the world and mentality of 13th century power and warrior culture (Duby 1987). The Swedish Army’s marches, rallies and hardships during the 17th century’s great continent wars have also been portrayed in close detail several times by Peter Englund (1993, 2000, 2011, 2013).

A skilled researcher and author can use his general knowledge and his own experience as a human being to understand and describe the situation on a historic battlefield. Nevertheless, this kind of work needs to rely on detailed written source material, to prevent them from turning into pure fiction (which, like visual art, can also have a great value for understanding humans in war, but is different from the one gained through historical research).

An additional way to enrich descriptions and the “hermeneutic interpretation” is to use archaeological methods. When doing battlefield archaeology, one can investigate the place where something happened and the remains that may be left. This work can shed light on details during a particular battle but can also be seen as a more general study of the materialization of war (for an overview regarding battlefield archaeology, see Sutherland 2005, Scott et al. 2000). Experimental archaeology, technical analyses and even re-enactment can also fill in details and give new insights (see Hocker this volume).

A special opportunity for a deeper understanding additionally emerges when written sources describing the battle can be combined with archaeological material from the place. A well-known study of this kind has been conducted at Little Big Horn in Montana. The field archaeological investigations have given a new, detailed perspective of General Custer’s defeat in 1878, known in traditional American history as Custer’s last stand (Scott 2000). A similar kind of critical battlefield study has been done by the archaeologist Tomas Englund at the inlet to Stockholm at Stäket. He has been able to tell a new story regarding the fight here between Swedish defenders and amphibian Russian troops 1719 (Englund 1995).

On the sunken battlefield of Mars (1564), there is a possibility to combine sources for a closer and greater human understanding. In the documents there is sometimes information of an individual’s fate on board in the battle. One such example is the *arklimästaren* (“gun master”) Esbjörn Svensson. The stress and the horror on the deck seemed to have been too much for this officer, and he commits suicide by blowing himself up with the powder from a gun (Smirnov 2009:103). Esbjörn’s situation and fear is
for us underlined and easier to understand when we meet the heavily burned timbers on the bottom, pieces of guns which have exploded from the heat and burned human bones spread out over the timbers. The face of the battle then meets us rather unmasked, 70 metres down in the Baltic Sea.

The content of the book

The fact that the authors in this anthology have relatively freely chosen different perspectives regarding maritime warfare means that the articles vary in scope and ambition. Some are more general, and some have the form of more specific case studies.

This short introduction on how to describe, present and study the very large field of battles, war and organized killings are followed by two articles by Kekke Stadin and Patrik Höglund which both deal with material attributes communicating the status and power of the officers on board early modern warships. Stadin discusses the admiral Jakob Bagges and other highly ranked noblemen’s self-fashioning as naval heroes.

Heroes and courage, but especially fear on board 17th century ships, are also discussed in the next text by AnnaSara Hammar. Her starting point is old court documents which she analyses with the aim to better understand the emotions and feelings of seamen in the past. The next article by Niklas Eriksson is about shipwrecks of the Scanian War between 1676–1679 raises general questions regarding the making of history and why certain stories, persons and shipwrecks get attention and others not.

The Rolf Warming chapter concerns the actual praxis of fighting aboard. By combining written sources describing strategy during battle and archaeological examples of actual weapons, he can give new insight into the process of naval hand-to-hand battle.

The “tools of warfare” is also the subject in Fred Hocker’s contribution, about the guns on board early modern warships. Experimental archaeology has given new understanding about the function and efficacy of these guns and the sort of impact they really had on the people on board. Mathilda Fredriksson and Sabine Sten’s text describes how information about the effect of weapon technology, but also more general conditions onboard, can be investigated by digital osteological analyses.

Jon Adams and Johan Rönnby’s contribution summarizes a mutual long experience of archaeological investigations and studies concerning different early modern warships. The new ships of the period, and the new way to fight at sea, are here interpreted as an active part in the state driven societal change.
during the 15th and 16th century. However, the role of material agency and human agents in history are argued as clearly different things.

The last three chapters of the book are all studies focusing on specific cases. Ingvar Sjöblom analyses the crew aboard the warship *Mars* (1564) and gives a detailed insight into the organization on board. Art Cohn writes about naval warfare during the American revolution 1776 at Lake Champlain, and the memories of individual people connected to this fighting, and Carlo Beltrame discusses aspects of the archaeological results of the investigation of *Mercurio* (1812) which sank during the Napoleon wars in the Adriatic Sea. A warship with a surprisingly big variation of artefacts.

The book *On War on Board* ends with a short reflection where the concept of war on board, and issues raised in the different articles, are discussed more generally and linked both to our interest in this subject and to the general humanistic question about the origin of war and violence.

Figure 1: A sunken battlefield, photomosaic *Mars* (1564) (Tomaz Stachura: Ocean Discovery)
References


