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Breaking Down the "Barbarian" Trope: Strategic Military Coordination in Decentralized Collectives

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Abstract

Early modern history abounds with descriptions of "barbarians," a term originating in ancient Greece and later applied to people deemed uncivilized. Historical knowledge about these groups comes largely from colonial or imperialist outsiders who mischaracterized them as irrational and violent. This characterization masks the fact that these decentralized groups achieved large-scale strategic coordination in the absence of centralized power. This paper examines historical examples of such collectives, illustrating how they leveraged flexible cultural and political repertoires, including socially cooperative violence, to maintain autonomy while scaling up collective action. We present a framework for understanding these dynamics that emphasizes how groups drew upon repertoires of institutions, resources, and strategies and analyze four case studies to explore how decentralized societies coordinated effectively without central authority. Finally, we suggest ways archaeologists might identify similar patterns in the past, offering a fresh perspective on the structural dimensions of large-scale, decentralized societies.

Keywords "Barbarians" · Militarism · Decentralized · Social institutions · Collective action

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Introduction

In AD 406, a large-scale contingent of Germanic tribes crossed the Rhine frontier, initiating a series of events that would lead to the eventual downfall of the Western Roman Empire. The sacking of Rome, led by Alaric of the Visigoths in AD 410, was just one event that stands out against a vast backdrop of military activities undertaken by a wide range of decentralized militarized groups that collectively managed what no one could do alone: defeat the Empire (Bogucki 2017; Heather 2010). While the fall of Rome looms large in popular historical consciousness, viewing this process as anomalous masks a phenomenon that is arguably more interesting from the perspective of contemporary anthropological archaeology: How do relatively decentralized groups effectively coordinate to scale up military activity and achieve the kinds of strategic collective action generally only attributed to states and so-called complex polities while maintaining political autonomy among their constituent parts?

Our conceptual jumping off point is those groups famous in the global historical imaginary for terrorizing, plundering, or otherwise confounding their more "civilized" counterparts. Examples include viking and Comanche raiders, Mongol hordes, the Sea People, colonial-era Iroquoian and Māori war parties, and the aforementioned Visigothic forces that sacked Rome. What is known about them generally derives from the perspectives of colonial or imperialist outsiders who typically present these groups as existing beyond the margins of the pre-modern state. The fact that these descriptions generally originate from the same populations that were the victims of what was often perceived as "irrational" or "disorganized" violence serves to mask the emic rationale and organization of those same groups.

We propose that the decentralized, militarized nature of so-called "barbarians" were conscious political strategies, often undertaken in opposition to encroachment on the part of pre-modern states and empires. To better understand how these often-powerful acts of coordination were carried out, we present here a conceptual framework that permits a more productive characterization of these large-scale decentralized military collectives and their achievements. Rather than reifying static characterizations, we offer an approach that presents an opportunity to explore and explain the organizational complexity and diversity of these groups based on evidence from the documentary and archaeological records. In particular, we believe there is a need to consider, in a serious and systematic fashion, the military capabilities and coordinated actions undertaken by members of relatively decentralized societies.

Our primary purpose is to consider how members of nonstate societies effectively organize to scale up cooperative offensive military capabilities in ways that allowed them to secure collective gains in the absence of centralized power. We are not concerned with "societies" writ large but rather the processes and outcomes resulting from cooperation and collective action in ways that do not conform to normative theories and models (e.g., the emergence of the state and conventional views of social evolution). Many such theories are concerned with

explaining the development of political and military complexity as theoretically coupled processes. Instead, we are interested in understanding and explaining strategies that these groups employed to effectively confound the ability of early states to both understand and undermine them. Our aim is to decouple these decentralized societies from externally imposed constructs and highlight their organizational accomplishments, including their ability to scale up strategic collective action, subvert the concentration of power in any one institution, and maintain autonomy among constituent groups in the face of rapidly changing macroregional conditions.

In this paper, we argue that the decentralized organization of these groups, which often appeared so chaotic to their contemporaries, were, in fact, very deliberate, and often complex, political and military strategies. We also argue that the use of violence to achieve strategic goals had high external visibility to outsiders but masked the collectively oriented institutions to which those militarized groups were attached. To support this assertion, we present an analytical framework situated in broader theoretical approaches to the study of organizational diversity and complexity in nonstate societies. This approach facilitates a systematic yet flexible means of comparing the repertoires of institutions, resources, and strategies that decentralized militarized groups employed to enable large-scale cooperation and collective action while maintaining autonomous socio-political structures and thwarting the accumulation of centralized power. This includes, but is not limited to, the strategic use of violence. Our approach functions as both a framework for individual case studies and a vehicle for wider diachronic and cross-cultural comparison of organizational diversity and complexity necessary for explaining variation and change (Feinman 2023). While the groups and strategies we are interested in are most visible in the historic-documentary record, groups who effectively organized to secure mutual benefits through coordinated, and yet decentralized, cooperation and collective action can also be found in the archaeological record. Elements of our approach help to identify and facilitate comparison among those cases. Finally, we suggest that elements of this approach may be useful to anthropological archaeologists studying decentralized societies more generally.

The Achievements of Large-Scale Decentralized Collectives

While global archaeological histories and introductory textbooks frequently highlight the achievements of centralized states and empires, they tend to overlook those of decentralized nonstate polities and peoples. Here, we present four brief vignettes to illustrate the specific kinds of large-scale coordinated military action we are concerned with in this paper. We return to these cases below to operationalize our framework to explain how each drew from and expanded upon existing repertoires in strategic ways in order to scale up collective action.

Our first case is situated in eastern North America, where what had been five separate Iroquoian nations united as the Haudenosaunee confederacy. This arrangement permitted military coordination, the securing of trade advantages, and, eventually, resistance to European intrusion. The confederacy's "Great Law of Peace" promoted

mutual nonaggression, defined strict diplomatic protocols for the appointment of leaders and reciprocal obligations of member nations, all underwritten by membership in clans which structured the function of institutions of interdependence and governance (Fenton 1998; Williams 2018). Between the later AD 1400s and 1650s, war parties raised among the Five Nations embarked upon a series of military campaigns that resulted in the relocation, dispersal, destruction, or incorporation of all other Iroquoian and most of the Anishinaabeg peoples bordering their core territory in what is now upper New York State (Parmenter 2010; Williamson 2023). By 1700, the territory under their control had expanded to encompass some 400,000 square kilometers (Hämäläinen 2022). By leveraging their unity, strategic position, and a combination of military strength and shrewd diplomacy, the nations of the Haudenosaunee maintained autonomy despite increasing European encroachment up until the time of the American Revolution.

Our second case focuses on early medieval Europe where, from the latter part of the eighth century AD, historical sources attest to an increasing number of attacks by viking raiders on Britain, Ireland, and the northern Frankish coast. By the middle of the ninth century, the size of raiding groups had grown, with contemporaneous texts describing large viking fleets operating across western and northern Europe, and as far south as Portugal, Spain, and the Mediterranean. Many of these fleets did not operate on a hit-and-run or seasonal basis but were active in the field for years and even decades at a time, traveling during the warmer months while spending winters ensconced in temporary encampments. If historical sources are to be believed, the fleets of the mid-ninth century were very large, comprising in some cases hundreds of ships and thousands of people. In at least some cases, they lacked a defined leadership structure, operating instead on a coalitional basis. One fleet, referred to in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as a "Great Army," which arrived in England in 865, is described at one point as led by no less than three leaders, whom the chroniclers styled as "kings" (Swanton 2000, p. 74). The activities of the Great Army would engulf England as it fought across the length and breadth of the country for over a decade, toppling the English kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia, and Mercia before finally being subdued by Wessex in 878. During this period, elements of the Great Army settled and occupied large territories in the east and north of the country—an area that would come to be known, historically, as the Danelaw (Raffield 2016, 2020).

The third case study presented in this paper also deals with maritime raiding groups. In late New Kingdom Egypt, a fresco and associated inscriptions engraved on Ramesses III's mortuary temple at Medinet Habu in Thebes details land and sea battles fought between the Pharoah's forces and militarized groups that have come to be known as the "Sea Peoples," ca. 1177 BC or thereabouts (Cline 2021; Edgerton and Wilson 1936). These sources describe marauding coalitions that threatened Egypt and devastated neighboring states throughout the eastern Mediterranean between the 14th and 11th centuries BC (Knapp and Manning 2016, p. 118; Emanuel 2021, p. 210). Earlier inscriptions by Merneptah and Ramses II mention smaller-scale raiding activities of similar groups suggesting a scaling up of military-economic strategy during the later Bronze Age. While the nebulous origins and apparent multi-ethnic composition of the "Sea Peoples" has generated considerable

debate on the legitimacy of this group as a political and/or ethnic construct, more recent scholarship recognizes their opportunistic coordination as a strategic response to a period of widespread societal upheaval associated with the collapse of Mycenaean palatial rule, predation, drought, disease, and population displacement (Cline 2021; Knapp and Manning 2016). Depictions and written accounts of military encounters with these invasive coalitions speak to their ability to force much more centralized polities to organize against them (Emanuel 2021; Redford 2018). Inscriptions such as "[n]o land could stand before their arms, from Ḫatti, Kode, Karkemiš, Arzawa, and Alašiya on…" (Edgerton and Wilson 1936, p. 53) speak to the abilities of these groups, whether displaced peoples, opportunistic raiders, or some combination of both, to force defensive postures by powerful empires and other, more centralized polities (Emanuel 2021, p. 209).

Returning to North America, the fourth case study focuses on the Comanche. Born of the disruptions and opportunities afforded by colonial expansion in what is now the American Southwest, the Comanche people created what has been called a nomadic empire in the 17th and 18th centuries (Hämäläinen 2008; Montgomery 2019). Moving from the Great Basin to the southern Rocky Mountains and then the Southern Plains in search of economic opportunity, these relative newcomers to the region preyed upon both weak Spanish colonial outposts and other Indigenous groups they encountered. Powered by horses and the extensive grasslands that sustained them, Comanches created a new economic and political order rooted in decentralized political power, kinship, and inter- and intra-ethnic exchange of slaves, livestock, and guns (Brooks 2002; Hämäläinen 2008; Montgomery 2019). Embroiled in a half-century war with neighboring Apache agriculturalists, Comanches razed Apache villages, Spanish haciendas, and missions alike, pillaging horses, captives, and supplies. In 1758, a multitribal coalition of some 2000 mounted warriors armed with muskets, metal axes, and armor led by the Comanche crushed both Spanish and Apache opposition north of the Texas frontier, cementing the military dominance of a new geopolitical entity, the *Comancheria*, on Spain's northern colonial borderlands (Hämäläinen 2010, p. 181–182). By 1780, more than 40,000 Comanche dominated a vast territory spanning a quarter of a million square miles, employing a guerilla-style military strategy and the interlinking of allied family groups in a vast, but flexible, kinship-based repertoire of power and control.

A More Productive Characterization

The societies described above and others considered herein that managed to scale up collective action in the absence of centralization share a number of co-occurring traits. Most commonly these include flexible leadership strategies; a decentralized political apparatus that allowed for various degrees of hierarchy and inequality without permitting the concentration of power in any one person or institution; a multiethnic and incorporative composition; and high mobility and ranging capabilities.

Cooperation and collective action can be difficult to observe directly in the archaeological record (Arkush et al. 2025; Thompson 2023). Indeed, only in the last ~10 years have conceptual models and practical applications for discerning the same

have permeated archaeological practice (e.g., Carballo 2013; DeMarrais 2016). Direct examples of the accomplishments of decentralized collectives come primarily from historical and documentary accounts by more centralized states and empires as opposed to the archaeological record, which provides only indirect evidence. While elements of the cultural repertoire that decentralized groups drew upon in order to scale up activities may have existed prior to engagement with the state, it was often external stimuli—whether it be gaining access to resources acquired by trading or raiding, defense or retaliation against encroachment, or predation upon what are perceived as vulnerabilities of more centralized polities—that precipitated an increase in coordination and collective action. In our analysis, we aim to highlight how decentralized collectives were able to draw upon pre-existing social and political resources to mobilize, expand, and resist more centralized polities while overcoming the inevitable discord, disputes, and other challenges that may have divided them.

Theorizing Organizational Diversity and Complexity in Nonstate Societies

Because of their proximity to colonial and imperial others, decentralized collectives have often been miscast as "barbarians" in the global historical imaginary, especially when they engaged these polities in military activity. Associated with the rise of Greek ethnic self-consciousness, the term βάρβαρος (barbaros pl. βάρβαροι barbaroi) was employed to refer to those who could not speak Greek or did not follow Greek customs (Aristotle 2009; Hall 1989; Kim and Konstan 2022). In Middle Kingdom and Han Dynasty China, we similarly find commentators describing the endless sea of Yi (夷;"The men 大 armed with bows 弓, the primitive inhabitants, barbarians" [Wieger 1927, p. 156]) that surrounded and harassed their borders (Brindley 2003; Huang 2021; Kırilen 2018; Schwartz 1968)—exemplified by imperial perceptions of the peoples of east China and the Shandong coasts during the Shang and Zhou dynasties (Huang 2021). Roman authors such as Tacitus and Plutarch explicitly sought to juxtapose the achievements of the state against the uncivilized peoples of *barbaricum* (Jones 1971; Schmidt 2002), serving to render the latter as convenient "Others," whose identities reinforced the perceived cultural superiority of their state-based neighbors. Classical perspectives on Rome and its neighbors provided a Eurocentric lens that historians later applied to phenomena such as the so-called southern African *Mfecane*, a period of widespread political upheaval and migration in Southern Africa during the colonial era (Etherington 2011).

In the early modern era, the "barbaric" label was similarly applied to Indigenous peoples of the Americas by European explorers and missionaries (e.g., de Montaigne 2018[1580], p. 206; Lafitau 1974, p. 161, 171; Thwaites 1896-1901, 11, p. 55, 88; 12, p. 31, 201). The characterization of these groups—both literally and figuratively—as existing in existential opposition to more centralized states and empires served as a strategy to justify the more brutal aspects of European rule, *vide* Spanish colonialism (Earle 2007), and the later American "Indian removal" of the early 19th century (Williams 1989). As with the Eurasian cases, othering and denigrating

neighbors perceived as threatening or somehow obstructing imperial ambition was a political convenience as opposed to an actual characterization.

The so-called "barbarian" was therefore a convenient label that was applied to outsiders in antiquity and later co-opted by states (e.g., barbarians-cum-"merciless Indian savages" [United States 1776]) as a tool with which to dominate or enforce change on those who either stood in the way of their expansionist ambitions or threatened their stability. Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that there is a symbiotic dependency assumed between decentralized, militarized groups, and early states and empires (e.g., Barfield 1992; Ferguson and Whitehead 1992; Scott 2017; Turchin 2009). While documentary history has done these peoples and their collective accomplishments no small disservice, we also note that they have often been omitted from generalized models of social and political complexity in anthropological archaeology.

Decentralized societies occupy a paradoxical role in the history of anthropology and the social sciences. Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) formulated barbarism as both a period and a condition of ancient society. His "savagery-barbarism-civilization" schema, along with similar models outlined in contemporaneous works (e.g., Tylor 1865; Lubbock 1870), served as both a system of classification and an attempt to theorize how such societal formations came to be. The societies he described, including both the 19th-century Haudenosaunee and the Germanic societies of Tacitus's time, had a profound influence on the development of Engles' and Marx's materialist approach to history (Hunt 2010). Despite early recognition of the societal logic that underpinned the conditions of "barbarism," it is also the case that such groups and their capacities for cooperation and coordination do not fit easily into later, 20th-century models of societal development (e.g., Sahlins and Service 1960). However, contemporary theoretical approaches recognize the ability of human societies to self-organize in more fluid and adaptable ways and provide an entry-point for understanding and explaining the scaling up of organizational complexity in the absence of centralized hierarchies (Feinman 2023).

Stepping Out of Neoevolutionary Boxes

Deficiencies in neoevolutionary approaches to socio-political organization have been subject to repeated scrutiny (e.g., Angelbeck and Grier 2012; Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Graeber and Wengrow 2021; Yoffee 2005). And yet, explicit conceptual frameworks are required that permit the identification and explanation of variation and change, especially in those societies that do not resemble in principle or practice those on which dominant frameworks have previously been based (Feinman 2023). Our interest here in developing a framework for understanding the internal logical of large-scale decentralized collectives overlaps with other cross-cultural studies of peoples and processes that do not neatly fit into socio-evolutionary boxes (e.g., Birch 2013; Graeber and Wengrow 2021; Kowalewski 2006).

Developing social theory for archaeology that seeks to explain decentralized social organization is difficult because one is tasked with explaining that which exists in practice but may leave only trace evidence in the archaeological record

(Carballo 2013, p. 20). Contrary to archaeological evidence for the centralization of power—understood as the concentration of resources and authority and visible in the materiality of the same (cf. Wolf 1982)—power in large-scale collectives is decentralized and relational (Saitta 1994; Schortman 2014). Because power is not unitary but comprises one property of many sets of relations, the exercise of power may not involve the concentration of wealth or labor in any one place or institution. As such, the materiality of dispersed and relational power is much harder to locate in the archaeological record (Arkush et al. 2025).

Decentralized political organization of course features strongly in the kinds of groups we are interested in. However, this does not preclude the existence of inequality, strong leaders, and degrees of hierarchy among their constituent parts. As is the case with confederated polities, the constituent groups comprising decentralized collectives may be organized along the lines of what social scientists and historians have labeled as tribes, big-men societies, chiefdoms, or even kingdoms. Leadership may be institutionalized or situational. In either case, the key is the lack of the accumulation of power in any one sector of the large-scale cooperating or coordinating group. These same types of institutional arrangements between groups possessing various degrees of internal hierarchy that did not extend to the collective were identified in a cross-cultural study of confederacies in the archaeological and historical records (Birch 2022). The objective of a confederacy was not to govern but rather to coordinate, usually with some kind of military and/or economic objective in mind; autonomy of the constituent parts was prized and preserved (Birch 2022). As such, when we conceive of decentralized groups engaging with outsiders according to specific practices and norms that involve resisting and/or extracting military-economic gains from them, the internal cultural logic of the so-called "barbarian" *modus operandi* becomes clearer. Indeed, the capacity of these groups to operate both autonomously and as part of larger conglomerates appears, in many contexts, to have been a defining aspect of their institutional structures. It may, however, be the case that certain individuals or factions are ultimately able to consolidate power and authority in a single locus of society such that what began as a decentralized collective may fracture or be otherwise transformed into a more centralized political structure. In other cases, autonomous groups may simply disarticulate themselves from the collective when the strategic basis for coordination changes or no longer serves the goals of those constituent parts.

The application of collective action theory has gained popularity in anthropological archaeology over the last two decades. Following Olson (1965), the essential logic of collective action is based on the assumption that if members of a group have a common goal or objective, and the perception that they would all benefit from achieving that objective, it follows that they would act in concert to achieve that objective, though Olson himself doubted the ability of individuals to overcome self-interested motivations and appreciated the challenges that come with increasing group size. Ostrom (1990) famously applied the concept to issues arising from the management of common-pool resources or "collective action problems." Most applications of theories based on collective action in contemporary archaeology have focused on it as a framework for analyzing sets of relations in complex societies, i.e., the apparatus of governance (elites) and the governed (commoners) (e.g., Blanton

and Fargher 2008, 2016; Carballo et al. 2014; Carballo and Feinman 2024; Feinman and Carballo 2018). Others focus on how groups might employ strategic collective action in situations where power and hierarchy are less pronounced (Roscoe 2013; Thompson 2023). The cases we consider here are all groups that exhibit high degrees of collectivity (e.g., as per Feinman and Carballo 2018) in their maximal form. While they may engage in militarized modes of strategic collective action (as per Birch 2022) they may not be dealing with collective action problems, per se.

The concepts of heterarchy (Crumley 1995), hydrarchy (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Price 2014:56), and anarchy (Angelbeck and Grier 2012) are relevant here in as much as power and autonomy in decentralized collectives were subject to constant negotiation and interchange, both internally and externally. Heterarchy, originally employed in a modern context to explain the structure of the human brain (McCulloch 1945), is defined by Crumley (1995, p. 3) as "the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways." While decentralized polities can almost always be characterized as heterarchically organized social systems, that feature alone does not explain how they scaled up cooperative strategies. In a similar vein, highly mobile, decentralized maritime polities have at times been referred to as hydrarchies. The term was employed by Price (2014) as a concept to facilitate comparison of the maritime expeditions employed by Viking Age raiders and those activities employed during the "Golden Age" of piracy in the Atlantic. Cooijmans (2020, p. 32) further defines hydrarchies as "unaffiliated, self-governing networks of political power…beyond the grasp of sovereign and commercial authorities." The term refers to the fact that such organizations were multi-component, highly adaptable, and segmentary "many-headed hydra," which were extremely difficult to defeat on account of the ability of such groups to reorganize around new leaders and strategies when one component was "cut off." At the same time, the hydrarchy concept permits the recognition of such groups as self-governing and underpinned by interpersonal bonds of trust, cooperation, and mutual recognition as opposed to being purely independent or unaffiliated (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2009; Raffield et al. 2016, 2025). As such, the hydrarchy concept is highly useful in terms of facilitating cross-cultural comparison between large-scale decentralized collectives and other polities that appear more structurally coherent.

Anarchist approaches to social and political organization emphasize humanity's ability to self-organize, especially when freed from the constraints of coercion and bureaucracy (Ward 1973, p. 39). Of particular interest here are elements of anarchistic theory that recognize strategies that purposefully resist concentrations of power in any one person or institution; that individuals and groups might accept emergent leadership when deemed as legitimate while simultaneously rejecting any authority which attempts to consolidate power; and that these strategies are achieved through networks of decentralized control and mutual aid (Angelbeck and Grier 2012). In some cases, these strategies may have been deliberately employed to subvert the accumulation of power and authority (Clastres 1974); in others, the underlaying cultural logic provided little to no opportunity for would-be leaders to monopolize resources and capital to build power over others. Additionally, when things fell apart, leaders could not coerce followers to remain with the whole. On the one hand,

this may have allowed for the relatively simple disarticulation of constituent groups following a defeat, as a result of internal discord, or when the perceived benefits of collective action were no longer to the benefit of the constituent parts; at the same time, there may also have been potential factionalism and conflict between constituent groups when organizational relations broke down.

Beyond "Social Cages:" Violence, Warfare, and Politogenesis

Social theories that seek to explain the relationship between war and social complexity are abundant (e.g., Carneiro 1970; Kelly 2000; Otterbein 1970), yet most fail to explain or account for the form of militarism and the military objectives that large-scale decentralized collectives tend to pursue. In order to understand military coordination among decentralized groups, we need more productive theoretical frameworks that decouple expectations about the relationship between warfare, violence, and social complexity. Keeley's (1996) now-famous statement on the prevalence and deadliness of warfare in small-scale societies, backed up by cross-cultural ethnographic data (Ember and Ember 1997) helped archaeologists to set and project expectations on the nature of warfare among nonstate societies in the human past. However, the motivations for conflict in nonstate societies have generally been cast as killing for revenge (so-called "blood feuds"), raiding, conflicts over territory or resources (including material goods and labor), or conflicts across the forager-farmer frontier (e.g., Golitko and Keeley 2007; Keeley 1996; LeBlanc 2006; Richter 1983). In these models, the outcomes of conflict do not have wide-reaching geopolitical implications within or beyond the society itself. These models also tend to assume that conflict is occurring among essentially independent groups (cf. Carneiro 2002), despite the fact that most groups are in some way politically entangled and that social and cultural phenomena are always defined by intra-group and intra-community relations, regardless of how mobile or sedentary each may be (Kowalewski 2013). In these models, inequality, hierarchy, and eventually the state are often presented as natural outcomes of warfare and the intensification of conflict (Haas 2001). This is the core premise of theories that view the escalation of conflict as the natural outcome of either environmental or social circumscription (e.g., Carneiro 1970; LeBlanc 2006). The sociologist Michael Mann modified the concept of circumscription to refer to "social cages"—the containment of people within fixed social and territorial boundaries and power structures—with the victors of successful warfare doing the "caging" (2012). Ian Morris takes this notion a step further, referring to caging and circumscription as a form of "productive" war (2014). In each case, there is an inherent logic that wars produce larger and "safer" societies through the development of governing structures that place a monopoly on war and violence in the service of maintaining the apparatus of the state and the basis of social power (see also Pinker 2011).

We argue here that war and militarism are viable strategies for highly cooperative groups to acquire more resources and protect themselves against potential adversaries in the absence of any desire to form a territorial state. Regardless of the nature or permanence of centralized political structures, "groups that successfully organize

themselves to raid others will acquire external resources and, in the long run, will be at a selective advantage against groups that are less well organized" (Stanish and Levine 2011, p. 13902). While authority, ranking, and hereditary leadership existed in the societies we are concerned with, many were organized as formal confederacies or informal alliances between peoples and leaders that did not require the sacrifice of local or individual autonomy. As noted above in defining the hydrarchy concept, decentralized political structures meant that there was no single leader for states to target and replace, which made them virtually undefeatable by traditional imperialist caging means (Hämäläinen 2022; Price 2014). Indeed, in contexts characterized by asymmetrical warfare, large-scale decentralized collectives often proved themselves to be more than capable of resisting caging by maintaining politically advantageous stalemates (Mack 1975). There are also questions regarding whether or not decentralized societies had any interest in doing the kinds of caging envisioned in Morris' (2014) version of "productive war," which included the consolidation of social power within a permanent and overarching centralized governing structure. Many decentralized collectives were expansive and incorporative. And yet, for them, what was considered "productive" war may have constituted something else entirely, including incorporation without subjugation. As such, while decentralized polities and their constituent parts may have openly engaged in "wars," they also utilized various militarized postures, behaviors, and strategies at home, at a distance, and within contexts not traditionally defined as open warfare (Brandão 1997; Lee 2023; Raffield et al. 2016).

Instead of framing the military activities of large-scale decentralized collectives as "warfare" in the classically western European sense (e.g., Parker 1996), a more productive characterization may be "socially cooperative violence" (Kim and Kissel 2018, p. 9–10). Individuals and groups at any level of socio-political complexity may cooperate, peacefully or violently, in whatever ways they believe will most effectively help them reach their goals (Ferguson 2013, p. 192; Gat 2015, p. 123). This may especially be the case where there is no central authority (i.e., the state) that holds a monopoly on violence such that it remains a strategy that can be employed by a broader cross section of society.

Our problem orientation and the framework presented below provides a new angle from which to investigate the structural dimensions of large-scale, decentralized societies who are best known for utilizing socially cooperative violence to achieve strategic goals. We require an approach that allows us to interrogate such societies on their own terms. This follows in the vein of institutional approaches for archaeology (Holland-Lulewicz et al. 2020), theories about why and how nonstate societies are able to scale up cooperative behaviors (Arkush et al. 2025; Birch 2013, 2022; Feinman 2023), and the call for a move away from categorical and cultural–historical thinking in anthropological archaeology (Feinman and Neitzel 2020).

The Framework: Repertoires of Institutions, Resources, and Strategies in Context

Our objective is to advance a framework that can be used to develop a body of theory that explains how decentralized, militarized collectives, as defined above, were able to a) achieve shared objectives in the absence of centralized power and b) modify strategies for accomplishing those objectives over time in the context of changing historical contingencies. We aim to show that the calculated use of violence was just one element of a cultural repertoire of resources and strategies that these societies mobilized in the face of changing conditions and factors to confront social challenges and opportunities to "scale up" their coordination in general and their cooperative violence specifically. This approach rejects perspectives that emphasize the lack of coordination and organizational sophistication of decentralized societies. More generally, the framework spotlights questions and processes perhaps not considered worthy of much attention in mainstream classificatory and evolutionary approaches to socio-political organization (Feinman 2023).

Figure 1 summarizes the framework. We employ the term framework in Ostrom's (2011, p. 8) sense: "Frameworks identify the elements and general relationships among these elements that one needs to consider for institutional analysis and they organize diagnostic and prescriptive inquiry." Our framework can be used to analyze individual case studies or facilitate cross-cultural comparison. We emphasize that application of the framework is a heuristic exercise intended to facilitate a deeper study of one or more societal groups, and as such a clear problem orientation is key. Assembling data to operationalize the framework in different societal contexts may reveal gaps in our understanding as much as it serves to create new knowledge.

At the framework's core is the community or group(s) being considered. We recognize that societies are not totalities but are composed of multiple overlapping and intersecting socio-spatial institutions and networks that give the appearance of social solidarity. Indeed Weber (1910, p. 459) argued for the replacement of the term society with the terms social relations and social institutions. Societies may be emically defined, as in the case of a self-aware and internally coherent ethnic or political group, but these groups might also be etically defined historical or modern constructs ascribed with a "name" that may not be recognized by the groups themselves. In our framework, the society may be defined as needed for comparative purposes. In many cases, it will represent the largest social extent across which political coordination is possible, better capturing the potential for upscaling and downscaling sets of relations between and among institutions. Whether applying the framework to a case study or comparative analysis, contextual information should be supplied for each society in question. It may include geography, environment, the overarching historical context, and factors that may contribute to changes in social or political organization, such as deteriorating or sub-optimal climatic/ecological conditions, shatter zones, refugia, or expanding world systems. In other words, the context is the range of pertinent conditions that impact the nature and activities of key institutions within any given society.

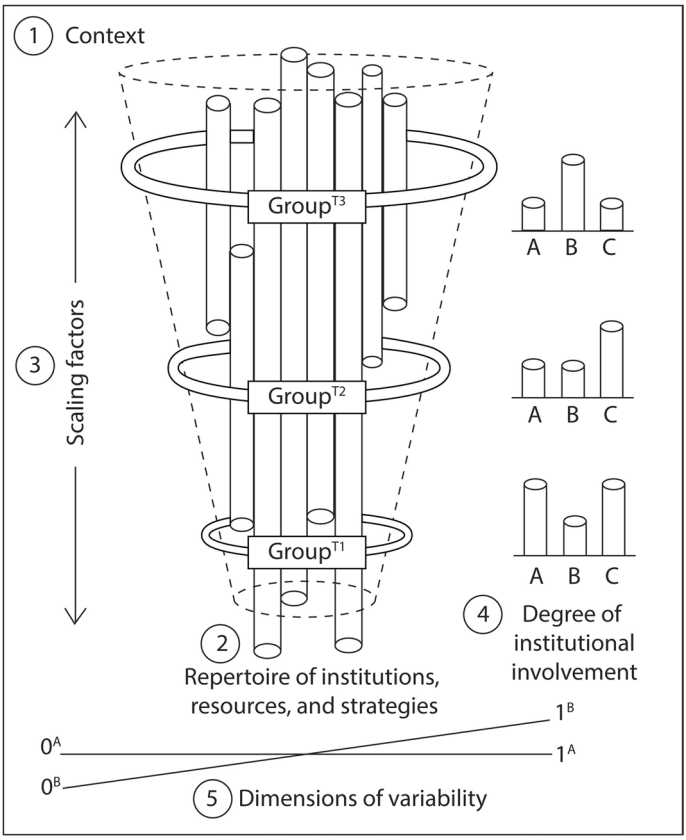

Fig. 1 Diagrammatic representation of the analytical framework described in this paper. Each element should be conceptualized as follows: 1) The context is the range of pertinent conditions that impact the nature and activities of key institutions within any given society; 2) represents the militarized group(s) engaged and the repertoire of institutions, resources, and strategies employed by its members. The notation $^{T1, T2, T3}$ represents moments or periods in time, acknowledging that the ways that societies might configure or enact this repertoire will fluctuate in the context of changing internal and external conditions. The dashed "cone" surrounding the core represents the fact that the internal logic of the sociocultural system may be rendered opaque to outsiders; 3) represents scaling factors that may cause a society or its constituent groups to scale up or down cooperative activities, e.g., climatic change, disease, displacement, economic opportunity, etc.; 4) is a visual representation of how the role and involvement of various social institutions in strategic collective action may wax and wane as per changing societal conditions—so, institutions may be present and play a certain role in society but that role may be amplified or dampened as per the strategies employed; for example, institutions A and C might be equally important as organizational principles at first but over time the role of A is diminished in favor of C or B; 5) represents dimensions of variability that are emergent properties of the application of the framework; e.g., Points 0-1a, 0-1b represent the total absence or total presence of degrees of formality, mobility, or heterogeneity, for example. Figure prepared by J. Birch.

While the framework may be utilized to analyze any moment in, or period of, time, we find it is particularly useful for studying historicized processes. The stages or phases for each group in the model should be understood as an episodic construct that charts the nature of societal context, institutions, resources, and strategies at

and through time, allowing for the analysis of responses to changing circumstances. These snapshots are not intended to be developmental or linked to the evolution or devolution of political complexity but may instead be tied to key historical or temporal "beats" as per the problem orientation of the research objectives (see case studies, below). While we include only three stages or phases in the diagrammatic representation of the framework, the model can incorporate any number of desired temporal frames. This temporal dimension also helps to frame how a society or collective might expand or contract in social scale over time (e.g., communities forming large-scale coalitions or confederations or fragmenting into smaller groups) or modify its engagement—whether peaceful or violent—with internal and external entities. We find that in anthropology and archaeology, history matters (e.g., Robb and Pauketat 2013; Whittle 2018) and wish to explicitly acknowledge that dimension of the framework.

At the core of this framework is the repertoire of institutions, resources, and strategies that societies have at their disposal to achieve strategic collective action. These are represented by the "cables" in the central pillar of Figure 1. The term repertoire is not one commonly deployed in archaeology. Here, we define repertoire as the cultural and political institutions, resources, and strategies that decentralized groups can draw on to achieve their collective objectives. Sociosemiotic research has suggested that the deliberate making and distribution of cultural repertoires is a strategy employed by heterogeneous groups of people in fashioning and maintaining distinct cultural identities (Even-Zohar 2000). Much as musicians might have a diverse repertoire of all of the pieces that they can play, groups must choose which behaviors and practices are most advantageous to engage in given the dynamic contexts they might navigate. We refer to these as strategies and discuss them further below.

Following Holland-Lulewicz et al. (2020), we define institutions as "organizations of people that carry out objectives using regularized practices and norms, labor, and resources." This definition corresponds closely to Weber's (1991) economic institutionalism inasmuch as institutional arrangements combine formal rules (compacts), informal constraints (norms and conventions), and the means by which the same are enforced (Nau 2005, p. 128–129). Since we seek to understand institutions in contexts not defined by urban or state-centric economic or political systems, we see the institution as both organization and norm or rule-making (Kowalewski and Birch 2020, p. 31). This definition permits those interested in both the behavioral and material correlates of what institutions do to use the concept, and it circumvents definitions of institutions that presuppose the existence of a state or central authority (e.g., Smith 2024). Examples of institutions might include kin groups, residential settlements, councils, religious organizations, guilds, raiding parties, armies, retinues, confederacies, and so on. An institutional approach also bridges common socio-spatial scales of analysis and re-focuses analytical attention on social units that are products of human behavior, as opposed to other categorical imperatives. An institutional approach permits consideration of how institutions are "created, reproduced, given new emphasis, de-emphasized, or abolished over time and space" (Holland-Lulewicz et al. 2020). The total repertoire of any society's cultural and institutional strategies is of course available to them at any given time; however, the relative dominance or influence of particular social institutions may wax

and wane (element 4, Figure 1). So, at stage 1, institutions (or resources, strategies) A and C may be dominant but, by stage 2 A has declined in relative importance. We acknowledge that we may not be able to identify the totality of institutions that existed in any one archaeologically or historically documented case but advocate here for an explicit identification and consideration of which institutions may be emphasized or de-emphasized over time and/or space.

Institutions collect and deploy resources, including economic and material resources as well as a broader range of assets and forms of capital that individuals might draw upon to engage in social life (Bourdieu 1986; Lin 1982; North 1990; Borgerhoff Mulder et al. 2009). Giddens' (1984) schema of allocative resources (e.g., tangible materials, including products and the means of production/reproduction), authoritative resources (e.g., power, status, rights that organize social space time and individuals), interpretative resources (e.g., knowledge, beliefs), and institutional resources (e.g., norms, social principles) apply here. Individuals and groups have a powerful incentive to coordinate and deploy cooperative violence in order to acquire and accumulate resources that can advance their collective interests.

Strategies are deliberately chosen and negotiated ways of accomplishing individual and collective goals. While strategies may be the product of the agency of individuals and groups, they are also informed by culturally ingrained processes people may not always be consciously aware of. We envisage strategies as drawn from a broader collective "library" of repertoires and operationalized within specific contexts to achieve (or attempt to achieve) certain aims. Blanton and Fargher (2008) demonstrate a range of potential strategies employed by elites and factions defined by class, economy, and ethnicity engaged in collective action in pre-modern states. Historical archaeologists (e.g., Galle 2010; Saitta 2007), in contrast, have discussed how marginalized and oppressed peoples utilized strategies based on collective action in order to assert their identity, agency, and foster social and economic relationships as a suite of mutually beneficial behaviors. As decentralized collectives comprise multiple, overlapping and intersecting institutions, we understand these institutions as engaging in and managing sets of relations according to strategies drawn from the cultural and political repertoire specific to that group. The incorporation of new people(s) and groups may enhance that strategic repertoire, providing new options and opportunities stemming from the diversification of experiences, expertise, and sources of information. These strategies may relate to specific internally focused social and political objectives as well as broader external social, political, and economic contexts. Groups within a society might also engage in such collective strategies at multiple scales and within, beyond, and between societal boundaries in ways that blur the same. Institutions within a decentralized collective might adopt different strategies from their broader repertoire depending on political, environmental, and other contingent factors. Articulations between institutions and resources (e.g., gift exchanges, alliances, covenants, religious rites or sodalities; largely conceived of as social "glue") are important components of the structure of the societal core. Certain strategies and articulations may, of course, be institutions in and of themselves (e.g., a council of kings or clan representatives). Indeed, increases in social complexity have been tied directly to increases in institutional arrangements and formalization of the same (Wickham 2016). The core group of

resources and strategies deployed by a decentralized collective may be opaque to outsiders (the external "tube" in element 2 of Figure 1). Outsiders may only perceive of external objectives and foreign policy, masking important domestic or local institutions and strategies and reinforcing that which they perceive as "barbaric."

The various historically contingent challenges and opportunities that societies and their constituent parts encounter may cause decentralized collectives to scale up strategic activity. Examples include, but are not limited to, the onset or intensification of conflict, encroachment by, or involvement with, the state, a shift from sedentism to mobility (or vice versa), population movement or displacement, or responses to climatic or environmental change. These are forces or processes that may cause strategic responses drawn from a society's cultural and political repertoire to scale up or down coordinated activities. As circumstances alter, the ways in which groups might draw upon repertoires of socially and culturally appropriate actions may similarly change. New options might be added to the repertoire in order to facilitate desired strategic action, articulating institutions and resources in new ways. For example, encroachment by a hostile army may cause previously dispersed populations to aggregate in larger, more defensible settlements, resulting in the emergence of new leadership roles or styles, alliances, or the reorganization of labor. Alternatively, dispersed economic opportunities may cause groups to fission or extend their ranging strategies to scale their activities to the availability of resources or take advantage of new sources of profit, bringing people, animals, and goods together in different sets of relations.

When considering repertoires of institutions, resources, and the strategies that bring them into alignment, we must also consider challenges groups might face such as dissonance, discord, or outright conflict, violent or otherwise. In examining specific and cross-cultural cases, we should be attentive to what the outcomes of such challenges may have been, e.g., fission, resolution, transformation, or otherwise.

Dimensions of variability are emergent properties of our framework. They may present themselves as tensions in comparative analysis and can affect the ways that societies mobilize their institutional repertoire. They may constrain or open up opportunities to utilize or create new strategies. These dimensions function more as a means of comparing cases than actual analytical building blocks. Examples include: diffuse vs. concentrated power; ethnic homogeneity vs. heterogeneity; high mobility vs. less mobility. Important dimensions of variability may only reveal themselves once the framework has been employed to compare outcomes either within or between societies. In what follows, we use four case studies to illustrate how these dimensions emerge.

Operationalizing the Framework

To illustrate the value of this framework for understanding how decentralized groups were able to engage in strategic cooperation under changing circumstances while remaining politically decentralized, we return to the case studies mentioned earlier. In each case, we emphasize the repertoire of institutions, resources, and strategies that facilitated the scaling up of collective action.

The Haudenosaunee in the Early Colonial Era

Northern Iroquoian societies occupied—and in some cases, continue to occupy—portions of the Northeastern Woodlands region of North America. The Iroquoian cultural pattern—defined by longhouse-based village life, a commitment to maize horticulture, and regionally distinct material culture patterns emerged in-situ within the region ca. AD 900-1200. By the time of European contact in the mid-1500s to early 1600s, Iroquoian peoples inhabited clusters of allied villages that formed emically defined Nations, certain of which were organized into confederacies. Affiliation through exogamous clans, the strategic incorporation of newcomers, and extensive networks based on trade, diplomacy, and including formal protocols and compacts were all part of the repertoire of institutions, resources, and strategies that allowed Iroquoian peoples to scale up collective action while maintaining autonomy in the context of increasing European encroachment and colonialism in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Kin-based institutions and idioms were the social backbone of Iroquoian society, structuring everything from household composition to relations between nations. Clans consisted of multiple related matrilineages and because members of the same clan might be found in any one settlement (a sub-clan) they structured relations at both regional and community levels and defined collective roles and responsibilities (e.g., reciprocity, hospitality, mourning, representation) in political and ceremonial contexts (Tooker 1971). Matrilineal descent and residence patterns combined with norms of clan exogamy meant that the women of any one household may belong to one sub-clan and include men from multiple other clans, creating vast networks of interaction and obligation to natal and marital communities.

Representatives of clan segments capable of building influence through kinship obligations, personal persuasion, reciprocity, and skill in war and oration would have simultaneously operated at multiple political and institutional levels (Richter 1992; Trigger 1976). A division of leadership for civil and military affairs may have developed during the 15th or 16th century in the context of population increase, interregional conflict, and expanding trading networks, though the ubiquity of this division of authority in eastern Woodland societies suggests deeper cultural roots (Dye 2009).

War parties were assembled by captains who recruited from allied communities and nations (Figure 2). In some cases, these were small affairs, intended to avenge the death of a kinsman in the absence of appropriate reparations payments or correct a perceived spiritual or political imbalance (e.g., Richter 1983; Thwaites 1896-1901, vol. 10, p. 225). In others, large fighting forces were assembled from multiple nations and peoples, as was the case for the 500-strong Wendat-led war party assembled in 1615 to conduct a raid against the Onondaga. In addition to a large contingent of Wendat warriors assembled from across the four Nations of their confederacy, members of the Onontchataronon and other Algonquian-speaking groups and Champlain and his French companions were invited to join the raid. Messengers were also sent south, to the Susquehannock, though they failed to arrive in time for the actual battle (Trigger 1976, pp. 304–305). Expectations based on ties of kinship, clanship, and membership in allied nations and confederacies permitted the scaling

Fig. 2 Engraving based on a drawing by Samuel de Champlain depicting a battle between Haudenosaunee and Algonquian war parties near the southern end of Lake Champlain. Image in the public domain.

up of cooperation and socially productive violence without the need for the creation of new or more centralized institutional structures. Northern Iroquoian peoples succeeded in forming large-scale political collectives of 20,000-25,000 people while maintaining the autonomy of communities, nations, and the clan-based institutions that cut across them.

To operationalize our model, we focus here on the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) confederacy. The confederacy likely formed in the later 1500s to early 1600s and was composed of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk Nations who occupied territories strung out in an east-west configuration across the Finger Lakes and Hudson Valley of contemporary New York State. Alone among the Iroquoian peoples of northeastern North America, the Haudenosaunee were able to leverage and adapt their strategic repertoire in ways that allowed them to scale up political and military activity to effectively control some 400,000 square kilometers. The context for Haudenosaunee military ascendancy was the early colonial era—a time when the introduction of European goods, persons, and pathogens destabilized existing sets of socio-economic and political relations. Environmentally, this period also witnessed the coldest spell of the Little Ice Age, a factor that would have affected the northern limits for maize cultivation (White 2017). How then were the Haudenosaunee able to draw upon existing repertoires of institutions and resources in order to scale up collective strategic action in ways that allowed them to secure collective gains during this turbulent era?

In their confederated form, the Haudenosaunee referred to themselves as the Great League of Peace and Power (Fenton 1998), governed by the *Kayanerenkó:wa*—the Great Law of Peace—which provided a set of formal diplomatic protocols that

structured internal and external relations (Williams 2018). While the Great Law was an innovative concept, it utilized existing notions about leadership and reciprocal obligation drawn from the Iroquoian cultural repertoire. Specific protocols detailed the mourning and raising up of the 50 civil leaders (Sachems) whose titles were distributed among specific clans within specific nations and who formed the confederacy council (Fenton 1998). Village councils were less formal—clan representatives (elected by women of the clan), war leaders, wise old men, and others who spoke for groups of followers in the village could attend and be heard (Richter 1992, p. 43). However, just as village councils provided a context and practice wherein residents could build consensus, the confederacy council provided a context that scaled up the same process while respecting the diversity and complementarity of perspectives represented (Williams 2018, p. 283). The objective of these discussions was always to come to consensus such that the council was of "one mind" regarding how to act or proceed. Wampum (strings or belts of white and purple shell beads) was employed as a mechanism for gift exchange, diplomacy, and spiritual potency, and as a mnemonic for negotiated rights and obligations (Bradley 2011).

While the confederacy served to coordinate strategic collective action, autonomy among its constituent parts was upheld and valued (Birch 2020; Muller 2008). This strategic mode of collective governance permitted nations within the confederacy to act independently and yet in concert. Haudenosaunee war parties were primarily recruited from villages within the nation and led by clan war chiefs—for example, it was Mohawk and Seneca war parties in particular that plagued the north shore of Lake Ontario in the 1640s (Williamson 2023). In a similar fashion, satellite colonies and outposts located to take advantage of strategic locations and trading routes were founded by Nations and did not belong to the confederacy as a whole (Jordan 2022; Williamson 2023). At the same time, it was possible to strategically coordinate the activities of war parties belonging to various nations based on agreements made during meetings of the confederacy council.

While small-scale adoption of prisoners to replace warriors lost in battle had long been an Iroquoian custom (Lynch 1995), the demographic collapse brought about by European-introduced epidemic diseases shifted the practice of prisoner adoption to larger-scale objectives of incorporation and population replacement, bolstering both the labor pool and military forces after losses to epidemic disease (Richter 1992). By ca. 1650-1700, it is estimated that war captives made up more than half of the Haudenosaunee population, generating both a protective military advantage and internal dissonance (Hämäläinen 2022, p. 107). The transformation of prisoner adoption from a small-scale practice intended to replace lost family members to one of large-scale population replacement is an excellent example of the transformation of an existing component of the cultural repertoire in response to changing needs and circumstances.

In a similar vein, the formal diplomatic protocols that bound the five nations of the Haudenosaunee together into a powerful decentralized collective was scaled up in the context of external relations. Formal diplomacy and treaties between the Haudenosaunee, other Indigenous peoples, and European powers aimed to affirm and secure rights to movement, land use, and military alliances. Wampum belts continued to be employed as part of an elaborate suite of political protocols that now

included Europeans (Muller 2008; Snyderman 1954). The continued symbolic use of kinship terms in forming treaty alliances with Europeans and other Indigenous peoples, reinforced expectations about duality and reciprocity while imposing yet another element of the Haudenosaunee cultural repertoire in the context of collective action strategies (Fenton 1985, p. 12). This strategy may have reached its apogee in the execution of a 1701 peace treaty at Montreal that ended their enmity with the French and native peoples as far away as Lake Superior.

Although dominant historical writings once painted a picture of the tragic decline and disappearance of once-great Indigenous Nations (Countryman 2012; Dowd 2022), the core repertoire of Northern Iroquoian institutions and strategies, though suppressed through the 18th-20th centuries, were never fully relinquished. Disastrous military defeats during the American Revolution, and the loss of territory and autonomy at the hands of the fledgling United States eventually extinguished the central council fire at Onondaga in 1777 (Preston 2009). Nevertheless, the core values and institutions present in Iroquoian societies prior to European contact continue to structure governance in sovereign Indigenous Nations today.

Viking Raiding Fleets and the "Great Army" in Western Europe

The Viking Age (ca. 750-1050 AD) is widely viewed as being characterized by processes of raiding, conquest, and settlement, which saw groups originally deriving from Scandinavia establish landholdings across the North Atlantic islands, Britain, Ireland, and Continental Europe. In Scandinavia itself, the Viking Age represents the latter part of the Late Iron Age (ca. AD 550-1050)—a period marked by a shift from local and regional power structures to the emergence of centralized kingdoms. These developments are widely viewed as representing the genesis of the modern-day Scandinavian nation-states (Price 2020).

In Late Iron Age Scandinavia, the rhythms of daily life were governed by subsistence farming. The population resided for the most part in dispersed rural settlements and in some areas, villages, engaging in agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, and hunting as far as the variable climate and topography of Scandinavia allowed (Price 2020:82-88). Although some larger "urbanized" communities existed, these were exceptions rather than the norm. Elite power was concentrated at local and regional levels and likely fluctuated regularly depending on the ability of individual leaders to consolidate and maintain political and diplomatic networks (Sigurðsson 2017). The institution of the *þing*, a general assembly comprising certain free landholders who met to discuss issues, resolve conflicts, and judge legal matters (Figure 3), also played a key role in legitimizing the status of leaders and enforcing the rule of law (Brink 2002, 2004; Sanmark 2017; Semple et al. 2021). It was kinship, however, which served as the primary social glue that bound communities together. Kinship bonds extended beyond immediate blood relations to include relationships with other groups that were maintained for political purposes (Miller 1990, p. 139–178). These relationships were often asymmetrical, reflecting bonds of obligation that were reinforced through institutions such as fostering and concubinage (Miller 1990, p. 122–123; Price and Raffield 2024, p. 34–45).

Fig. 3 Anundshög, a burial mound and þing site in Västmanland, Sweden. The site demonstrates long continuity of use from the Early Iron Age through to the end of the Viking Age. Photo by Ben Raffield.

From the latter part of the eighth century, Insular and Continental historical sources attest to an increasing number of viking attacks across Britain, Ireland, and the northern Frankish coast that may have focused in particular on monastic institutions and smaller settlements. The factors underpinning these attacks, which must have varied locally, have been discussed at length (see e.g., Ashby 2015; Barrett 2008; Baug et al. 2019; Heen-Pettersen 2019; Sindbæk 2011; Raffield et al. 2017), but they appear to have been driven primarily by a desire for portable wealth, perishable commodities, and captives. The fleets engaging in this initial phase of activity are generally believed to have been relatively small, and likely engaged in hit-and-run or perhaps seasonal raiding campaigns before returning to home bases in Scandinavia (Downham 2017).

The structure of the early raiding fleets is little understood. However, their operation was likely underpinned by extended kinship and social/diplomatic networks. The core of such groups probably comprised one or more established martial units—perhaps armed retinues associated with prominent war leaders who either directly led or sponsored expeditions—whose numbers were bulked out with additional participants. These might have included individuals whose involvement was leveraged through diplomatic networks, as well as those who sought opportunities to secure wealth and social advancement (Ashby 2015; Raffield et al. 2017, 2025). Given the small size of these raiding parties, they were most likely organized locally, either at the settlement level or through cooperation between several communities, with

responsibilities negotiated and mediated through the *þing*. The scale of resources necessary to construct, outfit, and maintain seagoing ships and crews (see e.g., Ravn 2016), speak to a need for extensive intergroup cooperation, as well as significant investment from local communities and elites.

The factors responsible for the scaling up of early viking raiding activity in western Europe were complex, and they are obscured by a lack of written sources that provide reliable insights into Late Iron Age social structures. It is likely that Scandinavians had been traveling to and trading with overseas communities for some time prior to the first recorded attacks, meaning that raiding groups were familiar with coastal landscapes surrounding their targets (Heen-Pettersen 2019; Price & Raffield 2024, p. 103–105). The sudden outpouring of seaborne violence by previously "unknown" raiders described in contemporaneous chronicles, therefore, may be more apparent than real. Nevertheless, it is possible that increasing social stratification and competition within Scandinavia provided the impetus for at least some groups to violently seize the goods that they had previously obtained through trade, in order to increase their wealth and prestige (Ashby 2015; Barrett 2008, p. 677–678; Raffield et al. 2017). It has also been suggested that an increased flow of Islamic silver into eastern Scandinavia drove some communities to seek out a comparable source of wealth in the west (Sindbæk 2011).

By the middle of the ninth century, however, the situation had clearly changed. During this period, we see large viking fleets operating not only across western and northern Europe, but also as far south as Portugal, Spain, and the Mediterranean. The largest of these fleets did not operate on a hit-and-run or seasonal basis, but rather remained in the field for years and even decades at a time, traveling during the warmer months while spending winters ensconced in temporary encampments. While their presence brought with it the latent potential for violence, the life course of these fleets was not governed solely by conflict, and they are recorded as engaging both in warfare and diplomacy, as well as establishing trading relationships with local populations (Cooijmans 2020; Downham 2010; McLeod 2014). Some fleets became deeply entangled in regional politics, exploiting weaknesses and serving as mercenaries in internecine wars, and in certain contexts they were even paid by local rulers to attack other viking fleets (e.g., Nelson 1991, p. 95). Other groups may have been seeking out land to settle, and a number are recorded as establishing landholdings that, in some cases, developed into permanent settlements.

The fleets of the mid-ninth century were of considerable size, comprising in some cases perhaps hundreds of ships and thousands of people. Based on the observations of outsiders, they appear to have lacked a centralized leadership structure, operating instead on a coalitional basis. Although the intricacies of fleet structures are generally obscure, these may have remained partially underpinned by kinship and diplomatic networks. Historical sources also indicate that the fighting elements of these groups were accompanied by their families, as well as merchants and artisans attached to the fleet (McLeod 2011, 2014; Raffield 2016, p. 314–319). Evidence from known winter camps suggests participation in both local and interregional trade, as well as craftworking (Clinton 2014; Hadley and Richards 2016, p. 50; Sheehan 2008; Williams 2013, 2015, 2020). The social structure of viking fleets appears to have been heterogenous and inclusive, and likely incorporated

members of regional populations subject to viking incursions (e.g., McLeod 2014; Raffield et al. 2016, p. 39–40). One fleet, referred to in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as a "Great Army," is described in 874 as being led by no less than three leaders, whom the chroniclers styled as "kings" (Swanton 2000, p. 74). Prominent war leaders played a primary role in managing diplomatic relationships with other viking groups and local rulers. Contemporaneous sources also mention presumably lower-status commanders leading smaller flotillas and land-based forces, and these leaders themselves were—at least to some extent—likely reliant on the support and cooperation of others who commanded individual ships (Price 2014, 2016; Raffield 2016, p. 324–330). Fleets were liable to split into numerous contingents or merge with others, as individual groups accomplished or abandoned various objectives or sought new opportunities elsewhere (Raffield 2016, p. 324; Cooijmans 2020).

This seemingly chaotic image of collective organization, however, almost certainly belies the intricacy of organizational structures within these groups. While kinship and personal political networks may have become less salient in determining actions undertaken at the fleet level, they probably still played a role in shaping the structural composition and daily operations of ships' crews and smaller flotillas. The identification of numerous leaders within individual fleets indicates that traditions of collective decision-making, perhaps influenced by longstanding institutions such as the *þing,* might have carried over from the terrestrial to the maritime spheres, allowing these groups to effectively scale up their activities. However, the authority of leading rulers was also likely underpinned by charisma and their ability to gain and redistribute plunder (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2009, p. 93–94; Price 2014, 2016; Raffield 2022, p. 424). At the same time, it is clear that fleets were also forging and experimenting with new forms of cooperation underpinned by loose and flexible ties (Cooijmans 2020). The heterogeneous and multi-cultural nature of at least some groups appears to have been offset by conscious efforts to develop specific in-group material identities, as indicated by the emergence of unique forms of martial equipment (see e.g., Raffield et al. 2016, p. 40–42). In light of this, we might view the "fleet" itself as an experimental, coalitional institution that gained prominence as a cultural strategy, adapting terrestrial organizational structures to align with and facilitate the operation of more agile, mobile political units, thereby providing an arena for experimentation and the formation of new, multi-faceted identities and lifeways.

While some elements of viking fleets appear to have been motivated by the desire for plunder, others are recorded as negotiating or forcibly establishing land claims in England, Ireland, and modern-day France. In England, for example, elements of the Great Army are noted as dividing up and settling the eastern and northern parts of the country during the 870s. We should not, however, assume that this was a strategic goal of the fleet from the outset (Williams 2023, p. 45–46); rather, these decisions appear to have been made by individual leaders and groups in response to fluctuating regional conditions (Raffield 2016, p. 330–331). In Ireland, the settlement at Dublin initially founded around 840 grew to become the epicenter of a powerful polity, with extensive trade and diplomatic links to Scandinavian settlements in England and also Scandinavia itself (see Horne 2022). On the Continent, successful war leaders were granted fiefdoms as part of diplomatic negotiations with regional

rulers (Coupland 1998; Cooijmans 2020, p. 174–179). Within this dynamic context, the archaeological record provides evidence for increasing integration between settlers and regional populations, as well as a fusion of cultural practices and influence (Kershaw 2013), though the balance of political power remained fragmentary (Williams 2011, p. 45; 2015, p. 30). Some Christian rulers made active efforts to bring viking leaders into the fold of European kingship through diplomacy (Lavelle 2010, p. 318–322).

Scandinavian settlements took on a different flavor across regions. On the Continent, some settlements, such as that established in Normandy, evolved into formalized, consolidated polities, while others were maintained as strategic enclaves or quickly faded from the historical record (Cooijmans 2020, p. 176–178; 2021, p. 24). In England, however, various elements of the Great Army and later waves of settlers from Scandinavia appear to have settled in largely autonomous territories. While the historical record indicates that raiding armies raised from numerous regions came together to engage in cross-border raids and more extensive military campaigns against the emergent English state, there appears to have been little coordination in defensive matters (Abrams 2001b, p. 139; Raffield 2020). This could indicate that the organizational structures and strategies that had underpinned the multi-party, consensus operation of fleets during the ninth century remained prominent, at least within contexts of offensive warfare (Raffield 2020, p. 209–210). As in Scandinavia, legislative assemblies were an established institution in England, once again provided a medium through which power, law, social interaction, and diplomacy were regulated and performed (Hadley 2006, p. 89–92; Semple et al. 2021, p. 11). While the relationship between viking groups and the Church is uncertain—especially during the early years of settlements—the latter was a powerful force both in governance and in precipitating ideological change (Abrams 2001a, 2023; McLeod 2014; Ten Harkel 2011). In Ireland, there seems to have been little impetus to establish dominance over the interior, and historical sources make frequent references to conflict between various viking factions (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983, p. 311, 347, 367). While contact was undoubtedly maintained with Scandinavian communities and those living across the wider sphere of the so-called "Viking diaspora" (see Cooijmans 2020; Horne 2022) the extent and influence of these relationships is difficult to gauge.

The Sea Peoples and the End of the Bronze Age in the Mediterranean

The development of the groups collectively referred to as the "Sea Peoples" took place in a period which presaged the decline of the powerful palatial centers and city states that dominated a vast network of political control and inter-regional exchange during the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean (ca. 1200 BC). As with the so-called barbarians who participated in bringing about the demise of the Roman Empire, the Sea Peoples have been described as both a product of and a factor contributing to the so-called Late Bronze Age collapse (Cline 2021; Knapp and Manning 2016).

More scholarship has focused on debates concerning the identity and origins of the Sea People than on their organizational capabilities. As with "the Vikings," the term "Sea Peoples" is a modern construct, encompassing various named groups like the Sherden, Lukka, Peleset, Denyen, Aqaiwasha, and Tjekker, among others (Matić 2022; Redford 2018). Theories regarding their place of origin range from the Aegean and Anatolia to the central Mediterranean, though it seems most likely that shifting contingents of various ethnic groups with fluctuating membership and different origins were responsible for many of the military activities attributed to the Sea Peoples (Cline 2021; Emanuel 2017). Some interpret the Sea Peoples as displaced migrants driven by famine or environmental crises, while others view them as opportunistic raiders or mercenaries. Regardless, recent interpretations emphasize their decentralized and fluid nature, suggesting that certain groups among them may have at one point formed a confederation capable of scaling operations for trade, mercenary work, or raids (Matić 2022). While Egyptian texts portray them as invaders defeated by pharaohs (Figure 4), others suggest they were integrated into societies as settlers or soldiers, highlighting their complex role in Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age transitions (Cline 2021; Emanuel 2021).

During the reign of Ramses II, the activities of these various militarized, maritime groups appear to have taken the form of localized, piratical raids. However, by the late 12th century BC, their activities appear to have become both more structured and more destructive. In the eighth year of the reign of Ramses III, they are represented—at least in epigraphic form—as a *coalition* of peoples who have come together by *proclamation* (Redford 2018, p. 123, italics in the original). Ramses refers to them as a confederation (Cline 2021). Redford (2018) notes that the etymology of the Medinet Habu inscription describing them suggests they may have issued some sort of "formal statement of union and intent"—akin to a manifesto.

A recent study of the terminology Egyptians used to describe leaders of the Sea Peoples' groups at Medinet Habu seems to indicate that they were perceived of

Fig. 4 Battle between the army of Ramses III and Sea Peoples on the northeast wall of the temple of the dead at Medinet Habu, Egypt. Image in the public domain.

differently than the leaders of territorial-based polities or political capitals (Matić 2022). According to Matić (2022), several features of these texts identify them as warrior groups similar to pirates or mercenaries, rather than large groups of migrants. There is no reference to a political capital, an institutionalized and/or centralized authority, or formal structures of governance. Instead, the allusions more closely align with those used to refer to mobile Bedouin tribes (Matić 2022, p. 77) and could perhaps be associated with ships' crews.

When seeking to understand which institutions permitted the Sea Peoples to scale up collective action, it is highly likely that these were maritime groups, possibly with semi- or impermanent bases, that comprised either individual ship-borne groups with distinct leaders or assemblages of the same. In this way, viking raiding fleets might provide a useful analogy where archaeological and textual data on the social organization of these groups are lacking. Some have noted that the Sea Peoples phenomenon marked the end of a Late Bronze Age regional system marked by political and economic centralization and a transition to the more decentralized social systems of the European and Near Eastern Iron Age (Sherratt 1998).

In terms of defining the strategic repertoires that these Sea Peoples may have drawn upon, it makes sense to consider a single-named ethnic group. Using a combination of documentary, iconographic, and archaeological evidence, a compelling case can be made for the identity of the Sherden as post-palatial Mycenaeans (Emanuel 2017, 2021). While much of what is known about Mycenaean social institutions relates to groups associated with palatial rule, texts also refer to individuals, communities, leaders of small groups, military commanders, and lesser territorial functionaries (Shelmerdine 2011). Although the collapse of palatial institutions is said to have mainly affected the ruling class, it also led to population declines more generally in terms of both settlement size and the abandonment of regions (Emanuel 2017:58). The Mycenean political economy was a complex nexus of relationships among palaces, towns, groups, and individuals, some of whom owned land and some who worked for wages (Shelmerdine 2011). Given this system, it becomes easy to see how some people may have been set adrift by drought and palatial collapse. These were possibly components of the institutional repertoire that Myceneans-turned-Sea Peoples a.k.a. the "Sherden of the Sea" (Emanuel 2017) drew upon for engaging in strategic collective action on the move. The success and prowess of Sherden military operations suggests that certain elements of Mycenean militarism (Palaima 1999) persisted despite the collapse of palatial control of the same, albeit in a more decentralized configuration.

The origins of the Philistines as a distinct cultural group in the Iron Age Levant have long been attributed to Sea People in-migration and settlement. Contemporary perspectives acknowledge that former Mycenaeans likely made up only a portion of these groups and that the establishment of their settlements and eventual cities took place over many decades rather than as a monolithic "invasion" (Knapp 2021; Maeir 2022). In addition to exhibiting certain elements of an Aegean-based material repertoire, the Philistines also adopted an institutional and strategic repertoire that strongly resembles the decentralized groups among which they originated (Cline 2021). The loosening of state-centered political organization created opportunities for the construction of new polities that included elements of both local and migrant

institutions and a highly flexible economic organization. Nevertheless, the image of the Philistines as a mighty and feared enemy in Biblical texts despite a lack of evidence for extreme militarism in the archaeological record may reflect the sort of "othering" observed among other so-called "barbarians," as discussed herein.

The Comanche and the Colonial Frontier

Over the course of the 18th century, the Comanche developed from their roots as a small group of Uto-Aztecan hunter-gatherers, transforming a vast portion of the US Southwest and Southern Plains into what has been called both a layered "confederation" and a powerful economic "empire." The rise of the Comanche took place in the context of opportunities and disruptions generated by Spanish colonial expansion to the west of the Comanche territory and French colonialism to the east (Figure 5). The introduction of horses, livestock, and European produced goods, as well as the European and Indigenous desire for slaves, provided new economic opportunities for these mobile, Plains-oriented peoples. Theirs was a political-economic project and "…their aim was not to conquer and colonize, but to coexist, control, and exploit" (Hämäläinen 2008, p. 4).

Fig. 5 "Comanche Meeting the Dragoons" by George Caitlin. Image in the public domain.

The Comanches emerged in the southern Rocky Mountains just as the Spanish colonial frontier was destabilized by the Pueblo Revolt, making Spanish horses and livestock available to groups who quickly seized upon the economic opportunities these afforded. When the Spanish re-established control over their colonies in the 1690s, the Comanche were poised to capitalize on new opportunities to trade in slaves, guns, and other European-manufactured goods flowing to and through the colonial borderlands. By the 1720s, the Comanche had relocated to the Southern Plains where, through systematic raiding, they expelled the Apache people and carved out a new home territory, the *Comanchería*, from which they raided and traded with European and indigenous settlements beyond its margins.

Kinship was the backbone of the Comanche cultural repertoire and provided a scaffolding for the scaling up of relations between key social institutions. There were four levels of Comanche socio-political organization: the nuclear family, the extended family, *rancherias*, also called residential local bands, and the political division. *Rancherias* were the primary residential unit for the Comanche. *Rancherias* were made up of one or more extended family groups, and generally one particular extended family served as the core of the *rancheria*. Social boundaries were fluid: individuals, nuclear families, and even extended families could move between *rancherias*. Likewise, unrelated nuclear families and individuals could attach themselves to a *rancheria*. *Rancherias* had to move frequently because a single *rancheria* might have more than 1000 horses, which quickly ate all the surrounding grass. The central man in the core extended family was called *paraibo*, (leader or chief). The main task of the *paraibo* was to hold the band together, which he did through exercising his skills in curing and sorcery, bravery in hunting and warfare, charisma, and political skills—and especially by giving things away. The *paraibo* led band councils that decided matters that affected the entire band. All men could attend the council and speak. The *paraibo* dominated the proceedings working to gain consensus on an important topic. He did not rule by decree or, in fact, really rule at all. The "division" was the largest political entity among the Comanche. The division consisted of local residential bands linked by kinship and sodality ties and who had common interests in such things as war, peace, and trade. A divisional chief seems to have been selected from among the chiefs present at particular divisional gatherings. Like *paraibos*, divisional chiefs had little formal power, but instead presided over efforts to reach consensus on important issues.

In contrast to the limited power of the leader of a *rancheria* or a division, the leader of a raiding party had absolute authority during the campaign. Generally, Comanche war chiefs led raids, but in fact, any man could gather warriors and go on a raid. A raiding party could be made up of individuals from the same band or from multiple bands. A man who decided to go to war might go from village to village recruiting warriors and the support of village chiefs. This individual became the leader of the war party. Warriors and chiefs from other bands followed his orders concerning strategy exactly. Raiding parties might include hundreds or even thousands of men and some women, and they were autonomous political entities during the time of their existence, under the absolute authority of their leader.

For Comanche men, social status was tied to their ability to protect and provide for their families and expand their kinship networks (Hämäläinen 2008). Strategic

alliances and trading partnerships with other Indigenous and European groups were a key part of the Comanche's economic strategy. These were reckoned in the language of kinship and kin-like relations (Montgomery 2019, p. 342). The other side of their foreign policy strategy rested upon heightened militarism, raiding to acquire horses, livestock, slaves, food, and other commodities. Their control over trade routes and the bison-hunting territories that provided the basis for both subsistence and a source of hides for trade was accomplished not by direct control but by continued use, monitoring, and raiding. The aim was not to conquer their trading/raiding partners because these people were the source of goods the Comanche desired. Instead, they "managed" them, manipulating external relations with other groups for the greatest gain. The coordination of these strategies—diplomacy, violence, trading, and raiding—was a delicate balancing act (Brooks 2002; Hämäläinen 2008). The Comanche's success seems to have been facilitated by collective action and mutual commitment to shared goals; there were no central institutions directing activities.

Discussion

In the case studies discussed above, what was visible to outsiders was an externally oriented military-economic strategy employed by groups labeled as so-called "barbarians." The etic positions of the observers recounting and documenting the behaviors and activities of these groups masked complex internal institutional arrangements that allowed them to coordinate collective action and extract collective gains while maintaining autonomy among their constituent parts. This was accomplished by drawing down upon and augmenting a repertoire of institutions, resources, and strategies that allowed them to scale up their activities without the development of centralized power structures. Following from the case studies presented above, we identify here dimensions of variability and points of comparison between these and other cases of large-scale decentralized coordination.

What "push factors" cause groups to scale up collective action in the absence of centralized power? For the so-called Sea Peoples, widespread drought and the collapse—imminent or active—of polities in the late Bronze Age palatial system caused population displacement. A joint military-economic strategy based on predatory raiding emerged as an alternative when agrarian pursuits were not an option (Knapp and Manning 2016). For the Haudenosaunee, viking raiding fleets, and Comanche, new economic opportunities were afforded by interaction with or adjacency to wealthy states, the Church, and opportunities for trading and raiding afforded by colonial frontiers. Commodities including livestock, guns, gold, and/or other forms of portable wealth such as captives were converted into the necessities of life, political influence, and other forms of capital. In Colonial-Era Southeastern North America, for example, the deerskin trade and its articulation with global economic endeavors provided new economic opportunities for Muskogean peoples, who leaned into institutions that favored larger situational and collective leadership than those often posited for 16th century societies (see Ethridge 2003). Such leadership strategies and institutions, however, were far from novel responses to colonialism

and had deep histories in the region (Thompson et al. 2022); it may have been these "push factors" that made them fall back or emphasize these kinds of institutions over others embedded in the functioning of Muskogean society.

The groups we are concerned with here all engaged in strategic collective action that employed a joint military-economic strategy. The main difference between these and more centralized polities is that the economic benefits conferred by the activities undertaken by the former accrued among individuals and the leaders of relatively small constituent groups as opposed to within a central authority or institution. Even when we see evidence for the emergence of socio-political roles that might reflect the centralization of power and authority (e.g., the 50 Sachems of the Haudenosaunee confederacy council; the Comanche leader Green Horn (Hämäläinen 2008); the historically styled "kings" of the viking Great Army) these individuals were not concerned with financing institutions that could then be used to concentrate power and authority at the expense of their followers. For example, it was the nations of the Haudenosaunee—and not the confederacy—that established colonies in strategic "middleman" positions between the Algonquins and the French. These strategic locations and the goods that flowed through them belonged to Nations and the lineages or clans within them who opened up those trade routes and to whom the benefits of those trade arrangements flowed, not into the Confederacy cum-institution itself (Williamson 2023). Similarly, the leaders of Viking Age raiding fleets likely distributed the profits of their activities to crew members and their political networks in order to maintain the bonds of loyalty upon which their position depended (Ashby 2015; Sigurðsson 2020; Raffield 2022). While we know much less about the internal economic structure of the Sea Peoples, we can imagine similar sets of political and economic relations among leaders and ships' crews. When military and economic activity was "scaled up," these distributed sets of military-economic relations remained. While "push factors" are often framed in deterministic terms, whereby groups are forced to engage in certain kinds of behaviors (e.g., raiding, migration, incorporation) as the result of destabilizing forces (e.g., climate, encroachment), we should also leave space for "possibilism" (Trigger 2006, p. 319) as an explanatory mechanism that permits the incorporation of indeterminacy and unpredictability as a factor in cultural change. We also acknowledge that while relatively distributed sets of relations characterized these groups during the initial "scaling up," alliances and confederations have often been stepping off points to later centralization.

At their height, the achievements of these groups in terms of territorial expansion and incorporation might be productively compared with other, decentralized strategies for extending control over regions (see Montgomery 2019 re: the Comanche). The successful strategies of these groups involved balancing the actions and roles of multiple sets of institutions—clans, nations, and confederacies; kin groups, fleets, and nascent polities—in coordinated socio-political structures. In both the ninth century viking case and the 16th-17th-century Haudenosaunee case, compacts between the headmen of migratory raiding fleets and war parties operating at a distance from their home territories permitted the coordination of autonomous groups to mutual advantage. While each may not have been working toward a common goal determined by a centralized governing structure, enough coordination seems to have been in place such that the objectives of each did not come into conflict in terms

of, e.g., targeting the same resources (both material and human), whether these be Christian monasteries or Indigenous villages. At the same time, flexible institutional and leadership structures allowed members of both societies to merge in the service of achieving common strategic objectives and then just as easily separate, indeed we see similar fission and fusion processes in the coalescence of the Creek Confederacy in the American Southeast (see Ethridge 2024) and the ever-shifting networks of the so-called Barbarians on the northern Roman frontier (Wickham 2016). While we have historic records detailing the nature of decision-making processes of early modern states, the same do not exist for either Haudenosaunee confederacy councils or the conferences of viking war leaders. If they did, we would be better able to understand the logic behind the strategic, purposeful nature of the actions of individuals and their institutions as well as any dissonance and negotiation that arose in these decentralized political structures. The capacity of these groups to operate both autonomously and as part of larger conglomerates appears, in many contexts, to have been a defining aspect of their institutional structures. However, identifying archaeological evidence of these kinds of strategic compacts and collective activities can be extremely difficult (Arkush et al. 2025). This is where the framework can reveal what we are missing.

The formality and control of leadership and decision-making is another important dimension of variability across our cases. While coordination among and between constituent groups seems important for achieving the largest-scale objectives of decentralized collectives, leaders generally do not seek to assert control beyond their direct subordinates. Ostensibly, the Sea Peoples who challenged Ramses III may have included military leaders united under a formal proclamation of intent (Emanuel 2021), though there is no firm evidence for formal institution-building among the same leaders. The Comanche were perhaps the least centralized of all of the cases discussed herein, apart perhaps from the emergence of the title and office of "*Cuerno Verde*" or Green Horn, a title claimed by a series of Comanche leaders in between 1768 and 1779 (Espinoza 1931; Hämäläinen 2008). In the Iroquoian case, the highly formal and exclusionary nature of Haudenosaunee confederacy governance may have asserted a stabilizing effect compared to the more informal and incorporative nature of Wendat leadership (Birch 2020). Rather than thinking about political institutions in decentralized societies along a spectrum of less to more hierarchical as an indicator of social complexity, we might productively interrogate societies along an axis of less to more formalized.

Another dimension of variability includes mobility. Some societies feature very high degrees of mobility, while others ranged from and returned home on a more regular basis. Strategic mobility permitted the mobilization of manpower, the long-distance exchange of ideas and resources, and was fundamentally antithetical to the accumulation of power and resources in any one place. For the Comanche, in particular, and perhaps also certain of the Sea Peoples, mobility permitted adaptability in response to shifting ecological and political conditions. However, high degrees of mobility and ranging also leave only faint, if any, signatures in the archaeological record. It is notable that the strongest physical evidence for the dominance of both the Comanche and the Sea Peoples comes from rock art panels, epigraphy, and textual records as opposed to strong physical evidence (Emanuel 2021; Montgomery

2019). For other cases, such as the Haudenosaunee and mainland Viking Age society (in contrast to itinerant fleets), warriors operated at a distance from relatively stable homeland conditions such that the effects of military operations were not necessarily felt directly by those in the societal core. Questions remain as to what changed for mobile, militarized groups as they became less tethered to a home base. What happened if and when they retethered, whether in their original home territories or in new lands settled through migration and conquest? Using additional case studies, we might consider how high vs. low mobility affects the centralization of leadership and coordination to achieve strategic objectives.

In each of the cases discussed, territorial expansion and strategies of incorporation led to heterogeneous populations. The creation of multi-ethnic societies as the result of migration can lead to what has been called the "migrant paradox" whereby the beneficial effects of migrants can be overshadowed by perceived mistrust (Clark et al. 2019; Nail 2015). In some cases, the creation of ethnically diverse groups was akin to notions of coalescence (Kowalewski 2006), whereby individuals and groups sought out mutually beneficial sets of relations owing to encroachment, population decline, displacement, or other historically contingent circumstances.

In others, however, the incorporation of outsiders as subordinate remnant groups or slaves resulted in deep structural inequities. Among the Comanche, the enslaved could be treated brutally, not because they were "different" but because they were not kin. Among Indigenous eastern North American societies, captives experienced a variety of fates, from ritual torture and dismemberment to full adoption (Snyder 2007; Starna and Watkins 1991). Among both the Comanche and Haudenosaunee, it was kinship and not ethnicity or race that determined one's position and status as a social being. The conditions of captives taken and held by viking raiding groups, in contrast, might have varied based on their perceived economic 'value' as hostages for ransom, their potential to be exploited for specialist skillsets, knowledge, or indeed as sexual objects or prospective relationship/marriage partners. In the latter cases, the nominal status of these individuals would have presumably been renegotiated in order to accommodate them within existing social structures, though perhaps with tacit acceptance of their reduced agency (Raffield 2022; see also Cameron 2011, p. 182–183). As such, we should not conflate decentralization with equity when considering the potential for structural inequality and structural violence in militarized collectives.

The coming together of peoples with different cultural backgrounds, either as captives and captors or allies and collaborators, would have diversified cultural practice and the repertoires from which strategic collective action could proceed (Cameron 2016). The Sea Peoples, for example, comprised multiple different named groups with origins ranging from southeastern Europe to the Aegean and Near East (Redford 2018). The Haudenosaunee saw the incorporation of diverse peoples as helpful in terms of the addition of kinship ties and new knowledge/information (Parmenter 2010). In the case of Viking Age raiding groups, the experience of spending extended periods of time living, traveling, and fighting together contributed to the development of group identities through shared experiences (Raffield et al. 2016). However, while we emphasize the benefits of diversity here, systematic inquiry should also be directed to how ethnic heterogeneity affects the degree to which

leaders can assert or must share power and the nature of dissonance in decentralized collectives.

With their decentralized power structures, these groups were difficult to control or defeat; hence, perhaps, the agitation among those that sought to conquer or control them. On the other hand, decentralized power had the potential to impact the ability of these groups to coordinate effectively when faced with the overwhelming soft and hard powers of a more centralized society. And, while we are unable to fully explore the point here, we note that states and empires that were able to defeat decentralized societies often did so by preventing them from deploying their strategic repertoires through practices such as forced resettlement, enslavement, dissolution, and/or dispersal. In the case of the Scandinavian groups that established landholdings in England during the ninth century, the marked shift from mobile predation to territorialized warfare arguably robbed these groups of the main tactical and strategic advantage—mobility—that had previously allowed them to effectively compete with their enemies in the field.

The cases discussed here are based primarily on a combination of historical, ethnohistorical, and anthropological evidence. Given the relative lack of attention to decentralized collectives in archaeological discourse, where might our framework help identify similarly organized societies or groups in the human past? We suggest, for example, that the adoption of these perspectives could provide an additional lens through which to study both archaeologically and historically documented collectives that may not as yet have been identified as such as per common scholarly discourse.

The identification of groups operating as decentralized collectives in the archaeological record is inherently more difficult than identifying those defined by the centralization of power, wealth, and materiality of the same. However, the approach presented here need not be restricted to those cases of the so-called "barbarians." We believe that a framework aimed at understanding how cultural and institutional repertoires can be scaled up by decentralized groups to achieve large-scale objectives is of utility in other cases without evidence for militarism. For example, anthropological–archaeological investigation and explanation of large-scale monumental constructions (e.g., Inomata et al. 2020; Kidder and Grooms 2023) and the aggregation of populations into mega-sites (e.g., Chapman 2017), and large-scale, low-density settlement configurations, (e.g., Kim and McAnany 2023) in contexts lacking centralized power structures and administrative systems would benefit from a consideration of how existing institutions and resources were strategically deployed in the service of collective objectives. In fact, we may be more likely to note the absence of evidence for certain practices and places when seeking out decentralized groups in the archaeological record. This includes a lack of primary or preeminent central places that assume a political function; a lack of concentration of material wealth or power in any one settlement or institution—acknowledging that what might be considered "central" in one context may not be considered "central" in others; evidence of high mobility and ranging capacities beyond a defined homeland or settlement system; or spaces for assembly in absence of a central authority. Indeed, archaeology's inherent epistemological positivism in terms of not recognizing or seeking out those behaviors or events that lack a strong material correlate may be one reason

why the kind of societies we are concerned with here often remain peripheral to archaeological discourse.

On the other hand, we might consider the archaeological correlates of relatively well-documented phenomena such as viking raiding or the activities of pirate fleets operating in the Caribbean during the so-called "Golden Age of Piracy." While, in both cases, the lives of these groups are best known as being characterized by violence, the material signatures identified at sites associated with them—where these can be identified at all—often emphasize commerce and exchange over militaristic activity (see e.g., Hadley and Richards 2016; Hamilton 2006; Skowronek 2016; Williams 2015, 2020, 2023). Although this in itself should not be surprising given that the subsistence of these groups was dependent on their ability to generate and recirculate wealth obtained through plunder, diplomacy, and trade, it nevertheless raises questions concerning our ability to define their presence within the archaeological record, in particular in contexts where historical documentation is lacking. In a discussion of the 18th-century port city of Port Royal in Jamaica, Hamilton (2006, p. 26) emphasizes that, archaeologically speaking, there is little evidence that explicitly speaks to the known presence of privateers and pirates within this milieu; this is instead something that must be gleaned from historical sources. The identification of known viking encampments associated with the Great Army in England has similarly relied, to some extent, on information provided by surviving chronicles. As noted by Soulat and de Bry (2019, p. 91), defining an archaeology of such groups is far from simple, and may rely on identifying specific combinations of items that speak, for example, to their heterogeneous or multi-ethnic composition and participation in or predation on long-distance trading networks. The fact that the activities and organization of decentralized collectives can be ephemeral or hard-to-read in the archaeological record makes an even more compelling case for the need to tackle questions about and understandings of these groups through cross-cultural and transdisciplinary approaches.

Conclusions

To summarize, in this article, we have attempted to introduce a heuristic framework for the study of decentralized societies that, historically, have often been pejoratively described by imperial or colonial powers as "barbarians." We have argued that these groups drew upon repertoires of institutions, resources, and strategies associated with small-scale and nonstate societies in ways that effectively allowed them to preserve autonomy and flexibility while simultaneously scaling up collective action. While the internal logic of these groups runs counter to neoevolutionary frameworks for categorizing social complexity, these objectives were accomplished through coupled military-economic strategies, in ways that, in turn, permitted them to challenge and extract gains from more centralized polities, including both states and empires.

Additional systematic cross-cultural comparison would offer much to the discussion of how large-scale decentralized collective societies functioned as well as identifying and explaining variation and change in the same. Archaeological data alone may not be sufficient for observing and documenting the kinds of collective

behaviors—e.g., alliances, strategic compacts, and military campaigns—that such groups engaged in. As such, we advocate for transdisciplinary approaches that supplement and enhance archaeology's conceptual toolkit in terms of recognizing the activities and behaviors of decentralized collectives in the human past. We suggest that the application of the framework provided in this paper is one way forward to facilitate that dialogue. At the very least, we hope that it provides a means for stepping beyond the perpetual hunt for the development of the state (a favorite archaeological topic) and examining other, less understood ways that societies were put together, governed themselves, and accomplished things—sometimes instigating significant changes in the world systems in which they were enmeshed.

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