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Ross Pickett
Roger Williams University

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Conflicts among Civilizations: The Influence behind War and Art

Ross Pickett, Marketing '09

The idea that conflicts among civilizations result from a cultural difference rather than an economic or political standpoint is a courageous one. These conflicts are too deeply rooted and complex to analyze in one single concept. Using only this central point, this theory attempts to define the reason behind all civilization, conflicts, and why culture exists. Is not money or economic value an underlying factor in wars throughout time? Political events have an incredibly important impact on the inhabitants of a civilization. Do these events not have influence on people, and in turn affect the ideas and beliefs of a nation? Is the rivalry between two peoples really caused by its cultural differences; or the thrill of competition, conquering, and becoming the most powerful? These questions come to mind when trying to validate the theory that conflict results from a cultural difference.

The origin of these conflicts is an area of debate, but the artwork influenced by them is remarkable. Within every piece created, there lies a factor of motivation behind it. Often these factors are similar to those that lie behind war. Many questions can be answered about conflict between humans, their origin, and how that foundation has reflected today's society by studying the influences behind war and art.

In Ancient times, battles were often fought simply for the expansion of an empire, and economic gain. Darius, king of Persia, is an excellent example. When he took the throne he decided that it was time to show his people the power his kingdom possessed. His conquest was based on the need for more land and money to support the beautiful capital of Persepolis. His mission was successful until he was defeated by the Athenians at Marathon. The point behind Darius's conquest is that he had no specific enemy; in fact, he simply decided he could not go east for fear of unknown territory, and he could not go west because of the harsh desert terrain. So the kingdom's location and terrain actually determined the outcome of Darius's conquest. The price of his massive army of soldiers, along with the expensive capital of Persepolis, put pressure on the empire's wallet too. More land for the empire meant a larger collection of taxes from citizens, and economic prosperity for the kingdom. Darius, a typical king of ancient times, used war for financial or economic reasons. What cultures it was fought against were simply determined by the layout of the land.

Darius took these conquests and used the profits they made to create beautiful structures in Persepolis. The Apadana of Darius, was a massive and elaborate audience hall generated from the taxes imposed on Persia's conquered lands (Figure 3). All its sculptures and columns were decorated and painted with striking colors and expensive metals. The depiction of animals fighting each other is a symbol of power and control for their military leaders. This hall would have been visited by many citizens, and as a result King Darius and Persia's wealth would be displayed to the public through its pieces. The battles Darius fought created an economic surplus and its outcome was the beautiful artwork still preserved today (King Darius III).

Politics are a means of change and debate for the people of a civilization. War is nearly the same. Karl von Clausewitz, when comparing war and politics, stated, “War is the continuation of politics by other means.” When change is brought about, some injustices can arise. Politics are the fluids that grease the gears of the public, and allow all ideas to be analyzed, protested, changed, and worked through. Often these gears can be turned in a different direction resulting in a war over political beliefs. Hannah Arendt observed that “political power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.” Does an army of soldiers marching in formation to fight in the American Civil War not show political power, motivation and humans moving together in concert for a belief? This war caused a country to turn on itself: two sides, one nation, and two conflicting political beliefs, which changed the country’s outlook and even determined the next president. Entering a civil war on political beliefs and finishing with a new unified country and political leader demonstrates the effect of politics on war and conflict.

The Roman ruler, Hadrian, ordered a beautifully carved relief depicted hunting and slaying wild boar to display his political power and integrity. Created c. 130 CE (Figure 1) the piece was originally erected on a monument for Hadrian. He then made an honorable sacrifice to the god Apollo. This image was meant to inspire the public, make them believe and trust in their noble leader, and make his political beliefs theirs as well. Just as a war is often fought to persuade certain people of a political belief, this art was of a similar motive (Stokstad 215).

The thrill and fame that comes with victory often causes a ruler to dream about the truly heroic status of being a war veteran. Alexander the Great’s story of conquest, power, and titles he attained is an excellent example of this. He began his life as the son of Philip, King of Macedonia. His father gained great respect and honor by conquering neighboring lands, and expanding his kingdom. With guidance from Phillip, Alexander determined that he would build a massive empire, in a quest to become a god among men. After conquering Upper and Lower Egypt, Alexander was given the title of pharaoh and the son of the supreme god Ra. Later, the oracles at Didyma and Erythrae claimed that he was the son of Zeus. Several pieces of artwork and sculptures were then made, showing him grasping the famous thunderbolt of his father. Alexander the Great continued to conquer in Egypt, Babylonia, Persis, Media, Bactria, the Punjab, and the valley of the Indus. His campaigns were all in the pursuit of divine power and recognition. When the Egyptians were conquered, he gladly accepted to title of son of Ra although this was the title of a completely different culture. Alexander’s pursuit of fame and divine ruling was purely that and his motivation involved no underlying cultural conflict (Stokstad 121).

This theme of the thrill and fame of war trickles down to middle class people as well. Nationalism is showing pride or loyalty for one’s country or kingdom. When a country is at war the citizens often feel a sense of pride that they are fighting for their home and nation. It gives them a purpose and duty towards their country. They are good citizens helping a just kingdom defeat an evil one. This gives rulers another reason for war or conflict: to help unify their kingdoms by spreading nationalism through its lower classes. Often these wars can encourage consumers to buy their products “in country” and in turn promote a better economy.

The East Pediment of the Temple of Aphaia, Aegina was created C. 490 BCE and it is an astonishing scene of the emotion, tragedy and triumph of battle (Figure 2). The carved marble warriors are depicted with muscular bodies and show no fear in the face of death. It displays the sense of heroism and the thrill of conquering. Several soldiers have been wounded and are shown struggling on the ground. Their injuries look cumbersome but it does not stop them from attempting to stand and continue fighting for their land. The glorified stories of war, divine rulers and nationalism of a country have clearly been transferred from conflict to creation (Stokstad 44).

All these rulers and examples show a motive for conflict other than a cultural difference. Why war or conflicts are fought between civilizations is a subject that could be debated with no end. The complexity of how our species reacts with each other and generates conflict exceeds the limitations of a single concept. There is not one answer to the question, but often the combination of the need for economic and political authority along with the thrill of victory, power, and nationalism joining together to create the motivation to fight and conquer. Plato encompassed man's greed for financial gain and recognition when he said, "Wars and revolutions and battles are due simply and solely to the body and its desires."

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