Casting the First Stone

LA-Times. November 10, 2003.

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You've seen the photographs, the most current version appearing in newspapers last week from Fallouja, "the epicenter of anti-American hatred in Iraq." Several boys cluster together. One of them cocks his right arm, his body torqued and ready to throw.

In another setting, he could be a Little Leaguer dreaming he is Nomar Garciaparra throwing to first base for the final out against the Yankees. Here, he is throwing a stone. His target is a monstrous American armored personnel carrier he won't even nick. He obviously has other dreams.

What do these Iraqi boys think they are doing? A simple answer is that these boys are reenacting rituals of stupidity in times of war. Stupid like the Polish cavalry fighting on foot with rifles against the Wehrmacht in 1939. Stupid like the 320,000 British soldiers dead or wounded during their summer on the Somme in 1916. Stupid like the 4,000 Zulus advancing again and again against 139 British soldiers dug in behind the depot barricades at Rorke's Drift in 1879.

But in all these cases, trained adult warriors were doing what their ideological and enculturating myths made them able and willing to do: to die fighting enemies who possessed terrifying weaponry. The Iraqi boys, however, have other historical precedents and sources of inspiration.

According to the Roman poet-philosopher Lucretius' anthropology of primitive times, man's first weapons were fists, nails and teeth, stones and crude wooden clubs. His vision is just one stage removed from the famous ape

scene in Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey." Our bet is that Kubrick got it wrong: Those apes first threw stones.

Piles of stones for throwing or slinging are regular excavation finds from the 7th millennium BCE onward. But by 2500 BCE, the finest instruments for killing in war had moved well beyond stones and slings. A monument known as the "Vulture stele" commemorates the victory of the king of Lagash in what is now Iran over the king of Umma in what is now Iraq. The Lagash warriors wear protective helmets and wield long spears and battle-axes, and they attack behind a literal moving wall of overlapping large rectangular shields. Every leap forward in military technology has changed the codes of warrior conduct for the elites who monopolize state-of-the-art equipment. The poorest and weakest, those feeling most oppressed -- these are often the youngest -- resort to slinging and rock-throwing.

The Greek historian Thucydides recounts how hated Theban troops occupying inveterate enemy Plataea in 431 BCE are set upon by women and slaves who "yelled and screamed from their houses and pelted them with stones and tiles," the first step in their eventual rout and slaughter.

In Homer's "Iliad," spears used by armored aristocratic warrior chieftains are the primary weapons of honor. When Homeric warriors use stones, they are massive helmet-crushing boulders befitting their heroic status. Only once does a hero hurl a fist-sized stone, as our Iraqi boys do.

Patroclus, Achilles' friend and fighting surrogate, has used up all of his aristocratic battle prowess in a killing spree with sword and spear. The Trojan champion Hector approaches in a chariot. Patroclus grabs and throws a "jagged, glittering stone." He misses Hector but hits the charioteer, Cebriones, right between the eyes: The sharp stone crushes both brows and both eyes burst from their sockets.

The scene reveals two things. Stone-hurling, whether with hands or slings, can be effective, even deadly. Ask Goliath. Ask veterans of riot control in Belfast or the Gaza Strip. Second, stones and sling bullets are weapons of last resort for warriors with access to better killing devices. But for the young, poor and powerless, they are weapons of necessity.

Ancient tacticians like Arrian recommended that armies train poor citizens as hurlers and slingers. Plato recommended that young men preparing for war compete at throwing stones both with their bare hands and with slings.

The wisdom of such advice is demonstrated in 425 BCE. A contingent of Spartan soldiers surrendered for the first time in more than 300 years of distinguished military actions. They were victims of bad luck in the strategic circumstances of the war they were fighting. But they were also worn out by the nearly constant harassment of Athenians who, being otherwise unarmed, resorted to the simple act of throwing stones.

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