Twitter Thread by James Palmer



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i am sick and reading about 19th century New Zealand, and it may be just that I'm a little hallucinatory right now but it seems like strategists and military historians should talk about the Musket Wars a lot more than they do?

like, it's basically the history of human warfare condensed into a few decades.

Hongi Hika, the war leader of the iwi (tribe) with the most European contact at first, and therefore the most muskets, travels to England, becomes a sensation, and meets George IV, who gives him a set of ceremonial armor, as one noble to another.

but in the context of a conflict that has gone from neolithic to early modern almost overnight, the armor is, in fact, a powerful asset itself, which Hongi Hika wears in battle

by the time that the Musket Wars end and the armed conflicts with Europeans begin, Maori are inventing forms of trench warfare so innovative that the British military engineers are studying them

also 'mana' and 'utu' seem like very useful terms to borrow to talk about some aspects of authority and power in pre-modern Europe that we don't have clear words for.

amid the rapid modernization of Maori warfare there continue to be Homeric feats of physical prowess and personal bravery, combined with images of gothic horror.

Te Waru of Ngaiterangi, after the fall of his home to the musket-armed Ngapuhi, sneaks into their encampment, ambushes and disarms a Ngapuhi leader, then hands his weapons to the guy he's just attacked and asks to be taken captive to speak for the lives of his people.

bear in mind that this takes place in a context where the torture and cannibalism of prisoners is common; the earth ovens containing the cooked bodies of some of Te Waru's relatives are still smoking around him.

His captors are so impressed by his bravery and speech that they free his wh■nau (extended family) and him and make peace, as well as gifting him a musket.

at one point Te Rauparaha, one of the most famous war leaders and a world-class strategist, is seeking utu (revenge/balance) against another leader for betraying and murdering his uncle

Te Rauparaha has forged alliances with European traders, including marrying a daughter to one, and pays an enormous amount of flax to get a trading brig to take him and his men to his enemy's town

his enemy, Te Maiharanui, and his family come abroad, thinking they're trading with the Europeans for muskets, and are ambushed. Te Rauparaha's cousin, Te Hiko, stares at the captive for half an hour before opening his lips and declaring 'These are the teeth that are my father'

Desecrating the dead, in particular, is a form of ritualized insult, and Te Hiko's father's bones have reportedly been taken to be carved into fish hooks. Te Maiharanui and his wife strangle their daughter on the voyage back as captives, to save her from revenge-torture.

But what's remarkable is that the killing, torture, and revenge - of a kind familiar to any Viking or Anglo-Saxon prince - *stops* as Maori political organization and state-making also rapidly evolve in the face of European power.