This is a study of a society at war. Its people, like any people at war, were not engaged in active conflict most of the time, but the prospect of violence was threatening enough that it did much to structure their world and affect their choices. It accomplished this partly by shaping a physical landscape—one that had been inhabited and modified by humans for thousands of years but now became marked permanently with fear made manifest: the massive defensive walls and windy hilltop settlements of southern Peru’s Lake Titicaca basin. These durable traces of fear and hostility on the landscape nudged the wall builders and their descendants toward certain kinds of possible futures and away from others.

The Lake Titicaca basin formed a major locus of pre-Columbian political development, hosting a series of early complex societies that culminated in the state of Tiwanaku. After Tiwanaku’s collapse in about AD 1000 came a turbulent interlude called the Late Intermediate period or Altiplano period (ca. AD 1000 to 1450). It was a time of extended drought, political fragmentation, and intense inter- and intra-ethnic conflict. People moved away from rich farmlands to settle on defensible ridges and hilltops, sometimes gathering in large fortified towns. Hilltop forts and refuges, known as pukaras in Quechua and Aymara, are visible across great stretches of the Andean highlands in this era, suggesting that a wave of conflict extended far beyond the Titicaca basin. But pukaras of the Titicaca basin rank among the largest, their coverage among the densest and most extensive. This extraordinary investment in hillforts indicates a level of concern with warfare unmatched at any other time in the archaeological sequence of the Titicaca basin. The pukara builders made other changes that were perhaps even more profound, discarding ancient traditions of ceremonial architecture, religious iconography, and elite privilege, and developing new ways of ordering people, beliefs, and landscapes. The new societies of the Late Intermediate period included
several ethnic and political groups, the largest and most powerful of which, reportedly, was the Colla. The Colla controlled the plains of the northern basin until about 1450, when they were conquered by the expanding Inca Empire. Their story, when cleared of complications and misunderstandings, offers a new way to think about war and political consolidation in late Andean prehistory. The chronicles, narrative compilations by Spanish clerics and bureaucrats early in the colonial era (ca. AD 1534–1650) from the testimonies of Incas and occasionally non-Inca native informants, describe the Colla as a great domain ruled by a powerful, possibly hereditary lord, who was considered a threatening rival to the fledgling Inca state. The Lupaca of the southwest Titicaca basin are described in similar terms. According to these accounts, at the time the Incas appeared on the scene, the Colla and Lupaca lords had consolidated large regions through conquest warfare, and the main obstacle to their continued expansion was their bitter rivalry with each other. The chronicles have dominated our archaeological vision of the region in the era before the Inca expansion, such that it is still quite common to read of the “Aymara kingdoms” of the Titicaca basin in general treatments of Andean prehistory.
But this story is contradicted by the archaeological evidence presented here. The density of hilltop forts in the northern Titicaca basin indicates frequent warfare even in the supposed heartland of Colla territory. Several subdivisions of the Colla area in the Late Intermediate period and later also suggest a socially or politically fragmented landscape. Within even the largest hillforts, evidence for sociopolitical hierarchy is limited. Did the Incas, or those who collected and preserved their histories, report conquest kingdoms where there had been none?

This book attempts to answer that question, developing a more robust, archaeologically based picture of the political extent and power of the Colla. It also uses the chronology of fortification in the Colla area to help clarify the causes of the violence that gripped the Colla region and the larger Andean highlands at this time, pointing to periodic drought as its initial impetus and several other factors that encouraged its continuation.

But the book has a broader aim as well. The case of the Colla highlights problems with the model, common to both archaeology and political
science, that warfare in preindustrial, nonstate societies leads to institutionalized leadership and large-scale, centralized polities. This was certainly the case in some times and places, but in others warfare had the opposite effect, especially where widespread fortifications hindered political centralization and regional consolidation. Endemic warfare encouraged the Colla and their neighbors to resettle in walled hilltop sites. These hillforts protected them from attack in the short term, but in the long term, they made the conquest and regional consolidation of this area by any particular leader far more difficult. The result was a Balkanized political landscape that was prone to repeated conflict.

The endemic, inconclusive warfare of the Colla region can be contrasted with another sort of military process, territorial conquest such as that accomplished by the Incas. The Incas assembled the largest empire of the prehispanic Americas largely through military expansion, the threat of attack, and the suppression of rebellions. In the process, Inca military conquest pacified the war-torn Andean highlands, a sea change visible at the transition to Inca control in the movement of people from defensible hilltops and ridges to more convenient, more vulnerable low-lying lands. Hence, over the same Andean terrain, war led in some time periods to consolidation through conquest, and at others to fragmentation and inconclusive cycles of violence (Arkush 2006). As archaeologists clarify these regional histories and their relationships to specific natural and built landscapes, it becomes clear that the pathways of warring societies are by nature historical and multilinear (Allen and Arkush 2006). This fact must lead us to reassess the role of warfare in the evolution and devolution of sociopolitical complexity.

Finally, in untangling the story of the Colla, I work toward an enhanced understanding of the importance of fortifications, both for the long-term histories of warring societies and for the archaeologists who study them. On a methodological level, the study demonstrates that an effective understanding of polity and warfare can be gained through the archaeological investigation of macro-scale patterns of fortification. On a theoretical level, it reconceptualizes fortifications as a form of “landscape patrimony”—a durable, physical fact on the ground that profoundly shapes the unfolding histories of specific regions.

**Violence on Paper: Models of Warfare**

The Colla case relates to two major questions about war: its causes and the role it plays in political centralization. Both questions have been developed