

While reading Colin Renfrew's new book *Prehistory: The Making of the Human Mind* (Weidenfeld, 2007 - Random House, 2008), I was struck by his observation (taken in turn from Wilson, *The Domestication of the Human Species*) that permanent, or even semi-permanent, settlements fundamentally changed people's interactions with the material environment. In this post I would like to sum up what Renfrew has suggested about how this changed human cognition, with a few comments of my own. Renfrew is an archeologist, and his discussion is appropriately guided by archeological evidence. My own archeological qualifications do not extend beyond a single graduate course and the fact that I will one day be buried, and therefore I must accept responsibility for the more wildly speculative elements of what follows.

Renfrew suggests that with settlement developed the notion of property, and the possibility of control over and the accumulation of property. I think Renfrew is onto something here, but I do not believe the concept of ownership would have been new. My understanding is that nomadic foragers do have possessions, though of course not many, and one need only observe a troop of chimpanzees at feeding time to see that even they have a functional notion of mine. It seems to me rather that the notions of property and territory (land property?) must have already been available. To be sure, these concepts were extended in new ways by settlement, but does not seem to me a change in fundamental cognitive abilities.

Renfrew observes that settlement must have made intensive investment in the environment practical, for the first time...

I assume that our nomadic forebears recognized their ability to modify a local environment in some strategic way and to benefit in the future from doing so when they returned to it. Indeed, one theory of agriculture is that it was invented by nomadic peoples as an investment in a place to which they would return. Settlement changed the scale on which it was practical to modify the environment. Renfrew suggests that settlement motivated the development of agriculture, and this seems sensible, examples of settled foragers and nomadic agriculturalists notwithstanding. This might have occasioned a cognitive shift in people's way of thinking about land, as Mithen suggested in his *Prehistory of the Mind*.

The biggest changes would presumably have been social. Renfrew suggests that the lithic monuments of Europe almost certainly occasioned social organization that, if it existed prior to their construction, has left no evidence. He emphasizes this because evidence suggests that the peoples of northwestern Europe at that time were quasi-nomadic, living in small, temporary hamlets. This might explain why the lithic monuments appear to have had no practical function. For the quasi-nomadic peoples of that time, no monument could be practical. The only use for monuments would be to occasion social interactions: in short, for "ritual."

Settlement, Renfrew suggests, brought about a new intensity of social relationships. In a nomadic band, one might simply leave, but this is more difficult to do in a permanent settlement, especially where property is involved. This must have helped to bring about social inequality, but the cognitive seeds of social inequality must have already been present. It is difficult to see how dominance hierarchies could exist without a notion of social inequality, and Larry Hirschfeld has convincingly shown that notions of human kinds have deep developmental roots. Settlement must have made possible a greater degree of social inequality, largely by blocking the mechanisms that usually maintain egalitarianism among nomadic foragers, but not by actually changing human cognitive capacities.

It seems to me that settlement brought with it a retasking of existing human cognition, but no real changes to cognitive abilities. If this conclusion seems obvious from the cognitive capabilities of contemporary nomads, it should not be: people move from settlement to nomadism and back again,

and there is no particular reason to believe, so far as I know, that any contemporary nomads have always been nomadic.