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No Place Like Home

A Quick Anthropological Overview of Paleolithic Shelter

Artxmis Graham Thoreau

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Neighborhood crime watch (i.e., snitches) and a faltering sense of community⁽¹⁾ are but two symptoms of the decay of the idyllic cul-de-sac image. Today, your neighborhood is a method of monitoring, with doorbell and driveway cameras. A sense of community in one's neighborhood is quickly draining away. I often hear those older than me reflect when it was much more common to walk over to the neighbor's house for dinner or a movie, with parents talking and children playing. Cookouts, yard sales as social events, and scavenger hunts are events I remember as much more common events from my own childhood (I am only 23, for reference).

Is this because of the rise of neoliberalism, a decay of moral values, home development plans or something else? How far back does the issue at hand go? What caused it? Without giving an elaborate history of neighborhoods and capitalist home design, I want

⁽¹⁾ I remember a Real Estate website stating, "Neighbors aren't as friendly as before due to changes in lifestyle and technological advancements that have reduced social interaction and made many less open to meeting others." The fast paced, online experience of modern life is so visible, yet never criticized by many..

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<https://medium.com/uncivilized/what-is-home-e850ce3b66f>

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to explore the ethos and strategies of shelter building in the Paleolithic, to be read alongside the likes of *The City and its Inmates* by John Zerzan. This text is limited in scope, because originally, it was intended as a shorter polemic, but quickly transformed into an anthropological examination of an often unattended topic, to show there is an alternative to the current system, albeit in a very focused manner.

In 2018, I contributed to the *Ultra Left International: A Manifesto*. One of my most important contributions was a small one, a footnote that became a sentence within the work itself, "Even under primitive communism alienation from the natural world was arguably the seed which evolved into societal alienation."

While I now hold a differing view, that Ritual was the birth of social alienation, I think that this notion of separateness has stuck with me for a while because I keep finding others have a similar view of separation, including the physical, spiritual and the psychological manifestations of it. It makes my understanding of the apparent decay of social relations more clear.

Fredy Perlman, in his *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan*, wrote:

Those who wall themselves in fall into a similar trap [self-defeat, my note].

Communities built walls before, at Jericho for example. But they built a wall once. Wall-building was not an institution among them. [...] Jericho's walls will no longer do. The walls have to be high and strong, and they have to be repaired as often as the ditches of Erech. [...] The seasons pass and the generations pass, yet the walls must still be maintained. And maintained they are, generation after generation. [...] Walls can-

such as elaborate disposal of dead group members.⁹ Perhaps there is a link of separateness between the building of more complex (still not housing, per say) campsite shelters and the Ritual mediation we know developed in the Upper Paleolithic? This would line up with the writing of Chris Scarre who states that less ambiguous evidence for shelters appears after 50,000 years ago. Scarre states these "more substantial structures" contrast with the earlier "flimsy" shelters of the Lower and Middle Paleolithic.¹⁰ The importance of the date is that this aligns with the so-called Behavioral Revolution, which brought about an explosion of symbolic expression, such as Ritual and art.¹¹ Echoing upcoming Neolithic and even modern housing is evidence of multi-room structures in the Upper Paleolithic as well.¹²

There truly is no place like home, when Earth itself is recognized as the home.

⁹ Ingersoll, Richard. "Architecture As Second Nature." *World Architecture a Cross-Cultural History*, Oxford University Press, New York, N.Y., 2019, pp. 4–5.

¹⁰ Scarre, Christopher. *The Human Past: World Prehistory and the Development of Human Societies*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2018, p. 114.

¹¹ Bar-Yosef, Ofer. "The Upper Paleolithic Revolution." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2002, pp. 363–393., <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085416>.

¹² "Tarpology - Know-How How to Set up a Shelter in the Wild." BUSHMEN, 24 May 2017, <https://bushmen.pl/en/tarpology/>.

not be permanently maintained with a temporary division of labor.¹

I don't write this with the intent to speak extensively of the ills of urbanization and cities. That much is self-evident within the Anti-Civilization milieu (or at least, I hope so, as some individuals try very hard to "synthesize," and or otherwise bring about nonsense). What I wish to speak about is the formation of physical separation before cities. What I mean is the enclosed living space and how we got here.

The development of enclosed living spaces has within it the nucleus of separation that we continue to perpetuate today, as described above. What I mean when I say enclosed living space is a more permanent shelter in which only a section of the wider community (immediate or near-immediate family, roommates, a single individual, etc.) is housed. These buildings also tend to rely on a division of labor and later, resources from abroad. Houses, apartments, and condos are contemporary examples. I contrast this with the existence of shelters in the Paleolithic that I define as temporary, encompassing a large portion of a foraging community, and based on the resources from the immediate environment. Such examples will be discussed below.

The most popular conception of Paleolithic shelter is, of course, the cave. However, while there is consensus on humans using caves as shelters, the amount of caves would never have housed the existing numbers of ancient Humans² (of which I mean species ranging from H. Erectus to H. Sapiens). So, while understanding caves were important for the Human family, especially when leaving our

¹ Perlman, Fredy. *Against His-Story, against Leviathan!: An Essay*, Black & Red, Detroit, MI, 2010, pp. 34–35.

² Libretexts. "2.2: The Paleolithic Period." *Humanities LibreTexts*, Libretexts, 13 Mar. 2021, [https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/Book%3A_Art_History_\(Boundless\)/02%3A_Prehistoric_Art/2.02%3A_The_Paleolithic_Period](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/Book%3A_Art_History_(Boundless)/02%3A_Prehistoric_Art/2.02%3A_The_Paleolithic_Period).

native Africa, I will focus on built structures. Also, these are not Human-made structures, and are at best, altered to suit more comfortable living.

Of course, a suburban home is hardly comparable to a living space like that possibly found in Terra Amata, France some 400,000 years ago. This contested site showed evidence of fire hearths within a space made of wooden poles and even animal skins, possibly housing twenty to forty people at once.³ That number would represent a large portion of a band, that of *Homo Erectus* or *Heidelbergensis*, which had a median community size of 50-100. While it is disputed if this was indeed a shelter (as opposed to natural placement of these materials by wind and water), reconstruction images show it would have had an open space as an entrance, a welcoming and non-enclosed space (excluding a possibility of a cover for the entrance).⁴

Living spaces such as Neanderthal-made mammoth bone shelters are a similar example. A Ukrainian site was the site of a shelter described as, "The home was apparently built in two parts. The lower part, or base, was made by assembling large mammoth bones to support the whole structure, which was 26 feet across at its widest. The bones themselves were likely obtained both through collecting those found on the ground and by killing the large beasts directly themselves."⁵ A similar find in Siberia, also made by Neanderthals, was indicative of housing several families, by the presence

³ Gerry. "Before the Ice: The First Inhabitants of Nice." That's How The Light Gets In, 16 July 2016, <https://gerryco23.wordpress.com/2014/01/13/before-the-ice-the-first-inhabitants-of-nice/>.

⁴ Hays, Jeffrey. "Homo Erectus Tools. Language, Art and Culture." Facts and Details, [https://factsanddetails.com/world/cat56/sub360/entry-2754.html#:~:text=Homo%20Erectus%20Shelter,-Terra%20Amata%20Hut&text=There%20is%20evidence%20that%20Homo,been%20footings%20for%](https://factsanddetails.com/world/cat56/sub360/entry-2754.html#:~:text=Homo%20Erectus%20Shelter,-Terra%20Amata%20Hut&text=There%20is%20evidence%20that%20Homo,been%20footings%20for%20)

⁵ Yirka, Bob. "Neanderthal Home Made of Mammoth Bones Discovered in Ukraine." Phys.org, Phys.org, 19 Dec. 2011, <https://phys.org/news/2011-12-neanderthal-home-mammoth-bones-ukraine.html>.

of several small hearths.⁶ This is even more interesting by the fact that Neanderthals had smaller communities than compared to us.

In addition to what I define as a typical Paleolithic shelter, is that when they were left behind, these shelters would simply fall apart and decompose or some parts may have even been recycled, hence the little evidence until later in the archeological record. The ethos and characteristics of these shelters are extensions of the foraging way of life. A South African history site the San of the Stone Age describes their shelter practices in a similar way, "[They] did not live in permanent houses, but in shelters made of materials they could find around them, like thin branches and tall grass. [...] They never settled in the same campsite, but used the same waterholes as they moved around. This also ensured that the land did not become exhausted."⁷

After the move out of Africa, and the extensive use of new environments, the use of caves in relation to Human-made shelters likely would be lower, especially as I said, caves could not support the relatively low Human populations. Is the decrease in cave habitation and other uses for survival a reason we find evidence of Ritual-Art in them? In fact, evidence for cave habitation in the Upper Paleolithic decreases and it is only in this time period that we find evidence of Ritual.⁸ Is this because our mental association with caves and rock shelters had faded and instead been used for Ritual because of a need for space to express Symbolic behavior, both in Art and more advanced forms of burial? Perhaps, since Ritual is an act that is disconnected from the day to day lives of individuals.

Locations in the Upper Paleolithic begin to take on the role of sanctuary, with man-made structures exhibit ritual affairs, too,

⁶ Libretext, Op. cit.

⁷ "San Hunter-Gatherer Society in the Later Stone Age." South African History Online, 27 Aug. 2019, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/san-hunter-gatherer-society-later-stone-age>.

⁸ Libretext, Op. cit.