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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Dusan Boric,
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

*CORRESPONDENCE
Gary M. Feinman
✉ gfeinman@fieldmuseum.org

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Editorial: The socioeconomic dynamics of settling down

Gary M. Feinman^{1*} and Victor D. Thompson²

¹MacArthur Curator of Anthropology, Negaunee Integrative Research Center, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, IL, United States, ²Georgia Museum of Natural History, Laboratory of Archaeology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, United States

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Introduction

Since the dawn of academic anthropology and archaeology, two centuries ago (e.g., [Morgan, 1877](#)), the advent of farming has been positioned as a “revolutionary” juncture in human history ([Childe, 1936](#)). Early theories linked the origins of agriculture to a subsequent process of settling down in more permanent communities (e.g., [White, 1949](#)). Researchers viewed the expansion of food surpluses, underpinned by domestication, as the preeminent causal role in a transformational process that was presumed to have global pertinence, kick-starting a linear progressive stepped path to larger and ultimately urban environments ([Childe, 1950](#)). An early stage in this presumed process was generally seen as small, autonomous, sedentary, and largely isolated agrarian communities ([Carneiro, 1970](#)) that only later were “pushed” by Malthusian forces or “pulled” by self-serving aggrandizers into larger, more unequal, and autocratic political formations (e.g., [Boserup, 1965](#)).

Although increments of knowledge from a multitude of disciplines have served to refine and widen our models and constructs (e.g., [Zeder and Smith, 2009](#)), core foundational pillars rooted in nineteenth century postulations (e.g., [Morgan, 1877](#)) continue to hold implicit sway across the social sciences and among the broader educated public. Here through comparative consideration of a series of case studies in conjunction with other published literature, we draw on new archaeological and historical findings, enriched by decades of field and laboratory analyses, to reflect critically on these long-entrenched views. We find that the key transitions in subsistence, settlement, institutions, and behavioral practices that occurred across six continents after 15,000 BCE were neither unilinear, uniform, or necessarily set in motion by climate change or technological shifts in food production ([Feinman, 2013](#); [Kerig et al., 2025](#); cf. [Boone and Alsgaard, 2024](#); [Dow and Reed, 2015](#)).

Diverse paths and processes

The manuscripts in this thematic collection serve as empirically grounded challenges to long-held categorical and transformational tropes. Collectively, they illustrate the great

diversity in the processes of settling down, which occurred initially in many regions of the world without domesticates (Cajigas et al.; Jenkins and Gallivan; Watkins). Likewise, several of these papers illustrate that even as settlements became more permanent, individual mobility continued and long-distance intercommunity networks thrived (Gragson and Coughlan; Jenkins and Gallivan). In two cases (Gragson and Coughlan; Kanne et al.), domesticated animals were integral to the establishment of permanent communities, with little direct subsistence reliance on plant-based agriculture.

A recurrent theme across these manuscripts (MacLellan; Miller; see also Feinman and Neitzel, 2023) is that the process of settling down, the transition to more sedentary lifeways, always involves much more than human–environmental or people–food equations or task groups (Kaplan et al., 2009). Cooperation is difficult to maintain, even in small groups, and settling down generally meant greater degrees of social interaction with larger numbers of people. People are selfish, have agency, and have the cognitive ability to problem solve and change. At the same time, they also are the most cooperative species on the planet with non-kin—both in terms of the scale of cooperation and the range of tasks that are implemented collaboratively. The juxtaposition of these seeming contradictory characteristics form the basis by which the fragile dynamics of cooperation emerge, while also laying the groundwork for durable institutions based on these initial venues of cooperation (Holland-Lulewicz et al., 2020).

Socioeconomic dynamics of settling down

Cognitive constraints limit the number of people that we can know on a face to face or biographical basis to a few hundred (Dunbar, 2008). When people reside in one place for stretches of time, they often make individual or cooperative investments in dwellings, ceremonial spaces, or the landscape, thereby diminishing their incentives to leave (Thompson, 2023). Such cooperative endeavors necessarily raise collective action dilemmas and free-riding, which revolve around a suite of issues including access, the etiquette of sharing, facility maintenance, dispute resolution, or collaborative participations (e.g., Wiessner, 2019). Greater scales and intensities of interaction generally provoke scalar stress (Watkins; Johnson, 1982), or what might be thought of as higher densities of and more intricate and diverse collective action challenges.

To retain their access to investments and help maintain cooperative networks, during the process of settling down, people often forge new institutions and innovations to foster cooperation, address free-riding, and leverage the economies of scale from pooled labor. The products of such innovations have been described as “energized crowding” (Smith, 2019) or the consequences of scaling (Bettencourt, 2013). Yet these changes, whether in the form of ceramic vessel technologies (Cajigas et al.), clay figurines (Miller), or ceremonial spaces (MacLellan; Watkins), take markedly different forms in distinct contexts. In some instances (Miller; Watkins) investments in ritual spaces preceded more permanent residential structures;

in others more permanent residential spaces were established before dedicated ritual spaces (Cajigas et al.). For the Maya, each of these patterns or architectural investment was evidenced in different regions (MacLellan). Alternatively, the herders of the western Pyrenees devised social agreements to manage cooperative land use before those collaborative arrangements materialized in more permanent settlements (Gragson and Coughlan).

Implications and prospect

Across these cases, we also see no evidence for linear, uniform, or progress-driven paths of long-term change. For most cases discussed, a time of settling down was followed by an episode of settlement movement, dispersion, or transition (e.g., Cajigas et al.; Quinn; Stoddart et al.). In other words, cooperation is fragile (Blanton and Fargher, 2016), and people often opted out even given their investments in architecture, landscape, and institutions. In this set of studies, the reasons for settlement abandonment only rarely seem to be a direct consequence of people-food equations; they more often reflect socioeconomic dynamics at community, regional, or even macroregional scales (Feinman and Neitzel, 2023).

In sum, these essays collectively serve to confront models that often are still rooted in a homogenized, linear past, and to raise new questions that challenge us to come up with analytical frames and mechanisms that help account for variation and change (e.g., Feinman, 2023), rather than continue to pursue the futile search for a uniform past that never actually existed. Through these cases as well as others (e.g., Feinman et al., 2025; Feinman and Neitzel, 2023), we have documented that history, institutions, and agency matter. Only by bringing these considerations earlier and more directly into the explanatory process will we be able to understand why and how the process of settling down, though generally important, had different implications and outcomes across the globe.

Author contributions

GF: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. VT: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

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