

Section 3 – Settlement

Settlement

The hunter-gatherers lived in an insecure world. Their groups were small, which provided little room for error. If there are only a handful of fertile women, a few more women dying in childbirth than usual or not enough girls making it through to their first pregnancy because of childhood illness may become a serious problem. In addition, children, who would normally be with their mothers, are an easier target for predators and so attract them. Here we see an evolutionary imperative in action: those tribes that keep their women safe from harm have a greater chance of surviving and passing on their genes.

The Taung Child is the fossilised skull of a young *Australopithecus africanus* discovered in 1924 in South Africa. The fossil is about three million years old.¹ In 2006, researchers identified marks on the skull as being consistent with the individual having been killed by an eagle. These marks are similar to those left on modern young primates who died in the same way, as the eagle tore their eyes out of their sockets. Horrible though this is, it was the reality of life; attack by opportunist predators was never far away and children are easy targets.

While the early death of a child is a tragedy, it would have been a much lesser disaster than the death of a fertile mother. The tribe would have invested far more in her, in terms of food and support, than in a child, and the woman could make another baby. A mother's death ends her ability to contribute to the child pool of the tribe, and her existing children become a burden on the others, impacting the overall viability of the group.

Protecting women and children and keeping close to a safe refuge is a basic impulse derived from the need to ensure the survival of our genes. This impulse led naturally to a desire to develop semi-permanent and then permanent homes, where the women and children were secure.

¹ *Australopithecus* is accepted as the ancestor of modern humans.