

WHERE DOES OUR URBAN HISTORY BEGIN: THE EARLIEST STRUCTURES, SETTLEMENTS AND SEDENTISM IN AUSTRALIA

Introduction

There are reasons why people build permanent dwellings and functional structures, and there are reasons people start to build those in the same location, forming settlements that may eventually grow to become hamlets, then villages, towns and ultimately cities. At times the dwellings and structures that are built, and the settlements formed, are as a result of a deliberate decision to create such entities. At other times they are constructed to meet the exigencies of the moment or as a result of an organic process in which there is no intended outcome, even though the result may be the same. While the people who construct such things may have clear reasons for doing so at that time, making their decision in light of immediate circumstances, they, nevertheless, are also doing so within the context of broader social and economic processes and imperatives.

This paper will begin by looking at the earliest history, or in some cases prehistory, of permanent structures and settlements in Australia, in the first instance simply by bringing together what is known of such things. Secondly it will consider the underlying higher order explanations and reasons as to why such developments were taking place within the broader social and economic processes and imperatives. In this I will link Australian evidence and insights to comparable phenomena in other parts of the world and other points in time, hopefully furthering our global understand of these processes.

The Earliest European Structures in Australia

Many may think that Australia's urban history began with the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. Once their temporary shelters had been erected as an interim measure, the British colonisers, lead by Governor Phillip, quickly set about constructing the important buildings and infrastructure required to create the functional, permanent settlement called Sydney Town, such as houses, huts, an Observatory, barracks, storehouses and a wharf.¹ The oldest structure that remains from that period, dating from 1793, now forms part of Elizabeth Farm in Parramatta.²

Few Australians, however, are aware that the first structures built by Europeans in Australia were in fact erected in 1629, a full 164 years before Elizabeth Farm. Indeed, some of those structures still exist. On West Wallabi Island, for example, in the Northern, or Wallabi, Group, of the Abrolhos Island, 50 kilometres or so off the central west coast of Western Australia, there is a rounded rectangular structure that is 7.9 metres long by 3.0 metres wide, made from dry-stone walls up to 1 metre high, with a central dividing wall. There is also a stone-lined well, two other natural wells modified by human hands and three stone box-shaped structure made from natural limestone slabs placed on their edge, on West Wallabi Island.³ On Beacon Island, in the

¹ George Forbes, *History of Sydney: From the Foundation of the City in 1788 Up to the Present Time, 1926*, Sydney: William Brooks, 1926, p.20; Tim McCormick, *First Views of Australia 1788 – 1825: A History of Early Sydney*, Chippendale: David Ell in association with Longueville Publications, 1987, p. 17; Françoise Fromont, and Christopher Thompson, *Sydney: History and Landscape*, Paris: Vilo International, 2000, pp. 17-18.

² Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, *Elizabeth Farm Parramatta: A History and a Guide*, Glebe: Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 1995, pp. 18-19.

The foundations of the original Government House from 1788, which lie under the forecourt of the Museum of Sydney, could be considered older.

³ Zusana Orme and Nuala Randall, 'A Survey of Historical Limestone Structures on West Wallabi Island, Houtman Abrolhos', *Bulletin of the Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology*, 11,2 (1987), pp. 25-28, 30-31. Personal Observation, 15-16 November 1997; Personal Communication, Corioli Souter, Assistant Curator, Western Australian Maritime Museum, 12 August 2003.

same area, is an elongated box-like structure, about 1 metre wide and 3 metres long, with walls of standing limestone slabs up to 70 centimetres high.⁴

These structures arose as a result of the Batavia Mutiny that took place from June to September 1629. In the course of the Mutiny a group known as the “Defenders”, principally made up of soldiers, held out against the mutineers on West Wallabi Island. The first structure described is known as “The Fort” and is believed to have been a defensive position built by the Defenders in their efforts to ward off attacks by the mutineers. The box-like structures are presumed to be fire beacons made by the Defenders to warn of attacks by the mutineers and to attract the attention of any rescue ship. At least one of modified natural wells is also the result of the efforts of the Defenders.⁵ The final example, the elongated box-like structure on Beacon Island, is believed to have been the prison constructed to hold the leader of the Mutiny, Jeronimus Cornelisz, following his capture.⁶ A photograph of the “The Fort” is shown below:⁷



Figure 1: "The Fort"
(Western Australian Maritime Museum)

⁴ Personal Communication, Corioli Souter, Assistant Curator, Western Australian Maritime Museum, 12 August 2003.

⁵ Orme and Randall, 1987 ‘A Survey of Historical Limestone Structures,’ pp. 25-28, 30-31.

⁶ For a more detailed account of these events based on original sources see: Henrietta Drake-Brockman, *Voyage to Disaster*, Sydney: Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1963; Rupert Gerritsen, *And Their Ghosts May Be Heard*, South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994, pp. 16-30, 271-287; Mike Dash, *Batavia's Graveyard*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002.

⁷ The structures on West Wallabi Island are listed in the Register of the National Estate as Nos. 9287, 9288, 9290, 9291 and 14863.

Permanent Aboriginal Habitations and Settlements in Australia

While the structures on West Wallabi Island are the first built by Europeans in Australia, as far as is known, they are not necessarily the first in Australian history, or prehistory. The first permanent structures and habitations, the first villages, even towns possibly, in all likelihood predate those from the Batavia Mutiny. Such settlements, constructed and inhabited by Aboriginal Australians, probably made their first appearance in the 1300s, if not earlier.⁸ These were the product of a long period of development in Australian prehistory. Archaeological evidence from south west Victoria, for example, indicates that a shift toward a more sedentary existence in that region commenced about 2,500 years ago.⁹ It is that shift that I will consider in the remainder of this paper, documenting in the process just some of the many examples where traditional Aboriginal populations were, at time of contact, observed to be living in large ordered settlements of seemingly permanent dwellings, constructing structures of considerable dimensions and, in numerous instances, exhibiting a high degree of sedentism.

Recognition of this phenomenon is important, in the first instance because it has a direct bearing on how former traditional Aboriginal societies are perceived in Australia, the point being that not all Aboriginal groups were stereotypically nomadic hunter-gatherers. Secondly, these examples provide an historically accessible opportunity to consider the question of why people originally began to live in the same location for extended periods of time and became sedentary. This is a question that is fundamental to human history because it encompasses the origins of pristine urban civilisation, the evidence for which in other parts of the world is normally only accessible archaeologically.

Before proceeding it is necessary to digress briefly to clarify some concepts and explain the significance of the types of observations and evidence that I will be presenting, beginning with the notion of “permanency” in terms of habitations. There appears to be a correlation between dwelling permanency and the amount of labour invested in the construction of those dwellings, which in turn relates to the occupiers degree of sedentism. As Rafferty puts it, the “expectation that sedentary people would build more substantial houses than people who are non-sedentary seems to be more or less correct both archaeologically and ethnographically,”¹⁰ and Kelly, “Cross-cultural studies demonstrated that investing labour in houses is related to low (or no) residential mobility.”¹¹ Thus people who spend days building a habitation are far more likely to exhibit a higher degree of sedentism than those who build a windbreak or shelter thrown up in an hour. However, because people build seemingly permanent dwellings, and these are aggregated or concentrated into a settlement of some size, one cannot assume they are sedentary, it requires separate proof. Sedentism itself is in fact a complex concept, and determining how sedentary people are based on observational or archaeological evidence alone can also be problematic. But I will return to these issues later, once some of the observational evidence I have alluded to has been presented, so that with concrete examples more meaningful elucidation can be provided.

Early Reports of Substantial Structures and Larger Settlements

The earliest historical reference to Aboriginal habitations of a more substantial nature relates to observations made by a land party from the Vlamingh Expedition, who reportedly saw 5 huts close together at Wittecarra Creek, close to the mouth of the Murchison River on the central

⁸ Rupert Gerritsen, *The Traditional Settlement Pattern in South West Victoria Reconsidered*, Canberra: Intellectual Property Publications, 2000, p. 35.

⁹ Peter J. Coutts, Dan Witter, M. McIlwraith and R. Frank, *The Mound People of Western Victoria*, Melbourne: Ministry of Conservation, *Records of the Victorian Archaeological Survey* 1 (1976); Bird and Frankel 1991:9; Gerritsen, *Traditional Settlement Pattern*, pp.32-33.

¹⁰ J. E. Rafferty, ‘The Archaeological Record on Sedentariness: Recognition, Development and Implications’, *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, 8 (1985), p. 129.

¹¹ R.L. Kelly, ‘Mobility/Sedentism: Concepts, Archaeological Measures and Effects’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21 (1992), p. 57.

west coast, on 25 January 1697.¹² One of these huts was described as being "made of clay with a roof sloping down on two sides."¹³ It was not until 1803, however, that probably the first report of Aboriginal people living in a larger, possibly permanent, settlement appeared.¹⁴ This report derived from the Baudin expedition, which encountered a settlement on the tip of Peron Peninsula, Shark Bay, Western Australia on 18 March 1803. Three members of the Expedition mention this assemblage of huts, Baudin, Peron and Freycinet, and the ship's artist Petit was ordered to make a drawing.¹⁵ According to Baudin, "Twelve or fifteen huts, much better made, than those we have found hitherto, composed the village where this small tribe lived ... ones that belong to the heads of families ... were much bigger and were built with considerably more symmetry."¹⁶ Peron description was, "these huts of the Land of Eendracht [central west coast of WA] ... are in the form of a hemisphere slightly depressed at the top Their height is from 12 to 16 decimetres [1.2 – 1.6 m], by a diameter of 20 to 25 decimetres [2.0 – 2.5 m]. They are composed of small trees implanted in the soil On the outside are attached layers of foliage and clumps of grass covered by a large quantity of soil."¹⁷

The drawing made by the junior artist Petit, first appeared in 1807 in Peron, Lesueur and Petit's *Atlas*, is reproduced below.¹⁸



Figure 2: "Cabanes des Naturales de la Presq'île Peron"
(Peron, *Atlas* Plate XXIV)

¹² Willem de Vlamingh, 'The Geelvinck Journal' in Gunter Schilder (ed.), and C. de Heers (trans.) *Voyage to the Great South Land*, Sydney: Royal Australian Historical Society, 1985, p. 131.

¹³ Nicolaes Witsen, 'Nicolaes Witsen's Account of Vlamingh's Voyage', in Gunter Schilder (ed.) and C. de Heers (trans.), *Voyage to the Great South Land*, Sydney: Royal Australian Historical Society, 1985, p. 218.

¹⁴ Flinders encountered large, sturdily built, "superior", shelters at the mouth of the Clarence River, one large enough for 12-15 people, and on Moreton Bay in 1799, but there is no further indication of their permanency or that of the small settlement on Moreton Bay. See David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, From In January 1788 to August 1801*, vol. 2, London: T. Cadell Jnr. and W. Davies, 1802, pp. 228,235-6.

¹⁵ Nicolas Baudin, *The Journal of Post Captain Nicolas Baudin*, Christine Cornell (trans.), Adelaide: State Library Board of South Australia, 1974, pp. 506-10; Francois Peron, *Voyage de Decouvertes aux Terres Australes, Execute par Ordre de sa Majeste, l'Empereur et Roi, sur les Corvettes le Geographe, le Naturaliste et la Goelette le Casuarina, Pendant les Annees 1800-1804*, vol 2. Paris: De L'Imprimerie Imperiale, 1807, pp. 203,208; Louis de Freycinet *Voyage de Decouvertes aux Terres Australes, Execute sur les Corvettes le Geographe, le Naturaliste et la Goelette le Casuarina, Pendant Annees 1800-1804*. Paris: De L'Imprimerie Imperiale, 1815, pp. 203-4.

¹⁶ Baudin, *Journal*, p. 507.

¹⁷ Peron, *Voyage de Decouverte*, p. 208 (Trans. Willem C. Gerritsen).

¹⁸ Francois Peron, Charles Alexandre Lesueur and Nicolas-Martin Petit, *Voyage de Decouvertes aux Terres Australes: Atlas*, Paris: De L'Imprimerie Imperiale, 1807, Plate XXIV. The drawing is usually ascribed to the engraver Pillemont or the more senior artist Lesueur but appears to have in fact been done by Petit. See Baudin, *Journal*, pp. 507-10.

Eastern Central Australia

Elsewhere in Australia it was not until the 1830s that substantive reports of larger, seemingly permanent settlements began to appear, as the vanguard of the British occupation, the explorers, moved well beyond the confines of the colonial frontier. On the upper-central Darling River early in 1829 Sturt reported that, “Early in the day we passed a group of seventy huts, capable of holding twelve to fifteen men each. They appeared to be permanent habitations, and all of them fronted the same point of the compass.”¹⁹ A simple piece of arithmetic based on Sturt’s estimates indicates that this “village” would have had a population of 840 to 1050 residents, a town really. Unfortunately, at the time of Sturt’s arrival a smallpox epidemic appears to have been in progress, which he ascertained was “sweeping them off in great numbers”.²⁰ Consequently he certainly encountered far fewer than those population estimates suggest.

The redoubtable Thomas Mitchell, in the same region six years later, on this occasion the lower-central Darling River, recorded in his journal that “we found a native village, in which the huts were of a very strong and permanent construction.” One of the huts was “unusually capacious ... capable of containing twelve or fifteen persons.”²¹ He even provided a plan drawing of this larger hut.

Some ten years later, close to the New South Wales/South Australian border, when on another of his expeditions Sturt again struck upon another village. A drawing based on Sturt’s sketch of that village appears below:

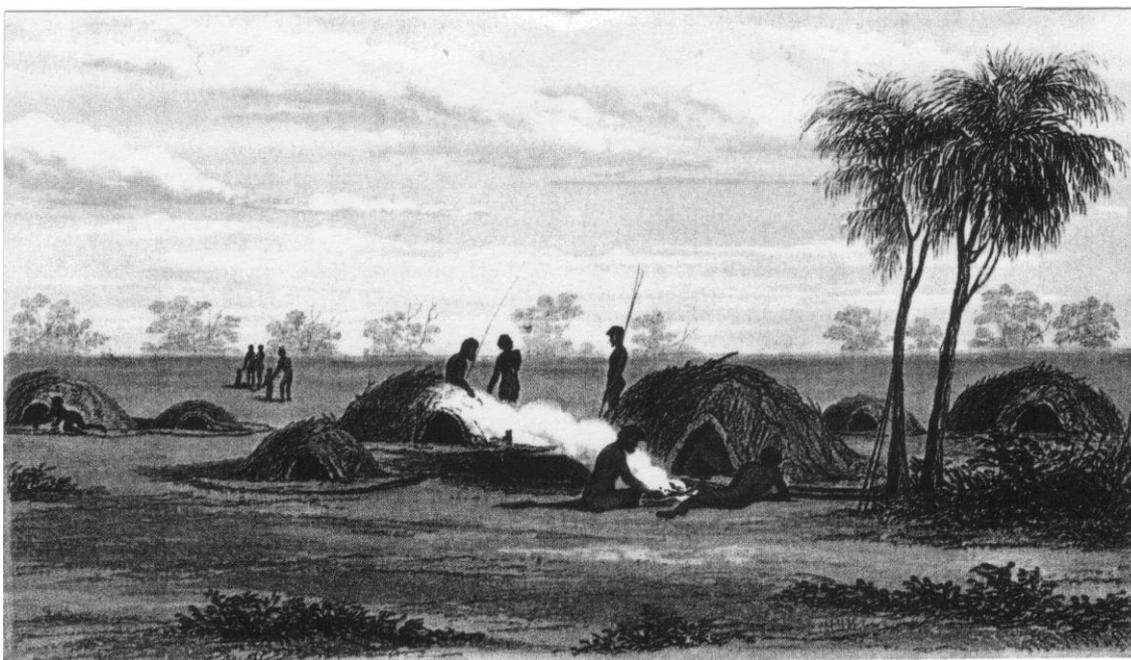


Figure 3: “Native Village in the Northern Interior”
(Sturt, *Narrative of an Expedition*, vol. 1, p. 254.)

In his detailed description of this village Sturt noted that “They were made of strong boughs fixed in a circle in the ground, so as to meet in a common centre; on these there was ... a thick

¹⁹ Charles Sturt, *Two Expeditions Into the Interior of Southern Australia During the Years 1828 – 1831*, vol. 1, London: T. and W. Boone, 1833, p. 89 (5/2/1829).

²⁰ Sturt, *Two Expeditions*, p. 93.

²¹ Thomas Livingstone Mitchell, *Three Expeditions Into the Interior of Eastern Australia*, vol. 1, London, T. and W. Boone, 1839, p262.

seam of grass and leaves and over this again a compact coating of clay. They were from eight to ten feet [2.4 - 3.0 m] in diameter, and about four and a half feet [1.35 m] high, the opening into them not being large than to allow a man to creep in. These huts also faced north-west, and each one had a smaller one attached to it as shown in the sketch ...”²²

Reports of “villages” and clusters of “permanent”, “well-built”, “substantial” “clay-covered” or “multi-room” dwellings are in fact quite common in eastern central Australia.²³ On the middle Barcoo River in 1846 Mitchell had observed “huts of a very numerous tribe ... Well beaten paths, and large permanent huts”.²⁴ Sturt upon encountering a deserted village, probably in the Strzelecki Desert, said there were “two or three huts in the village of large size, to each of which two smaller ones were attached, opening into its main apartment.”²⁵ Surveyor Lindsay claimed to have encountered village-like settlements around Poepel Corner in 1886, including one containing a structure “large enough to accommodate thirty or forty natives.”²⁶ Another explorer, Conrick, had in fact chanced upon just such a structure, “90 ft [27 m] in circumference ... used for holding corroborees” in the same area in 1874,²⁷ while one of the lesser known explorers Goyder reported a similar, though uninhabited, structure 100 kilometres south east of Lake Eyre South in 1857. By his account, “They [the “wurleys” in a settlement there] are constructed in a similar manner to those described by Captain Sturt, and are very warm and comfortable, the largest capable of holding thirty to forty people, quite round, from three to four feet high, and entered by a semicircular opening”²⁸

Other examples of clusters of reputedly permanent dwellings seen in this part of Australia in the 19th and early 20th century included a cluster of 16 huts seen by Brock, a member of one of Sturt’s expeditions, in north west New South Wales, and another 32 on the Paroo River in north west New South Wales, reported by Gow in 1861.²⁹ “Large numbers” of more substantial dwellings were noted in the Coopers Creek, Lake Hope area of the north east of South Australia by A. W. Howitt in the 1860s when searching for Burke and Wills.³⁰ Alice Duncan-Kemp, as a child recalled seeing “a cluster of sixty grass-and-sand built shelters” in the early 1900s, near a place called Pharmaleeche Channel in south west Queensland. This settlement collectively housed “two hundred or more people”.³¹ On the Diamantina River in 1875 Surveyor Lewis passed by a “native camp ... over forty gunyahs capable of accommodating six or seven people each,” constituting a settlement in excess of 240 people.³²

Large encampments may arise for a short duration when Aboriginal people from a number of tribes or groups met for ceremonial reason, though these were occasions where vigorous bartering also ensued, marriages were arranged and disputes settled. Consequently it is necessary to determine if the presence of people in significant numbers in the same location was a transitory affair or a more permanent arrangement. Statements that suggest a more sedentary lifestyle are, therefore, indicators of this. According to surveyor Lewis, the Ngameni of north

²² Charles Sturt, *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia ... During the Years 1844-46*, vol. 1, London: Smith Elder, 1849, p. 254.

²³ Rupert Gerritsen, *Australia and the Origins of Agriculture*, (forthcoming a).

²⁴ Thomas Livingstone Mitchell, *Journal of an Expedition Into the Interior of Tropical Australia in Search of a Route From Sydney to the Gulf of Carpentaria*, London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848, p. 324.

²⁵ Sturt, *Narrative of an Expedition*, p. 387.

²⁶ David Lindsay, ‘Explorations in the Northern Territory of South Australia’, *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia: South Australian Branch*, 2 (1890), p. 4.

²⁷ John Conrick, ‘Papers [manuscript]’, National Library of Australia, n.d., MS 1317, p. 37.

²⁸ G. W. Goyder, ‘Northern Exploration’, *Parliamentary Papers, 1857-8, South Australia*, No. 72, 1857, p. 4.

²⁹ Robert Biggart Gow, ‘Diaries and Journal [manuscript]’, National Library of Australia, MS 24, 1861, p. 69; Daniel George Brock, *To the Desert With Sturt: A Diary of the 1844 Expedition*, Kenneth Peake-Jones (ed.), Adelaide: Royal Geographical Society of Australasia: South Australian Branch, 1975, p. 71.

³⁰ Alfred William Howitt, ‘Notes on the Aborigines of Coopers Creek’, in R. Brough Smyth (comp.), *The Aborigines of Victoria*, vol. 2, Melbourne: Government Printer, 1878, p. 302.

³¹ Alice Duncan-Kemp, *Where Strange Paths Go Down*, Brisbane: W.R. Smith and Paterson, 1952, p. 211.

³² James William Lewis, ‘Journal of Mr Lewis’s Lake Eyre Expedition’, *Parliamentary Papers, South Australia*, No. 19, 1875, p. 23

east South Australia, who he encountered in 1875, “return and live in the same wurleys which are very large and well built; the camps may be considered more as villages than anything else.”³³ Around the Diamantina River F.H. Wells described, in the 1890s, such huts in detail, “The wurleys at a permanent camp are dome shaped circular erections built of logs, cane grass and mud. In the cold weather fires are kept burning constantly inside. During the summer months the natives keep inside their wurleys in the daytime, thus avoiding the intense heat, but sleep outside at night.”³⁴ Sturt, in alluding to the abodes of the “interior natives” gave a very similar description. They “... were made of strong boughs with a thick coating of clay over leaves and grass. They were entirely impervious to wind and rain, and were really comfortable, being evidently erections of a permanent kind to which the inhabitants frequently returned.”³⁵

Supporting the notion that some groups at least were in constant occupation of their settlements, missionary Reuther spoke of the tribe from north east South Australia “named the Nguraworla because the people do not change over their wurleys, even when someone has died in [their] hut.”³⁶

Western Australia

In Western Australia, as in the east, numerous reports about villages and permanent habitations began to appear when the British colonists mounted expeditions to the north of Perth in the 1830s and 1840s, particularly in the Victoria District, the region around Geraldton. The first of these emanated from an expedition lead by Lt. George Grey. It had been intended that this expedition would examine the country around Shark Bay and the adjacent Gascoyne coast but the enterprise was crippled by a cyclone and then an accident with the boats, necessitating an overland journey back to Perth from the Murchison River with almost no food, a distance of about 550 kilometres. Along the way Grey’s party passed through the Victoria District, 400 - 530 kilometres north of Perth, occupied at that time by the Nhanda people. Here Grey recorded in his journal:

April 5 1839 : The estuary [actually a salt marsh, Hutt Lagoon] became narrower here, and shortly after seeing these natives, we came upon a river running into it from the eastward [Hutt River]; its mouth was about forty yards [36m] wide, the stream strong but the water brackish, and it flowed through a very deep ravine, having steep limestone hills on each side ... Being unable to ford the river here, we followed it in a SE direction for two miles [3.2 kms], and in this distance passed two native villages, or, as the men termed them, towns, - the huts of which they were composed differed from those in the southern districts, in being built, and very nicely plastered over the outside with clay, and clods of turf, so that although now uninhabited they were evidently intended for fixed places of residence.³⁷

I recently identified the site of the first village and determined that it covered an area of at least 3.97 hectares.³⁸ This indicates that the settlement was of significant size. In fact, by applying a formula developed by Hassan,³⁹ relating site area to population, I deduced that the first village

³³ James William Lewis, *Report on the Lake Eyre Expedition*, Adelaide: Government Printer, 1875, p. 3.

³⁴ Francis H. Wells, ‘The Habits, Customs and Ceremonies of the Aboriginals on the Diamantina, Herbert and Eleanor Rivers in East Central Australia’, *Report of the Australian Association For the Advancement of Science*, 5 (1894), p. 517.

³⁵ Sturt, *Narrative of an Expedition*, vol. 2, p. 139.

³⁶ Johannes G. Reuther, *The Diari*, P. A Scherer (trans.), Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1981, p. VII,226/1411.

³⁷ George Grey, *A Journal of Two Expeditions in North-West and Western Australia During the Years 1837-39*, vol. 2, London: T. and W. Boone, 1841, pp. 12,19.

³⁸ Rupert Gerritsen, *Nhanda Villages of the Victoria District, Western Australia*, Canberra: Intellectual Property Publications, 2002, pp. 9-10.

The specific or proximate sites of all these villages have been identified in the course of my research.

³⁹ Fekri Hassan, *Demographic Archaeology*, New York: Academic Press, 1981, p. 67.

had a population of at least 290.⁴⁰ If both the villages here were of similar size, as Grey's comments suggest, then it would seem the second village may have been of a commensurate size in population terms.

Over the next 130 kilometres two further villages-like settlements were sighted, at the Bowes and Greenough Rivers. In regard to the latter settlement Grey recounted, "We passed a large assemblage of native huts, of the same permanent character as those before I have mentioned: there were two groups of those houses close together in a sequestered nook in a wood, which, taken collectively, would have contained at least a hundred and fifty natives. We halted for the night in the dry bed of a water-course, abounding in grass ..."⁴¹

A. C. Gregory, as the head of an overland party from Perth to Champion Bay, reported on 20 November 1849 that, upon reaching the Greenough River, "we fell in with a large party The next morning about 70 men and several women came to our encampment."⁴² Analysis of Aboriginal population structures, based on data collected principally by Chief Protector George Augustus Robinson in Victoria in the early 1840s, provides a ratio of adult men to total population. Depending on the sample this ratio varies from 3.29 to 4.20.⁴³ If applied to the number of men encountered at Greenough the lowest ratio translates as a population figure of 230 individuals, providing some credence for the estimate of 150 Grey gave as the population of the village.

Over the following 12 years, as exploration continued and the British settlers began to expropriate the Victoria District, all the elements of Grey's observations were borne out by a variety of explorers, government officials and "pioneers".⁴⁴

Approaching the Irwin River, in the south of the Victoria District, in 1846, explorer Lt. Helpman, for example, provided a detailed description of the type of huts referred to by Grey. His journal entry stated that, "We here met with the first native hut; it was well plastered outside and the timber which formed it was about 6in. [15 cm] thickness, about 6ft. [1.8 m] high inside and capable of holding ten persons easily."⁴⁵ Captain Stokes of the famous "Beagle" even slept in one during a land reconnaissance in the area in December 1841: "We noticed their winter habitations substantially constructed and neatly plastered over with red clay ... Some neighbouring wigwams of superior structure gave us snug quarters for the night."⁴⁶ One of Daisy Bates' informants, shepherd Edward Cornally, recounted that as a youngster he had seen "the skeletons of much larger huts capable of holding ten or twelve natives,"⁴⁷

Analysis of such reports, if considered in conjunction with the French drawings and descriptions of the Peron Peninsula shelters, 150 kilometres to the north, has lead me to conclude that the dwellings of the Victoria District were typically dome-shaped structures up to 1.8 metres high, that they were built with large timbers and coated with clay, and capable of accommodating at least ten people.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Gerritsen, *Nhanda Villages*, p. 15.

⁴¹ Grey, *Two Expeditions*, pp. 37-8.

⁴² Augustus Charles Gregory, 'Report by Assistant Surveyor A. C. Gregory of a Journey to the Murchison River and Discovery of Copper Ore – Dec. 1849', in *Exploration Diaries*, vol. 4, bound typescript, Battye Library PR 5441, 1849, p. 237.

⁴³ Gerritsen, *Traditional Settlement Pattern*, p. 19.

⁴⁴ Gerritsen, *And Their Ghosts*, pp. 66-7,82-91

⁴⁵ Robert Helpman, 'Champion Bay to the Coal on the Irwin River by Lt. Helpman R.N.', in *Exploration Diaries*, vol. 4, bound typescript, Battye Library PR 5441, 1846, p. 9.

⁴⁶ John Lort Stokes, 'Visit to the Country Adjacent to Champion Harbour, Reported to be Port Grey, and Examination of the Coastline to the Northward', in *Perth Gazette*, 25 December 1841, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁷ Daisy May Bates, 'Papers of Daisy Bates [manuscript]', National Library of Australia, MS 365, Section IX, Pt. 5, 'Native Huts and Shelters', n.d., p. 6.

⁴⁸ Gerritsen, *Nhanda Villages*, pp. 16-18.

Victoria

I now turn to Victoria where accounts of large, seemingly permanent, structures and settlements also began emerging in the 1830s, particularly in Western District in the south western part of the state. The first of these dates from 26 July 1836, when Mitchell and his expedition reached White Lake at the western end of the Grampians. Here he recorded that he had “noticed some huts of a very different construction ... being large, circular, and made of straight rods meeting at an upright pole in the centre; the outside had first been covered with bark and grass, and the entirety coated over with clay. The fire appeared to have been made nearly in the centre; and a hole at the top had been left as a chimney.”⁴⁹ This observation is well known and frequently cited. However, on the same day, in his journal, Mitchell's deputy Stapylton mentions that they “passed to day several Guneaks [habitations] of very Large dimensions one capable of containing at least 40 persons and of very superior construction.”⁵⁰ Taken together they appear to strongly imply that Aboriginal people in the southern Wimmera built well executed dome-, teepee- or tent-shaped structures capable of holding 40 people. Support for this can be found in the journals of Chief Protector George Augustus Robinson who noted and made a drawing of “two large native huts” of similar form he encountered a little further south, in the central west of the Western District, in June 1841.⁵¹ Possible corroboration of this claim can also be found in a letter written in 1868 by Rev. J. Francis, manager of the Lake Condah Mission, in 1868 to amateur ethnographer James Dawson, advising Dawson that people at the Mission, who had come from all over the western part of the Western District, had told Francis they had formerly lived in, “communities of 30-40 and even more, occupying one Mia mia [habitation].”⁵²

The Western Districts of Victoria were notable for the occurrence of substantial dwellings and villages. On a certain “Scrubby Creek”, south east of modern day Caramut, William Thomas, Sub-Protector of Aborigines, claimed that in 1840 the

first settlers found a regular aboriginal settlement. This settlement was about 50 miles NE of Port Fairy. There was on the banks of the creek between 20 and 30 huts in the form of a beehive or sugar loaf, some of them capable of holding a dozen people. These huts were about 6 feet high or little more, about 10' in diameter, an opening about 3 feet 6 inches high for a door which they closed at night if they required with a sheet of bark, an aperture at the top 8 or 9 inches to let out the smoke which in wet weather they covered with a sod. These buildings were all made of a circular form, closely worked and then covered with mud, they would bear the weight of a man on them without injury. These blacks made various well constructed dams in the creek which by certain heights acted as sluice gates in the flooding season.⁵³

Accompanying this description Thomas did two drawings of the village, based on eyewitness accounts, one of which appears below.

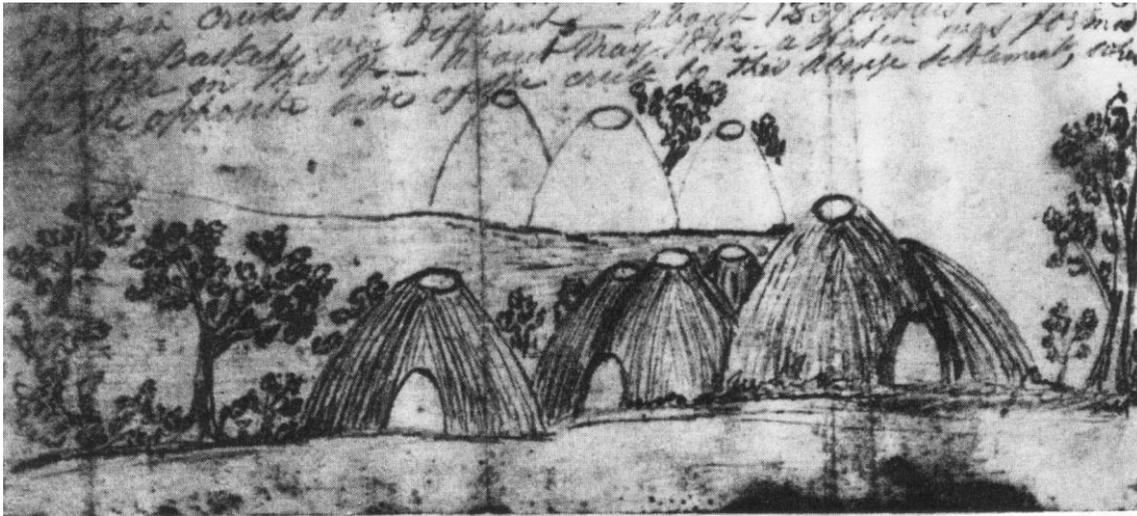
⁴⁹ Mitchell, *Three Expeditions*, vol. 2, p. 194.

⁵⁰ Alan E. J. Andrews (ed.), *Stapylton With Major Mitchell's Australia Felix Expedition*, Hobart: Blubberhead Press, 1986, p. 146.

⁵¹ Ian D. Clark (ed.), *The Journals of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate*, Melbourne: Heritage Matters, 1998, vol.2, p. 273 (21/6/1841)

⁵² J. Francis to James Dawson 14 April 1868 quoted in Elizabeth Williams, ‘Estimation of Prehistoric Populations of Archaeological Sites in South Western Victoria: Some Problems’, *Archaeology in Oceania*, 20,3 (1985), p. 75.

⁵³ William Thomas, ‘Papers of William Thomas’, Dixson Library, MS 214, Box 24, Item 11: “Aborigines Superior Race” 1858.



Figures 4: Sketch of Village on “Scrubby Creek” near Caramut
(Notebook of William Thomas, Smyth Papers)

Another settlement, with a population up to 500, may have in been existence in the Western Districts, on one of the “stony rises”, a lava flow adjacent to the Eumeralla River and Gorrie Swamp on the south eastern side of Mt. Eccles. Again it was Chief Protector Robinson who first reported this “sort of village”, in his journal on 20 March 1842 and in a report to La Trobe on 9 April 1842. In his journal Robinson wrote, “decided to stay and go to natives Set off south through wooded land ... - crossed a swamp (dry) and at five miles came to the stony rises masses of lavre, steep stone ... Led our horses into the stony rises: ... plenty ash hills [mounds], round sharp layrs, plenty huts of dirt and others built of stone. Stone houses, stone weirs. Saw Mt. Eel [Eccles]. Mt Napier bore north and Mt Eels WNW.”⁵⁴ He stated in his report to La Trobe that, “On the 19th I visited Mr Hunter's station ... Mr H was absent ... Whilst in the neighbourhood I deemed it advisable to effect a communication with the natives, and on the 20th crossed a swamp to some strong rises, and succeeded in conferring with the blacks; they had a sort of a village and some of their habitations were of stone. I passed several stone and wooden weirs for taking fish, also places for snaring birds; their dwellings are among rocky fragments and loose crags, thickly wooded and bound by swamps.”⁵⁵

Writer and traveller William Westgarth also visited the area in June 1844 and subsequently published three slightly varying accounts of this “village”, the first in 1846, “There was a ‘native township’, as it was termed, on the banks of the Eumeralla Lake or swamp, where the stony rises in that part of the country commence. The aborigines generally encamped there during a portion of the year, for the purpose of fishing, with occasional rambling over the neighbouring country. Mount Eeles [Eccles], an adjoining volcanic hill, with a large and romantic crater, appears to have been a favourite resort, their repeated visits having worn a distinct track to the summit. At the period above alluded to, these Eumaralla blacks were stated to be about two hundred in number, but two years previously, when this locality was first taken up for pasturage, the township was said to contain five hundred.”⁵⁶

In an attempt to suppress the resistance emanating from the stony rises the Commissioner of Crown Lands, Foster Fyans, also had occasion to visit the village in the stony rises some months after Robinson. Basing himself at “Eumeralla” Station he reported to La Trobe that near Mt Eccles, “the party proceeded on foot, and waded with considerable difficulty through the

⁵⁴ Clark, *Journals*, vol. 3, p. 48 (20/3/1842).

⁵⁵ George Augustus Robinson, ‘Report, Chief Protector Robinson to Superintendent La Trobe’, *British Parliamentary Papers (Aborigines)*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 209.

⁵⁶ William Westgarth, *A Report on the Condition, Capabilities and Prospects of the Australian Aborigines*, Melbourne: William Clarke, 1846, p. 8n.

marshes nearly one mile and entered a great stone Range to a point called the Township.”⁵⁷ Calculations, based on traditional Aboriginal population structures and instances of confrontations involving as many as 150 warriors in this area, suggest that this settlement indeed may have numbered around 500.⁵⁸ Having identified this site I visited it in December 1999 and found considerable evidence of prior occupation and walls of what appeared to traditional stone dwellings. A photograph of a part of the complex appears below.



Figures 5: Complex Stone Arrangement, Stony Peninsula, Eumeralla River, south western Victoria
(Personal Collection, 4 December, 1999)

Dating, based on radiocarbon assay and occupational accretion rates, of a nearby hunting station site known as Gorrie Swamp Hut, excavated by archaeologist Elizabeth Williams, suggests occupation on a regular basis commenced here in the late 1300s.⁵⁹

Reports of seemingly permanent and substantial domiciles and settlements in western Victoria and eastern South Australia were common in the 1830s and 40s before traditional Aboriginal societies were overwhelmed by the colonial invaders. These include a “village” of “13 large huts built in the form of a cupola,” reported by Robinson near Mt. Napier in May 1841,⁶⁰ another near Hamilton, “at least 20 well built worns or native huts,”⁶¹ and a deserted hamlet at Lake Elingamite capable of accommodating 60 to 70 individuals.⁶² Just to the east of Port Fairy, near Tower Hill, Robinson referred to a settlement as “a native village: an assemblage of huts” on one occasion, or as a “native township”, on another, and indicated the population may have been up to 150.⁶³ Sub-Protector Sievwright, who accompanied Robinson on the second

⁵⁷ Foster Fyans, ‘Captain Fyans to Superintendent La Trobe, Eumeralla, 9 Oct. 1842’, *British Parliamentary Papers (Aborigines)*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 235.

⁵⁸ Gerritsen, *Traditional Settlement Pattern*, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁹ Gerritsen, *Traditional Settlement Pattern*, p. 35.

⁶⁰ Clark, *Journals*, vol. 2, p. 196 (10/5/1841).

⁶¹ Clark, *Journals*, vol. 2, p. 201 (11/5/1841).

⁶² Clark, *Journals*, vol. 2, p. 136 (16/4/1841).

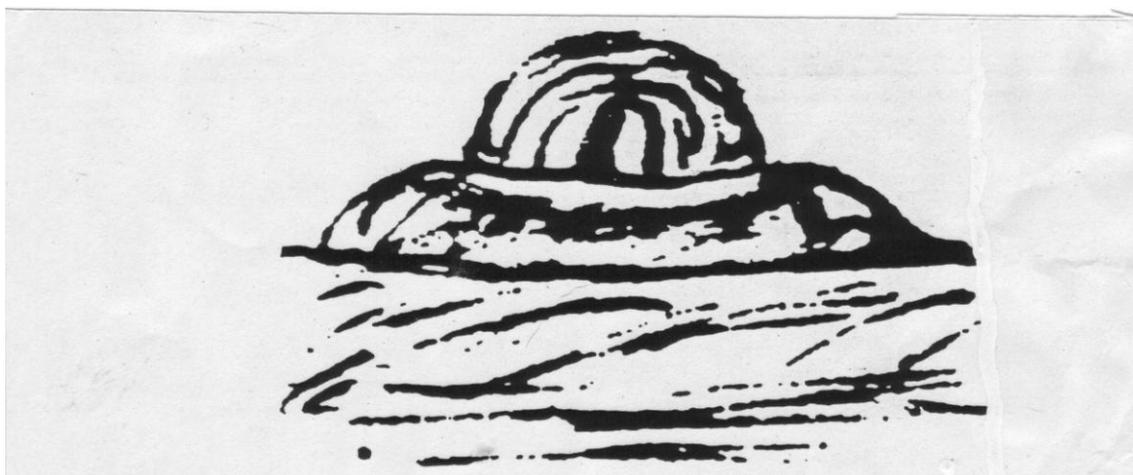
⁶³ Clark, *Journals*, vol. 2, p. 154 (28/4/1841); vol. 3, p. 54 (23/3/1842).

occasion, reported that they had, “visited a tribe who constantly reside in the neighbourhood of Port Fairy.”⁶⁴

Squatter Gideon S. Lang described not only the form of some of these types of habitations in rare and significant detail, but their construction as well.

The huts are generally about nine feet [2.7 m] in diameter, five feet [1.5 m] high, and in the shape resembling half an orange. They are built in the first place of ... dry stiff branches ... the lower row set in the ground, and the rest interlaced above in the manner of a bird's nest. Upon this they place branches of trees, reeds, or long grass; over this they again place grass, turf, and above all sand if they have it, the top being rendered around and smooth like the Esquimaux winter hut. There is one low opening or door at one side of the hut, and in the opening is placed a fire. The largest of these huts I ever saw was on the Koorong [The Coorong], an arm of the sea behind the coast sandhills [Younghusband Peninsula], between Adelaide and Portland; it was fourteen feet [4.2 m] in diameter and quite eight feet [2.4 m] in height inside, and rose perpendicularly at the sides, and could accommodate an unusually large number of people.⁶⁵

Most of the more permanent residences were either “cupola” or “dome” shaped, although there was a double “sugarloaf” form, such as the “fine large double hut ... with two entrances,” seen by Robinson near Mt Napier,⁶⁶ with some apparently a perpendicular type, as alluded to by Lang. A drawing of the dome shaped form, typically situated on an occupation mound, appears below.



Figures 6: Cupola on Mound

(Clark, *Journals of George Augustus Robinson*, 1998, vol. 2, p. 243, fig. 5.11)

Dwelling Types and Settlement Hierarchy

If all known reports and observations are taken into account it is possible to classify the traditional Aboriginal habitations in the parts of Australia highlighted here. A detailed explanation and justification for this is beyond the scope of this paper, and so I refer you to my earlier work for this.⁶⁷ The categories, a modification of this earlier work, embraced here are:

⁶⁴ Charles Sievwright, ‘Journal and proceedings of Assistant Protector Sievwright, Western District, from 1st March to 31st March 1842’, Dixon Library, Archival Estrays: Official Papers of New South Wales, List 11 CSIL/11, 23 March 1842.

⁶⁵ Gideon S. Lang, *The Aborigines of Australia*, Melbourne: Wilson and Mackinnon, 1865, p. 26.

⁶⁶ Clark, *Journals*, vol. 2, p. 196 (10/5/1841).

⁶⁷ Gerritsen, *Traditional Settlement Pattern*, pp. 23-26.

Temporary

- Windbreaks
- Half cupolas
- Temporary cupolas

More Permanent

- “substantial” cupolas
- stone walled dwellings

Complex

- Double cupola or other multi-roomed dwellings
- Lodges (enlarged dwellings)
- Stone galleries (multi-roomed gallery arrangements)
- Stone structures

Similarly, it is possible to discern a settlement hierarchy employing historical ethnographic observations and information in the parts of Australia in question. This settlement hierarchy is based on a modified form of the lower limb of a common settlement hierarchy and includes homesteads, lodges, dispersed settlements, hamlets and villages, although some settlements may have been of a size to be considered small towns.⁶⁸

A Comparison

The simplest means of putting the Aboriginal settlements discussed here into some sort of perspective is to compare them with examples from archaeologically known early neolithic settlement in the Middle East, Mexico and China. In the Middle East, Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) villages in the Levant, covered areas ranging from 0.5 to 12 hectares, having populations calculated to be from 100 to 500.⁶⁹ PPNB Jericho, described as a “large village”, covered 2.5 hectares, equating to a population of 230.⁷⁰ From the early part of the Mexican neolithic analog, the Early Formative (Ajaltan Phase), hamlets of 50-80 people and villages with estimated populations in excess of 200 have been found. By the end of the Early Formative these had grown as large as 650 inhabitants⁷¹ The dwellings themselves were initially single roomed with dimensions of 4 m to 6 m, and large enough for just 4 people. In form they were

⁶⁸ Gerritsen, *Traditional Settlement Pattern*, pp. 26-29.

⁶⁹ Ofer Bar-Yosef and R. H. Meadows, ‘The Origins of Agriculture in the Near East’, in T. Douglas Price and Anne B. Gebauer (eds), *Last Hunters – First Farmers: New Perspectives on the Prehistoric Transition to Agriculture*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1995, p. 76; Ofer Bar-Yosef, ‘The Natufian Culture in the Levant, Threshold to the Origins of Agriculture’, *Evolutionary Anthropology*, 6 (1998), p. 168.

Calculations based on formula developed by Hassan, *Demographic Archaeology*, p. 67.

⁷⁰ Ofer Bar-Yosef and A. Belfer-Cohen, ‘From Foraging to Farming in the Mediterranean Levant’, in T. Douglas Price and Anne B. Gebauer (eds), *Transitions to Agriculture in Prehistory*, Madison: Prehistory Press, *Monographs in World Prehistory No. 4*, 1992, p. 34; Bar-Yosef and Meadows, ‘Origins of Agriculture’, p. 76; Bar-Yosef, ‘Natufian Culture’, pp. 168,170. Calculation based on Hassan’s formula.

⁷¹ Kent V. Flannery, ‘The Origins of the Village as Settlement Type in Mesoamerica and the Near East’, in Peter J. Ucko, Ruth Tringham and Geoffrey W. Dimbleby (eds), *Man, Settlement and Urbanism*, London: Duckworth, 1972, p. 44; Richard S. MacNeish, ‘The Evolution of Community Patterns in the Tehuacan Valley of Mexico and Speculations About the Cultural Process’, in Peter J. Ucko, Ruth Tringham and Geoffrey W. Dimbleby (eds), *Man, Settlement and Urbanism*, London: Duckworth, 1972, p. 80; R. D. Drennan, ‘Religion and Social Evolution in Formative Mesoamerica’, in Kent V. Flannery (ed.), *The Early Mesoamerican Village*, New York: Academic Press, 1976, p. 350; Kent V. Flannery, ‘Linear Streams Patterns and Riverside Settlement Rules’, in Kent V. Flannery (ed.), *The Early Mesoamerican Village*, New York: Academic Press, 1976, p.173; J. Marcus, ‘The Size of the Early Mesoamerican Village’, in Kent V. Flannery (ed.), *The Early Mesoamerican Village*, New York: Academic Press, 1976, pp. 80-83; R. G. D. Reynolds, ‘Linear Settlements on the Upper Grijalva River. The Application of the Markovian Model’, in Kent V. Flannery (ed.), *The Early Mesoamerican Village*, New York: Academic Press, 1976, p. 181; Hassan, *Demographic Archaeology*, pp. 52,93; E. M. de Tapia, ‘The Origins of Agriculture in Mesoamerica and Central America’, in C. W. Cowan and Patti Jo Watson (eds), *The Origins of Agriculture: An International Perspective*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, p. 157; C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky and Jeremy A. Sabloff, *Ancient Civilizations: The Near East and Mesoamerica*, Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1995, pp. 245-7; D. K. Jordan, ‘Chronological Table of Mesoamerican Archaeology’, 1999, <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/arch/mexchron.html>.

rectangular by the Early Formative with wattle and daub walls (cane plastered with clay), and grass or palm thatch roofs.⁷² In China, during the Initial, also known as Early, Neolithic single room, mostly round structures, 2-3 m across, predominated, being built with walls of wattle or posts and coated in clay.⁷³ Villages at this time covered areas of one to two hectares, reaching up to eight hectares, representing populations from 145 to 205, up to 400 or more⁷⁴

As can be seen in the examples cited from East Central and Western Australia and Victoria, dwellings capable of accommodating at least 10 people were relatively common, with some able to house 30 or more. Several of the settlements were in the 200 to 300 range in terms of their population, with possibly 500 at the Eumeralla village site and as many as 1000 on the Darling River. This is quite comparable to the nature of habitations and size of settlements found in the early neolithic in other parts of the world, as the agricultural revolution was taking off in those places and urban civilisation was commencing.

Sedentism

The most commonly employed framework classifying forms of mobility and sedentism was developed over 30 years ago by Murdock and his collaborators, positing five categories : fully nomadic, semi-nomadic, semi-sedentary, sedentary but impermanent, and sedentary and permanent.⁷⁵ Elsewhere I have argued that this schema is completely inadequate in describing situations where sedentism is evolving and where there are subtle but important distinctions in the degree of sedentism.⁷⁶ Instead, building on studies I have undertaken regarding the Nhandu of Western Australia and south west Victoria, and in the course of my current research, I have devised a typology employing the concepts of seasonal, multi-seasonal, seasonally mobile, sequential and partial sedentism as the alternative to Murdock et al's "semi-nomadic" and "semi-sedentary" categories.⁷⁷ From my analysis, based on a synthesis of historical ethnography and archaeological evidence, which I call reconstructive ethnography,⁷⁸ I have concluded that Aboriginal populations in the areas in question exhibited all these forms of sedentism. In some

⁷² G. R. Willey, G. F. Ekholm and R. F. Millon, 'The Patterns of Farming Life and Civilization', in R. C. West (ed.) *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 1, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964, p. 451; Flannery, 'Origins of the Village', pp. 37-8,44; 1976b:16,19/12020; M. E. Whalen, 'House and Household in Formative Oaxaca', in R. R. Wilk and W. Ashmore (eds), *The Household and Community in the Mesoamerican Past*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988, pp. 252-3; Richard S. MacNeish, *The Origins of Agriculture and Settled Life*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, p. 112..

⁷³ K-C Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, p. 90; G. L. Barnes, *China, Korea, Japan: The Rise of Civilization in East Asia*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1993, p. 104; Bruce D. Smith, *The Emergence of Agriculture*, New York: Scientific American Library, 1995, pp. 130,133-4; Tracey L. D. Lu, *The Transition From Foraging to Farming and the Origin of Agriculture in China*, Oxford: John and Erica Hodges, Archaeopress, *BAR International Series No. 774*, 1999, pp. 36-7,88-9; W. Yan, 'Neolithic Settlement in China: Latest Finds and Research', *Journal of East Asian Archaeology*, 1 (1999), p. 134; G. Shelach, 'The Earliest Cultures of Northeast China: Recent Discoveries and New Perspectives on the Beginning of Agriculture', *Journal of World Prehistory*, 14,4 (2000), p. 396.

By the Middle Neolithic larger habitations, up to 3-5 m in dimension, with square or oblong pit houses, began to become more common (Chang, *Ancient China*, p. 90; Barnes, *China, Korea, Japan*, p. 104.)

⁷⁴ Chang, *Ancient China*, p. 90; Gary. W. Crawford, 'Prehistoric Plant Domestication in East Asia', in in C. W. Cowan and Patti Jo Watson (eds), *The Origins of Agriculture: An International Perspective*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, p. 14; Barnes, *China, Korea, Japan*, p. 104; Smith, *Emergence of Agriculture*, p. 134; A. P. Underhill, 'Current Issues in Chinese Neolithic Archaeology', *Journal of World Prehistory*, 11,2 (1997), pp. 120,122; Lu, *Origin of Agriculture in China*, pp. 36,39,88-9; Yan, 'Neolithic Settlement in China', p. 134; Shelach, 'Earliest Cultures of Northeast China', pp. 398,400.

⁷⁵ George P. Murdock, *Ethnographic Atlas*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967, p. 51; George P. Murdock and S. F. Wilson, 'Settlement Patterns and Community Organization: Cross-Cultural Codes', *Ethnology*, 11,3 (1972), pp. 254-295; George P. Murdock and C. Provost, 'Measurement of Cultural Complexity', *Ethnology*, 12,4 (1973), pp. 379-392.

⁷⁶ Gerritsen, *Traditional Settlement Pattern*, p. 37. See also Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture*, New York: Crowell, 1968, pp. 611-33.

⁷⁷ Gerritsen, *Traditional Settlement Pattern*, pp. 33 - 43; Gerritsen, *Nhandu Villages*, p. 16; Gerritsen, *Australia and the Origins*.

⁷⁸ Rupert Gerritsen, 'Naming Names: Historical Ethnography as a Form of Ethnohistory', *Aboriginal History*, (forthcoming b).

cases they appear to have been fully sedentary. Strong indications of higher levels of sedentism, drawing on cross-cultural studies and archaeological research, can be seen in some of the evidence I presented earlier, for example references to constant occupation, multi-room dwellings and dwellings with perpendicular sides. These last two features have typically been found in the dwellings from the early neolithic periods of China and Mexico and, later Neolithic in the case of the Middle East.⁷⁹

Final Comments and Conclusions

I have presented here a proportion of the evidence assembled in the course of my research, endeavouring to show that in some parts of Australia Aboriginal populations built permanent and at times large habitation structures and lived highly sedentary lives in permanent settlements of considerable size. To some extent this is a heretical notion, but the evidence cannot be ignored and cannot be explained satisfactorily in any other way. Some may be puzzled by these occurrences, the explanation I propound, however, is an economic one, and lies in increasing extractive efficiency and the commencement of food production economies.

In conclusion it must be realised by those concerned with Australia's urban history that in most instances you are really referring to modern urban history. Australia has a deeper urban history stretching back to 1629 in terms of a European presence, for centuries before that in terms of Aboriginal settlements patterns. Perhaps it is time we recognised the fact that there is not only Australian urban history but also an Australian urban prehistory.

⁷⁹ Rafferty, 'The Archaeological Record', p. 130; Gerritsen, *Australia and the Origins*.