

Week 5b Thursday, April 30 Seminar Questions on Mithen II

Focus on the questions Q1-Q5 in small groups. We will discuss questions Q6 and Q7 and any questions generated by the small groups in the full seminar.

Q1 Discuss the physical characteristics of the “Nariokotome boy” (*Homo ergaster*) as described in Chapter 10 (p. 139 ff). What theory of the origin of bipedalism does Mithen find most persuasive (p. 144-145)? What are the implications of bipedalism for music and language (p. 150 ff)? Discuss the significance of the decision to call this skeleton a “boy” (as opposed to, say, a “young male”)?

Q2 What does Mithen mean by the terms *onomatopoeia*, *sound symbolism*, and *sound synaesthesia*? (pp 169 ff). How does his discussion relate to Ramachandran’s ideas about synesthesia and language evolution? Why does Mithen amend his ‘Hmmm’ proposal to ‘Hmmmm’ at this point? (Count the “m’s”!) (p. 170)

Q3 What is the difference between an ‘indicator’ and an ‘aesthetic’ trait (pp 177-178)? Discuss Mithen’s examples at the top of page 178. What arguments does Mithen present (citing Miller, also) that music may be both an aesthetic and an indicator trait (p. 179 ff, p. 187)? Why might hand-axe production be an aesthetic trait (p. 189)?

Q4 What are some of the reasons that Mithen cites in Chapters 13 and 14 for the increased need for cooperation among early humans? How is a sense of self- and group-identity related to a theory of mind (pp 212-213)? Do you find his arguments about the role of music in enhancing cooperation (p. 213 ff, p. 218) to be compelling? Why?

Q5 In Chapter 15, Mithen argues that Neanderthals used Hmmmm communication rather than language. On p. 228 he mentions three sources of evidence for this claim: the archaeological record, the absence of symbolic artefacts, and the long-term cultural stability of Neanderthals. Discuss each of these in turn. The summary on pp 233-234 may be helpful. Do you feel that Mithen has made a strong case for both of his two claims: (1) Neanderthals did not have language, and (2) Neanderthals did use ‘Hmmmm’?

Q6 Mithen ends the book with a coda concerned with the evolution of *homo sapien* language. In particular, how does he account for the transition from Hmmmm language to compositional language using a modified version of Wray ideas (p. 253)? How does his view about the move of compositional language from the role of supplement to that of the dominant form of communication allow him to accept a version of Bickerton’s position on protolanguage (p. 259-260)? Mithen ends the chapter with a return to the central thesis of his earlier book, *The Prehistory of the Mind*, by discussing cognitive fluidity. How does he relate his views to that of Chomsky (p. 264)? How, if at all, might it relate to Jackendoff’s account of consciousness in Ch. 3 of his text as discussed in Wednesday’s workshop?

Q7 What is Mithen’s position about the nature of musical communication in the modern (fully linguistic) world? (Chapter 17)

Last small group task: the group as a whole should ultimately formulate a question for full seminar and write it on the board before the full group session.