INTRODUCTION

In this paper I survey the recent literature on ancient cities and urbanism throughout the world. I emphasize recent work outside of Mesoamerica that seems especially interesting, as a complement to papers dealing with Mesoamerica presented by other participants.

SOME CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

“City,” “urban site,” “urban society,” and “urbanization” are often undertheorized and it is easy to find publications in which the author leaves these terms undefined and simply assumes that we all know what they mean. Too often a site is simply labeled a “city” or a society is called “urban” without explaining why. Often the context suggests that the author has not thought very hard about these terms and is more interested in other issues. It is also not uncommon to see “urban society” and “the state” more or less conflated, as if no states ever existed without cities and there were never any cities without states. Indeed, Fox (1977:24) flatly asserts that cities are found only in societies that are organized as states. Some would probably still argue that this is in fact the case, but there are others who argue that one or the other sometimes occurred without the other. Monica Smith (2003b), for example, argues that there were cities in Early Historic India before real states arose, while others question whether the early Egyptian state was very urbanized. Of course, it is possible to define both “city” and “state” in ways that make their co-occurrence a tautology, but it is doubtful whether that is useful. One simple notion, often unstated, is that states are the kinds of political systems that go with complex societies, and the larger settlements of complex societies are what we mean by cities. But it is more useful to frame the matter more broadly, as issues concerning the relations among kinds of settlements or systems of settlements and forms of political, economic, social, and religious institutions and practices.

It won’t do to suggest that these terms are like pornography—we can’t define it but we know it when we see it. On the other hand, efforts to give precise definitions run into difficulties. It is notoriously unsatisfactory to rely on any single variable, such as sheer size, or being in the top tier of a regional settlement hierarchy, to mark a site as “urban.” Trying to categorize “cities” into a limited number of discrete types also runs into problems—the categories tend to intergrade and different variables do not necessarily neatly bundle together. It seems best to define several variables (i.e., axes), and then see where specific cases fit on the scales implied by these axes.

One very mischievous property of the English language (and of Spanish also) is that the routine employment of the definite article (“the”) encourages us to speak almost unthinkingly of “the” city and “the” state. But this leads us toward reification and even essentialization of categories and it creates unnecessary conceptual difficulties. It is far better to speak (and think) of “cities” or “a” city, but never of “the” city.

Another issue that we should be aware of, although I have less strong opinions about how to resolve it, is that I see a certain shifting between the concept of a city as a kind of place (or kind of site), and a city as the context in which certain kinds of institutions and/or practices are carried out. Of course, from a purely logical point of view these concepts may amount to the same thing, yet I think there are differences in the extent to which “kinds of place” or
"kinds of activities" is given primacy. In contrast, though "states" have more or less well-defined boundaries, I don't believe anyone thinks of a state as a kind of place, while we do routinely think of states as definable by certain kinds or combinations of institutions and practices. Possibly it is best to think of urban societies as kinds of societies that have places that are the physical settings for "urban" activities, practices, experiences, and/or functions.

RECENT LITERATURE ON ANCIENT CITIES IN GENERAL

The book edited by Monica Smith (2003a) emphasizes the social construction of ancient cities. Contributors provide examples from Mesoamerica (Cowgill, Yaeger, Houston et al.), Mesopotamia (Keith, Zeder, Emberling), Peru (Moore, Attarian), the Indian subcontinent (Smith), and China (Shen). Especially interesting is the chapter by McIntosh and McIntosh on the Middle Niger, since it goes beyond "the usual suspects" to consider alternative kinds and trajectories of urbanism.

The volume edited by Nichols and Charlton (1997) concentrates on what they call city-states. I can only agree with numerous reviewers who have found their definition of "city-state" problematic, especially in being excessively broad (it includes everything from Teotihuacan—which I would call a regional state and possibly, briefly, a hegemonic empire—to the numerous small polities of the Basin of Mexico in the 1300s). Nevertheless, their book contains numerous valuable case studies, including Mesoamerica (Webster, Pyburn, Charlton and Nichols, Hodge), Mesopotamia (Stone), Egypt (Wenke), South Asia (Kenoyer), China (Yates), Greece (Morris, Small), Okinawa (Pearson), and Peru (Wilson, Kolata).

Mogens Herman Hansen (2000) provides studies of some 30 cases that meet his definition of "city-state." Contributors represent the Near East, Greece, Italy, barbarian and medieval Europe, the Arabian Peninsula, China, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Mesoamerica. A recent supplement adds several more cases. Both these and the Nichols and Charlton volume emphasize "state" at least as much as "city," but both include much of use for studies of urbanism.

Similarly, the book on empires edited by Alcock, D'Altroy, Morrison, and Sinopoli (2001) includes useful data on urbanism topics. This is also true of the volume on archaic states edited by Feinman and Marcus (1998). Southall (1998) is less useful, at least in the early section on ancient cities which makes little use of recent research and tends to treat traditional Marxist categories as givens into which cases are fitted, rather than as concepts deserving further research and refinement. Peter Hall's Cities in Civilization (1998) has a promising title and may be of considerable value for the past few centuries but has little to offer students of ancient urbanism.

Especially provocative is Virginia Betz's (2002) argument that cities did not simply come into being as consequences of the pursuit of political, religious, and/or commercial objectives, but instead were a deliberately invented new kind of settlement, designed to be inviting. She makes extensive use of psychological, city-planning, and other literature unfamiliar to most archaeologists. Those accustomed to a more materialist paradigm may not be fully convinced, but she raises many issues and concepts that should not be ignored and which provide important insights.

EGYPT

It is not clear that Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom Egypt was as devoid of cities as earlier writers such as Wilson suggested. Very little is yet known of settlements during these periods, and it is at least possible, if not highly probable, that some were of considerable size. What is clear, however, is the early and relatively rapid development of sizable regional states. It still seems accurate to say that throughout Egypt's history, political unification was the normal state of affairs and that political fragmentation was associated with "times of trouble." Publications on Egypt that look especially important for city and state include Bard (1997), Bietak (1979), Wilkinson (1999), Kemp (1977, 1989), O'Connor (1998), Trigger et al. (1983), and Wenke (1989).

SOUTHWEST ASIA

Van De Mieroop (1997) is a good recent general book on Mesopotamian cities, although already out of date in some respects, such as the unexpectedly early development of fourth millennium cities in northern Mesopotamia. Marcus (1998) tends to minimize differences between Egypt and Mesopotamia, but I think most regional specialists remain impressed by differences as well as similarities. Mesopotamia was most characterized by numerous autonomous small polities that can reasonably be called city-states, in a larger region of relatively similar culture (even if shared by speakers of very different language families from early on), with periods of wider political unification short-lived and less typical, in contrast to the Egyptian pattern of political integration on a broad regional level. This degree of regional political integration does not seem to have been characteristic in Mesopotamia until the Persian conquests. Part of the difference may be explainable in terms of geography and transport possibilities, but it seems likely that different traditions of political institutions and practices were also a factor.
Pre-pottery Neolithic Jericho and Çatal Höyük have been widely claimed as the world’s first cities, but Emberling (2003) and Van De Mierloot (1997) briskly dispose of these claims. It unreasonably stretches the term to label them urban. Emberling (2003) sees a rather sudden rise of truly urban settlements in southern Mesopotamia ca. 3500 BC at sites such as Uruk, and a nearly contemporary appearance in northern Mesopotamia at Tell Brak. The volume edited by Rothman (2001) contains fascinating essays on the late prehistoric Uruk period of the fourth millennium BC. Marcus’s (1998) claim for a large regional state at this early date is questioned by many regional specialists, as is Alpaz’s (1993) notion of a major political expansion into northern Mesopotamia at this time. Nevertheless, some sort of fourth millennium southern Mesopotamian “presence” in the north, including good evidence for actual colonies, seems more pronounced than, for example, current evidence for Teotihuacan “presences” outside central Mexico. There was clearly a great deal going on, over a quite wide region, long before the better documented literate societies of the 3rd millennium.


**SOUTH ASIA**

The Indus Valley civilization remains enigmatic, and perhaps unusually different from all other early civilizations, so much so that some (e.g., Possehl 1998) question whether it should even be called a state. However, the largest sites surely deserve to be considered “urban” to a significant extent. Recent publications include Jansen (1980, 1989), Kenoyer (1991, 1997, 1998), and Possehl (1990, 1997, 1998, 2002).

There is growing interest on the part of Western scholars in the “Early Historic” societies of the last centuries BC and first centuries AD in South Asia, e.g., Aitchin (1995), Smith (2003b), and Sinopoli (1994, 2001). Also important is work on the historic medieval city of Vijayanagara, of the 1400s-1600s. Publications include Fritz et al. (1984), Mack (2002), and Morrison (2001).

**CHINA**

For decades we have had fascinating data on great prehistoric and early historic cities of the Shang, Western Chou, Spring and Autumn, and Warring States periods, especially through the English-language publications of the late K.-C. Chang, as well as others, and “seemingly” studies such as Wheatley’s *Pivot of the Four Quarters* (1971) and Boyd (1962) on Chinese architecture and town planning, but scholars aware of what has been accomplished by regional settlement pattern studies in Mesoamerica and elsewhere have been frustrated by the absence of comparable data from China. Happily, that is now changing, largely due to the efforts of Gary Feinman and his students (Underhill 2002; Underhill et al. 1998, 2002). There also appears to be a great deal of further work on urban sites themselves, both in the traditional “heartland” of northern China and in other regions. I am not aware of any major recent synthesis, but we should be on the lookout for this.

**THE ANDEAN AREA**

At least some view Andean states as not highly urbanized, although there are a number of settlements that certainly count as cities, such as Wari, Tiwanaku, Galindo, Chan Chan, and Cuzco. Stanish (2001a, 2001b, and personal communication) argues that this was because Andean states tended to depend on staple financing rather than wealth financing and price-fixing market institutions were weakly developed. However, the idea that the largest Andean cities were small compared to those in other early states may depend on his acceptance of quite high estimates for some early cities in other regions and limited use of Mesopotamian data, where fourth and even third millennium cities seem surprisingly small by Mesoamerican standards. Bawden (1996) suggests that big cities such as Late Moche period Galindo on the North Coast were actually a sort of aberration from the cultural tradition of the Peruvian North Coast, supported by coercion rather than legitimation by appeal to tradition, and were ultimately unsuccessful for that reason.

**GREECE AND ROME**

There is quite a lot of recent literature that it would repay Mesoamericanists to get in touch with. We can no longer dismiss classical archaeologists as atheoretical antiquarians or too dominated by texts. A great deal of anthropologically and sociologically informed work is being published, often highly relevant for Mesoamerican issues.

Students of the Greek and Roman cities of Classical Antiquity debate the extent to which some of the cities some of the time may have been more than just “consumer” cities, as thought by Max Weber and more recently by Moses Finley. At issue is the extent of entrepreneurial spirit and practices and the degree to which activities in cities generated wealth as well as consuming wealth generated in the countryside. This is related to, but not to be confused with, the formalist/substantivist debate of Polanyi and others. Some important
publications are Andreau (1999), Hopkins (1978), Morris (1997 and personal communication), Parkins (1997), Parkins and Smith (1998), Rich and Wallace-Hadrill (1991), and Stambaugh (1998). The current state of this debate seems to be that Weber and Finley overestimated the differences between earlier cities and the cities of Medieval and later Europe, with their relatively high degree of political autonomy and strongly entrepreneurial spirit. Entrepreneurial activities and attitudes were by no means insignificant in all earlier cities. In other words, the differences were not always as great as Fox’s (1977) contrast between “administrative” and “mercantile” cities would suggest. Nevertheless, many think that this requires modification of the ideas of Weber and Finley rather than sweeping rejection, and new concepts to replace theirs have not been forthcoming.

The consumer city issue is also debated concerning the cities of ancient Mesopotamia (e.g., Van De Mieroop 1997). I think that archaeological, ethnohistoric, and archival work on Aztec society in and near the Basin of Mexico has reached a comparable point. That is, while controversy continues, at least there is a reasonable amount of evidence that can be debated. This is still decidedly not the case for earlier periods in the Basin. For pre-Teotihuacan times, almost nothing is known of Cuicuilco.

We still know little about the scale and organization of production, distribution, and consumption within the city of Teotihuacan, and almost nothing about other Teotihuacan period settlements in Central Mexico except their locations and approximate sizes and periods of occupation. Work in progress by Charlton and Otis Charlton at small sites in the Teotihuacan Valley and by García Chávez and others at Azcapotzalco and other sites is beginning to improve the situation. Also, very little is known for the “Epipaleo” period after the collapse of the Teotihuacan state, although recent work by Crider et al. (2003) has made a beginning on this topic, and proposed further study by Nichols and others of the materials from Cerro Portezuelo currently at UCLA should also help.

My impression is that elsewhere in Mesoamerica, it is scarcely possible, as yet, to discuss “consumer city” issues with anything approaching adequate databases, although the Valley of Oaxaca and parts of the Gulf Lowlands and the Maya area may offer exceptions. What we can do, however, is to formulate the kinds of research designs that could begin to address such issues.

**Sub-Saharan Africa**

Recent work, especially that by Roderick McIntosh (1991, 1998), Susan Keech McIntosh (1999a, 1999b), and McIntosh and McIntosh (1993) has emphasized historical trajectories interestingly different from those commonly used in comparative studies of political and urban development.

**Mesoamerica**

I will mention only a few very recent works that may not be widely known to participants, since Mesoamerican cases are a main feature of other presentations in this and other meetings of this project. For Teotihuacan, Robertson’s work (1999, 2001, in press), based on sophisticated computer analyses of data from René Millon’s Teotihuacan Mapping Project, has superseded and greatly expanded on previous efforts to identify urban neighborhoods and larger districts within the city. Cowgill (2003) is a very recent overview of that city, and Cowgill (2000) discusses evidence of planning in the city’s layout, including practical and cosmological aspects. An important review by Michael Smith of Late Postclassic Mesoamerican city sizes is in press (Smith 2003).

**A Few Debated Issues**

**Cities as Inventions?**

It is often assumed that places with urban qualities simply arose as “natural” responses to various forms of political and/or economic centralization by which people were, in Childe’s famous words, “persuaded or compelled” to congregate in considerable numbers in certain places, together with large and impressive structures and arrays of structures intended to express and further legitimize the authority of powerful political, religious, and/or military leaders. One view is that increasingly powerful leaders intentionally planned their courts to be large and impressive, religious leaders oversaw construction of increasingly impressive temples, or both, while the dwellings of those who staffed these planned cores or otherwise served the rulers simply aggregated around the peripheries. In this view, other distinctive features of the earliest urban places arose either as unintended consequences of these new kinds of settlements or as responses to these unintended consequences. In this view, it is not unreasonable to think of cities as merely “emerging.”

An alternative view, argued especially by Betz (2002) but at least suggested in some other literature, deserves more attention—that the earliest cities in all or many of their aspects (not just civic-ceremonial cores) may have been designed to attract settlers by the qualities of their built features. In this view, it is hardly appropriate to think of cities as “emerging”—they are, instead, *created*. Many archaeologists are likely to continue to pay most attention to environmental settings, technologies of production and transport, and political and economic considerations. However, we will miss something important if we do not also think hard about the
likely new experiences, attitudes, and emotions generated by life in cities. It is also important to recognize that, for the first time, other segments of societies began to have the experience of not living in a city. That is, “rural” is not a meaningful concept except in societies where urban places exist. For Fox (1977), the distance between urban and rural life becomes far more salient in his “administrative” and “mercantile” ideal types, but it should not be underestimated for societies with cities closer to his “regal-ritual” type as well.

**The Nature of Urban Neighborhoods**

A good deal of work has been done on identifying and characterizing neighborhoods in Teotihuacan, most recently by Robertson (1999, 2001, in press). One result is that he tends to confirm and add detail to Millon’s earlier suggestion that neighborhoods were relatively heterogeneous internally, though with some tendency for higher proportions of higher status occupants to live nearer to the civic-ceremonial core. Robertson also sees signs of a tendency for neighborhoods to become less heterogeneous over time, and suggests that this may have led to increasing social tensions within Teotihuacan.

For the Mesopotamian city of Nippur, Stone (1981, 1987), aided by texts, has provided especially interesting data on neighborhoods and spatial organization of the city. Bawden (1996:86) sees considerable variation in North Coastal Peru; Late Moche Galindo was highly segregated into walled districts, while Gallinazo and Chimú settlements do not exhibit this rigid differentiation.

There is also a good deal of information on some cities of Classical Antiquity, including, not surprisingly, Pompeii. But, even here, there are limits to the “Pompeii premise,” and interpretations are not as easy as one might think (Allison 1997).

**Problems of Method in Identifying Tiers in Regional Site Hierarchies**

There is a considerable literature that has been built up around the premise that the number of distinct tiers in regional site hierarchies is diagnostic or at least suggestive of distinct levels of sociopolitical integration. This has a deceptive appeal to some archaeologists because it implies that, if the number of tiers can be satisfactorily ascertained, one can simply read off from it the type of society—whether “chiefdom,” “state,” or whatever. There is little doubt that, in a general way, more complex societies tend to have wider ranges of site sizes. But both conceptual and methodological problems abound. We need to reexamine the evidence that the number of tiers in a regional site hierarchy correlates more than vaguely with the form of regional sociopolitical organization. We need to be more fully aware of the possibility that different hierarchies (political, religious, commercial) may not closely coincide. We need to give far more thought to how site “size” is defined, so that data from different projects can be properly compared. We need to pay much attention to kinds of sites as well as sheer extent. Minimally this means getting good information about kinds of structures present (e.g., big mounds, little mounds, no mounds) and whether occupation looks heavy or dispersed, and how apparent different kinds and qualities of artifacts are in surface collections. “Full coverage” survey is not enough; we need full coverage with high intensity in at least subsamples of the lands within regions, and we need far more site excavations designed to get good representation of all parts of a settlement.

All the above is fairly obvious. Less obvious, it seems, is the apparent statistical naiveté with which distinct tiers in settlement hierarchies are divined. It seems that standard procedure is to generate a histogram of the numbers of sites in different size categories within the region surveyed. Usually the resulting profile is more or less irregular, with multiple peaks separated by valleys of varying width and depth. Often some of the valleys are so wide and deep that there is no reasonable doubt that they reflect “real” discontinuities in site sizes, and these can be reasonably interpreted as reflecting real and sociopolitically meaningful tiers or levels in political or other regional hierarchies. But, all too often, other valleys are not so wide or so deep, and there is room for considerable difference of opinion about how meaningful they are. Sometimes “emergence of the state” hinges on tiny differences in numbers of sites assigned to adjacent size categories. Remarkably, this approach has been used for several decades, without, to my knowledge, any serious criticism or application of basic statistical theory to testing the significance of these smaller valleys in histograms. I have been working on methods for cleaning up this particular act. At the moment, it seems that a variant of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test may be quite useful, although I need to read more statistical literature on this topic.

Less problematic are uses of the “rank-size” concept, based on the notion that in a “mature” regional settlement system, if major settlements are ranked from largest to smallest, the sizes of other settlements relative to the largest will be approximately 1/4, 1/3, 1/4, 1/5, etc. This is especially useful because if the largest city is considerably more than twice the size of the next largest, the shape of the distribution is quite concave, and this is a pretty reliable indicator of a very high degree of political and economic concentration in the “primary” city and a rather weakly developed hinterland. Conversely, a convex distribution, in which one or more cities
are not much smaller than the largest, is a good indicator of a multi-centered situation, which may mean that the region would better be subdivided into two or more subregions.

Incidentally, if the rank-size rule were closely approximated in a region, separate tiers in the settlement hierarchy would not exist. If there were distinct tiers, the histogram of site size versus rank would have several pronounced shoulders rather than a roughly lognormal pattern. It is interesting to see how often both the “multiple tiers” concept and the “rank size” concept are applied to one and the same data set, with no apparent inkling of their logical incompatibility.

CITIES AS COSMOGRAMS

There is good evidence that the layouts of many cities in the New World and in East and Southeast Asia were designed to be cosmograms, or at least to physically embody some important religious concepts. However, this is less clear in other parts of the world, and there seems to be great variation. Kemp (2000), for example, discounts cosmic aspects to planning in New Kingdom Egypt. His arguments are to some degree tendentious. Nevertheless, he reminds us that it is well to approach each case with skepticism, remembering how easily one can deceive oneself with coincidences that seem too good to be merely accidental.

CITY STATES?

For better or worse, I cannot discuss this thorny topic at any length. Suffice it to say that concepts and definitions vary widely. One axis of differentiation is whether emphasis is more on the “state” aspect or the “city” aspect. When emphasis is mostly on the “state” side of the label, might it be better to use a term such as “little state” or “statelet”? This might apply especially well in Mesoamerica to regions such as the Mixteca Alta, where the largest settlements were usually not very large. In contrast, Fox (1977) emphasizes the “city” aspect, and for him “city-states” are limited to “mercantile” cities that have carried their relative independence from encompassing regional states to the logical extreme where the regional state, at least for practical purposes, no longer exists. Many may find this concept too narrow, in which case some other concept would seem more appropriate. One common denominator is, I believe, that we are thinking of sets of polities whose citizens have both a strong identification with their specific city and awareness of strong similarities with neighboring polities in the same general region. But we need to go beyond that if we are to make much use of the concept.
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