

READING 1

Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, *In the Balance: Themes in World History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), selections from chapter 3, "Settled Societies: The Emergence of Cities."

Abstract: This essay considers the emergence of early cities, where growing populations of sedentary peoples were concentrated in increasingly complex settlements. In so doing, it explores the causes of early urbanization such as agriculture and the desire for safety, and documents the rise of cities in diverse regions of the world. At the same time, this essay emphasizes that there was no inevitable pattern that led to urbanization, and that the transition from gatherer-hunter societies to settled societies was slow.

Introduction

Human population increase on a global scale has been a constant factor in changing community forms and evolving relationships between humans and their environments, despite dramatic, though usually short-term and regionally limited, decreases due to war or disease. Here, we consider one particular form of human organization: the emergence of early cities, where growing populations of sedentary peoples were concentrated in increasingly complex settlements. Complexity was both a necessary condition for and a consequence of larger communities. Complexity appeared in the form of bureaucracies that registered populations, taxed them, and maintained order, as well as in the form of systems of trade, communication, and defense. No less important were rituals of public order, both religious and secular, and aspects of everyday life such as going to the market to buy food or taking part in an annual festival. In this chapter we explore a wide array of forces and circumstances that encouraged human settlement in early urban forms. We examine relationships between urban communities and their environments, as well as the structures of the communities themselves. Finally, we look at the human experience of city life, its benefits and its challenges.

Gathering-hunting Societies

Small social groupings were characteristic of gathering-hunting societies. These units usually consisted of persons related by bloodlines and organized into groups that we might today term family structures, either nuclear (parents and children) or extended (nuclear plus siblings, their offspring, and grandparents). As groups increased in number, greater social complexity was apparently required by the demands of decision making and organization. Groups formed clans or tribes, as well as larger social and family units, based on shared cultures and blood relationships. Often members shared a fictive identity, an invented or socially constructed history that served to create a

shared sense of belonging and promote social cohesion. What forces brought these people together in large communities? What encouraged the particular form of complex social and economic organization characteristic of the city?

Urban Societies

Early cities were the result of multiple factors of growth and change. Urbanism was most often due to combinations of factors, though selected examples from around the globe suggest the primacy of some causes at the expense of others. Whatever immediate causes and conditions led to the rise of cities throughout the world, the emergence of urban societies was an intensification of earlier social dynamics, not a revolutionary process. Even as cities emerged, the majority of people remained in rural communities, linked through trade and systematic contact with urban centers. In this chapter we survey early cities in various regions of the globe, identifying characteristic features of each in order to illustrate the complex nature of both the process of urbanization and the phenomenon of urbanism as experienced by peoples in widely varying cultural contexts throughout the world.

Causes of Urbanization

The earth's increased human populations were fed by successful economic systems that integrated regular food supplies and other connections between communities. The emergence of the city as a form of human community required the creation of such systems to connect urban and rural activities and resources. Agriculture was only one reason that people settled down and populations began to be concentrated in urban clusters. Successful agricultural systems supported larger populations, including nonfarming peoples, in towns and villages. As gatherers and hunters began to cultivate crops and domesticate animals, they became less mobile and began to settle in more fixed communities. In time, most of these communities grew in size.

Other reasons that people settled together in large communities included the advantages gained from increased access to trading opportunities, the desire to be near religious shrines or other sacred sites, and, finally, the safety and defense afforded by large numbers of cooperating community members. Social structures in large communities became more varied and complex, and kinship ties were replaced by other bonds, such as ties based on loyalty, economic gain, or protection. Social stratification is characteristic of most cities. Whether the most basic social structures were invented or the natural consequence of familial or blood relationships, they were perceived essentially as kinship-based units with a common identity and culture. They served a primarily economic function. In the increasingly ambiguous and complex social settings created by the challenges of larger communities, a

strong group identity and sense of belonging became essential to successful social interaction.

Groups eventually developed culturally distinct governing rules, hierarchies, gender roles, beliefs, and values. Management of this complexity encouraged the concentration of power, which in turn required large bureaucracies to administer the populations brought under the control of powerful individuals or groups. Large sedentary communities multiplied around the globe after the ninth millennium B.C.E., when a variety of circumstances accounted for their growth in size and scale. These settlements became increasingly diversified according to function, necessitating ever more interdependent economic and social structures. The more densely populous and complex settled societies became the first cities.

Cities, Complexity, and Civilization

The formation of cities was accompanied by increasing economic, social, and political complexity. This complexity meant that many peoples, occupations, goods, and ideas came together into a single settlement that satisfied the diverse needs of that community. Though cities appear around the world, they were not a universal state in the development of civilization, a term derived from the Latin word for “city,” *civitas*, nor were they the logical and necessary culmination of earlier forms of community. The most common definitions of “civilization” include the presence of some or all of the traits commonly found in the large-scale, complex communities we call cities: monumental architecture, usually religious in nature; writing or other formal systems of record keeping and communication; trade, government, social stratification, and representational art.

Agriculture and Cities

The development of agriculture was important to the rise of cities, since agriculture supported the population growth that cities housed. Surplus food produced as a result of technological innovations in cultivation and other forms of subsistence or specialization allowed people to settle in communities that grew in size and density and became cities. Reliable food supplies were essential to the emergence and survival of cities. The resources needed for expanding and densely settled populations could be obtained by trade or by other means, such as war, as well as by integrating agricultural hinterlands with the concentration of population in an urban center. In addition to the production of surplus food as a condition conducive to urban development, the concentration of people in cities was also caused by population pressure on limited resources (causing people to flee farms and villages looking for work and food), drastic environmental change, the need for protection, the

need for periodic markets for trade and exchange, the concentration of political power, and the institutionalization of religion.

Cities as Ceremonial Centers

Once material needs were provided, one characteristic (though not the only) urban form that emerged was the ceremonial complex. As symbols of cosmic, social, and moral order, public ceremonial structures such as pyramids, mounds, and temples were centers of political, social, and sacred space. Staffed by priests in service to rulers, these monuments represented the redistribution of resources essential to the economic relationship that existed between the urban center and its agricultural hinterland. In other words, religious practices often served as a symbolic means of redistributing resources.

West Asia: The Early Growth of Agricultural and Urban Systems

Urbanism has been more extensively studied in West Asia than in almost any other part of the world. This is partly due to the abundant and well-preserved evidence and partly the result of scholarly interest in studying what were thought to have been the world's first cities. The earliest West Asian cities were based on gathering and hunting as well as on the cultivation of domesticated crops by sedentary farmers. Hunting and gathering continued to supply needs after groups became sedentary and the products of farming were among many resources in a broad-based lifestyle.

Early West Asian Cities

By around 6500 B.C.E. in West Asia, settlements such as Tepe Guran in the western Zagros Mountains of Iran or Jericho in Palestine were large enough to be considered small cities. They initially served their hinterlands, the surrounding rural areas, as exchange centers for goods and services, culture, and ideology. Tepe Guran was a seasonal town, serving as winter quarters for nomadic people who, following their herds, moved twice a year, once from summer pasture and once for winter pasture.

Jericho

Jericho was an older, year-round settlement, dating back to as early as 9000 B.C.E., when the site was established as a sanctuary beside a spring for hunter-gatherers. Over the next millennium, their descendants made the transition from a wandering to a settled existence. By the eighth millennium B.C.E., Jericho had a population of about 2000. The community was surrounded by defensive and protective walls to which were attached such monumental architectural features as a heavy stone tower. Jericho seems to have been only

incidentally a farming community. It perhaps drew its wealth from trade, the exchange of goods that traveled from the Red Sea to Anatolia. Around 7000 B.C.E., Jericho was abandoned and replaced by a more modest and straightforward farming community with houses and walls built of sundried mud brick, a material widely used throughout West Asia at this time. The decline and replacement of Jericho seem indicative of a pattern in West Asia. Like Jericho, there were many other settlements that appeared and declined, expanded and contracted, as cities eventually became more closely connected with the agricultural development of their hinterlands.

Çatal Hüyük

The size of later West Asian cities reflected, in most cases, the agricultural potential of the immediately surrounding region. One of these cities, Çatal Hüyük in central Turkey, is an example of a complex urban society that eventually came to be based on agriculture but which also relied on game hunting and the gathering of undomesticated plants. By 5800 B.C.E., the city had a population of some 5000 people settled in about a thousand densely built houses surrounded by a well-watered plain. Çatal Hüyük's economy centered on large herds of domestic cattle, though grain farming dependent on irrigation was also practiced. Built on the side of a hill, the town was a solid block of interlocking one- and two-story adobe buildings, each sharing walls with its neighbors. Although a labyrinth of alleys wandered through the town, access to many of the residences was across the roofs of their neighbors. This sort of town planning may have been dictated by concern for defense of the city against outside marauders or interlopers in trade.

From evidence excavated so far at Çatal Hüyük, it is clear that the city served as a cultural as well as economic center. Excavations have indicated the existence of a complex, ranked society, whose priestesshood and shrines suggest a possible matriarchy, or female rule. In fact, the presence of ritual or ceremonial functions at Çatal Hüyük may have been as significant for the center's existence as any economic or military reasons. Early civic leaders may have been spiritual as well as political rulers. Their powers are depicted in wall paintings as male deities who were partners of female goddesses, and necessary to the fertility of the community.

Specialists in Cities

The role of religious specialists was only one activity common to cities. Other specialists were skilled laborers or artisans, some of whom passed on the valuable secrets of their trade through family or household relationships. At Çatal Hüyük, for example, there was a specialized labor force producing ground and chipped stone implements and excellent woolen textiles. Both copper and lead smelting were done, and both metals were worked into ornaments. Pottery was also produced, though none of it was more than basic

utility ware. Specialists were important to cities, because they relied on unique skills and knowledge unavailable to the ordinary field laborer; their diverse activities flourished because urban centers provided for the centralized collection of resources needed by their craft and for the sale and distribution of their products in urban markets. Like other city dwellers, specialists were dependent on their rural counterparts, who remained full-time food producers.

Çatal Hüyük's society and culture, taken together with that of the earlier and smaller Jericho, underlines the difficulty of making a unilinear connection between agriculture and the emergence of cities. The process of urbanization was a slow one of trial and error, complicated by environmental and other accidental factors. The interplay of environment, food supply, and urban formation was a dynamic social process. No "first city" emerged in West Asia during this earliest period, only many towns, each in its own way seeking to sustain a society that became more dense and complex. Some were successful and some were not; success, in some cases, meant building larger, even more complex urban systems and political orders. Elsewhere, success meant survival of populations in smaller human communities and the disappearance of urban centers.

Environmental Factors and Urban Growth

Environmental factors also offer clues to the process by which peoples settled down and cities appeared. Between the seventh and fourth millennia B.C.E., when the agricultural world of West Asia was being consolidated, the climate remained fairly constant, but around 3500 B.C.E. it began to change. Glaciers ceased their rapid melting and rains diminished. By 3500 B.C.E., the oceans were as high as they would be. For example, the upper limits of the Persian Gulf coast lay well north of Basrah, and the heavy runoff of the Tigris-Euphrates watershed flooded the area with lakes and marshlands. Over several hundred years, when the oceans began to drop, the Persian Gulf slowly receded and the water table dropped. Following 3500 B.C.E., in Sumer, as the area at the head of the Persian Gulf came to be known, the extent of arable land was greatly enlarged due to an ample supply of water from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. As fast as land became available for cultivation, people moved in from nearby regions, from the northern Iraqi plains, and even from the southern coastal regions of Arabia, where steadily increasing desiccation (drying up) was making vast tracts of land uninhabitable.

The Settlement of Sumer and the City of Uruk

Within this context of environmental change, Sumer was an attractive area for settlement in the late fourth millennium B.C.E. Those who moved into the area from other parts of West Asia carried with them the heritage of more than

2000 years of experimentation in agriculture and settled communities. In Sumer they joined an already established population which had cultivated the marshes for a thousand years and developed small town settlements scattered along the gulf coast. Together, the new and old settlers used the latest farming techniques, including irrigation, and equipment on fertile soil as it dried out. The result was a greatly increased agricultural production, which in turn attracted more people and created denser settlements.

Uruk was one of several cities that emerged in Sumer following the climatic changes that occurred after 3500 B.C.E. Growing out of two smaller farming communities, Uruk eventually encompassed 9 square kilometers (3.5 square miles), but it served a much wider hinterland as a focus of economic, social, and cultural interchange. Uruk differed from smaller farm communities in the diversity of its economic production and the fact that its large labor force was paid wages in the form of surplus grain, as meticulously recorded by scribes.

Uruk as a Ceremonial Center

The conversion of the small village or domestic shrine into a temple occurred by the first half of the fourth millennium B.C.E.. The White Temple at Uruk, dated to about 3100 B.C.E., is built of mud brick with whitewashed walls and decorated with elaborate buttresses and recesses. Built on a raised platform or ziggurat, this temple incorporates the remains of earlier sanctuaries, which were bricked over to form the successive foundations of new temples; because the god of the temple was believed to be the landowner in perpetuity of the ground that had been consecrated to him, his shrine could not easily be transported to a new site. Both temples and their supporting ziggurats were “mountains” where the natural potency of the earth and therefore all of life was thought to be concentrated. A city’s shrine served its inhabitants and attracted worshipers and traders from the hinterland. Priests first appeared at some time prior to 3000 B.C.E., when they are depicted on seals and stone carvings. They were perhaps the first social group to be released from direct subsistence labor, since their role in religious ritual and as spokesmen for gods was related to the exercise of power by kings (see Chapter 4). The term for “king” appears in Sumerian inscriptions by the beginning of the third millennium B.C.E., and the rise of kingship is further attested to by the presence of monumental palaces and royal tombs from this period.

Urbanization and the Invention of Writing in Sumer

It is likely that the complexity of business transactions and administrative and legal needs presented by the challenge of organizing larger urban communities stimulated the writing system developed by the Sumerians around 3000 B.C.E. The centralization of the economy through the integration of urban center and hinterland required the systematic collection and

allocation of goods, aided by a means of recording such transactions. The redistribution of resources administered by the newly centralized Sumerian kingdoms was documented in the earliest written records: lists of the contents of storehouses. Though the earliest script appeared in Sumer and, like the origins of scripts elsewhere in the ancient world, was pictographic in nature, cuneiform, or “wedge-shaped,” script, developed by the Sumerians to write on clay tablets, eventually spread throughout West Asia among peoples whose languages were unrelated.

The Urban Diet

Grains supplanted livestock as the local diet of city folk. Barley, wheat, and millet were served with lentils, beans, turnips, onion, garlic, leeks, cucumbers, lettuce, cress, and mustard. The daily diet of barley paste or bread was accompanied by onions or a handful of beans and washed down with beer. More than fifty varieties of fish are mentioned in texts before about 2300 B.C.E. Along the city streets of Uruk, vendors of cooked foods offered customers fried fish and grilled meats. Mutton was common (the Sumerian language contained more than 200 words describing the types and varieties of sheep), along with goat, beef, and pork.

The business of agriculture and food supply was only one of the enterprises on which Uruk was based. The ubiquity of mosaic decoration in the area has led many to believe that a considerable number of the inhabitants did nothing but turn out colored clay tiles. As the lower Iraqi area of ancient Uruk had no source of strong, workable stone at hand, hundreds of people were engaged in importing stone and cutting it for use in building. Ensuring a water supply was another major activity in Uruk. As the years of drying continued, major projects were undertaken to straighten and clean river courses and canals, which were cut away from the rivers to the fields in ever more complex patterns.

Uruk provides an example of the relationship of environment to the emergence of cities. By 2800 B.C.E., the plains of Sumer were no longer profusely dotted with small settlements. Instead, there were lines of cities — Uruk, Lagash, Nippur, Kish — each with its hinterland of associated settlements that followed the lines of the rivers and main canals. Because they had developed considerable organizational experience during the earlier centuries of plenty, they were able to use complex irrigation methods to adapt to the increasingly dry conditions and scarcity of food.

West Africa: Early Cities of Trade

Urban development occurred in parts of Africa other than the Nile Valley at later dates and was perhaps less environmentally determined than was urbanization in ancient Egypt. In the present-day West African nation of

Mali, oral traditions indicate that the city of Jenne-Jeno dates from about the eighth century C.E. Written historical records mention Jenne (or Jenne-Jeno, “old Jenne”) only in 1447 C.E., when an Italian merchant wrote about “Geni,” located at the southwestern edge of the navigable inland Niger Delta. Arab chroniclers writing after 1300 C.E. described the city as flourishing and prosperous. Before archaeological investigation, these historical sources had led historians to conclude that the city had developed only 500 years ago in response to the stimulus of Arab trade in North Africa.

Jenne-Jeno

Evidence from excavations of Jenne-Jeno made in 1977, however, confirmed a much earlier and entirely indigenous growth of urbanism in the western Sudan. Radiocarbon dates document the continuous settlement of Jenne-Jeno from before 250 B.C.E. In the early phases of the site, its inhabitants fished, hunted, used pottery, and had domesticated the cow. By the first century C.E., they were cultivating African rice. About the same time, people began to build more permanent mud structures and the size of the settlement increased to an area of more than 10 hectares (approximately 25 acres); at the height of the settlement (400–900 C.E.), Jenne-Jeno had spread to more than three times that size. Its population may have reached between 7000 and 10,000 inhabitants. Finds of pottery and terra-cotta sculpture, copper, iron slag, and gold indicate a rich material culture, craft specialization, and the involvement of the city in long-distance trade.

Jenne-Jeno was a city without a citadel. A large wall, however, that measured about 3 meters (10 feet) across was built around the city. As was characteristic of West African urban wall-building traditions, the Jenne-Jeno wall was probably not built for defensive purposes. Walls served to define the settlement’s identity and allow the city’s elite to protect and tax the flow of goods, caravans, and people.

Like a number of other West African urban centers, Jenne-Jeno was located on trade routes. The city was an important collecting point for gold and other goods and was critical to the development of West African commercial relations. Like other centers of social, economic, and political complexity, Jenne-Jeno enjoyed a stable agricultural base. The rich floodplains of the inland Niger Delta produced a considerable surplus in rice, sorghum, and millet and supported trade in these and other foodstuffs, such as smoked and dried fish. Well placed on the axis between the savanna and the edge of the desert, called the Sahel, and situated at the highest point for reliable transport by canoe along the Niger River, Jenne played an important role in the pre-Arab trade network. Both copper and iron were unavailable locally and were brought in from more than 50 kilometers (31 miles) away. By the first millennium C.E., Jenne-Jeno was also participating in long-distance trade in

African gold. These early African trade networks appear to have made possible the rapid expansion of trade with Arabs in later centuries.

Regional Systems

The example of Jenne-Jeno suggests that a city should not be thought of as an economic breach with the countryside. The origins of West African trade have long been attributed to the external stimulus of North African and Mediterranean contacts, and these contacts, in turn, were believed to have led to the emergence of West African urbanism and political centralization. The evidence from Jenne-Jeno contradicts this view and suggests indigenous trade and independent urban development effectively related to the city's relationship with its own hinterland in an integrated regional system. Archaeologists have surveyed a 100-kilometer-square (62-mile-square) area of Jenne-Jeno's rural hinterland and sampled some forty-two contemporary sites. On the basis of their size and diversity, it is clear that these sites functioned in a hierarchical relationship to Jenne-Jeno with Jenne-Jeno as their center and increasingly smaller settlements spaced at further distances as though along spokes on a wheel. Their patterning further supports the presence of a high degree of urbanism and an intraregional economy with Jenne-Jeno as its center point. Jenne-Jeno flourished not in isolation but within a rich and ancient urban system. The failure of written historical sources prior to the mid-fifteenth century to mention Jenne-Jeno by name may be taken as silent testimony to the independent emergence of the city in West Africa.

Summary

This chapter has provided examples of the transition from early settled communities to urban centers beginning as early as the sixth millennium B.C.E. These early cities were concentrations of increasingly diverse and highly stratified populations. Many originated as or became ceremonial centers, drawing large numbers of people to participate in rituals that were believed to propitiate deities, to encourage good agricultural harvests, or to request the support of the gods in war against their enemies. The exercise of political power, including the symbolic representation of that power in monumental architecture, played a key role in the rise of cities. Cities as ceremonial centers were established at sites that were both economically and strategically advantageous.

Cities gradually transcended their original primary functions. They were the centers from which ideology, institutions, material goods, and other urban "products" were transmitted to their hinterlands, on which they in turn depended. Such systems were also recipients of goods, peoples, and ideas from areas beyond their radii. The degree of urbanism in any part of the

world was dependent on the ability of each large community to maintain an integrative system between itself and its hinterland. Though cities flourished around the world, most people still did not live in cities; most did, however, live in intricate relationship with them, visiting them, trading with them, and supporting them with food and other necessary and valued goods and services.

Wherever urban systems appeared, they had common characteristics. Urban society became more complex than that of earlier gathering-hunting-agrarian communities. It involved larger numbers of people and greater management and control of resources and environments, resulting in a wider variety of economic activity and a more rigid structuring and organization of the city's inhabitants. In addition to more opportunities and the availability of more goods and services, urban life often meant the intensification of inequality and rigid divisions along lines of class, status, and gender. The systems of authority and relationships of inequality found in urban settings grew out of earlier patterns of larger social groupings and evolved to suit the conditions of urban life: complex and large communities of varied, interdependent parts required the mechanisms of control and centralized decision making to negotiate these differences. For example, gender differences and relations became more clearly defined. Even in early agricultural communities, male dominance was more accentuated than it had been in gathering-hunting societies, an accentuation that was powerfully confirmed and perpetuated in urban societies. Some male gods were even credited with the growth of cities, and male warriors and rulers protected the trade routes that connected cities with their supporting hinterlands.

The growth of cities was neither quick nor regular. It was a slow, varied, and disjointed process by which prior social dynamics were merged into developing urban systems; but once under way, the process of accumulating levels of complexity and diversity continued without cessation or reversal. Complexity inevitably resulted from the successful integration and exploitation of differences – whether of gender, status, family group, or occupation – which in turn characterized successful urban life. Cities everywhere thus shared another common feature: they became hierarchical enclaves in which inhabitants were increasingly subject to the experience and expectation of inequality and injustice. Privilege and power were further defined by the accumulation of wealth made possible by the centralizing momentum of urban life.

Cities became centers of complex social space. Some urban residents were stratified, dominated, and exploited by others. The tools of authority and control necessary for territorial and material expansion were also directed toward the control of diverse urban populations. Well-organized, exploitative systems enabled cities and their elites to accommodate their expanding

populations and maintain growth and order. City dwellers built buildings and produced art; they engaged in abstract intellectual expression, producing artifacts that historians have used to define urban cultures. But urban processes resulted not only in the benefits enjoyed by complex societies and cultures; homelessness, exploitation, and injustice have also been characteristic of the urban experience throughout world history. People residing in the hinterlands were drawn to emerging cities by the promise of opportunity for economic gain or material benefits. But often this proved elusive and led only to the exchange of rural hardships for misery and exploitation in an urban setting.

It is difficult to find one all-embracing reason that explains the origins of all cities, but it is impossible to understand the historical rise of urbanism without taking into account the functional relationship between the urban center and its surrounding area. The process of successful integration of city and countryside, of constructing a larger political or community identity from increasingly diverse and divergent parts, is common to all the urban societies described in this chapter. Cities remain a constant throughout history after their appearance in the sixth millennium B.C.E., and both cultural and historical circumstances determine the changing nature of cities and their variety.