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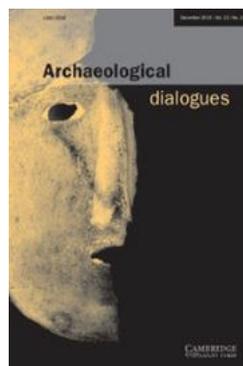
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## Towns and cities. A commentary on 'performing towns'

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necessarily part of some social practice, even when they are carried out within the scope of one. The challenge, therefore, is to determine and weigh the multidimensionality of practices.

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## **Towns and cities. A commentary on ‘performing towns’**

*Monica L. Smith\**

In this paper, Axel Christophersen does three important things. First, he addresses the way in which the inhabitants of premodern cities created an urban ethos through their cumulative daily actions. Second, he provides the opportunity to address a long-standing definitional challenge in the study of cities by examining what it means to undergo a process of ‘urbanization’. Finally, he focuses our attention on medieval Scandinavia as a region that has had a considerable amount of archaeological research but with which many readers may not be familiar compared to other historical periods in Europe.

The recognition of an urban ethos is an essential component of the understanding of the meaning of city life for its inhabitants. This process has been well studied by ethnographers of contemporary cities who capture city-dwellers’ philosophical musings, with some of the most poignant expressions of the relative advantages and disadvantages of urban life expressed by those engaged in menial labor and others at the margins of economic viability. Although ancient urban migrants must have engaged in similar sentiments, they are more difficult to access directly.

There are distinct advantages that accrue when we have texts describing the life of ancient urban inhabitants. Just as modern people of all social classes can clearly identify the relative merits and disadvantages of city life, so too did ancient urbanites express a simultaneous capacity for exhilaration and dismay. The Roman poet Juvenal wrote about noisy cart traffic, filthy streets and criminals in a way that provides an aura of dangerous inconvenience that we might never have imagined if we only looked at the soaring columns and triumphal architecture of the Forum and the Colosseum. In southern India, mute architecture of the first centuries A.D. is similarly enlivened by the Sangam texts that populate the urban realms with a cacophony of sound:

In Kanchi’s city there are groves in which  
The pregnant monkeys seize, when keepers armed  
With sticks are negligent, the ghee-mixed rice  
Intended for the elephant whose trunk  
Hangs down, and whose bad temper is subdued  
By being tied to wooden pillars strong.

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Strong chariots run and make ruts in the streets.  
 There is an army strong, invincible,  
 And famous; markets where the city folk that densely live do  
 always buy and sell . . . (Chelliah 1985, 129)

Often, even just a little nomenclature can provide some knowing insights into ancient peoples' perceptions of the urban world around them. Snippets of graffiti give us the quotidian details of urban spatial realms: the map from Nippur that identifies one passageway as 'the gate of the unclean women' in the second millennium B.C. (Ur 2012, 51), or the approximately 11,000 instances of graffiti at first-century A.D. Pompeii that included taunts, prayers, lovers' entreaties and advertisements for gladiatorial games (Benefiel 2010).

When we do not have specific texts, or when texts are limited, archaeology enables us to imagine other ways of being. Using the example of Trondheim in Norway, Christophersen's account of the daily trudging through dim, frozen streets reminds us of the power of narrative in the process of seeing the ancient individual, a mode of scholarly presentation that is relatively rare in the study of ancient cities, despite its inclusion in analysis of prehistory for the past 20 years or more (e.g. Boutin 2012; Tringham 1991). Interestingly, archaeologists have most often given themselves permission to impersonate the agents of small-scale societies; after the Neolithic, we expect people to be able to speak for themselves.

But even in literate eras, there are 'people without history'. While the experiences of the rural might well have continued the tropes of prehistory, the advent of urbanism brought new ways of interacting with others. The analysis of material culture, even in a simple object such as a worn-down tool or a well-used hearth, indicates the extent to which work, culinary practices and the routines of daily life in cities are different from the quotidian configuration of rural places. People are made urbanites not only en masse, but also through individual actions. Through a first-person narrative, Christophersen invites us to consider the way in which urban life is strung together in vignettes of experience. The author's exhortation to 'assess the long-term consequences of the formation of social practices in urban communities' through this narrative approach thus adds to the literature of social agency in ancient urban centers that has been handily addressed by numerous other contemporary scholars, such as R. McIntosh, Jesse Casana, Stephanie Wynne-Jones, Jeffrey Fleisher and Augusta McMahon.

The second important aspect illuminated by Christophersen relates to the issue of definitions. The author's discussion of population centers in Scandinavia illustrates the conundrum of definitions in the study of urbanism as one of the most compelling but complex subjects of archaeological and social analysis. Sometimes researchers have tried to parse this dynamism by augmenting the term 'urban' with prefixes and suffixes that attempt to identify the intent and outcome of different agencies within concentrated populations, referring to proto-urban, urban, urbanizing, and urbanized environments (cf. Smith 2003). The author starts out making a similar distinction in this paper but almost immediately falls into the unavoidable position of having to use

another word in order to break up the repetitive use of the words ‘city’ and ‘urban’ by using them interchangeably again with the word ‘town’. It is indeed ironic that a concept so central to the modern world, the concept of the city, should have no plausible synonym, but the use of the word ‘town’ obscures an important distinction among the sizes of population centres.

‘Towns’ deserve to be more closely analysed as definitionally separate and functionally distinct entities. Their roles as settlements of intermediate size enabled residents to participate in the economic, social and political activities of urbanizing environments in specific ways. Researchers working on social complexity are beginning to address the way in which towns have their own dynamic processes that are in some ways independent of proximate urban centres (e.g. Tol *et al.* 2014). In fact, the study of towns is likely to yield a more tractable way of understanding the first truly urban realms, because any city’s origins are otherwise very difficult to ascertain, buried as they are beneath metres and metres of occupation. In addition to studying towns in the interstices of urban networks, as Tol and colleagues are doing, one can also evaluate them as offshoots of urban centres that then engage in their own trajectories of growth (e.g. Mohanty, Smith and Matney 2014) and as the apex of settlement hierarchies when true urbanism does not seem to form (e.g. papers in Neitzel 1999). In sum, the threshold events that seem essential to city life might be most efficiently identified in towns as both precursors and contemporaries of truly ‘urban’ spaces.

Scandinavia is an ideal place from which to address the transition from rural to town to city life. Located in an area of distinct environmental challenges and opportunities, Scandinavia represents a concentrated seasonality for domestic plants and animals and associated outdoor productivity. Christophersen’s imagined street scene would have characterized much of the year, in which harsh exteriors were matched with warm, noisy interiors that became increasingly concentrated in urban spaces. At the same time, the region had excellent maritime connectivity in a manner that can compare well with other regions of the world, such as the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, where connectivity across the ocean was often easier than connectivity overland. Urban centers in Scandinavia were the nodal points of this connectivity, linking together the most challenging of outside worlds with the great intimacy of closed spaces once ashore.

The long-distance, trade-based connectivity of northern Europe started in the Roman period in the early first millennium A.D., and continued through the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods that set the stage for continued interactions between Scandinavia, Britain, Iceland and beyond. Towns played a central role in the Viking Age of the first millennium A.D. (see e.g. Clarke and Ambrosiani 1995), as did the concept of ‘things’ or gatherings that brought populations together in ostensibly neutral areas as a way of creating community and imposing law across dispersed populations (Iversen 2015).

The multiple ways in which people entered into collective social realms in the challenging environments of Scandinavia provide critical comparative insights for the study of urbanism elsewhere. Initial archaeological assessments of urbanism focused on the temperate zones of the Near East and classical Mediterranean worlds, in which the provisioning of settlements

was tied to a seasonality of rainfall and storage of plant foods. More recently, studies of tropical urbanism (in regions such as the Maya region and South East Asia) have shown the ways in which the challenges of provisioning and social organization in those environments were distinct from those developed in temperate locales. The distinct physical landscapes, harsh environments and maritime focus of Scandinavian cities of the first and second millennia A.D. provide yet another important comparative region for understanding the development and continuity of urban life, in which the storage of animal foods and a greater dependence on fish provided distinct conditions for the support of durable-goods production and consumer economies.

In sum, Christophersen's paper brings to light the ways in which archaeology and history (when we have it) can be utilized to humanize the past as endured by those who lived and thrived in challenging conditions while creating distinct and enduring forms of community. One hopes that he will continue this trajectory into more comprehensive works that bring the past alive for scholars and for the general public alike, as a way of illustrating the shared humanity of the urban experience even when lived under circumstances very different from today. James Deetz (1977) provided for us an excellent model in his book *In small things forgotten*, for which Christophersen could handily provide a counterpoint through large places remembered.

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**On complementarity of practice, scale and structure. Scalar aspects of social/material space in Anatolian peri-urban contexts in antiquity** LuAnn Wandsnider\*

In his illuminating article, Christophersen rethinks concepts in and approaches to the archaeological study of urban living, focusing especially on medieval urban towns in Scandinavia. He recruits various concepts – interaction, event, leakage and creativity – from a materially imbued social-practice theory to explore the urban landscapes as a complex of dynamic social spaces. Christophersen draws from scholars (Hodder 2012; Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996; Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012) who emphasize that practice is routinized behaviour through which actions and events are performed, that practices are tied to a place and timescape, that social actors live with and interact with materials, and that materials may be the media of interaction with others. Following Hodder (2012), he emphasizes that the nature and quality of social and material relationships lead to the formation and stabilization of practices. In turn, this practice constitutes the town or city.

Christophersen offers this approach as an antidote to earlier 1980s–mid-1990s processual approaches, with their emphasis on urbanization and

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## Urbanity as social practice *Axel Christophersen*

I would like to thank the commenters for spending their time on critical and constructive responses to my paper ‘Performing towns’. The comments add valuable insights, knowledge, viewpoints and ideas, which significantly elucidate the possibilities as well as the limitations of approaching medieval urban communities from a social-practice theoretical perspective (SPT). The commenters have pointed at theoretical questions too superficially treated, the need for a more extensive knowledge base and, most importantly, the need for a broader discussion of the methodological and empirical consequences of an SPT approach in analysing everyday life in a Scandinavian urban community based on archaeological empirical data. Rather than giving individual feedback, I instead centre my reply around four topics that the commenters have raised and which relate closely to the paper’s paramount issue and development potential.

### Town, urbanization and urbanity

The concept of ‘town’ and of its derivations ‘urbanization’ and ‘urbanity’ is essential and, as sharply pointed out by Monica Smith and Sven Kalmring, my superficial treatment obviously requires clarification. My point of departure is Kalmring’s assertion that I also omit ‘the classic discussion . . . on the designation and character of the earliest towns in the north’ (p. 137). That is true, but this discussion is very well known and for that reason I found it more appropriate to put effort into advocating new trajectories that could take us away from the (seemingly) perpetual discussion of ‘what is a town’. That discussion, which I have taken part in from the late 1970s (e.g. Christophersen 1980; 1989; 1994a; 1999b), is, in my opinion, locked in an overall ‘criteria-fixed’ position with an urge to classify, organize, structure and hierarchize history after a priori scheduled and selected criteria and definitions. I am well aware of the importance of clear criteria and definitions. But, as Monica Smith points out, ‘People are made urbanites not only en masse, but also through individual actions’ (p. 147). This obvious, but nevertheless important, observation does not sit well with the mainstream processual discussion about what a town *is* (or should be), where ‘people’ are classified and grouped in categories according to their role and function in production, exchange or the exercise of political or religious power (or both). At this point it is well worth drawing on the statement by Jeffrey Fleisher that ‘Rather than enforcing a strict distinction between processual and practice approaches, such studies

work productively between them, exploring relationships between different levels within urban settings' (p. 134). This Giddens-inspired statement is, of course, very true, and it mediates the difference in opinion about what and how new trajectories in archaeological research in preindustrial Scandinavian urbanization processes should (or could) follow in the future. For that matter, my use of the notion of 'urbanity', conceived as a particular way of life structurally related to urban landscapes and population density, should not be taken, as Kalmring suggests, as an attempt to supersede 'the perception of "urbanization" as a conscious process' (p. 138). I fully agree with Kalmring in this. Rather, the purpose was, helped by this term, to introduce the possibilities of an SPT approach and draw attention to issues and topics seldom discussed in archaeology within the traditional understandings of 'medieval urbanization' in Scandinavia. Ulrich Müller also advertises the need for more focus on what 'urbanity' is about in an SPT framework:

precisely because this term is central for urban archaeology, I would have liked to see a more detailed analysis. There exist very different attribution practices, for example in sociology and urban geography. Therefore 'urbanity' in the praxeological sense can also be further expanded, since an urban culture can purport both an 'objective' context and the subjective meaning of the agents (p. 143).

To me urbanity is still intentions and experiences realized within an urban landscape, performed as human interrelations.

### **How can SPT be a theoretical resource for urban archaeology?**

Ulrich Müller's insightful comments map out a solid ground for applying SPT in archaeological research. SPT, he points out, is not a coherent theory of practice but instead a bundle of theoretical approaches frequently applied in material-culture studies today. Owing to this fact, it is important to further develop some of SPT's essential concepts and coherence according to the needs and possibilities offered by present archaeological research practice and empiricism. One conceptual notion of paramount interest to archaeology is that of 'material resources' in the broadest sense (i.e. time, space, material objects and arrangements). While Schatzki argues that 'understanding specific practices always involves apprehending material configurations' (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny 2001, 3; after Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012, 9), Shove, Pantzar and Watson emphasize, like Reckwitz, the presence of material resources in social-practice development (*ibid.*, 9). In my opinion, this understanding invites archaeology to explore and refine its theoretical starting point. Müller, though, referring to Schatzki's use of the intriguing concept of 'teleoaffective structures', seems to be undecided whether it is at all possible to successfully apply more complex and sophisticated versions of SPT without at the same time being reductionistic. Müller's restraint is clearly expressed in his comment on my tentative introduction of a set of archaeological criteria (proto-, stabilized and ex-) to identify different stages in the development of practice patterns, which he finds 'somewhat simplified' (p. 144), and which, if applied reductively, may cause pure functionalistic

explanations. In general, I do not disagree with his argumentation. The dangers for a 'reductive understanding' of social-practice formation processes are obvious. Archaeological records alone are not capable of penetrating deep into the interactions between the intentional, the knowledge-related and the teleoaffective elements in practice-pattern processes. But what we definitely *are* capable of doing, and therefore *should* do, is to examine the physical remains that have been involved and look for the physical traces of interaction. The implication of such an aim is demonstrated by LuAnn Wandsnider's interesting comments on the role of architecture in urban settlements in Roman Asia compared with the province of Rough Cilicia. Architecture seems to have been used to facilitate communication and to create mutual understandings in urban societies with different scalar linguistic environments, population densities, political settings and available resources. Monica Smith advocates a similar approach when she argues for analyses which work within an understanding of the importance of the 'intermediate' size of towns as decisive for 'residents to participate in the economic, social and political activities of urbanizing environments in specific ways' (p. 148). Size/scale and population density have, indeed, for long been important matters within Scandinavian urban archaeology. Yet again, the importance of such elements is principally measured against their usefulness as quantitative criteria for urbanization rather than as material resources actively involved in social-practice patterns as actants, which I sense is what Monica Smith is hinting at.

A comment should also be made in order to further reinforce the importance of the issue of 'unintended consequences and unanticipated activities'. This is a profoundly theoretical topic closely related to our comprehension of the uncontrollable dynamic in practice-pattern bundles/practice complexes and the equally important dynamic forces unfolding in leaking zones. I would have expected more focus on this issue because of its interest for the question of how these dynamic and transformative forces influenced the development of social-practice formation in particular, and thus historical development in general. While 'history' was created from a starting point in the past, we utilize its narrative potential from the opposite end, from the present, where the loose ends are no longer loose, but tethered and structured in sequences of logical and consecutive incidents, accidents, events and happenings. History is about an infinite number of loose ends that have influenced the past, but who has cared about the loose ends? Ulrich Müller makes an interesting but cryptic and dense comment when he states that social-practice theory has 'indisputable' strength, because it shed lights on 'the routine nature and reproduction of agency knowledge as "unpredictability"' (p. 142). Jeffrey Fleisher is even more specific when commenting upon the issue of contact zones and unanticipated activities and how they possibly are important for the formation of urban life in the Middle Ages, while Sven Kalmring exposes little interest in this matter, asking, 'have we not already identified our spaces and areas of *leaking zones of contact* in the quite physical medieval towns themselves?' (p. 140). Yes, indeed, but the question is whether or not we fully understand the transformative forces and mechanisms that derive from such meetings. Kalmring's statement illustrates

in a striking way the importance of further refining the matter of leaking zones and loose ends, both theoretically and empirically.

### **SPT and archaeological records: possibility, limitations and challenges**

Theory formulation is important in many ways, not least for the art of asking questions that open unknown landscapes of knowledge and track the ‘six walks in the fictional woods’, as Umberto Eco describes the presence of the reader in the (hi)story (Eco 1998). The archaeologist is the reader and the records are access to the (hi)story. This access goes through the questions we ask and the (hi)story is constructed in our interpretations. Knowledge formation thus is just as much dependent on the creativity and quality of the objectives set – formulated as concrete questions – as on the sources and methods that are available. But this does not at all exclude us from pointing out the methodological and empirical challenges faced by an SPT approach to archaeological records. The commenters have all in different ways questioned the methodological and empirical implications – positive and negative – that derive from an SPT approach: Monica Smith reminds us wisely that when texts are not available or are limited, archaeology offers alternative ways of gaining access to past realities. Kalmring, on the other hand, expresses doubt whether an SPT approach to urban archaeology can contribute with new evidence and ‘digestible hard facts’ (p. 140). Kalmring is even uncertain whether knowledge about the ‘smallest units’ in urban societies is fully feasible from archaeological records, but if so, what can such knowledge contribute to an understanding of the ‘main lines’ in medieval urban development? The ‘main lines’ in science are matters of discursive formation, and so also is the question of what is feasible in archaeology. My simple point is that empirical feasibility in most cases is about discovering new ways of utilizing old records – discovering new sources and developing new methodological tools to penetrate the material remains, and thus we start chasing embedded historical data along new paths and from new heights in the landscape. Müller points correctly to the fact that I have not provided any proposal as to which methodological tools to apply in this regard. Wandsnider and Smith provide us with some concrete examples of that, based on reinterpretations of architecture and the use of size equivalents. Wandsnider urges us to be aware of the need for a better grip on the synchronous interaction between people’s social practice and material, which in research practice means advancing stratigraphic and/or chronological ‘resolving power’, a methodological challenge comprehensively dealt with by e.g. Stefan Larsson (2000; 2006). Also, Jeffrey Fleisher’s comment on the possibilities of improving our knowledge about urban practice complexes based on material remains was positive and constructive, first because he supports his reasoning with the need to include new advances in archaeological technique, besides already known excavation and documentation practices, and second because he provides practical examples and results rich in perspective from his own research at Songo Mnara. Thanks, Jeffrey!

A final, summarizing reflection: Monica Smith urges me to read James Deetz’s book *In small things forgotten*, which for many years has been a great inspiration even in my research. In Lisa Falk’s edited volume *Historical*

*archaeology in global perspective* (1991), James Deetz writes an introduction in which he makes a statement of the utmost relevance to the discussion of SPT's practical feasibility: 'Historical archaeology deals with the unintended, the subconscious, the worldview, and mind-set of an individual. It provides access to the ways all people, not just a small group of literate people, organize their physical lives' (cited in Little 2007, 60). If this is so, then SPT has in the future the possibility to lead open-minded archaeologists by Eco's six, or even more, paths into a landscape of hitherto unknown past social practices, and the traditional discussion of the urbanization process will never be the same.

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