

# Urbanism and the Middle Class Co-Emergent Phenomena in the World's First Cities

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Beginning six thousand years ago, intermediate categories of socioeconomic status formed for the first time in cities as entrepreneurial individuals and households engaged in scaled-up manufacturing activities and in new types of “white collar” work, such as accounting, writing, and middle management. Knowledge workers were indispensable not only for the production and trade activities that characterized ancient cities, but also for the growth and management of religious institutions and the development of political authority. Archaeological and textual data provide evidence for a middle producer-consumer stratum in both tangible possessions (real estate, dwellings, material goods) and intangible investments (schooling, language, and mannerisms). Using information from Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, Rome, and Mesoamerica, the article assesses how strategies of resource management and risk-taking utilized by the middle class also resulted in generative political relationships to address middle-class anxieties through the development of law codes, insurance, and formal systems of professional advancement.

**Key words:** archaeology, urbanism, middle class, production, consumption

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The analysis of ancient socioeconomic status generally has focused on two distinct and mutually opposed groups: elites, who had wealth and political power, and a proportionately larger number of undifferentiated non-elites, who engaged in physical labor and had little wealth accumulation. In this article, archaeological finds and historical texts are used to demonstrate that the advent of cities brought into existence, for the first time in human history, a distinct intermediate producer-consumer group of entrepreneurs and managers which can be identified and analyzed as a middle class. Cities provided new forms of economic and social integration marked by increased production and a demand for skilled managerial labor in which educated individuals handled new information technologies, such as writing and other forms of record-keeping. Skilled entrepreneurs and master craftsmakers also were responsible for the growth of production and distribution technologies in ancient cities, as well as for the intensification

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of urban-hinterland relationships that supplied food, raw materials, finished products, and labor for growing urban areas.

Archaeologists have utilized the label “middle class” to suggest the presence of an intermediate stratum in ancient complex societies, particularly in Mesoamerica (e.g., A. Chase 1992; D. Chase 1992; Chase and Chase 2017; Hicks 1999; Hill 1952; Lohse and Valdez 2004:5) and in the Roman world (Hill 1952; Mayer 2012). Although the full implications for the middle class as a generative social category in the ancient world have been slow to be theorized, recent cross-cultural comparative work on ancient cities has specifically emphasized the potential for social and economic mobility marked by differential urban consumption (Sinopoli et al. 2015; M. E. Smith et al. 2016). The recognition and analysis of the intermediate stratum as a middle class provides an agentive, integrative, and dynamic perspective on the workings of ancient urbanism, in which opportunities for wealth accumulation were integrated with new opportunities for consumption and social display. The middle class also was essential in the subsequent development of states, which similarly relied on an intermediate stratum of managers and other administrative personnel in a much larger landscape (Figure 1).

Cities were critical focal points for the management of goods and services that formed the basis of complex political economies and the institutions controlling them (see Morehart and De Lucia 2015). Urban institutions such as palaces and temples outlasted any individual’s lifetime (Flannery 1972; Fried 1967; Spencer 2009; M. L. Smith 2015), but elites at the helms of those institutions were inherently dependent on others to elicit, assemble, record, track, protect, and transfer the surpluses that resulted from the exercise of political and ritual power. Population centers often thrived as a result of the inclusion of high-risk areas of agriculture and resource extraction that compelled

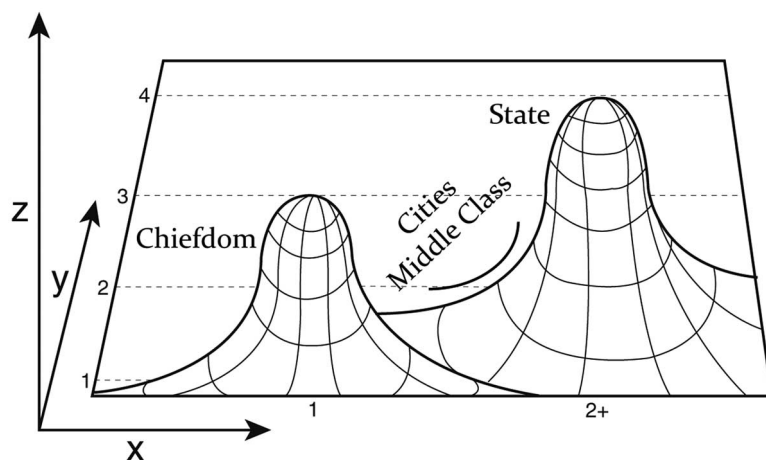


Figure 1. The middle class as a professional managerial group constitutes the key institutional element in the shift from chiefdoms to states (adapted from Spencer 2009:139).

the development of knowledge-intensive management strategies (see Wilkinson et al. 2014 for northern Mesopotamia and Park 1992 for the Nile Valley). Ancient cities' institutions were directed toward day-to-day organizational actions but also resulted in distinct risk-mitigation strategies through diversification that depended on managers' capacities to constantly absorb new information and calibrate responses across multiple future time-scales.

The effect of the intermediate stratum was not limited to an ancillary or incidental role in institutional growth, but formed an entirely new category in human communities. The chiefly societies that constituted the most complex form of sociopolitical organization prior to urbanism had some workers with specialized knowledge (such as shamans and labor managers for the construction of monumental architecture), but any delegation of authority was risky and generally avoided (Spencer 2009:136). Because urban economic and social activities involve larger numbers of people and larger areas of habitation, with repetitive tasks often carried out at a distance, delegation was essential. Through delegation, managers engage in three types of activities essential for the success of institutions: they collect and relay information; they keep track of decisions; and they manage daily activities carried out by subordinates, such as manual laborers (Hales 1986; Smith 2010). The supervision of laborers also encompasses an essential socializing role given that managers are the ones to face the repercussions of workers' noncompliance (whether through outright abandonment of work, sabotage, or the types of slowdowns and subterfuge described by Scott 1998). Elites also depended on the intermediate managerial stratum to buffer tensions between the wealthiest and the poorest factions of society (Hicks 1999; López-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez 2014).

Anthropologists studying contemporary life have emphasized that "middle-classness" as a distinct producer-consumer phenomenon is widespread and not limited to modern neoliberal economies (Heiman et al. 2012a). As Mark Liechty (2012:271) has proposed, middle-classness emerges out of a variety of "conditions of possibility" that include "new and shifting modes and relations of production, circulation, and consumption" (2012:278) in which middle-class individuals are "simultaneously sellers of labor and owners of capital (skills, education, achievements)" (2012:279) characterized by "credentialed, salaried, 'professional' employment" (2012:279). Characterized in this manner, the emergence of a middle stratum of producer-consumer is recognizable even in communist regimes (e.g., Russia in the twentieth century; see Gerber and Hout 1995:623) and under socialist parameters (Fehérváry 2012). The extremely rapid rise of the middle class in modern China (Zhang 2012) and India (Dickey 2012, 2013; Srivastava 2012) illustrates that an intermediate producer-consumer stratum can emerge under a variety of political conditions.

The development of a middle class has profound implications for household and community structure, in which the positionality of a professional class of knowledge workers is intertwined with and simultaneously augments the new production and consumption opportunities created in urban environments. Nascent middle-class groups

support the diversification of urban economies through the consumption of style-driven material culture and aspirational displays of wealth (Chikweche and Fletcher 2014; Krishnan 2016; cf. Silverstein and Fiske 2005 for the concept of “trading up”). Drawn into cities by the economic opportunities available in them, individuals and households within an emergent intermediate producer-consumer stratum also negotiate transitions between “traditional” village life and the new social realm of urban circumstances (Jeffery et al. 2011). These transitions are fraught with anxieties as individuals and households continually negotiate their positionality through decision-making about the selection and display of material objects at home and in the workplace as well as through the acquisition of customs, manners, and education.

#### THE MIDDLE CLASS AS A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PHENOMENON

Anthropological discussions of class structures are interwoven with the foundational texts of our discipline, in which scholars recognized that the growth of human populations after the Neolithic was a process accompanied by the emergence and display of sociopolitical and socioeconomic differentiations. In 1922, Max Weber (1968) noted the essential dependence of ruling families on a hierarchy of subordinates that included household officials, vassals, and administrative staff. V. Gordon Childe (1950) focused on the development of craft specializations that enabled, or sometimes compelled, producers to engage with a diverse array of consumers. Karl Marx examined the importance of class distinctions but primarily discussed only the two diametrically opposed classes of owners and workers and labeled the middle class “unproductive” labor (Heiman et al. 2012b:10). Sherry Ortner (1998:2) has focused on this lacuna, noting that “[a] good deal of the post-Marx debate has concerned what to do with the middle class, who are . . . the most dynamic part of the structure of capitalism.” This dynamism results from the producer-consumer positionality of the intermediate stratum, which is defined based on amounts of wealth and privilege as they are distributed over both space and time. As Heiman et al. (2012b) emphasized, the middle class is often in a condition of flux, such that each generation’s middle-classness consists of different strategies, aspirations, and material expressions than those of previous and succeeding generations (see also Gunn 2005; Hicks 1999; Mayer 2012).

Most recently, the definition and study of middle-classness has focused on consumption as a rubric of measurement, an assessment strategy that emphasizes the *performance* of class and diverges markedly from the prior Marxist-influenced focus on production capacities (Krishnan 2016:185; see also Chikweche and Fletcher 2014; Greene 2008; Mayer 2012). The criterion of “consumption” (of both tangible goods and intangibles, such as education and leisure pursuits) as a definitional rubric provides both a qualitative basis for assessment and the capacity to generate quantitative statistics to evaluate the growth, decline, and change of the intermediate producer-consumer stratum over time (e.g., Fehérváry 2012; López-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez 2014; Kharas 2010; Mercer 2014). A focus on the consumptive and performative aspect of

middle-class positionality is particularly useful for archaeological work, given that much of the premodern era is known on the basis of the quantity, quality, spatial location, and variety of artifacts and architecture in ancient sites (Figures 2 and 3). Qualitative and quantitative assessments of consumer goods and other forms of materiality, such as dwellings, enable archaeologists to ascertain the dynamic churn of class display in which indi-

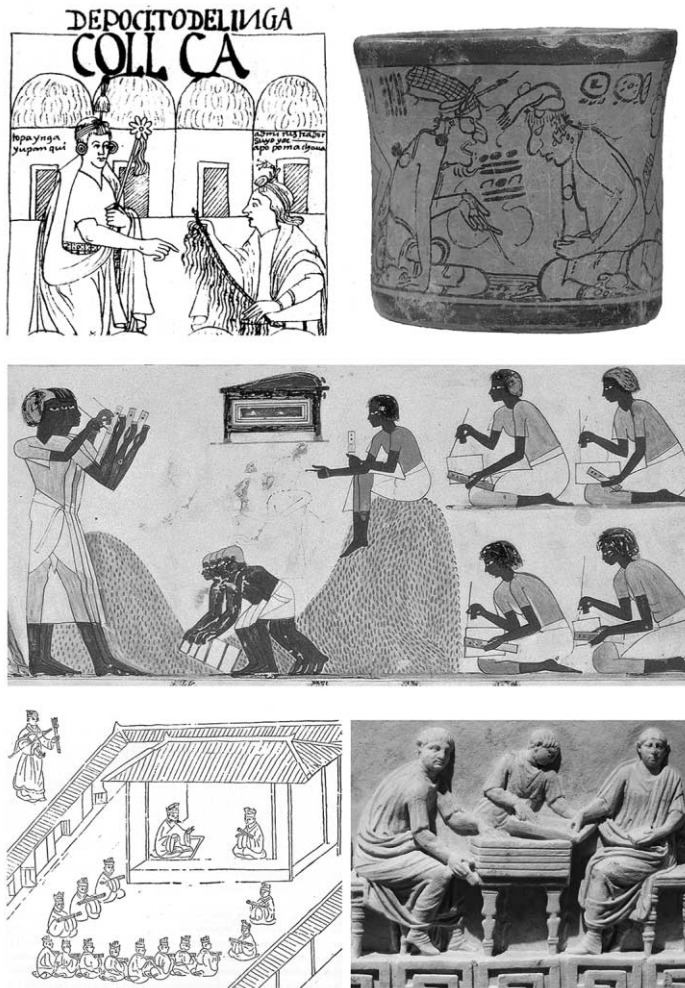


Figure 2. Displays of middle-management performance, clockwise from top right: Andean quipu in the writings of Guaman Poma; Maya scribal instruction; Egyptian scribe at crop harvest; Roman government secretaries; Chinese Eastern Han submission of accounts. (Clockwise from top right: courtesy INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock photo; Wikimedia Commons/Kimbell Art Museum; Getty Images; Classic Image/Alamy Stock Photo; after Wang 2014, citing Ren Rixin 1981, fig. 9)

viduals, households, and entire groups mobilize themselves into and out of the middle class.

As drawn from Dickey (2012:574), Harriss (2006:447–48), Hicks (1999:411–13), Liechty (2012), and Ortner (1998), urban class structure in this article is defined through the following parameters:

The *upper class* refers to the wealthiest stratum of society, whose members often are in apex positions of political power. Their dominance may be expressed in the control of a large number of “attached” specialists (cf. Costin 1991) for the production of goods (such as ornaments and weaponry) whose distribution is restricted to other elites. Members of the upper class have sufficient wherewithal to engage in a wide array of consumption practices in both fixed-place items (such as architecture) and portable goods. Because of their wealth they also can withstand long-term and significant economic shocks and can engage in investments in which returns are expected over the long term.



Figure 3. Displays of middle-class consumption: Chariot race in the Circus Maximus, Rome (top); China Eastern Han tomb banquet scene (bottom). (Courtesy Getty Images [top]; ART collection/Alamy Stock Photo [bottom])

The *lower class* refers to the economically least-well-off stratum, marked by little wealth accumulation and often living a hand-to-mouth existence. Subsistence often is generated through daily wage income achieved through physical labor and transformed into goods and food either through a market mechanism or through direct provisioning by workplaces or charitable organizations. The lowest economic classes have minimal capacity for architectural aggrandizement and relatively few possessions, which (on the plus side) enables them to be relatively mobile. When faced with diminished opportunities in one location, they may seek labor opportunities elsewhere.

The *middle class* is contrasted to the two ends of the economic spectrum by the scale of its members' capacity to acquire, accumulate, and have control over real property, portable goods, and information. Middle-class households have an occupational focus on professional employment, whether as specialized master craftsmakers, knowledge workers, or middle managers, and invest resources in the formal and informal education of children to also engage in those forms of employment. This focus on "white collar" work provides both the economic wherewithal and the social milieu for the acquisition, display, and protection of the modest assets that can be garnered by middle-class households. Individuals and households do not have unlimited capacities for consumption, however, resulting in anxieties that result from a continual process of display-related decision making.

#### THE MIDDLE CLASS AND URBANISM

Although rural locations can produce a range of wealth types, researchers have noted that urban trends and practices are an essential referent of middle-classness historically (Gunn 2005) and in the present day (Jeffery et al. 2011). Cities are precisely the places where new economic and social realities develop as a result of concentrated populations: cities enable the accumulation and display of material wealth and provide the opportunity for a greater range of employment types not directly tied to agriculture. In addition to the panoply of manufacturing, financial, and ritual institutions that require managerial expertise, cities also are the seats of civic and national governments that rely on the management of large amounts of information related to production (bills, receipts), exchange (contracts, insurance), and administration (genealogies, laws, adjudications).

The interdependence of the intermediate stratum and urban structures can be seen in the premodern period as well, providing the opportunity to address how middle-classness and urbanism were mutually constituted phenomena. The world's first urban centers are known from 6,000 years ago in Mesopotamia, with subsequent independent manifestations of urbanism known from all of the inhabited continents except Australia. Cities were the birthplace of writing and other forms of record-keeping, and the training needed for skills such as writing was also concentrated in cities, whether in formal institutions or informally through the presence of tutors and other freelance instructors. Education consisted of more than just the technical skills of writing and included the knowledge of specific and distinct mannerisms, modes of speech, and other

intangible markers of identity and social position that were encompassed in the scribal profession. The middle classes became the central participants in both the creation and validation of knowledge as writing was not only used to capture economic transactions but also served to render and transmit authoritative accounts of cultural practices of medicine, ritual, poetry, prose, and drama.

It was the advent of urban centers, rather than any particular form of economic system, that provided the “conditions of possibility” encompassed in the material record of production, consumption, and distribution. Ancient urban archaeological sites have evidence of a high per-capita consumption of durable goods in which the promulgation of new technologies and new styles drove a fast-fashion culture of accelerated goods replacement (M. L. Smith 2012). In cities, individuals and households engage in enhanced production capacities, as noted long ago by V. Gordon Childe (1950:8). He viewed cities as places where a concentrated population could support artisans who might fill important niches but whose output was absorbed only slowly by rural populations, such as metalsmiths who would have to rely on a strategy of itinerant manufacture since no village would have enough demand to support them year-round. For those entrepreneurial individuals, “one result of the Urban Revolution will be to rescue such specialists from nomadism and to guarantee them security in a new social organization” (Childe 1950:8). Archaeological evidence shows that loci of residence often were also loci of production and wealth distribution, a configuration that ranged from independent workshops to those “sponsored” by others (Sullivan 2007; see also Costin 1991).

In addition to being places of accelerated production, cities also are locations of diversified consumption in which there are ample opportunities for individuals and households to expend their wherewithal and display their status (e.g., Chikweche and Fletcher 2014; Mercer 2014; Scheld 2007). The knowledge of prevailing styles can be exhibited through the acquisition of display objects but also can be demonstrated merely by talking about what is fashionable, thus providing a low-cost opportunity for engagement with urban status markers and to identify upgrades in categories of goods (cf. Silverstein and Fiske 2005). Investigations in ancient cities show households occupying a middle range of sizes and amenities in between the most elaborate elite residences and the smaller dwellings of the poor (e.g., Carmean 1991; Mayer 2012). Within those households is a greater range of portable material culture that was tangible, transferable, and heritable. The archaeological evidence of intermediate categories of wealth also includes intermediate-sized tombs and burial assemblages (e.g., Richards 2010; Storey 1992) as well as variable labor investments and raw material types among consumer goods suggestive of differential value (e.g., Bray 2012; Greene 2008; Powers 1986). Texts and artifacts such as insignia and badges of office also indicate that managers, knowledge workers, and master craftsmakers received greater compensation (e.g., Englund 1991; Li 2013).

Ancient textual sources illustrate the deliberate negotiations and reflexive awareness of middle-class life (Mayer 2012). An exquisite example is found in the Egyptian



document known as the Eleventh Dynasty *Satire of the Trades* (c. 2134–2040 BC). This didactic treatise disdainfully describes various forms of manual labor prior to the exhortation, “If, though, you know how to write that is better life for you than these professions. . . . A day in the school chamber is more useful for you than an eternity of its toil in the mountains” (Williams 1972: §22). The phrasing suggests that at least some sectors of society could choose their professions, among which scribal work was deemed highly desirable. These individuals would still occupy an intermediate social position, however, as the text also indicates how the scribe should act in the presence of higher-status individuals such as lords and court officials. The *Satire of the Trades* was used as a textbook for more than a thousand years and prompted additional permutations over time, such as the Nineteenth Dynasty (1295–1186 BC) version that exhorts: “Be a scribe, that your limbs may be smooth and your hands languid, that you may go out dressed in white” (Williams 1972:218).

### THE ANCIENT MIDDLE CLASS

Archaeological and textual evidence from early complex societies provides the opportunity to evaluate the development and impact of a middle class positioned between nobles and physical laborers. As in the modern world, the middle stratum in antiquity is marked by a suite of characteristics that often includes property ownership (with its ancillary components of resource accumulation, control over spatial organization, legal title to land, and capacity to designate inheritors); investment in the identity-making and social-display processes of domestic spaces; evidence for control over others’ time and energy (indicated by the relative size and energy investment in residential architecture as well as evidence for small-scale commerce or manufacturing with larger-than-household-size staff, such as workshops); consumption patterns beyond basic subsistence goods; and investment in children through education. Despite the disparities of data sets (which consist primarily of archaeological and ethnohistoric data in the New World, and archaeological and textual data in the Old World), the emergence of an intermediate stratum can be identified through case studies from Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, the Roman Mediterranean, and Mesoamerica.

#### *Mesopotamia*

As the location of the first archaeologically known cities, Mesopotamia provides one of the most robust global cases of urbanism and political economy. Examinations of rural-hinterland activities traceable through material culture show relationships among initial urbanism, resource management, and human-environmental dynamics (e.g., Adams 2012; Ur 2012). Beginning in the fourth millennium BC, Mesopotamian cities were places of complex economic and ritual networks that were eventually bolstered by the development of record-keeping tokens, followed by writing (Englund 2004). Archaeological investigations of Mesopotamian cities illustrate a variety of regional and long-distance trade networks that supplied copious quantities of food (grain and animals) as well as pottery, stone, and ornaments to urban dwellers.

In Mesopotamia, the first cities in the fourth millennium are marked by city administrations and the presence of municipal leaders (Yoffee 2016:1056), for which sophisticated longitudinal studies enable us to assess the agency of middle managers. For example, Wilkinson et al. (2014) query a vast multiproject database to address the formation and resilience of the first cities in northern Mesopotamia in the fourth and third millennia BC and conclude that urban systems were more long-lived than contemporaneous cities in the Levant because the former had a larger “zone of uncertainty” that could be exploited in good years for food production and in bad years for sheep-raising for textile production. By focusing on risk as an essential component of urbanism, Wilkinson and colleagues highlight urban residents’ capacity to affect the configuration of surrounding regional economies through the nodal function of urban markets, implying that some amount of risk is essential for the growth and maintenance of urbanism. Cities were the physical locus of the institutions that managed rural productive variance; some of the urban institutions were political and encompassed elites who had the power to control or initiate conflict, while other institutions were centralized along religious lines (such as temples) or economic principles (such as elite households and markets).

Two powerful observations emerge from the perspective offered by Wilkinson et al. (2014) on risk-taking as a component of urbanism: first, that an increased deliberate engagement with risk may be an essential component of urban formation, and second, that institutions are more important than hierarchy for the development of social complexity. Institutions would have required middle managers to know and respond to on-the-ground conditions in different places and would also have required those individuals to interact and share knowledge because no single person would have had complete information about all potential areas of investment. The tens of thousands of administrative texts recovered from urban sites demonstrates the massive quantities of information being collected and assessed by managers; by the early second millennium BC, personal and household archives were also being kept by independent merchants (Ur 2012:544–48).

As the primary risk-managing entity for institutions, members of the middle class would have gained information for their own investments and social displays utilizing the same skill sets, social networks, and entrepreneurial capacities afforded by professional employment. Third-millennium Ur III texts, written at a time in which urban centers were flourishing, reveal a distinction between managers and “working classes” in both compensation and status (Englund 1991:258). Multiple socioeconomic classes also are revealed in documents such as the early-second-millennium Law Code of Hammurabi, which ascribes different legal prescriptions according to the social standing of the petitioner; for example, a man seeking to divorce his wife was to give her a mana of silver unless he was a workman, in which case he would give her one-third that amount (Viel 2012:537). Similarly, punishments were graded according to the status of the aggrieved, such that “If a man has knocked out the tooth of a man who is his colleague, they shall knock out his tooth. . . . If he has knocked out the tooth of a working man, he shall pay a third of a mana of silver” (Viel 2012:635).

*Egypt*

Egypt has some of the best evidence for an intermediate category of economic and social status given the extraordinary preservation of papyrus documents and material goods. Traditional interpretations of Pharaonic Egypt emphasized the command economy and state monopolies evidenced in official papyri; more theory-driven scholarship, however, has highlighted the presence of a middle category of individuals who developed in tandem with urban settlements and with the state. Shortly after the unification of Egypt, textual sources illustrate the presence of a wide variety of specialized bureaucrats, including architects and overseers who engaged in the essential tasks of labor management, raw material sourcing, and construction. By the Sixth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom period (2325–2175 BC), tomb inscriptions record lengthy “career biographies” of individuals who moved up in ranks over time in their service to the pharaoh; one such biography is that of Weni, who started as a custodian of the storehouse as a youth and progressed through various offices that presumably involved greater responsibilities and rewards: inspector of tenants of the palace, overseer of the robing room, companion and inspector of priests, and eventually chamberlain of the palace and governor of Upper Egypt (Richards 2010:68–69).

By the Middle Kingdom (2030–1640 BC), numerous texts describe individuals who are neither elite officials nor ordinary laborers: they own and inherit property, contribute to temples, possess or have control over the labor of slaves and hired workers, and are wealthy enough to have mortuary monuments and acquire objects of gold and semiprecious stone. Stephen Quirke (1991:145) notes that the temple registers of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom settlement and pyramid complex of Senusret II records grain deliveries to the temple by “townsmen” who are distinct from priests and clerical staff, indicating individuals with sufficient means to make donations. Individuals with resources also could avoid labor tithes by hiring a substitute worker, a “practice [that] must have sharpened consciousness of the division between clerical and manual labor” (Quirke 1991:145).

Egyptian middle-class individuals acquired their wherewithal and social standing through trade and through specialized professions such as writing taught in formal schools attested as early as the Tenth Dynasty (beginning c. 2106 BC). As seen in the *Satire of the Trades* cited above, writing as a skill set engendered an entire series of changes beyond a technical skill to include mannerisms and even the ability to go out “dressed in white” as a visible social signal that carried beyond the workplace into the public realm (cf. Krishnan 2016). The presence of a middle class in Egypt had implications not only for economic activities but also for political configurations. Karl Butzer (2012) has discussed the multiplicity of actions that accompanied the collapse of the Old Kingdom and the reorganization of the state in the Middle Kingdom. He notes the factors of renewed stability, which included a return to a centralized autocracy, the demilitarization of the provinces, and the “reemergence of a middle class” that was part of the larger bureaucracy of the renewed political apparatus (Butzer 2012:3634; see also Williams 1972:216).

*China*

The development of cities in China beginning in the Bronze Age (second millennium BC) was accompanied by the development of administrative configurations to address the challenges and opportunities of concentrated population centers that were often spectacularly large (Jing et al. 2013; Li 2013). The Bronze Age cities of Erligang and Xintian were more than 20 and 60 square km, respectively; Linzi was perhaps “the most populated city in the world during the fourth and early third centuries BC” with a city wall that encircled 20 square km of settlement (von Falkenhausen 2008:225). At these and other cities, texts and evidence for social stratification in the varying sizes and embellishments of tombs indicate large numbers of middle managers who engaged in bureaucracy, warfare, the construction of palaces and tombs, divination, sophisticated craftmaking, and elaborate ritual practices. Diverse consumer goods, including a wide variety of traded wares within cities (e.g., Jing et al. 2013), signal the presence of cultural interlocutors, traders, and distribution specialists who would have been engaged in identifying desired goods and securing their acquisition (or managing local imitative manufacture) for urban consumers.

Educational institutions were an important part of the social and political landscape as early as the Zhou period (11th–8th centuries BC), with its two-tier educational system consisting of “state schools” for noble families and “country learning” for non-elites (Peng 1991, cited in Lu 1998:60). The Zhou period also saw the beginnings of a highly bureaucratized administrative system that engaged a large number of scribes and property managers, some of whom had no prior documented family history of such appointments and appeared to have been promoted to those roles on the basis of “personal qualification” (Li 2013:149). The defeat of the Zhou dynasty in 770 BC, far from reducing the ranks of the intermediate stratum, resulted in their augmentation. Xing Lu (1998:62) describes this era as one in which “private ownership of land replaced feudal fiefdom, commercial activities increased, and more cities emerged.” The legal system, previously focused exclusively on lineages, was augmented to include codes that reflected the autonomy of vastly larger numbers of people in urban settlements (Li 2013:175). The intensification of formal educational systems, such as the one espoused by the teacher-philosopher Confucius, further bolstered the ranks of educated officials who dealt with astronomy and divination as well as practical matters such as military knowledge and agriculture (Lu 1998:64). Their highly visible middle-manager roles included mediation of rituals and the articulation of war strategies and moral doctrines in which administrative professionals had “the hope of advancing up the social ladder” (Lu 1998:61; see also Li 2013).

In the Qin dynasty, starting in the fourth century BC, the growth of urban-based bureaucracy supported massive projects of physical and ideological consolidation promulgated under China’s first unifying “empire.” The imperial system was manifested through extensive and detailed written records that conveyed both idealized political relationships and evidence of actual transactions in tax rolls, tallies, passports, and lawsuits. Middle managers were implicated in such projects as the construction of roads, fortifications, and tombs (including the famous terracotta warriors in the tomb of the

ruler Qin Shihuang); the rewriting of history; the monitoring of agricultural crops and taxation; the imposition of new calendrical forms and standardized monetary systems; and the management of armies in which individuals could move up in rank through their actions and initiative (Yates 2001). Rank-holders had specific responsibilities and rewards; for example, officers were compensated on the basis of their subordinates' successes in taking heads, rank-holders were entitled to plots of land with access to government slaves to work that land, and commoners who had achieved rank status could expect lighter terms of punishment than other commoners (Yates 2001:360).

In the Han period (206 BC–220 AD), the growth of the civil service was bolstered by the creation of the imperial university, located in the capital, which produced more than 10,000 graduates per year for official service and imparted cultural knowledge through its very architecture: classical poetic and philosophical texts were inscribed on stone slabs in front of the lecture hall (Li 2013:287, 312). The concept of the intermediate stratum as a middle class not only is indicated by the differential visibility of those who engaged in professional credentialed employment achieved through education but also can be measured in the documented rewards of career advancement, social entitlements, and differential pay scales. Dynastic histories indicate that there were 30,000 officials in the imperial capital, and another 100,000 officials throughout the empire as a whole, with graduated pay scales in both cash and grain (Li 2013:284–85). Differential consumption was marked by a dramatic increase in the volume and variety of consumer goods utilized in daily life and in tombs by “an upwardly mobile population anxious to appropriate to itself the ornaments of material success” (Powers 1986:288). By the second century BC, Confucian principles underwrote a legal system that protected those assets, with different regulations and treatments for educated people and for commoners (Eberhard 2004:88).

### *The Roman Mediterranean*

In the Roman world, texts and archaeological remains enable us to identify a range of social statuses encoded into material objects, housing configurations, and recreational activities. By the middle of the second century BC, a growing number of individuals have been characterized as the “middle classes” between the high-ranking senatorial group and the masses (Hill 1952; Mayer 2012). These individuals focused on commerce and finance, taking advantage of the increased opportunities for maritime trade after the first overseas wars with Carthage in the middle of the third century BC. Middle-class entrepreneurs competed for public contracts such as provisioning the army, tax-farming, and building roads and bridges; they also developed “companies” with partners and shareholders. They formed professional associations that became social centers with “clubhouses” (*scholae*) found in urban centers (Mayer 2012:85). Education was a way of providing knowledge transfer for commercial activities but also encompassed moral virtues and cultural expectations.

Emanuel Mayer (2012:1) has argued that the intermediate producer-consumer stratum not only was an essential component of the functioning of the Roman state but also underwrote the entire realm of what we know as “Roman culture” in the form

of abundant consumption: “Without a thriving class of artisans, merchants, and professionals, Roman urban life as we know it would not have come into existence. . . . it is thanks to these middle classes that we are left with the thousands of marble sarcophagi and hundreds of elegantly decorated houses” that characterize Roman cities. Nor was the impact of the middle class limited to the domestic realm; as Lechtman and Hobbs (1986:81) argue, the Roman public architectural design program of theaters, baths, and fora constituted a “completely urban event, the dramatic and visible realization of a new concept of the city rendered by an imperial vision but accomplished largely by an urban middle class.” The impact of the middle class on the built environment was manifested not only on the Italian peninsula but throughout the Mediterranean realm of the Roman Empire, where households displayed their modest wealth through domestic furnishings, the endowment of clubhouses and monuments, and the public display of manners and customs materialized in a very active culture of leisure, sports, and the performance of life-cycle rituals with standardized grave goods.

The development of a consumer culture was far from static, however, and a constant churn of new goods, materials, and styles was made possible by the growth of Mediterranean shipping and a network of state-sponsored roads. Roman archaeological sites reveal an incredible diversity of daily-use objects, including pottery, ornaments, and foods, whose popularity changed over time (Greene 2008), as well as rapid changes in ephemeral social displays such as clothing and hairstyles as ascertained through texts and statuary (Bartman 2001). Yet consumption was tinged with a certain level of anxiety as well, manifested in the writings of popular authors who scolded people for their purchase of expensive foreign baubles, extolled the virtues of simple country life, or simply provided comic relief that belied an underlying tension about consumption. The Roman *Satyricon* of the first century AD is a discourse about an elaborate dinner party by the social-climbing Trimalchio, in which laughable excesses would, for the audience, have tapped into some of the uneasiness about how to choose among different types of objects (Arrowsmith 1959). Roman-era graffiti show the trade-offs and choice-making involved in even the simplest of purchases, as seen in the advertisement from Pompeii that informed passersby that “You can get a drink here for only one aes. You can drink better wine for two aeres. You can drink premium Falernian wine for four aeres” (Harvey 2016:284).

### *Mesoamerica*

Ancient New World cultures are at first glance more difficult to evaluate because we lack textual evidence on economic transactions and social relationships. Interestingly, however, Mesoamerica with its lack of texts is the place where the concept of the middle class in the archaeological record has been most consistently raised. Scholars of the ancient Maya cultural zone, which contains a significant number of cities, long ago utilized the evidence for craft specialization found in urban areas as an indicator of numerous classes by the mid-first millennium AD (summarized in Becker 1973,

citing, e.g., Kidder 1950:4–8). Large, permanent marketplaces in the urban core have been found at Maya sites, with particularly well-documented examples at Caracol (Chase et al. 2015), Chunchucmil (Dahlin et al. 2007), Sayil (Tourtellot et al. 1992), and Tikal (Jones 2015:70). The resultant archaeological data, combined with ethnohistoric evidence, support a model of robust exchange in obsidian, marine shell, chert, salt, cotton, cacao, and forest products such as wood and honey in which regional market exchange provided entrepreneurs with the potential for upward social mobility and displays of material affluence (Masson and Lope 2004:212–14) and provided consumers “a wide variety of goods that were available to the general populace” (Chase et al. 2015:248). The excavated rock alignments in the marketplace of Chunchucmil are interpreted as an intermediate level of architectural investment that was greater than what might be sustained by itinerant peddlers but less elaborate than the facilities that one would have expected from high-end merchants of luxury goods (Dahlin et al. 2007:380), suggesting that marketplace structures themselves revealed varying levels of status in the production and distribution of goods.

Ancient Maya cities also reveal a range of consumption parameters in architecture, material goods, burial practices, and spatial organization that indicate the presence of a discernable middle-stratum group of producer-consumer individuals and households. Educated professionals’ skill sets enabled them to translate knowledge among political, economic, and ritual domains, such that “(s)cribes, sages and calendrical specialists had the skills essential to tabulating large numbers involved in all types of calculations, including transfers of goods” in an economic system that included both tribute and market oversight (Freidel et al. 2017). The term “middle class” was first explicitly used to describe an intermediate stratum among the Maya by A. Chase (1992) and D. Chase (1992), but for the most part the further theoretical consideration of the role of this middle stratum has not been extensively explored in the scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup> The Maya region was characterized by a network of cities rather than a unifying state, in which the link between urbanism and the development of a middle stratum is seen within “primate centers” such as the ancient city of Caracol, where the excavators suggest that the middle stratum would have comprised the bureaucracy for the management of elaborate agricultural terraces (A. Chase 1992:41–42). These individuals also supervised and controlled the energy expenditure of others: the ethnohistoric evidence suggests that the “middle stratum” of individuals could own slaves (D. Chase 1992:121).

As in the case of Egypt and Rome, the Maya middle classes were not merely an incidental effect of urbanism but were an active and constituent part of urban formations in which dynamic changes occurred over time in the relative size and impact of the intermediate stratum. The Early Classic period appears to have exhibited fairly stark differences between elites and commoners; the subsequent Classic and Postclassic eras provide evidence for a more subtle gradation of wealth indicative of broader participation in consumption activities such as burials, architecture, and portable goods (A. Chase 1992:43–44; see also Carmean 1991; D. Chase 1992; Masson and Lope

2004); Arlen Chase further suggested that the intermediate stratum might have acted as a buffer to elite-commoner dichotomies sometimes blamed as a source of the so-called Maya collapse, necessitating a more nuanced assessment of the terminus of major urban occupations.

Evidence from the later period of the Aztecs, whose capital and realm were conquered by the Spanish in AD 1519, also provide clear signs of a dynamic intermediate social stratum. Alfonso Caso utilized colonial textual sources to proclaim that in the pre-contact Aztec realm “(n)ot only plebeians and nobles existed, but also a well-developed middle class” (1963:865). In addition to the specialized merchant guild of the *pochteca*, archaeological evidence and early textual records indicate the presence of household-based local producer-vendors (Nichols 2013:53) with specialized knowledge of raw materials and manufacturing techniques (M. E. Smith 2003). The middle class also included minor officials, ritual and ideological specialists, and “enforcers and military personnel” (Hicks 1999:413). Middle-class specialists were compensated in a variety of ways, including tangible gifts and insignia as well as intangible allocations such as proximity to the seats of power, exemption from the most odious forms of labor tribute, dispensations to consume items (e.g., types of clothing) that were otherwise restricted by sumptuary laws (Hicks 1999), and gifts of land (Caso 1963:868). Institutional protections for merchants included a legal system with a hierarchy of courts (Kurtz 1984), some of them located in marketplaces. The relationship between the upper class and the middle class was one of mutual dependency in which skilled managers buffered elites “from having to deal face-to-face with each of their subject households” (Hicks 1999:422) and, more significantly, “could be expected to support the upper class against the lower if that should become necessary” (1999:419).

#### ANXIETY, RISK, AND MIDDLE-CLASS LIFE

The archaeological and textual records of past urban societies indicate that cities and the middle classes emerged together in interdependent, mutually constituted economic and social configurations. However, the interpretive significance of middle-classness in ancient societies is not limited to the fact that an intermediate stratum existed, nor to the observation that the intermediate stratum fulfilled a distinct function within ancient cities through entrepreneurial activities and middle-manager institutional occupations. We can address middle-class generative effects through an assessment of risk in the form of both anxiety about agentive actions and concern for the impact of large-scale external events.

In the earliest cities and states, middle-class individuals and households experienced an enhanced understanding of risk not only because their managerial skills were utilized to implement emergent institutional strategies but because they also engaged with a materially mediated sense of risk at home. In their study of middle-class formation in the contemporary world, Chikweche and Fletcher (2014) note that almost as soon as the middle class emerges, they face new and distinct forms of uncertainty. Because middle-class households have limited disposable income, their members ex-



press anxiety related to the consumption of both tangible goods (e.g., Chikweche and Fletcher 2014; Iyengar 2010; Silverstein and Fiske 2005) and intangibles such as education (Katz 2012; Vincent and Ball 2007). Consumption activities of the kind that mark middle-class dynamics are both multivariate and longitudinal, in which expenditures result in “sunk costs” and constraints on future choice-making (e.g., Mercer 2014). After a course of action such as house or tomb construction, workshop expansion, or an educational trajectory has been decided upon, the continual opportunities for augmentation and change lead to a sense of uncertainty about the past, present, and future of any expenditure. Even the act of acquisition is fraught: Kevin Greene (2008:81) reminds us that personal security is potentially compromised in every excursion to the market, whether through theft or through exposure to disease.

Ancient texts reveal a long history of uncertainty about consumption practices. An ancient Egyptian papyrus from around the seventeenth century BC contains a “Recipe for Transforming an Old Man into a Youth” involving an elaborate preparation of fruit—a cosmetic treatment that is not about curing a disease, but improving one’s physical appearance (Breasted 1930:495). In Han period China, scholars and legalists debated among themselves about the moral implications of the explosion of artifact designs and architectural embellishments, and about the exotic raw materials used in their manufacture (Powers 1986) in ways that reflected an anxiety of choice-making and the social signals that such choices conveyed. The Roman state expansion throughout the Mediterranean facilitated the availability of increasingly diverse amounts of consumer goods. As signaled by the *Satyricon*, how were individuals to determine which items were stylish must-haves among the mass quantities of trade items circulating around the Mediterranean, and which expenditures would lead to the opposite effect of disdain and the subsequent loss of both money and prestige?

Social anxiety not only emanates from agentive acts of consumption but also is generated by external events, such as political turmoil, warfare, environmental degradation, cataclysmic natural events, and economic collapse. Ulrich Beck’s (1992) classic study on modern risk provides the theoretical apparatus to address the role of risk in complex societies more broadly by examining the social effects of uncertainties that are beyond individual and household control. Cities themselves seem to be inherently risky undertakings given their populations’ dependence on a surrounding hinterland, but cities are paradoxically resilient formations because of their abilities to pull in far-flung hinterlands in ways that compensate for area-specific shortfalls (Batty 2008; Smith 2015; Wilkinson et al. 2014). Cities’ economies of scale thus seem to be the key element in managing both landscape-scale risk and household risk, but this strategy is only made possible by the presence of an intermediate, middle-manager stratum whose record-keeping skills enable large-scale risks to be quantified in ways that make systematic responses possible.

Risks generated by external events are both conceptualized and borne differently by an intermediate stratum. Uppermost elite groups have large-scale accumulations that insulate them from most economic and political downturns; by contrast, the

lowest economic classes' dependence on manual labor enables them to be relatively mobile. The middle classes occupy an in-between position that accentuates the disadvantages of both ends of the spectrum: their physical resources are insufficient to buffer them from downturns but too numerous to abandon. Nor can middle-class households simply avoid all risk-taking, because they are constantly defined against both the upper and the lower classes in a fluid social and economic environment (e.g., Fussell 1983; Gunn 2005; Liechty 2012). Intermediate-status individuals and households thus were intimately familiar with aspirational risk management even in the first cities. As indicated above for Mesopotamia (where a high level of risk was related to basic food procurement) and China (where a high level of risk was related to political turnover), an attention to risk enables us to focus on the ways in which the existence of a middle class was a generative political and economic force in ancient cities.

Middle-class groups become essential components of urban and territorial governance not only because of their skills in the economic and environmental realm, but because they serve as an essential buffer to upper-class ambitions in the social realm. As Harriss (2006) has noted, tensions between classes can be most marked at the middle-to-lower-class boundary in matters of housing and the rights to livelihoods. By cultivating and rewarding a middle class, elites both elicit essential managerial support for institutional activities and outsource their direct control of laboring classes, resulting in reduced tensions between the very poor and the very rich. As essential knowledge workers, the middle classes are compensated not only through a higher relative quantity of wherewithal but also through the elite dispensation of insignia and badges of office. Such a strategy was made even more effective and visible when there were mechanisms by which laboring classes could aspire to upward mobility, such as the Chinese educational system that enabled those without family connections to become officials (Li 2013), the Inka practice of elevating commoners to *yanakuna* or overlord status (Kolata 2013:85–86), and the Roman conditions under which manumitted slaves achieved high office as imperial freedmen (Liu 2013).

Household risk was buffered by adherence to a promotion system and the possibility of increased rewards, and by participation in the same institutions that allowed civic entities and states to diversify and protect their resource base. These “institutions” included not only physical entities such as religious precincts but also contractual instruments such as insurance and the legal system. Insurance can take a variety of forms (including formal written contracts) that manage sums pooled by individual participants and reallocated to those who have suffered misfortune due to a covered incident. Insurance for material goods and tangible property may well have been an outgrowth of previously existing forms of collectivities against loss, such as burial societies that offset the costs associated with funerals. However, insurance differs from burial societies in significant ways. Insurance can be designated for a wide variety of activities and commodities, whereas burial societies targeted only one type of loss. Also, insurance pools for material goods and fixed-place property take into consideration that not all individuals and households will eventually reclaim their invest-

ments, resulting in a residual pool of resources that can in turn be invested in other pursuits—though again with risks, an illustration of the fundamental way in which risk is incorporated into the entrepreneurial enterprises of urbanism.

Through contracts, the act of record-keeping (often by a professional) provides a socially validated recognition of mutual obligations, often materialized in a tangible form. The first written contracts in Mesopotamia date to the twenty-seventh century BC (Slanski 2012), in which individually generated complaints resolved through judicial actions were usually related to goods and real estate. Factors such as inheritance had an impact on interrelated aspects of spatial organization and responsibilities for property; for example, houses, empty lots, and private alleys could be transmitted through inheritance, but streets could not (Keith 2003:63). The subsequent development of law codes extended the already well-established concept of contract enforcement, providing equal access to the rules for large numbers of people. In Mesopotamia, the numerous law codes began c. 2100 BC, of which the Code of Hammurabi (c. 1750 BC) is the most famous (Slanski 2012). It offers a contract-like prescription for the treatment of property by different categories of people: “A temple-woman, a merchant and a tenant with special duties may exchange their field, their orchard or their house for silver” (Viel 2012:444). In addition, the law codes themselves functioned as a generic contract with a function of insurance:

If a man gives silver to another man in a partnership arrangement they shall divide equally in the presence of the god any profit or loss which results (§77, Viel 2012:483).

If a man has given his boat to a boatman for hire and the boatman is careless and sinks the boat or loses it altogether, the boatman shall repay the owner of the boat with another boat (§236, Viel 2012:662).

The frequent reference to written receipts in the code suggests that they were a routine item, kept in private hands, and brought to the courts when settling disputes.

In the Near East, laws were instantiations of divine order, mediated by rulers “with the obligation to execute and maintain lasting just ways for their people” (Slanski 2012:98). But which people were implicated in this protection? Lower-class individuals had little to protect, while upper-class individuals, belonging to a small and often inter-related cohort, would not have needed abstract laws. But the appearance of a large number of people with property indicates the existence of a middle class with an interest in protecting their investments and the ability to bequeath them. Yoffee (2016:1056) has noted that much of the work of adjudication was undertaken at the local group level in Mesopotamia, indicating the extent to which royal legal proclamations were a validation of practices already in place and overseen by those who had the most to gain and lose in the subtleties of economic transfers. A telling integration of education and the legal tradition can be found in Mesopotamia as well: students would copy the text of

the Code of Hammurabi as part of their education. Exemplars are found throughout the Mesopotamian world in a manner that neatly intertwined the concept of law with the practice of learning that foreshadowed students' eventual careers as office-holders and magistrates (Slanski 2012:103–4).

### DISCUSSION

A focus on the intermediate producer-consumer stratum of ancient complex societies provides important, and testable, insights on how institutions and hierarchies actually functioned in the development of cities and states. Although there is much work to be done to identify the many different types of non-elites and the relationships sustained among different socioeconomic groups (cf. Lohse and Valdez 2004; Overholtzer and Robin 2015; M. E. Smith et al. 2016), the recognition of a dynamic intermediate stratum provides an agentive stance from which to analyze ancient cities and states in a comparative global perspective, in which cities functioned as the essential nodes for subsequent state growth (e.g., M. L. Smith 2003; see also Jennings and Earle 2016; Wengrow 2015). Apex leaders could not have carried out their political, economic, military, and ritual desiderata without a large support network of skilled, educated personnel. As Yoffee (2005, 2016:1058) suggests, urban governments needed to simplify and make “legible” the practices of organization that enabled governance to take place. The mechanisms of the process of “legibility” (what we might also call “transparency”) involved the creation and enforcement of pathways to promotion and reward, and the use of an intermediate stratum that provided essential support services to elites while buffering elites from masses of laborers.

The concept of middle-classness can serve as an invigorating rubric to analyze not only those societies for which there is increasingly robust evidence for market-based exchange, formal education, property ownership, aspirational consumption, and a legal structure that addresses risk. Given the essential economic and even ideological role of the intermediate social stratum in complex societies, the concept of a middle class also can be productively applied to societies that have been viewed as constituting stark juxtapositions of elites and laborers. The Andean region, though replete with large polities and urban centers within complex societies ranging from the Tiwanaku polity of the late first millennium AD to the Inca polity of the early second millennium AD, traditionally has been interpreted as having societies divided into commoners and nobles (Dillehay 2013; Kolata 2013:53). Yet the existence of an intermediate managerial stratum is strongly suggested by the presence of armies; the construction of roadways, granaries, fortifications, and other engineering endeavors; and the use of the *kipu* as a documentary device (for the latter, see Urton 2014). Evidence for trade across the economic zones of the Andes from the sea to the highlands and down to the jungles suggests that some individuals would have served in a managerial or dispatch capacity and kept tallies of values, worth, and equivalencies among different types of goods. Research in the region has increasingly emphasized the existence of multiple forms of economic interaction and governance along with merchant networks (Dillehay 2013)

and the existence of markets (Stanish and Coben 2013), signaling the potential for identifying and analyzing the effects of a functional middle class in the Andean realm.

In South Asia, there is ample evidence for the development of urbanism, merchant traditions, and writing beginning in the mid-first millennium BC, subsequently bolstered by the development of Buddhist monasteries as educational institutions that imparted secular subjects such as grammar and medicine as well as religious training (Singh 2008). The subcontinent's first decipherable writing, promulgated by the Mauryan ruler Ashoka in the third century BC, mentions a variety of officers, including the "city officer of judicial affairs" and the "dharma officers" entrusted with disseminating officially approved religious doctrines (Sugandhi 2003:237). Early political treatises such as the *Arthashastra* refer to a managerial class of accounts officers, ledger keepers, and "subordinate officers" (Rangarajan 1992:332–34), while poetic texts depict lively urban markets and entertainment. Investigations of Early Historic cities illustrate the presence of variable housing sizes and quality, and a diversity of artifact types such as ornaments and pottery in similar categories (Lal 1949; Mohanty and Smith 2008), indicative of variable quantities of income and status displayed in material goods. Similarly, along the Swahili coast of East Africa from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries AD, traders brought an extensive range of pottery, minerals, textiles, and beads whose use and display was not limited to the uppermost social ranks (Kusimba 1999: 130). Studies of the spatial configurations of Swahili trading towns indicate the presence of a range of sizes and embellishments of domestic spaces (e.g., Wynne-Jones 2007) that may be indicative of the dynamic and evolving positionality of intermediate socioeconomic groups.

### CONCLUSION

The development of an intermediate producer-consumer class was an integral part of the development of urbanism. Responding to the "conditions of possibility" in the expanding economies of the first cities, the middle classes served as the essential administrative stratum of political expansion and consolidation. As in the present day, the entrepreneurial wealth accumulated by the middle class enabled them to invest in production and engage in a greater variety of consumption, including aspirational purchases of goods and services. Their activities in the middle-manager stratum of administration, as well as the anxieties for preserving their limited amounts of wherewithal in the face of risk, also resulted in distinct sociopolitical institutions, such as law codes, corporations, and insurance, which contributed to the vibrancy of the urban realm and subsequently enabled the expansion of the state.

### NOTES

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1. For example, Carmean (1991) uses the terms "middle rank" and "middle sector" to describe the social configuration of domestic architecture of intermediate size, and Lohse and Valdez (2004:5) mention the ethnohistoric term referring to "medium men," but they do not engage in the obvious potential for the discussion of a "middle class." Instead, authors tend to reinforce the predominant interpretation of an elite/commoner divide by asking how we might therefore distinguish the difference "between high-status commoners and low-status elites" (Lohse and Valdez 2004:5). Other significant writings on Maya non-elites similarly focus heavily on "commoners" as the principal counterbalance to elites, a long continuity of the historical approach to a two-class system that dates to the early analysis of the Maya by J. Eric Thompson in the 1920s (A. Chase 1992:31).

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