

Ancient Cities as a Blueprint for the Future

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You might think that ancient and modern cities are very different: after all, we have electricity and the internal combustion engine, and they did not. Yet if you have been lucky enough to travel to Rome, Teotihuacan, or Xi'an, you have already experienced the many ways in which ancient cities were very much like ours. Archaeological and historical evidence illustrates that ancient cities were dense, crowded spaces graced by tall buildings, with community-sized religious structures, wide avenues and plazas, and a food network that went deep into the countryside. Ancient cities, just like ours, were populated by migrants, had different ethnic communities, and were places where people could find diverse forms of employment, education, and entertainment. In my recent book *Cities: The First 6,000 Years*, I explore these questions of ancient and modern urbanism, drawn by the many similarities of ancient and modern cities, and what that means for us as a species moving towards a future of increasingly large settlements.

Ancient and modern cities became large, long-lived settlements despite what might seem to be considerable disadvantages. There was noise and crowding and pollution, there were high prices, large amounts of trash, and close quarters that meant that diseases traveled faster (and were spread to more people)



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than in dispersed rural settlements. Most of the time, ancient urban dwellers were surrounded by strangers, just as you are today when you walk down a city street or drive on an urban highway surrounded by people that you will probably never see again. In fact, it is a wonder that the concept of urbanism was not a one-time experiment that people afterward found too risky to repeat.

But starting around 6,000 years ago, and despite their disadvantages, cities started to become the dominant type of population center. From the world of small villages that characterized most of the existence of our species, we have since become a world of urban settlements: today more than 50 percent of the world population lives in cities, and that proportion is growing. Nor is any city full: even the most densely crowded settlements on earth—such as Tokyo and Mexico City—are still growing, with edges of suburban habitation stretching out farther and farther into the surrounding hinterland.

How can we use archaeological insights to understand why cities became so counterintuitively popular? Cities were incubators for economic, social, and



Figure 1. Detail from a mosaic floor of the eighth-century church of Saint Stephen in Umm al-Rasas, Jordan, depicting the ancient city of Philadelphia (modern-day Amman). (Alamy BT7YGC)

political interactions that dispersed rural villages could not achieve, even if their inhabitants occasionally gathered together when visiting ritual sites or trade fairs. Seeking to make that festive and entrepreneurial atmosphere permanent, people eventually ceased returning home after pilgrimages and incrementally brought cities into existence. In those dense population centers, people invented many new systems, including writing and coinage. The whole concept of the middle class was new too, resulting in managers and accountants to keep track of all the new upswings in production and consumption, and teachers to guide the next generation of students preparing for professional careers that did not rely on agriculture or other physical labor.

In recent years, urban archaeological investigations have become much more extensive and intensive, enabling us to address questions about the scope and scale of ancient cities. In areas of tropical forest, researchers such as Diane Chase and Arlen Chase have led the way in using LIDAR surveys to peer through jungle vegetation, revealing Maya cities that were much larger than previously known and that had extensive suburbs connected by raised causeways. J. Andrew Dufton has examined how people in ancient Roman cities continually upgraded their residences in a process he calls gentrification. And Lee Mordechai and Jordan Pickett have examined how ancient civic leaders used unpredictable events such as earthquakes as an excuse to build new infrastructure and to engage in redevelopment that suited ever-changing urban needs.

Another thing we can see from the study of ancient cities is that they have always been networked with other cities into a larger phenomenon of eco-



nomic and social connectivity. In ancient Mesopotamia, there are several candidates for the “first city,” including Tell Brak and Uruk, but these sites, and many others, were in contact with other large settlements up and down the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. When we think of the cities of the Maya, Greeks, Romans, ancient Han Chinese, or any other group, we similarly recognize that many archaeological sites of urban size existed simultaneously.

The urban network effect augmented the pace and intensity of economic activities beyond a single settlement. Cities connected large regions of the ancient world through a type of early globalization through trade, with both ordinary goods and fancy items moving hundreds of kilometers, even in places where travel was wholly on foot, as it was in Mesoamerica and the Andes. For regions where sail power could be used, the scale of production and transport was truly impressive. In the Roman world, for example, pottery



Figure 2. The city of Rome. (Photograph by the author)

kilns turning out decorative tableware could produce 25,000 vessels in a single firing.

The social implications of urban networks also were considerable. Just as today, once a person took up residence in a city, she or he was much more likely to move to another city than back to the countryside. (Although we are prone to romanticizing rural life, for every person who actually moves to the country to

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take up farming, there are thousands of rural people making a beeline to the city.) In a village, everyone was known from birth; there was little chance to change identities. In a city, by contrast, there were many different groups to which a person could belong: a work group, a religious community, a group based on children or elders or hobbies, and even a group resulting from simply living in a particular neighborhood.

As we can see from textual sources, ancient people had an eye for the attractions and challenges that urban life posed. City managers in Mesopotamia, Japan, and ancient India created law codes that set out expectations for urban behavior. Poets everywhere extolled the dubious virtues of city life, in which petty crimes were interspersed with flaunted displays of wealth. Even the way we talk about our own cities resonates with the ancient love-hate perception of the metropolis: the tale of the country mouse and the city mouse associated with the sixth-century BCE author Aesop likely originated on the Indian subcontinent, making a long but densely connected trek halfway across Asia.

Working in India, I have seen the development of urbanism both through the lens of archaeology and as someone who has lived in villages and cities while doing field research. Our investigations, carried out as a joint UCLA-Deccan College partnership with co-director R.K. Mohanty, first focused on the 2,000-year-old city of Sisupalgarh in eastern India. Through surface surveys, geophysical survey, and excavations, we looked at the architecture and artifacts of ordinary domestic life to understand how the ancient city grew and developed. The ubiquity of some artifacts, including low-cost terracotta ornaments and shiny pottery vessels, suggested that people across the socioeconomic spectrum took up urban styles that made them look and act differently from those in rural places.

In recent years, we have expanded the scope of our project to the countryside around Sisupalgarh in an effort to understand human impacts on the ancient environment as they intensified food production and landscape management. We have also gone farther



Figure 3. The city of Teotihuacan. (Photograph by the author)

and farther out into the countryside and taken up residence in villages that are today undergoing a shift as the entire nation of India grows and urbanizes. In villages, we have seen local demographics skew to mostly the very old and the very young, as grandparents and grandchildren watch adults commute to the largest nearby city for work. Worldwide, choices about education and employment have a palpable effect on the entire region, as remittances buy property while also leaving farms short-handed.

The past and present of cities—eloquently told in the humblest sherds of pottery and the grandest monuments of downtown—give us a blueprint of the future. By understanding that the opportunities and constraints of the urban form have been with us from the very beginning, we can confidently say that we have little choice but to move forward in urban environments, because we can imagine no other form of settlement as the basis for surging populations. That is not all bad; after all, cities are places of efficiency and are visible locales for social justice, inclusion, and diversity, which has made them successful and resilient for the past 6,000 years.



Figure 4. *Cities: The First 6,000 Years* (2019) was published in the United States by Viking (Penguin Random House) and in the United Kingdom by Simon and Schuster.