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978-0-521-19008-4 - The Cambridge World History: Volume III: Early Cities in Comparative Perspective, 4000 Bce–1200 Ce

Edited by Norman Yoffee

Excerpt

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I

Introduction: a history of
the study of early cities

NORMAN YOFFEE WITH NICOLA TERRENATO

M. I. Finley¹ provides the essential challenge to archaeologists studying ancient cities:

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to catch the ‘feel’ of an ancient city. What we see is either a ruin or a shadow overlain by centuries of subsequent habitation. Nothing can be deader than the models or reconstructions of ancient buildings and districts: they may serve to recreate the formal interactions of the architects but they mislead badly in recreating the living reality within a living community.

He could also have been talking about ancient historians whose data, in their own way, are as fragmentary as archaeological data, their reconstructions often elite-focused, formal, and drained of life. Texts shed dramatic points of light on ancient lifeways but give few clues as to how the points might be connected to form a picture of a vibrant community. And, if we have such urban textual lampposts and archaeological reconstructions of buildings and districts, how can we know why people came to live in cities, how cities flourished and/or collapsed, and how citizens understood their lives?

In the ancient world, from the fourth millennium BCE to the early second millennium CE (which is the timespan covered in this third volume of the *Cambridge World History*) the world was a world of cities. That is, the majority of the population lived in communities, not isolated farmsteads. Some of these communities were cities; and towns, villages, and the countryside, which was populated by pastoralists, were connected in various ways to cities.

But what is a “city”? The sages (some of whom are reviewed below) have replied: cities are permanent settlements that are rather large in area and

I thank Merry Wiesner-Hanks for inviting me to edit this volume. I also thank Roger Bagnall, Director of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, for hosting the conference of authors that led to this volume; Merry Wiesner-Hanks also contributed support for the conference. Finally, thanks to all contributors for their stimulating essays and goodwill for this project.

¹ Moses I. Finley, “The City,” *Opus* 6–8 (1987–9), 309.

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have quite a few people, several thousands of them, who live quite closely together and are socially diverse; there are leaders and their minions who keep track of people and things in the city and which leave and enter the city; cities have a center with impressive architecture that affords and/or restricts political, social, and/or ideological activity; cities depend on food-stuffs that are produced in the related countryside for the benefit of those in the cities; cities provide certain services and manufactured goods to people in the related countryside and acquire, through long-distance trade, luxury and utilitarian goods; cities provide a sense of civic identity to the people living in them (and related hinterlands), and they are the arenas in which rulers demonstrate their special connections to the high gods and the cosmos; and cities are containers of potential social drama and discontent among various competing/cooperating social groups and their local leaders; cities create and incubate significant environmental and health problems.

I won't be surprised if readers are not content with this smorgasbord-like "definition" of a city, whose parts are in fact gleaned from thinkers in many fields. Although I may be accused (rightly) of avoiding a simple and unambiguous definition of the city, I submit that, together, these partial definitions are in fact variables that can structure research into ancient cities. There will be many exceptions and qualifications to the variables in my sprawling definition. This definition is really a kind of "ideal-typical" model (in the Weberian sense) that authors in this volume amend, emend, and liberally qualify. For the still discontented who would insist on a simple and tidy definition of cities, I refer you to the wisdom of G. F. Nietzsche, who said: "You can only define things that have no history."² In any case, the search for a definition of "the city," so that archaeologists can identify it, as opposed to other forms of settlement, is a relic of disco-age social theory. Modern archaeologists study how early cities are structured, what leaders in cities do and also what they do not do, how people in cities worked and worshipped, why many early cities are fragile, many resisting incorporation into territorial units, as well as a host of other activities and behaviors that can be studied in light of the variables of urban life that are posited above.

The justification for this volume is that early cities (that is, those cities that evolved after the time when there were no cities – see the previous

² Friedrich Nietzsche, "Definierbar ist nur Das, was keine Geschichte hat," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift. Zweite Abhandlung: "Schuld," "Schlechtes Gewissen," und Verwandtes*, O. Höffe (ed.) (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), p. 820.

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volume in this series) were not rare. The earliest cities appeared in Mesopotamia and Egypt at the end of the fourth millennium BCE, in South Asia in the early–middle of the third millennium BCE, and in China not long after that. These cities developed independently in their regions. Subsequently, in Asia and in the Mediterranean world, numerous cities appeared and multiplied. In Africa outside the Nile Valley, cities were founded in the first millennium CE. In the New World, cities appeared early in the first millennium BCE in Middle America, slightly later in South America, and at least one city emerged at about 1000 CE in the Middle West of the USA. This volume attempts to “catch the feel” of these cities and to do so it advances some distinctive and new approaches.

Before describing these new approaches, however, it is necessary to review how and why cities evolved, although this is not the focus of this volume.³ Cities evolved as “collecting basins” in which long-term trends toward social differentiation and stratification crystallized independently all over the planet. The earliest cities in many regions, like Mesopotamia, Egypt, South Asia, North China, in the Maya area, and in the Andean region, were competitors; indeed, the first “states” were usually “city-states” that did not encompass large, territorial expanses within a single political structure.

The many and often differentiated social groups that lived in the countryside in modest villages and small towns were drawn into and became recombined in cities. These cities grew as nodal points of pilgrimages and ceremonies, exchange, storage and redistribution, and as centers for defense and warfare. In these cities, along with their associated and restructured countrysides, new identities as citizens were created but did not entirely supplant existing identities as members of economic, kin, and ethnic groups. In the earliest cities, new rituals and ceremonies connected leaders with citizens and the gods. These displayed and justified the supremacy and legitimacy of the new rulers and reaffirmed their command over the social order. The social roles and practices of citizens were routinized within the urban layout of monumental constructions, streets and pathways, walls and courtyards. The built environment itself demonstrated the superior access to knowledge and planning and control held by the rulers, ostensibly on behalf of all. Statecraft in the earliest cities involved providing an order to the

³ See Norman Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) from which this section is drawn.

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present, which the rulers proclaimed in literature as timeless and the goal of history. Newly created urban landscapes overlay but did not eliminate the unruliness of a society composed of many groups, each with its own interests and orientations.

The growth of cities was often revolutionary, in the sense used by V. Gordon Childe (see below): early cities were not simply accretions on a stable rural base, nor were they simply the apex of a settlement pyramid. Settlements in the hinterlands now became “peripheries” of cities, and so in the evolution of cities, social life both in and outside of cities changed utterly, redefined in the process of urbanization and ruralization (as the countryside itself was recreated because of its new relation to cities).

A history of research, part one

If the above, generalized overview of the evolution of cities outlines important commonalities in the evolution of cities around the world, it does not foreclose an investigation into significant divergences in the history of early cities nor critical distinctions in the nature of urban life. The chapters in this book speak precisely to these differences. Furthermore, the variations in urban life can only be identified and explained through a comparison of cities and social institutions.

Before describing how the following chapters will employ the comparative method, I present a brief history of the study of early cities. This will provide perspective on the definition of cities and their evolution presented above. (This digest of studies can be supplemented by reference to the “further readings” to this chapter.)

Today archaeologists have renewed interest in ancient cities, just as their geographer, sociologist, and historian colleagues and the public are concerned about the plight of cities in the modern world. Today, cities constitute 50 percent of the world’s population, generate about 75 percent of the world’s gross national product, consume 60 percent of the world’s water, and emit 80 percent of global greenhouse gases.⁴ The number of books about modern cities is legion, and there are valuable companions to the study of cities,⁵

⁴ Thomas Gladwin, “Doomsday Alert: Megachallenges Confronting Urban Modernity,” *Journal of the International Institute, University of Michigan* 16 (2008), 14–16.

⁵ Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (eds.), *A Companion to The City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

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encyclopedias of cities,⁶ evocative descriptions of modern cities,⁷ and claims that cities are the “engines of innovation.”⁸ This last assertion is, of course, not new: to cite only studies by modern urbanologists, it was argued by Jane Jacobs⁹ for the earliest cities, and she has been echoed by Edward Soja.¹⁰

The view of the city as locus of rational behavior and the good life harkens to the earliest works in the Western tradition on cities by Greek and Roman philosophers and historians, like Aristotle, Theophrastus, Pausanias, Strabo, and Vitruvius, and others. They contrasted urban life, which was ideally suited for political discourse, that is, as a place for self-government, and “civilized” behavior, and considered the countryside as backward, populated by simple rustics.¹¹ Of course, one can also find accounts of the city as the home of thieves, swindlers, tyrants, and malcontents. Mesopotamian literature, preceding the thoughts of Greeks and Romans by several thousand years, had much the same variety of views about cities and the countryside, as did early Chinese writers in the first millennium BCE. In the fourteenth century CE Ibn Khaldun wrote how urban life became corrupt and needed to be periodically cleansed by noble barbarians (nomads) from the countryside. There is not much new, it seems, in modern accounts of cities, only degrees of foregrounding social institutions and making moral judgments.

It is not necessary to review the history of evolutionary thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in which speculations of laws of society and laws of nature were propounded. Ideas of progress and of the great chain of being did not, of course, rely on archaeological evidence. Cain and his son Enoch were the first city-builders according to the writer of Genesis, and the antiquities of Greece and Rome had little prehistory except that speculated in classical literature. The evolution of cities played little or no part in the discussions in the West that focused on the distinctions

⁶ Peter Clark, *Cities in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Ray Hutchison, *The Encyclopedia of Urban Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010).

⁷ Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Random House, 2007); and Mark Mazower, *Salonika, City of Ghosts* (New York: Knopf, 2004); Gary Wills, *Venice: Lion City* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

⁸ Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

⁹ Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Random House, 1969) argued that the earliest cities (like Çatal Höyük in Neolithic Anatolia) evolved before farming, and domestication of plants and animals ensued to provide food for the cities.

¹⁰ Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

¹¹ Moses I. Finley, “The Ancient City,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19 (1977), 305–27 presents a digest of classical accounts.

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between “community” (Gemeinschaft) and “society” (Gesellschaft) by Tönnies or between “status” and “contract” by Maine. The evidence, such as it was, came from travelers and colonials observing “native” people, those thought to be in a “state of nature” and without history, which by implication meant non-urban. Consideration of the evolution of cities changed in the middle of the nineteenth century when the great geological and evolutionary time-depth of the world was established, and ancient Mesopotamian cities, known only from garbled references in classical sources and the Bible, were beginning to be excavated. Arguably, the first modern attempt to understand the ancient history of cities as living communities was developed by Fustel de Coulanges in 1864. Whereas scholars today cite his work in inevitable homage to a scholarly ancestor, it is due more careful consideration than that.

Fustel’s ancient city

It is a long-established commonplace, when discussing ancient cities (especially in the Mediterranean context) at least to mention Fustel, or even to take his volume *La cité antique* as the point of departure for a chronological review of the relevant literature.¹² Ancient historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists, however, typically pay little more than lip service to his work, which is generally seen as outdated, quirky, and somewhat at odds with the later discourse on cities in these disciplines. Significantly, his legacy is instead much more influential in historical sociology and in urban studies, where his work is considered seminal and his influence on figures like Émile Durkheim, Werner Sombart, and Max Weber is carefully retraced and analyzed. Considering how in recent years the disparate threads of scholarship on pre-modern cities seem to be in the process of being tied together again in holistic approaches, it is arguable (as well as desirable) that Fustel’s views be more seriously taken into account by all those who study ancient urbanism.

Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges was trained in the 1840s and 1850s as a Greco-Roman historian at the École Normale in Paris.¹³ His Latin dissertation was on the Roman hearth goddess Vesta as a powerful force in the emergence of political institutions. He expanded it and published it as his first major book in 1862, with the title *La cité antique. Étude sur le culte, le droit,*

¹² This section is written by Nicola Terrenato.

¹³ François Hartog, *Le XIX^e siècle et l’histoire: le cas Fustel de Coulanges* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).

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les institutions de la Grèce et de Rome (Paris 1864). In the meantime, he had been appointed to a chair of general history at the University of Strasbourg, and he progressively devoted himself almost exclusively to medieval and modern French history, which he later taught at the Sorbonne and at his alma mater, the École Normale, till his death in 1889. This appeared to him a more urgent and patriotic undertaking than ancient history. *La cité antique* thus stands in splendid isolation in Fustel's personal intellectual trajectory, as well as in the context of late nineteenth-century historiography of the Greek and Roman world.

Fustel's main thesis is that family and other kin structures are fundamental elements and building blocks of ancient cities and that religion in general and the ancestor cult in particular provided the initial cement for the aggregation of population in cities. Extended family groups developed private property as a result of the need to place their dead on land they controlled, so that their worship as deified ancestors could be officiated by the elder male as a high priest of the group. Several family groups would then come together to form a wider lineage, again under the rule of a leader with priestly prerogatives. The city was a natural transposition of this basic structure on a larger scale, with the king as high priest of the wider lineage system represented by the citizens, and the city's territory was the private property of the polity. The state, in other words, was a new entity of a higher order but structurally similar to the families and lineages that continued their existence within the new organization.

A formation process of this kind would explain the emergence of political institutions in all Greek and Italian states in the early first millennium BCE (and resonates, with qualifications, for many other states, too, as will be noted below). While this in itself amounted to a daring comparative stance for classicists of his time, it is clear that Fustel believed that the model could be applied at least to all the cultures that shared what was then called Indo-European (or Indo-Aryan) religion and possibly beyond. In letters and unpublished papers, he explicitly considered Indian and even Phoenician, Chinese, and Native American cities as potential comparanda, although he never expressed this in print.

La cité antique is beautifully written, and it had considerable success with the educated public, not unlike a number of other pioneering books in the social studies that came out in the same decades and dealt with pre-modern culture, such as Maine's *Ancient Law*, Morgan's *Ancient Society*, or, slightly later, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. While Fustel enjoyed high professional recognition – he was for a while the director of the prestigious École

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Normale, and even taught history privately to the Empress Eugénie – his first book never really became a part of the ancient history curriculum, as it was considered too general and vague in its scope and too summary in its treatment of the primary and secondary literature. Fustel made no attempt at determining any chronological framework, nor did he detail the specifics of the process, an approach that was completely at odds with the dry philological historiography that was being codified at the time by the German school led by Mommsen (whom Fustel openly detested).

It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that some better-read classicists, such as Arnaldo Momigliano and Moses Finley, went back to Fustel in their search for a more interpretive ancient history, one closer to the social sciences than to the humanities. While they correctly reconstructed the intellectual milieu from which Fustel's vision had arisen, they generally failed to see much contemporary relevance for it. Meanwhile in Paris, academic filial piety had driven some *normaliens* to seek inspiration in his work, most notably Georges Glotz,¹⁴ who explicitly tried to reimplant Fustel's ideas within the specialist discourse on ancient Greece.

At the same time as ancient historians were rethinking their discipline, social anthropologists were doing the same, developing evolutionary models to explain the emergence of states and cities. Like all revolutionary intellectual movements, they eagerly went back beyond the generation that had preceded them to look for early prophets of the new ideas. In doing this they were happy to recruit Morgan (who himself knew and referenced Fustel), as an early proponent of a stepwise succession of social organisms of increasing complexity. While some, like Clyde Kluckhohn, acknowledged the existence of Fustel, his scope seemed very narrow (mainly on ancient Greece and Rome) and its culture-historical approach too little concerned with the material conditions connected with the rise of political complexity. Fustel's insistence on religion and worldviews was enough to relegate him to a footnote in prefaces at best.

In sharp contrast with his reception among historians and anthropologists, Fustel was from the start hailed by the new discipline of sociology as one of its founding fathers. This was undoubtedly helped by Émile Durkheim, who was Fustel's star student at the École Normale – he dedicated his dissertation on Montesquieu to the memory of Fustel – but is also probably symptomatic of an intellectual bifurcation that happened

¹⁴ Georges Glotz, *La cité grecque, evolution de l'humanité collective* (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1928).

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at that time and whose effects are still arguably current today.¹⁵ Whereas theoretical reflections on urban life in all its cognitive aspects became a staple of sociological thought, archaeologists studying cities (see below) tended to ignore belief systems or regard them as epiphenomenal correlates of material conditions. Only occasionally cross-fertilization took place, as in the case of Max Weber (see below), who was originally trained as an ancient historian but who championed the new field of sociology and was also read by economists, anthropologists, and other social scientists. Weber certainly knew Fustel's work, to the point of paraphrasing extensive portions of *La cité antique*¹⁶ in his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1922). While Weber explained urban processes in materialist and institutional terms, which Fustel never did, it is interesting to note that Weber too did not ignore questions of ideology and its role in shaping the urban experience.

Another discipline that revered Fustel as one of its cherished ancestors was the history of religions. This is not surprising when one considers the critical role that Fustel assigned to religious beliefs in urban life. It is also clear that the study of non-monotheistic religions developed into one of the very few disciplines whose comparative approach included the classical world (which was marginalized in anthropological archaeology). Roman religion was and is studied in the context of other religions, and this is exactly what Fustel had been advocating ever since his doctoral dissertation. Indeed, it has been suggested that Georges Dumézil's lifelong commitment to explaining Roman religion in terms of Indo-European beliefs and culture was a direct extension of Fustel's original vision, in line with what happened in comparative linguistics.

Now that, as this volume asserts, the time has come for a comparative approach to pre-modern cities, it is relevant to assess what lasting value *La cité antique* may have. What is striking in reading the book today is how it locates itself in a peculiar space above history, as it were, but below pure political science (or structuralist timelessness). There is no chronology and not enough actual events in Fustel's study to be anything like an historical narrative, and yet it is not completely atemporal or abstract. Fustel's overriding concern is to understand where the very idea

¹⁵ François Héran, "L'institution démotivée: De Fustel de Coulanges à Durkheim et au-delà," *Revue Française de Sociologie* 28 (1987), 67–97.

¹⁶ Max Weber, *The City*, Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (trans.) (New York: Free Press, 1958).

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of city originated and to reconstruct why participants in the process created cities in the form that they did, without relying on political abstractions. Fustel's city is made of actual people whose lives were structured by traditions and mentalities, but who also made decisions that led to social change.

There is much in *La cité antique* that is a harbinger of many current ideas. His insistence on the ideological sphere, for instance, certainly appears in many theories being applied to cities today. New discoveries about the central importance of religion in early and even pre-agricultural sites (like Göbekli Tepe in Turkey and Poverty Point in Louisiana) lend intriguing support to Fustel's theses about the importance of religion in early settled life.

Furthermore, Fustel's emphasis on religion as a way to shape relations between the natural world and the social world helps to frame the emergence of sociopolitical complexity in terms of the actual cognitive horizon of the actors involved. Fustel is also adamant that the *anciens* have nothing to do with the *modernes* and that any analogy with our time can only be grossly misleading. Such a perspective makes it impossible to think teleologically about political institutions.

Fustel arguably laid the groundwork for the concept of *mentalité* that would later be at the center of the historical and social thought of the Braudelian Annales school (ironically developed at his institution's arch-rival *École des Hautes Études*). He forces his readers to imagine what it would involve to be constrained by beliefs and behavioral norms that are very different from ours and still bring a city into existence. His most remarkable insight is that this is accomplished by taking an existing cultural element – the family – and recasting it on a different scale to create something that is new but still feels familiar and understandable to those who become a part of it for the first time. Moreover, he sees the family as the only *vrai corps* of ancient societies, rejecting any influence of modern individualism (a product of Christianity in his view).

Fustel's masterpiece is, like several other great essays of that glorious second half of the nineteenth century, a suggestive and engrossing read. It is certainly off the mark in many details – for instance, there is ample evidence against the notion that early Romans were buried on their private family land – but this does not detract from the fascinating cultural landscape it paints. *La cité antique* not only shaped modern thought about cities, but it also rings quite relevant in many modern studies of early cities.