1. The city in history

In 1519 Fernando Cortés and a band of some 200 Spaniards arrived on the Gulf coast of Mexico. After founding the city of Veracruz, Cortés and his men rounded up several thousand Indian allies and began their march inland toward the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. Two years later, this great city came under Spanish control and served as the center of an expanding colonial territory. Roughly a decade later, the process was repeated high in the Peruvian Andes when Francisco Pizarro and his followers marched into the Inca capital of Cuzco and declared it Spanish territory. Meanwhile, French and Portuguese explorers had touched on the coast of Brazil in search of commodities for trade, and the latter soon founded a number of port towns which would later become major urban centers.

Latin American civilization and its cities are commonly conceived of as variants of Iberian forms implanted some 450 years ago by the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores. In some respects this is correct, for groups and individuals of Hispanic cultural background provide the driving force behind urban development in Latin America today, as they have for centuries. However, we must not forget that urbanization in Latin America did not begin with the coming of Europeans, nor does it end with them. The hundreds of thousands of rural peasant migrants who are currently swelling the cities and towns of Mexico, Guatemala, and the Andean nations bring with them cultural components with roots in pre-Hispanic civilizations that produced some spectacular urban achievements.

It is true that the territory now occupied by Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Venezuela, and other countries of northern South America never saw the indigenous development of societies that might be termed urban. But the Andean mountain chain and adjoining coastal strip in western South America, together with Mesoamerica (the area of indigenous “high culture” that covers central and southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, and part of Costa Rica), tell a different story. These regions comprise the two cradles of New World civilization, and it was here that the first true cities in the Americas emerged.

The most vivid written testimony of the remarkable urban civilizations of the Incas, Aztecs, and other peoples encountered by the Spaniards is found in writings and chronicles of the sixteenth century, which frequently speak of these newly discovered societies in a tone bordering on awe. Few experiences of the early explorers could match that of Fernando (Hernán)
2 Latin American urbanization

Cortés and his men in 1519 as they crossed a high mountain pass between snowcapped peaks and gazed down into the Valley of Mexico. The sight of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, a great island city with sparkling white and multicolored pyramids, far surpassed anything they had expected. In a letter to the Spanish king soon thereafter, Cortés remarked that Tenochtitlán was as large as Seville or Córdoba, dwarfing many Castilian cities of lesser renown.

But evidence of pre-Hispanic urbanization is not limited to the Spanish chronicles, to the traces of Inca architecture that remain in modern Cuzco, Peru, or to the fascinating remains brought to light by excavations in Mexico City. As current archaeological investigations are making increasingly clear, the Inca and Aztec cities represent only the end point of many centuries of urban development. Nevertheless, pre-Hispanic urbanization is a separate topic in its own right and will not be dealt with in detail in this volume.¹ In this chapter we will touch on only a few highlights before moving on to the colonial period, for it was during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries that the social foundations of the modern cities were established, foundations which were predominantly European in character. Before proceeding, however, it is important to clarify the meaning we attach to such terms as “urban” and “civilization,” for these concepts have attracted much attention and comment from archaeologists and ethnologists alike.

Cities and civilization

The late V. Gordon Childe (1950) coined the phrase “the urban revolution” to designate a development (or bundle of processes) in human history comparable in importance to the beginnings of agriculture that preceded it by several thousand years (the “food-producing” or Neolithic revolution). He listed ten criteria that he believed would be present in every truly urban society: (1) an increase in settlement size toward “urban” proportions; (2) centralized accumulation of capital through tribute or taxation; (3) monumental public works; (4) a system of writing; (5) advances toward exact and predictive sciences; (6) long-distance trade in luxuries; (7) a system of class stratification; (8) full-time craft specialization; (9) the appearance of representational (naturalistic) art; and (10) the appearance of the state—a politically organized society based on territorial principles rather than kinship.

In stressing these features, Childe clearly had in mind much more than a particular type of human settlement. He was addressing himself to the initial appearance of that characteristically large, complex, socially stratified, and heterogeneous kind of society that engulfs all of us today—what anthropologists commonly refer to as civilization. Thus, according to
The city in history

Childe, the development of cities always occurs hand-in-hand with the growth of civilization as a whole—the first trait is always found in association with the remaining nine—and it is impossible to separate the two.

Soon after Childe formulated his concept (based to a great extent on his own archaeological excavations in the Middle East), it came under attack from many scholars, some of whom were puzzling over how to reconcile the high cultures of Latin America with such a scheme. To insist on writing as a criterion of civilization, for example, would eliminate the Incas from consideration. Others have questioned the significance of representational art and point out that not all of Childe’s ten criteria carry equal weight (see R. McC. Adams 1966 for a fuller discussion). But of more immediate concern is the argument that, contrary to Childe’s assertion, civilizations may exist without cities. The Mayas, who will be discussed in more detail below, are often cited as a case in point. Despite their renowned intellectual and artistic achievements, as reflected in their architecture, sculpture, and writing, the Mayas built few settlements that could be called large, permanent, or densely populated. As long as urbanism is defined primarily in terms of population size and nucleation, the Mayas and other similar cases must be classified as nonurban civilizations.

However, such an approach leaves us with the thorny question of how large and how dense a settlement must be in order to be called a city. Furthermore, how are we to control for cultural and historical differences in defining what is urban? We tend to agree with Richard Blanton (1976: 250) that it is futile to search for a set of universal criteria for defining the city and that we must avoid the notion that size and density are the most important indicators of urbanism. Instead, we define cities as nodes of concentration in a state society. This concentration may be reflected in large numbers of people and shelters, but this is not necessary. Of greater importance are the nodal functions (such as ideological, administrative, mercantile, industrial) that a given city performs vis-à-vis the society of which it is a part, functions that by definition will be absent or little developed in small towns and villages in the same society. Thinking along similar lines, Richard G. Fox (1977: 24) has defined the city as “a center of population concentration and/or a site for the performance of prestige and ceremonial functions found in a state society.” Particularly in nonindustrial settings, cities may be distinguished not so much in terms of their populations or economic specializations, but in terms of their ritual status and political power.

Such was the case, we believe, with many Maya “ceremonial centers” in ancient Mesoamerica. While these centers supported few full-time residents, they nevertheless exercised important functions that served to knit together the disparate segments of this complex society. In Fox’s terms,
4 Latin American urbanization

they were “regal-ritual cities” whose primary role in society was ideological. Maya urbanism was manifested primarily in the higher density of ritual and prestige functions in the ceremonial centers, traits that are difficult if not impossible to reduce to a quantitative index of urbanization.

Having thus taken a broad approach to the concept of urbanism, we find it less necessary to distinguish between urban and nonurban civilizations, for most complex, heterogeneous, and socially stratified state societies are apt to contain urban centers that will fit our definition. As we shall see, many of the first and largest cities in pre-Hispanic America took the form of city-states similar in pattern to those found in ancient Greece and Rome.

Pre-Hispanic cities in the Andes and Mesoamerica

The cities of ancient America paralleled in size and cultural importance those of antiquity in the Old World. Many centuries before the rise of the Inca Empire, for example, Peruvians were building the largest cities ever to be found in indigenous South America. Among the largest of these was Tiahuanaco, which emerged in the southern highlands around 200 B.C. at the Bolivian end of Lake Titicaca. A magnificent example of early urban planning, Tiahuanaco covered an area of at least 1½ by 1¼ kilometers and possessed a regular ground plan, massive buildings, pyramidal platforms for religious constructions, drainage canals, great stairways, and stone construction (Hardoy 1973: 330–2; Rowe 1963: 7).

Much later in northern Peru between A.D. 900 and 1463, there flourished a great urban state on the coastal desert that had as its capital at Chan Chan one of the most extensive and remarkable metropolitan centers in ancient America. This site has produced no impressive monuments or spectacular temples, but the ruins stretch over an area covering at least twenty square kilometers, including nine rectangular enclosures, some with walls over twenty-five feet high. These may have been residences of elite groups, for inside they are divided into symmetrically arranged rooms, courts, and plazas interconnected by mazelike corridors and narrow halls (Keatinge and Day 1974: 228–9; Moseley 1975: 37–40).

Curiously, the Inca Empire, which began to take shape in 1438, never attained the level of urban development manifest at Tiahuanaco or Chan Chan (the latter was conquered by the Incas in 1465 and absorbed into their empire). Cuzco, the capital city rebuilt by the emperor Pachacuti in the 1460s, was the only large metropolitan center built by the Incas in a vast empire that engulfed some six million people representing forty major linguistic groups.

At its height, the Inca capital contained an estimated population of
The city in history 5

between 100,000 and 300,000 inhabitants (Katz 1972: 279). The city was divided into two moieties – upper and lower – and into twelve sections corresponding to main provinces of the empire. Above all, Cuzco was an administrative center, and Friedrich Katz (1972: 281) and others have referred to it as a “city of bureaucrats.” People could travel to and from Cuzco only on official business or with special permission from a state official. Commercial life, by comparison, was less well developed. Exchange of merchandise was in the hands of the state, and the rulers were less intent upon enriching the capital than they were on organizing their far-flung territories held together by an elaborate system of roads and some 170 administrative centers (some of them small cities in their own right) scattered throughout the realm (Morris 1972: 394).

Inca urbanism was very different from the pattern found in its contemporaries, Aztec Tenochtitlán. The exaggerated enthusiasm of the Spaniards who saw the Aztec city in its glory is absent from the early Peruvian chronicles. The low stone frontages of Cuzco lacked the visual impact of Tenochtitlán, with its towering, brightly colored pyramids and platforms. These two very different cities were products of two contrasting strategies of empire building. The Incas were master organizers who redistributed state revenues throughout all parts of their empire. The Aztecs, on the other hand, enriched their capital city and left their conquered subjects to their own affairs as long as they met their tribute quotas.

While none of the Mesoamerican peoples ever put together a political empire comparable to that which dominated the Andes, it was in ancient Mexico that pre-Hispanic urbanization attained its fullest expression. As in Peru, the civilizations encountered by the Spaniards in this region were only the last of a long line of urban peoples dating back to the appearance of the Olmec culture on the Gulf coast of Mexico about 1500 B.C. The Olmec “regal-ritual” cities of La Venta and San Lorenzo, among others, functioned as political capitals and nodes of economic exchange and may thus qualify as some of the earliest urban centers in the Americas. The Olmecs were followed after the time of Christ by the Classic Maya, who made their home in the hot, humid lowlands of the Yucatan peninsula. Tikal, the largest Maya city, had an estimated population of forty-five thousand and covered a staggering 123 square kilometers at its height in A.D. 550 (Haviland 1970: 193). This was a metropolis of considerable influence, with a well-developed stratification system that included a hereditary aristocracy, substantial numbers of government functionaries and bureaucrats, priests, astronomers, clerical personnel, scholars, traders, potters, sculptors, and other specialists.

Contemporary with the Classic Maya were the great civilizations centered at Monte Albán and Teotihuacán in the Mexican highlands, where urbanization reached an unprecedented level between A.D. 200 and
6 Latin American urbanization

700. In number of people and population density, both of these cities far surpassed the sparsely inhabited Olmec and Maya settlements (although Tikal may have rivaled Monte Albán in population). Both of these highland cities were supported by intensive cultivation techniques, and Teotihuacán, at least, appears to have been more socially complex than Tikal. René Millon (1973) has recently completed a detailed map of the entire site and believes that Teotihuacán was larger than imperial Rome, boasting a population of perhaps two hundred thousand or more in A.D. 600. “For more than half a millennium it was to Middle America what Rome, Benares or Mecca have been to the Old World: at once a religious and cultural capital and a major economic and political center” (Millon 1967: 38). In addition to 300 impressive ritual structures of various kinds, Millon has mapped more than 4,000 buildings, tightly packed in a planned fashion into an area of twenty square kilometers.

Teotihuacán was a splendid example of city planning and preindustrial engineering. Towering above the center were the great Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, the first a little over 200 feet high. The major axis of the city was the Street of the Dead, which at the north stopped at the Pyramid of the Moon and to the south ran over three kilometers beyond the city center. Not far from the pyramids were the city’s two major buildings: the Great Compound and the Ciudadela. The first of these probably housed the government bureaucracy, while the second, of both political and religious importance, was most likely the home of the rulers (Millon 1976: 236–7).

The rest of the city, which was primarily residential, was laid out in grid fashion with an orderly appearance, even in areas of great crowding. There were dozens of barrios or neighborhoods containing 2,200 apartment compounds clearly designed for urban life in a crowded city. Each compound included several households that together contained an average of 100 people. At least 400 of these compounds were occupied by craftsmen, and others formed part of “ethnic enclaves” of recently arrived migrants or their descendants.

Also of note is the important role of commercial activity in the urbanization of Teotihuacán, for this was a trade center quite unlike the cities of Tikal and Cuzco, where most commercial activity was in the hands of the state. Teotihuacán housed a number of large, thriving marketplaces that must have attracted thousands of outsiders each day.

Oddly enough, this great metropolitan center was abandoned and in ruins when the Spanish arrived and had been so since A.D. 700. Monte Albán collapsed at about the same time, and Tikal and other Maya cities a few centuries later. All over Mesoamerica cities were abandoned, partially destroyed, or both. Yet urbanism never disappeared altogether in the Mexican highlands. When the Spanish came upon Aztec Tenochtitlán in
The city in history

1519, what they saw was a city that had become great by imitating its many neighbors in the Valley of Mexico and beating them at their own game.

The Aztec tribe was a latecomer in the Valley of Mexico, a fertile area around the shores of five interconnecting lakes that supported many populous cities and towns that were constantly at war with one another. With the choice sites already occupied, the intruders from the north settled on an island in the lake and founded their settlement in A.D. 1325. This marshy, barren island did not seem to be a favorable site, but it possessed amazing potential, and the most highly urbanized city in the New World arose here in the short period of only two centuries.

In customary Mesoamerican fashion, the heart of Tenochtitlán contained the palaces and temples, including an imperial precinct for the residence of the emperor Moctezuma and his bureaucratic entourage. Extending outward from the center in four cardinal directions were avenues that divided the city into quarters, each with its own temple. The quarters in turn were subdivided into barrios.

Tenochtitlán was a warlike, predatory city–state that took what it could from the millions of people in central Mexico it eventually came to dominate but gave very little in return. All roads led to the capital, in which outsiders were easily accepted and integrated into urban society. There were large transient and immigrant populations that included craft groups, rulers, noblemen or warriors from subject states, and others displaced by war (Calnek 1972b: 348–9). It was not long before the island was filled to capacity, and although it was connected to the mainland by five causeways, more space was needed within the city itself. The Aztecs solved this problem by establishing new gardens and residential neighborhoods on chinampas, or floating gardens. By 1519, Tenochtitlán covered more than twelve square kilometers and contained perhaps as many as two hundred thousand people (Calnek 1972a: 105–9; 1972b: 348). At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Aztec capital was thus a thriving urban metropolis. It included a powerful aristocracy, a second tier of lesser nobles, a great mass of warriors, large numbers of artisans, merchants and transients, an agricultural peasantry, and the landless urban poor.

The ancient American cities varied among themselves to a much greater extent than we have been able to convey in these few pages. They arose for different reasons, occupied diverse ecological settings, and fulfilled different functions. Clearly, it would be unwise to attempt to reduce them to a single type.

In one important respect, however, all the early cities described in the preceding paragraphs were alike. Their sameness stems from the fact that they were all products of primary urbanization: each represented an
extension and continuation of a particular cultural base that had its roots in the villages and towns of the hinterland. As Robert Redfield and Milton Singer (1954: 57–8) state, the cultural role of these cities was primarily orthogenetic: “It is to carry forward, develop, elaborate a long-established local culture or civilization . . . The orthogenetic city . . . is the place where religious, philosophical and literary specialists reflect, synthesize and create out of the traditional material new arrangements and developments that are felt by the people to be outgrowths of the old.” This characterization applies as much to the warlike city of Tenochtitlán as it does to the sacred pilgrimage centers of the Olmecs; all were constructed, as it were, from local cultural materials.

In contrast to this type of city stands another, in which the principal urban role is to create and introduce original modes of thought, cosmologies, and social procedures into the society at large. Such cities are the result of secondary urbanization, a process carried forth by people of a different cultural background from those in the hinterland. In this setting, city ways and city ideas frequently come into conflict with those of the country folk, and such urban centers are termed “heterogenetic.” Whenever this urban role is paramount, the mode of integration between city and country rests not on a common cultural consciousness but on the exercise of force or economic symbiosis. Heterogenetic cities were not absent in ancient America, for conquest and subjugation of alien populations were quite common in many times and places. But this sort of urban center is best exemplified by the expansion of the West, which brought with it great movements of people, a capitalist economy, and an exploitative colonial ideology. Almost overnight in Latin America, the orthogenetic Indian capitals were transformed into heterogenetic vehicles of Spanish colonial administration. For those who survived the experience, life would never again be quite the same.

The Iberian conquest and colonization: an urban venture

At the time of the conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century, Spain was just beginning to acquire a national identity, symbolized by the marriage of the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. While commercial activity and the growth of cities were most advanced in the coastal areas of Catalonia and Valencia on the Mediterranean, the more immediate predecessors of Spanish American cities were in the heartland of Castile, the region that supplied most of the early colonists. Although the origin of cities in Castile can be traced back to Roman days (Morse 1962a: 475), urban development in this region between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries occurred hand in hand with the reconquest of Spanish territory from the Moors, who had occupied the area for several centuries. Thus, in
contrast to other parts of Europe, most medieval towns and cities of Castile were founded for military reasons and did not develop from commercial activity, although the subsequent growth of many of them did stem from trade (Torres Balbás et al. 1954: 9). In Portugal, the pattern of urbanization was closer to that of northern Europe. The most important Portuguese cities in the sixteenth century were the agro-commercial, maritime towns that had developed along the coast in response to economic possibilities rather than to politico-military design (Morse 1965: 37).

In the strict sense, then, it is not possible to speak of a single, unitary Iberian pattern of urbanism that was imposed on the New World, for the Spanish and Portuguese programs of colonization differed substantially in this regard, especially in the early years. However, all Iberians have traditionally placed a very high value on living in compact, densely settled urban centers and the results of this cultural pattern are plainly visible in Latin America today. For the Spaniard, Portuguese, and Latin American, civilized life can best be lived in town, not among the countryside. Anthropologists who have studied peasant communities in the Mediterranean region have been impressed, even in the rural setting, by their compactness and density of settlement, which often create an impression of crowding to the outside observer. It is safe to say that at the time of the conquest most Iberians shared an urban ethos and a concept of urban living that set them apart from most of their neighbors in northern Europe. Spaniards especially were city-minded people, and Spain was vastly more successful than Portugal in putting its ideals into tangible form in the newly conquered lands.

Any observer acquainted with the variety and diversity of urban forms in Spain cannot fail to be impressed with the monotony of the urban landscape in traditional Spanish America. The physical and architectonic uniformity that characterizes hundreds of settlements south of the Rio Grande underscores two important aspects of the Spanish colonial experience. First, it was primarily an urban undertaking. Indian populations were subjugated and other areas colonized by the founding of cities and towns to house the Spanish population; no European peasant communities were established in Spanish America. Second, the Spanish conquest and colonization was above all a planned undertaking, directed almost from the start by the Crown and a creaking colonial bureaucracy that greatly enlarged over the years.

Nowhere is the effect of conscious planning more evident than in the physical structure of Spanish American cities, most of which are based on the twin concepts of the central plaza and the checkerboard pattern of straight streets oriented toward the four cardinal directions. Traces of this plan can be seen in Santo Domingo, the first Spanish city in America, which was established on the Island of Hispaniola (now shared by Haiti
and the Dominican Republic) in 1496. In 1514 the Crown gave instructions to Pedrarias Dávila for the founding of Panama City, and in the decades to follow the same plan was repeated all over Spanish America in cities such as Mexico City, Bogotá (Colombia), Santiago (Chile), and La Paz (Bolivia), to name but a few. Royal orders for the laying out of new cities were promulgated in 1573 by Philip II (Nuttall 1922), and they are notable for their detail. They contain instructions for the selection of the site, the location and shape of the central plaza, the location of the church and government buildings, the construction of private housing, and measures for dealing with the natives.

A common feature of all early Spanish American cities was their exploitative and administrative character. They were vehicles of conquest founded for the purpose of colonial exploitation, and their political structure frequently preceded their economic base. In some cases, such as Veracruz, Mexico, for example, city governments even preceded the settlements themselves (Gibson 1969: 234). A definitive typology of colonial Spanish American cities must await the results of further research, but a few general types can be sketched here.²

The mining of precious metals, especially silver, was a principal goal of Spanish colonialism and the mainstay of a number of highland cities such as Potosí in the viceroyalty of Peru (see Hanke 1956) and Zacatecas, Guanajuato, and Potosí in Mexico. Large numbers of Indians, blacks, and mulattoes comprised the labor force in these settlements, which were often unstable and shared a boom town atmosphere. As Charles Gibson (1966: 122) has remarked, “The rapidly created communities housed a spendthrift, unsettled, or lawless class of colonists, a substantial number of whom were always prepared to move to other, and presumably more rewarding strikes.”

Coastal cities, dedicated to oceanic commerce and military defense, were of a different character, although like the mining towns they contained large transient populations. Few of the mainland ports could match the size and importance of Santo Domingo and Havana in the Caribbean, but the cities of Veracruz in Mexico, Portobello in Panama, and Cartagena on the South American coast are well known. All of these were notable for their large fortifications, soldiers’ quarters, supply houses, and commercial buildings. With the exception of Cartagena, which rivaled Havana in size, the population of most coastal cities fluctuated widely according to the rhythms of trade. Veracruz housed only a small permanent Spanish population but swelled enormously whenever the fleets arrived. In a similar fashion, Portobello mushroomed from a tiny settlement to “a huge, sprawling campsite at the time of its fair” (Gibson 1966: 124).

In a class by themselves were the highland administrative and agricul-