

CHAPTER I

*Introduction: The Ancient City
as Concept and Reality*

Urbanism has many faces, as the following two descriptions – of indigenous New World and West African Islamic cities respectively – make clear:

Indigenous urban centers in central Mexico were arranged according to astronomical bearings dictated by cosmological criteria . . . They were focused on great squares that served ceremonial, as well as commercial, needs or functions, close to prominent temples and palaces to project a particular social order and proclaim dynastic power. As the visible markers of wealth and status dissipated with increasing distance from the city center, crowded residential quarters for commoners were organized around more modest, sacred places. At the urban perimeter, the landscape dissolved into less structured villages and hamlets surrounded by market gardens.¹

Traditional Hausa cities have a clearly identifiable focal center, a bounding wall, and building of fairly uniform character occupying most of the land between. There is usually a triple focus, for in addition to the Emir's palace and the main city market there is the Grand Mosque, often an imposing building rising above the generally even skyline . . . The city is divided into wards or quarters, and further sub-divided into compounds, in each of which rights of occupation are passed down within a family. All compounds once included some cultivated land, though most families also had fields within and outside the city wall: but as the population has grown, ever more dwellings have been built within each compound. Narrow winding paths run between the compound walls, which often remain intact, broken only by a single doorway . . . Minor markets and small mosques are spread through the various wards, and craft industries are also widely scattered, so that for many people residence and workplace are the same.²

This book is about one particular, historical type of urbanism: the ancient Greek and Roman city. It is not a comprehensive treatment of its topic, that is, it neither deals with all of the different aspects and features of ancient Greek and Roman cities, nor with all of the modern scholarly

¹ Butzer (2008) 89–90. ² O'Connor (1983) 196–7, cited in Kusimba (2008) 232–3.

2 Introduction: The Ancient City as Concept and Reality

discussions and debates concerning Greco-Roman urbanism. Rather, my aim has been to outline what I consider to be the most distinctive features of Greek and Roman cities – features which single them out as one particular manifestation of the global, world-historical phenomenon of urbanism – and to deal with some of the modern discussion regarding these features.

The book is bracketed by two broadly ‘historical’ chapters (Chapter 2 ‘Origins, development and the spread of cities in the ancient world’ and Chapter 10 ‘The end of the ancient city?’), in which I explicitly discuss some aspects of the development of ancient urbanism over time. The chapters in between have broad thematic titles, e.g. ‘City and country’, ‘Urban landscape and environment’, ‘Politics and political institutions’, ‘Civic ritual and civic identity’, and so on. Here, the stress is on continuities and similarities rather than on change and diversity (although these two aspects are not entirely ignored) so as to delineate most clearly the specific characteristics of ancient urbanism. In each of these chapters, I focus on those aspects of, say, Greco-Roman urban landscapes or civic politics that I consider most typical. I am well aware that the choices that I have made, both of inclusion and of omission, can be questioned. Also, it might be argued that I generalise too much and am not sensitive enough to the particularities of time and place. However, besides providing students and other interested readers with a brief introduction into some of the major aspects of the topic, my main purpose in writing this book has been to provide scholars interested in the comparative study of urbanism (whether they are historians and archaeologists working on other periods or social scientists and others active in urban studies) with a useful ‘working definition’ or ‘model’ of ancient Greco-Roman urbanism, based on a fairly wide range of existing research. Models are always provocative since for the sake of analytical clarity they highlight some aspects of the phenomenon under study while ignoring or diminishing others. That, however, is partly the point: if this book succeeds in provoking people to pursue their own research and to come to their own conclusions regarding the various aspects of ancient civic life, or to include the ancient city in comparative analyses of (pre-modern) urbanism, then it has well served a main part of its purpose.

Although I deal with aspects of the ancient city broadly from Homeric times (eighth/seventh centuries BCE) until late antiquity and draw on material and discussions relating to cities throughout the regions that eventually came to constitute the Roman Empire (though with an unavoidable emphasis on Greece/Athens and Italy/Rome, given the bias

Introduction: The Ancient City as Concept and Reality

3

of both ancient sources and much modern debate), there is one important thematic demarcation: this book is about the ancient city and civic life, that is, about aspects of ancient urbanism, but not about *urbanisation*. Even though there is some brief discussion of urban networks in Chapter 3 on ‘City and country’, the data and literature on pre-modern urbanisation are sufficiently complex and wide-ranging for a comparative study of ancient urbanisation processes to require a volume of its own. To some extent, it is a different topic, and though I touch upon it from time to time, it is not systematically dealt with here.³

Reading through the vignettes of New World and West African urbanism cited above, it is possible to discern both differences and similarities between these two descriptions, on the one hand, and differences and similarities between these descriptions and Greco-Roman urbanism, on the other. Central squares with temples around them, for instance, sound familiar to classical scholars, as do workshops doubling as residences, but city plans dictated by astronomy and narrow winding paths (instead of straight paved roads) have a less familiar ring to them. The similarities we perceive between manifestations of urbanism widely scattered in time and space would suggest that it is indeed justifiable to speak of ‘the city’ as a phenomenon shared by different cultures and societies. Yet at the same time, the idiosyncrasies displayed by the urban traditions of different societies would seem to lend credence to particular culture-bound categories such as ‘the Maya city’, ‘the medieval European city’ and ‘the (pre-modern) Chinese city’. Even within particular societies or cultures, moreover, the diversity of urban experience can be breathtaking: one need only compare a small Archaic Greek polis or a modest Roman provincial town with the sprawling urban mass of the imperial capital of Rome or other imperial urban giants, such as Alexandria in Egypt or Syrian Antioch.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall discuss some of the answers that scholars have given to the question ‘What is a city?’ and also to the question of whether it is justifiable to speak of ‘the ancient city’ as a specific analytical category. Since some of the answers that have been given to this latter question were influenced by several long-lasting debates in western scholarship on the nature of Greek, Roman and later European urbanism, we shall pay attention to these debates as well, and also explain why, in spite of some recent scholarly trends, the study of ancient cities still remains highly relevant.

³ For discussions of ancient urbanisation, see Woolf (1997); Osborne and Cunliffe (2005); Bowman and Wilson (2011).

4 Introduction: The Ancient City as Concept and Reality

What is an (Ancient) City?

‘It will not have escaped notice that I have so far avoided defining what I mean by a city’, Moses Finley wrote, a few pages into his famous essay on the ancient city. ‘Neither geographers nor sociologists nor historians have succeeded in agreeing on a definition’, he continued, ‘[y]et we all know sufficiently what we mean by the label, in general terms’.⁴ This, as the archaeologist George Cowgill has noted in a different context, is a bit like saying that cities are like pornography – we cannot define it but we know it when we see it.⁵ Yet as usual Finley was onto something: as a (historical) topic of study, the city has proved particularly intractable. Scholars have variously tried to come up with some sort of trans-cultural and trans-historical definition of the city, but none of these attempts has been entirely successful, at least not ‘without excluding whole periods of history in which we all know cities existed’, in Finley’s words.⁶

Most familiar is probably the demographic approach, which comes in two varieties: a focus on population size and density (population magnitude) and a focus on the characteristic (demographic) features of an urban population (population makeup).⁷ How large does a settlement have to be to count as a city? Historians of early modern Europe have often used 10,000 inhabitants as a yardstick.⁸ Clearly this would disqualify the majority of Greek poleis and Roman civitates which, on the basis of other criteria, are generally thought of as cities, as well as many cities in later periods.⁹ Throughout Greco-Roman antiquity, the majority of urban residents would have lived in towns of 5,000 inhabitants or fewer. Moreover, the socio-political fusion of urban core and rural territory typical of Greco-Roman cities complicates the use of population numbers attested in ancient sources for purposes of cross-cultural comparison (e.g. with medieval Europe, where a strict administrative separation between town and country was often observed).¹⁰

An alternative is not to look at overall population size as such but at population *density*, or nucleation. As Spiro Kostof has observed: ‘Cities are places where a certain energized crowding of people takes place. This has nothing to do with absolute size or with absolute numbers: it has to do with settlement density. The vast majority of towns in the pre-industrial

⁴ Finley (1981a) 5. ⁵ Cowgill (2003a) 1. ⁶ Finley (1981a) 5.

⁷ The distinction and the terms used derive from Storey (2006a) 2. ⁸ See De Vries (1984).

⁹ Clark (2009) 7 defines small towns (meaning, c. 1500 CE, a place with 2,000 inhabitants or less) as ‘a prominent feature of the European urban network (unlike elsewhere in the world)’.

¹⁰ Scheidel (2007) 79–80.

world were small: a population of 2,000 or less was not uncommon, and one of 10,000 would be noteworthy'.¹¹ Recently, Robin Osborne has advocated a similar population density approach to urbanisation in Archaic Greece.¹² From a cross-cultural perspective, however, the density approach gets us into trouble too, for it cannot really accommodate the so-called dispersed cities one finds in parts of pre-colonial Africa, Asia and the New World, which somewhat counter-intuitively combine relatively low population densities spread out over vast areas with other, clearly urban features.¹³

Instead of focussing on population magnitude (size and density), one might also inquire into the specific makeup of an urban population, that is, in terms of its particular demographic features (fertility, mortality, morbidity, age structure and sex ratio). Here we can point, for instance, to the much-debated 'urban graveyard' theory, according to which in larger preindustrial cities, the number of deaths always outstripped the number of births, necessitating a continuous inflow of migrants to stop the urban population from dwindling over time.¹⁴ Or, one might concentrate on the specific socioeconomic makeup of an urban population. The populations of places we tend to call cities are generally characterised by differentiation according to occupation, status and wealth, resulting in social heterogeneity and hierarchy.¹⁵ Occupational specialisation and occupational diversity are often singled out as particularly distinctive criteria: the city population and the surrounding countryside constitute a market of sufficient size to make specialised production of goods and services economically possible.¹⁶ These criteria create some problems for small Archaic and Classical Greek poleis, where a majority of citizens would have been farmers; but even in such settlements, artisanal specialisation was probably greater than in a village. Moreover, these poleis are often considered to be cities on the basis of yet other criteria, such as density of settlement or having a clearly defined urban centre, which was true of almost every polis.¹⁷

This brings us to yet another way one might define cities, that is, by means of layout and the structure of the built environment (urban landscape): the presence of central squares or plazas, paved streets, defensive

¹¹ Kostof (1991) 37, cited in Marcus and Sabloff (2008b) 12. ¹² Osborne (2005).

¹³ Kusimba, Barut Kusimba and Agbaje-Williams (2006) with reference to Yoruba cities; Hansen (2008) 75–6 with many references to specialist literature.

¹⁴ See Chapter 4 for discussion. ¹⁵ Kostof (1991) 37–8.

¹⁶ Mumford (1961) 103–9 for a classic analysis.

¹⁷ As the research by the Copenhagen Polis Centre has made clear, see Hansen (2003) 266–7, 237–76; (2006) 98–100.

6 Introduction: The Ancient City as Concept and Reality

walls and gates, public architecture for religious, political or ceremonial/entertainment purposes and some element of town planning. It is perhaps in this sphere that the intuitive understanding of a settlement as ‘urban’ (we know it when we see it) is strongest. Thus Cortés and his Conquistadores, upon entering Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire of Mexico, immediately recognised the place as urban, as ‘a great city’, despite the fact that it was the product of a civilisation entirely alien to them, a culture that had developed independently on another continent.¹⁸

As if taking their cue from this famous encounter, in a tradition stretching back to V. Gordon Childe’s famous 1950 paper on ‘The Urban Revolution’, archaeologists working on ‘early cities’ in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Asia, Africa and the Americas have increasingly engaged in wide-ranging comparative studies of urbanism. They have observed striking similarities between cities across space and time, particularly in terms of layout and the general structure of urban landscapes, for instance between New World and Old World urbanism, or, to mention just one particular example, between the city of Amarna in New Kingdom Egypt and late medieval London.¹⁹ Structural similarities between pre-modern cities have also been noted by historians and sociologists, most prominently by Gideon Sjöberg, who argued that the pre-eminent distinction in urban development throughout time was that between the preindustrial and the industrial city.²⁰ Even this long-accepted distinction is now being questioned. As Monica Smith has argued, pre-modern and modern cities share such features as fluid urban-rural boundaries (i.e. it is often impossible to mark clearly the point where the city ends and the countryside begins as urban features might continue well beyond official ‘city limits’ or city walls; in other words, there is nothing specifically modern about ‘suburban sprawl’). Pre-modern and modern cities might also share characteristics such as links with distant hinterlands through exchange and the use of luxury goods as social markers. What all these similarities through time and space suggest is ‘that the capacities for human interaction in concentrated locations are exercised within a limited set of parameters’.²¹ This, in turn, prompts the observation (in Glenn Storey’s words) that ‘[h]uman nucleation behaviour into cities might be a form of [evolutionary] group selection strategy that has proved eminently adaptable for humans and has fostered strong interspecific ties of cooperation’.²²

¹⁸ Renfrew (2008) 45, citing Díaz del Castillo (1956) 216.

¹⁹ Renfrew (2008) 44–9; on Amarna and London, see Carl et al. (2000) 344–5.

²⁰ Sjöberg (1960).

²¹ M.L. Smith (2003b) 3–8 (quote from p. 6).

²² Storey (2006a) 23.

Along such broad interdisciplinary lines, combining insights from human geography, ecology and evolutionary biology, we may eventually be able to arrive at some universal understanding of urbanism. However, the attempt requires analysis at a very high level of generality, which might at first sight seem unhelpful to historians and archaeologists interested in specific urban cultures. Yet the broad comparative study of world urbanism does supply us with a rough cross-cultural template that can be used to sketch the outlines of a particular type of urbanism, in order to bring out, as sharply as possible, its cultural specificities.

To do this properly, however, we need, in addition to the mostly ‘etic’, outside analytical perspectives mentioned so far, to try also for a more ‘emic’ approach that looks at the ways in which people in the past themselves defined and thought about those settlements in their society that we would call ‘urban’. One way to do this is to look at the legal and political terms and criteria used to define cities within the society one studies, a strategy often employed by historians. Thus, for instance, historians of medieval Europe have focussed on civic charters and the legal and political terminology used to describe and acknowledge civic status.²³ In the ancient world, particularly under Roman rule, cities often had clearly defined legal statuses, being, for instance, *municipia*, *coloniae* or *civitates peregrinae* (see Chapter 5). In looser terms, ancient texts from Homer to Constantine recognise as essential elements required of a polis or civitas (i) the presence of a political community, a citizenry and (ii) the presence of a particular set of public buildings and civic amenities.²⁴ Although often somewhat tautological, such statements and descriptions allow us some insight into the criteria by which Greeks and Romans distinguished their poleis and civitates from other types of settlement. On occasion, the emic approach can seem misleading: the Greek travel writer Pausanias, writing during the Roman imperial period, noted that even an insignificant place like Panopeus in Phocis, Greece, which had no

²³ See Boone (2013) for an overview.

²⁴ Note e.g. Homer, *Il.* 1.1–305, 2.1–282 (the Greek army before Troy behaves like the popular assembly of a polis); *Od.* 2.1–259 (popular assembly on Ithaca); 9.105–115; Alcaeus fr. 28, fr. 112; Thuc. 7.77.4; Plato, *Leg.* 778a–779d (men make the polis); Homer *Od.* 6.262–8 (a description of the urban landscape of Scheria, polis of the Phaeacians), Lycurgus, *Leoc.* 150; Pausanias 10.4.1 (territory, buildings and amenities make the polis); Vergil, *Aen.* 1. 419–29, 441, 446–9, 505–9 (Roman vision of the city as consisting of public buildings, elective political institutions and laws and statutes projected on the mythical foundation of Carthage; see Edmondson (2006) 250); Dio Chrys., *Or.* 7 (vivid descriptions of civic buildings and an account of a lively popular assembly, with even poor herdsmen holding citizenship and participating); *CIL* 3.7000 (letter of the emperor Constantine to the town of Orcistus, stressing its civic character by referring to its large citizen population and splendid buildings and amenities).

8 Introduction: The Ancient City as Concept and Reality

public buildings at all, was in his day thought of as a polis (10.4.1), while a large and powerful polis like Classical Sparta arguably had no clearly defined urban centre (Thucydides 1.10.2).²⁵ On the whole, however, Greek and Roman sources do refer to either one, and often to both, of the two elements just mentioned (citizenry and urban core with public buildings and amenities) when describing poleis and civitates.²⁶

What, then, is a city? Given that, through application of a few very strict criteria to define urbanism, we often lose more, in cross-cultural terms, than we gain, and since a clear scientific definition of urbanism as a type of human nucleation behaviour still lies in the future (if indeed it will ever be forthcoming), it is probably best to work with concepts of urbanism, whether general or culture-specific (e.g. Greco-Roman urbanism), that are a bit fuzzy around the edges. One relatively useful strategy has already been mentioned, which was also successfully employed by Mogens Herman Hansen and his colleagues at the Copenhagen Polis Centre in their massive research project on the Archaic and Classical Greek polis, namely to focus on those settlements that the Greeks (and, for this book, Romans) themselves considered to be poleis (or *civitates*, *municipia*, or *coloniae*. . .).²⁷ Another, compatible approach is suggested by Glenn R. Storey in his introduction to a recent collection of papers on *Urbanism in the Preindustrial World*, namely to regard as cities those places which are considered to be cities by the majority of specialist scholars who study them, even if such sites ‘may not look like a city according to our modern standards’.²⁸ Though not ideal, these two strategies, when combined, in practice mostly suffice for the purpose of comparative research, and they also underlie my approach in this book.

What, though, was ‘the ancient city’? Can we actually, with any intellectual justification, speak of ‘Greco-Roman urbanism’, as I have done so far? My argument, in this book, is that we can, and the book itself is an attempt to provide a sketch of this particular type of urbanism. There were some essential differences between Greek and Roman cities, of course, and to some extent these will become apparent in subsequent chapters. Concepts of citizenship differed somewhat, for instance, with the Romans developing a far more legalistic notion (citizenship as a clear, legally defined set of duties and privileges), making it much easier for them to

²⁵ See Hansen (1997) 34–5 for a different view of Sparta.

²⁶ Hansen (2006) 56–65 on ‘the polis as city [i.e. with a clear urban core] and state’, though, contrary to Hansen, the fact that poleis (and civitates) were political communities does not necessarily make them ‘states’, see Chapter 9 for discussion.

²⁷ Hansen (2006) 56. ²⁸ Storey (2006a) 2.

admit foreigners and even freed slaves to the citizen body.²⁹ To mention some other differences, Roman centuriation practices arguably imply a far greater desire to control and administer the shape and division of civic territory than we can find among the Greeks³⁰, and Roman cities from the earliest days of imperialist expansion in Italy had been part of a hierarchy of strictly defined civic statuses, with each status implying a specific legal relationship with the city of Rome itself.³¹ On the whole, however, the similarities outweighed the differences, as I hope this book will make clear. Since this argument is essentially contained in the chapters that follow, I shall limit myself here to discussing briefly several famous earlier attempts to formulate a general ‘model’ of the ancient Greco-Roman city.

‘Roman cities were just like Greek cities’, Nicholas Purcell has recently written, referring to strong similarities in the manner of exploitation of territories, social structure, expressions of communal identity and urban landscapes. Purcell’s essay is mildly polemical, for, as he notes, ‘the idea that ancient urbanism should be taken as a single phenomenon . . . has not been popular among ancient historians’ even though ‘[i]t is familiar to archaeologists’. He justifiably singles out Frank Kolb’s major study of *Die Stadt im Altertum* as one important exception among more recent scholarship.³² However, for several important nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers, ‘the ancient city’, comprising both the Greek polis and the Roman civitas, was an analytical category of crucial significance. Here I refer primarily to Fustel de Coulanges, Max Weber and Moses Finley. For all three, delineating the contours of ‘the ancient city’ as an ideal type served to stress the essential *differences* between antiquity and modernity, and for each of them, emphasising these differences served a broader political and intellectual agenda.

The French historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges was provoked to write his *La Cité antique*, published in 1864, by the use Jacobin revolutionaries had made of ancient Greco-Roman examples to justify radically egalitarian policies.³³ In this he was a late representative of the *Idéologues*, a group of liberal intellectuals who in the decades around 1800 had already sharply criticised the Jacobin use of antiquity as inspiration for the (violent) reform of French society.³⁴ Greek and Roman mentality and institutions, Fustel argued, were irremediably different from

²⁹ E.g. Gauthier (1981). ³⁰ Though note Boyd and Jameson (1981).

³¹ Cornell (1995), esp. 345–52. ³² Purcell (2010) 579, 590; Kolb (1984).

³³ Fustel de Coulanges (2001) 5; Momigliano (1994) 169; Vlassopoulos (2007a) 30–1.

³⁴ Vlassopoulos (2007a) 30–1, 45–7.

10 Introduction: The Ancient City as Concept and Reality

those of later Europe. The ancient polis or civitas, according to Fustel, found its origin in a primordial, Indo-European notion of private property (which at a stroke also ruled out 'primitive communism' as mankind's pristine state, another revolutionary favourite).³⁵ Early Greeks and Romans worshipped their ancestors, who were spiritually located in the hearth of the household. Ancestor worship was therefore closely linked with the cult of Hestia or Vesta, the hearth-goddess. Given that this religion was centred on the family house and the family tomb, possession by the family of the house and its tomb and the land on which these stood was sacred and inalienable. Over time, the unification of families (*gentes*) into phratries, tribes and, ultimately, cities transferred these notions to the level of the community, exemplified by the cult of the civic hearth. Ancient cities, Fustel aimed to show, thus came into being in a way fundamentally alien to the medieval and early modern European urban experience.

The great German sociologist Max Weber was similarly preoccupied with the differences between Greco-Roman and medieval European cities, but in his case the preoccupation stemmed from his desire to explain the origins of European capitalist modernity. Although he would famously stress the role played by the Protestant Reformation in stimulating 'the spirit of capitalism' in northwestern Europe, the origin of European commercialism lay for Weber in the specific structures of the medieval city and the collective mentality of its burghers. In this he stood in a tradition going back, via Werner Sombart, Karl Bücher, Karl Marx and others, to Adam Smith.³⁶ Like the economist Bücher, who in 1893 had aroused the ire of contemporary ancient historians, above all Eduard Meyer, by contrasting the medieval 'city economy' (*Stadtwirtschaft*) and modern national economy (*Volkswirtschaft*) with what he called the ancient 'household economy' (*Hauswirtschaft*), Weber employed an ideal type of the ancient city to bring out, by contrast, the unique characteristics of the medieval city. Ancient cities, according to Weber, were in origin clubs of warrior-farmers, whose membership (citizenship) and political participation were predicated on their ownership of land in the community's territory, and who supplied their own armoury.³⁷ The ancient polis or civitas thus represented a union of town and country, and even when the cities became more 'democratic', admitting the landless to their citizen bodies, agrarian interests continued to reign supreme, as exemplified by

³⁵ Momigliano (1994) 169. ³⁶ Finley (1981a).

³⁷ Weber (1972) 809; see Martin (1994) 97–9 for a good short discussion of Weber's view of the ancient city.