URBAN LIFE IN THE DISTANT PAST

In this book, Michael E. Smith offers a comparative and interdisciplinary examination of ancient settlements and cities. Early cities varied considerably in their political and economic organization and dynamics. Smith introduces a coherent approach to urbanism that is transdisciplinary in scope, scientific in epistemology, and anchored in the urban literature of the social sciences. His new insight is “energized crowding,” a concept that captures the consequences of social interactions within the built environment resulting from increases in population size and density within settlements. Smith explores the implications of features such as empires, states, markets, households, and neighborhoods for urban life and society through case studies from around the world. Direct influences on urban life — as mediated by energized crowding — are organized into institutional (top-down forces) and generative (bottom-up processes). Smith’s volume analyzes their similarities and differences with contemporary cities and highlights the relevance of ancient cities for understanding urbanism and its challenges today.

Michael E. Smith is a Professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University. An archaeologist who has directed excavations at Aztec sites, he has forged a new approach to the scientific and comparative analysis of early cities based on transdisciplinary research projects that link ancient and contemporary urbanism. He has published fifteen books and more than 150 articles.
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Rubina Raja is Professor of Classical Archaeology at Aarhus University, Denmark, and Centre Director of the Danish National Research Foundation’s Centre of Excellence for Urban Network Evolutions. She specializes in Mediterranean and Near Eastern Archaeology in a diachronic perspective, often with a focus on urban societies.

Søren M. Sindbæk is Professor of Medieval Archaeology at Aarhus University, Denmark, and Co-Director of the Centre of Urban Network Evolutions. He specializes in Viking and early medieval Europe, with a focus on urbanism and social networks.

Michael E. Smith is Professor of Archaeology at Arizona State University and Director of the ASU Teotihuacan Research Laboratory in Mexico. He specializes in Aztec provincial archaeology and comparative urbanism.
URBAN LIFE IN THE DISTANT PAST

THE PREHISTORY OF ENERGIZED CROWDING

MICHAEL E. SMITH

Arizona State University
I dedicate this book to the memory of George Cowgill, who got me started in ancient urbanism as an undergraduate at Brandeis University.
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PREFACE

This book is the culmination of a career of comparative research on early cities. My professional trajectory has taken me from excavations of Aztec cities, towns, and villages in Mexico, to comparative studies of early urbanism in Mesoamerica and around the world, including a series of transdisciplinary urban projects that have tried to link early cities with urbanism today. As my work has proceeded, I have become increasingly convinced of two things. First, early cities have much to teach us about cities, settlements, and societies today; and, second, archaeological information about early cities has yet to be systematized, compared, or analyzed adequately. Yes, there are countless excellent studies about cities and urban systems in many regions. But the most important questions have not been answered. What are the general patterns of city growth, layout, and operation, and how are they manifested in the many unique cases? What are the overall trends through time? Most important for this book, what was life like in the cities of the distant past? How were cities shaped by their overall society, and how did cities, in turn, influence broader social phenomena?

These questions were on my mind in 2017 when I received an invitation to spend several months writing a book at the Centre for Urban Network Evolutions at Aarhus University in Denmark (“UrbNet”). The present volume is my attempt to answer these and other questions about cities before the modern era. The book serves several needs. It synthesizes a large amount of information on early cities around the world. It promotes a view of cities and societies that emphasizes the importance of population and social context. My key concept is “energized crowding,” which is the creative and generative process that results when people are concentrated together in cities. Energized crowding is important because it led to change and expansion in cities and settlements, and it helps explain many of the salient factors of cities, from social interactions and economic growth to crime and poverty.

This book is timely for several reasons. First, archaeologists now have much more data on early urbanism than ever before, resulting from both expanded fieldwork and new analytical techniques. Second, urbanism has become a dominant process in the world today, and the achievement of urban sustainability is a high priority for our species and the planet. Scholars and practitioners...
working on cities today need all the help they can get, and I believe that the record of early cities can contribute useful knowledge. This will only be possible, however, if archaeological (and historical) data are analyzed in an interdisciplinary fashion, following a scientific epistemology and taking advantage of a wide range of social scientific findings. Many of my archaeologist colleagues are content with particularistic local studies, interpreted from a nonscientific perspective. That is fine for some purposes, but if archaeology is going to take its place as a historical social science, we need analysis, synthesis, comparison, and quantification.

There are not many new archaeological finds reported in this book. Nevertheless, many well-known sites, buildings, and artifacts are given a new twist by putting them into an explicitly comparative framework. I include twenty-nine case studies, examples of sites chosen to illustrate particular points in the text. I take a broad view of urbanism, and archaeologists will find new material on ancient social, economic, political, and demographic patterns and how they relate to cities and settlements. I include longer discussions than one might expect in an urban book on topics like commercial economies, autocratic regimes, social inequality, collective action, and generative processes.

Scholars and students of urbanism who are not archaeologists will find data and descriptions of early cities that are intended to be accessible to social and natural scientists and humanities scholars. Readers who want to know about spectacular finds may be disappointed. I do mention the “Death pits” of Ur, the pyramids of Egypt and Mesoamerica, and the colossal architecture of capital cities from Persepolis to Teotihuacan. But, for me, such features are only interesting for the information they provide about ancient kings, urban planning, economic organization, and class structure.

This book began with my four-month stay in 2018 as a visiting researcher at UrbNet at Aarhus University in Aarhus, Denmark. I gave a series of lectures that formed the basis for the book, and I wrote three chapters during my stay. I wrote an additional chapter at UrbNet in 2019. UrbNet provided me with two able research assistants, Line Egelund and Nikoline Petersen, and a stimulating place to think and write. I thank the director and deputy director of UrbNet, Rubina Raja and Søren Sindbaek, for giving me the opportunity and support to get this book started. I also thank the community of faculty, postdocs, and students at UrbNet for good discussions and feedback as I presented my ideas. Hard questions from Johan S. Larsen and Felix Riede were especially appreciated. Christina Levisen, the UrbNet administrator, helped in many ways. My stay at UrbNet was supported by the Danish National Research Foundation under grant DNRF119 – Centre of Excellence for Urban Network Evolutions (UrbNet).

My experience working on transdisciplinary research projects has contributed to the development of the ideas in this book. As part of Late Lessons in
Early History, overseen by Sander van der Leeuw, a project on neighborhoods and open spaces developed into a grant-supported project on access to urban services. I thank the members of those projects – colleagues Christopher Boone, George Cowgill, Sharon Harlan, Barbara Stark, and Abigail York, and students and postdocs Wen-Ching Chuang, Timothy Denneyh, April Kamp Whittaker, Alexandra Norwood, Juliana Novic, and Benjamin Stanley – for expanding my understanding of urbanism and of transdisciplinary research (Chapter 7). The Social Reactors Project – Luis Bettencourt, Jose Lobo, Scott Ortman, and me – has been a productive, enlightening, and fun experience (Chapter 3). The Incipient Settlement Persistence Project is continuing this line of path-breaking research, and I thank Katherine Crawford, Nicolas Gauthier, Angela Huster, Jose Lobo, Matt Peeples, Ben Stanley, and Abigail York (Chapter 8). I have worked out the ideas in the book over many years of teaching my advanced undergraduate class, “The Earliest Cities,” and I thank students in that class for listening to me rant and for asking some good questions.

Many colleagues helped me with feedback on my case studies, saving me from many small errors (and a few big mistakes!). They are Adrian Chase (Tikal), Brian Byrd (Beidha), Matt Peeples (Southwestern pueblos), Sarah Klassen and Roland Fletcher (Angkor), Rubina Raja (Jerash), Soren Sindbaek (Ribe and Fyrkat), Federica Sulas (Swahili city-state capitals), Alan Covey (Huanuco Pampa), Anna Stevens (Amarna workers compound), Alexandra Sanmark (Thing sites), Erick Poehler (Pompeii), Lisa Nevett (Olynthus), Kirstine Haase (Odense), and Vincent Gabrielsen and David Blackman (Rhodes).

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various stages of preparation of the book. Rachel Paul copy edited the manuscript, and Sergey Lobachev of Brookfield Indexing compiled an excellent index.

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