Making Ancient Cities Plausible

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The state of archaeological research on ancient cities is presented in three edited volumes, and our understanding of ancient urbanism is undoubtedly advanced. Some venerable questions are renewed, including how and whether ancient cities differ from modern ones. However, the chapters consist mainly of narrowly focused aspects of ancient cities, and there are few interconnecting themes running through each volume. Future investigations of ancient cities will depend on an engagement with modern urban and social theory and from new kinds of comparative studies.

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“Cities occupy 3 percent of the Earth’s land surface, house 50 percent of the world’s population, generate about 75 percent of the world gross national product, consume 60 percent of the world’s water, and emit 80 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions” (Gladwin 2008:15). It is increasingly and obviously important to study cities, and there are dozens of books on my shelves about urban populations, entirely new cities, how urban life is shaped by networks of transportation and communication in cities and new landscapes of streets, parks, plazas, and vacant spaces, how identities

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of citizens are created, how economic opportunity and deprivation co-exist in cities, how governments plan or do not plan cities, how cities are imagined in literature. Such books include, for example, Calvino’s (1974[1972]) *Invisible Cities*, arguably the most cited book on cities; Alter (2005), Bridge and Watson (2000), and much else. As Salman Rushdie said, “The modern city is the locus classicus of impossible realities” (see Gladwin 2008:15).

Cities are in vogue in historical research, as in the informative and delightful accounts of the *City of Ghosts* (Salonica [Mazower 2004], the *Lion City* (about Venice [Wills 2001]), and *The Big Oyster* (about New York City [Kurlansky 2007]. Archaeological studies of cities, such as the most recent ones I have, on Tiwanaku (Janusek 2008), and Uruk (Liverani 2006), also abound, in addition to slightly older ones on Tikal, Teotihuacan, and Andean, Classical, Mesopotamian, Harappan, and other cities.

It was not always so. Although Aristotle (Everson 1988) famously wrote of city life, and there are ancient Chinese (Lewis 2006) and Indian treatises (Kenoyer 1998) on cities and how cities should be organized, and Ibn Khaldun (1969) wrote of dissolute cities and morally pure Bedouin sweeping in from the desert to set them right, Fustel de Coulanges (1864) in the 19th century more or less inaugurated modern studies of cities. The towering figure of Max Weber, surveying early cities from the Near East, India, and China (1958[1921]) first pondered the differences between ancient and modern cities, and M. I. Finley (1982, 1987–1989) continued this theme, concentrating on the ancient world in a series of studies (see Raaflaub 1990).

Urban sociologists of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s (e.g., Park and Burgess 1984[1925]; Wirth 1938; Redfield and Singer 1954) turned their attention to cities, mainly Chicago, and this greatly influenced archaeologists and ancient historians in Chicago, especially Robert Adams (Kraeling & Adams 1960; Adams 1966), who also responded to the founding figure of urban studies in archaeology, V. Gordon Childe (1950).

Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, as the work of Walther Christaller was translated into English (1966), archaeologists in Cambridge, United Kingdom (UK), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, and other places became fascinated by “central place theory” and urban geography more generally. Although Richard Blanton (1976) and Richard Fox (1977) wrote synthetic essays about cities, for a time archaeologists seem to have yielded comparative research on ancient cities to popular writers (e.g., Mumford 1960), historians (e.g., Wheatley 1971, Shama 1995), geographers (e.g., Sjoberg 1960) and sociologists (Eisenstadt and Schachar 1987). A reader on ancient cities, consisting of articles from *Scientific American* (Davis 1973) and excerpts from a book, *Man, Settlement and Urbanism* (Ucko, Tringham, & Dimbleby 1972) seems to have represented, minimally, archaeologists’ interests in cities. In recent years some archaeologists have looked to urban planners and postmodern urban geographers, such as Edward Soja (1996, 2000), for inspiration.
Now, the number of archaeological studies on cities has increased greatly, including a review of the field by George Cowgill (2004), conference proceedings (Nichols & Charlton 1998; Hansen 2000), and a book by Bruce Trigger, in part on cities (2004), various articles by Michael E. Smith (e.g., 2007), and my own contribution to the subject (Yoffee 2005).

The three edited books that I review here all treat aspects of early cities and have overlapping but different objectives. Glenn Storey’s (2006b) volume began as studies of the population of early cities, Smith’s (2003c) as an attempt to delineate what ancient cities have in common with modern cities since cities are “socially constructed,” and Marcus and Sabloff’s (2008) book seeks to discover the essential characteristics of the ancient city. There are strong essays in all of the books and interesting editorial introductions, and anyone interested in the topic needs to consult all three volumes. In the following review, I discuss all the chapters in the three volumes, but not necessarily in the order presented in the books. I devote occasional comments to issues that cross-cut the volumes, especially when on the same city or area of the world covered in different volumes. I conclude by considering some of the gains in knowledge that one gleans from the volumes as well some aspects of the study of cities that are not found in the volumes.

URBANISM IN THE PRE-INDUSTRIAL WORLD

Glenn Storey’s “Introduction: Urban Demography of the Past” (2006a), faithful to his original intent of considering the demography of cities, emphasizes the themes of population makeup, fertility, morbidity, and mortality in concise and informative introductions to the chapters in the volume. His main point seems to be that early cities were not “unrelieved landscapes of crowded human habitation” (2006a:23). Indeed, the density of many cities discussed in the book is surprisingly low. This leads to his final, surprising thought: “Human nucleation behavior into cities might be a form of group selection strategy that has proved eminently adaptable for humans and has fostered strong interspecific ties of cooperation” (2006b:23). None of the chapters leads to this conclusion, however, and most studies of cities, both ancient and modern, do not find cities as places of “cooperation.”

The concluding chapter of the volume, “Shining Stars and Black Holes: Population and Preindustrial Cities,” by Deborah Nichols (2006), repeats some of the main points of the chapters. The odd image of “shining stars” refers to the fascinating remains of cities, whereas the “black holes” connotes the “urban death traps” of infectious disease and other miseries characteristic of urban life. Nichols briefly discusses the issues of how population estimates are made (but readers of Don Rice’s [2006] chapter on the Maya and Elio Lo Cascio’s [2006] chapter on Rome will already have encountered the brutal realities of estimating the population of ancient cities). Nichols also mentions
discussions in several chapters of the relation between the countryside and cities. Rather than a synthesis of the volume or a critique of any claims made in it, this concluding chapter should be read as a kind of misplaced second introduction to the volume.


Although studies of Greece and Rome are obviously significant to any study of the “preindustrial” world, and those who study this slice of antiquity are increasingly anthropological (and Storey himself is a Romanist with a strong anthropological orientation), these chapters on the Classical world are not the best representatives for those wishing to know more about Greco-Roman cities. Morris’s (2006) chapter is an exception since it is something of an overview of Greek cities and, inevitably, of Morris’s own work (and that of Anthony Snodgrass). Morris’s chapter also introduces two themes cited sporadically in the volume, Max Weber’s notion of consumer cities, producer cities, and mercantile cities, the first being what Weber thought characterized ancient cities, and Roland Fletcher’s (1995) uniformitarian arguments about the interaction and communication limits of populations. Morris considers Greek cities mainly consumer cities, although he admits that Athens “resembles a producer city” in some periods. Morris does not follow Fletcher’s limits on the population of cities since he considers the form and structure of cities reflects the symbolic landscapes they present or represent.

There are two points in Morris’s chapter that especially interested me. First, he considers that Athens grew seven-fold in two generations in the late eighth century B.C.E. This rapid growth naturally led to significant changes in social structure. Morris also notes that huge Hellenistic cities, with populations in the several hundreds of thousands, were “primate” centers. This follows the ideas of Carol Smith (1976 and cited by Junker in this volume), who first discussed “dendritic” systems and argued that cities that were extremely prominent in their local systems (as first-order centers) were “primate” because they were connected to the outside world, either through trade or as colonial ports of entry. Thus, the growth of Hellenistic cities was not through a process of accumulating local forces.
The two chapters by Lo Cascio and Paine and Storey are part of a debate between the authors. On the one hand Lo Cascio considers Rome to have had an abundance of water and grain and deaths did not outnumber births. Paine and Storey, mainly using funerary inscriptions and literary evidence, find urban Rome experienced appalling living conditions with catastrophic mortality rates and was subject to various epidemics. Migration was the key to stable population levels. The chapter by Shaw, which follows these, describes the data from various Roman imperial places and finds that most deaths occurred in late summer and early fall, but with some significant differences in some locations. These three chapters are only notes on the nature of life and population structure in Rome. Similarly, the other chapter on Roman times, Bagnall’s on Roman Egypt, presents some new data on the demography of Upper Egypt which, it turns out, differs from Middle Egypt. Of course, Bagnall and Bruce Frier (1994) wrote an entire book on the population of Roman Egypt, so this is just an update on that work. These chapters are not vademecums of urban life in the Roman world.

The two chapters that close this section could not be more different. Petersen, Bolsen, and Paine’s is on medieval Danish towns—so small that calling them cities stretches the point considerably—discussing demographic and mainly osteological findings, such as that migrants were a bit taller than the towns’ settled folk. Rothschild’s chapter on colonial and immediately postcolonial New York, ca. 1628–1880, by contrast offers a welcome richness in data and theory.

Rothschild’s (2006:124) chapter considers, if briefly, many salient questions about early cities, how they develop, how they organize the regional system in which they play central a central role, how the various parts of the city cohere or aspire to cohere, and how families and households “reflect, reject, and make the personal conditions and events in the wider sphere” meaningful in their lives. One wishes that the other studies of cities in this volume would have started with these questions.

In some ways New York (meaning Manhattan since the other boroughs were separate places; Brooklyn was the fourth largest city in the United States in 1860) may not be a typical city since it was founded de novo by the Dutch in 1628. Its population grew rapidly at some times but not as explosively as in the times when mass migrations occurred. Rothschild considers that one factor of growth was the opening of the Erie Canal, which greatly expanded New York’s hinterland. She also reports on the transformations of landscape through the leveling of hills and the construction of buildings that necessarily altered the daily lives and practices of people. New York changed from a city that “faced” Europe early on to one that was oriented inland. Rothschild further discusses how space was sorted by wealth and unemployment and by ethnic enclaves. She shows how perceptions of class were as important as actual wealth and status since the “dregs” of a notoriously lower-class
neighborhood used tableware and tea sets that emulated those of the middle class. The best tableware was found in a brothel.

The chapter by Chapurukha Kusimba, Sibel Barut Kusimba, and Batunde Agbaje-Williams, “Precolonial African Cities: Size and Density” (2006) along with Bagnall’s chapter on Roman Egypt, represent Storey’s section, “Urban Society on the African Continent.” Naturally, the Kusimbas and Agbaje-Williams had an impossible charge to survey all the urban forms in all of Africa for all of “preindustrial” time. Their essay is a valuable introduction to the subject. The authors show that claims about harsh environment (of poor soils and inadequate rainfall) and endemic diseases in sub-Saharan Africa preventing or retarding urbanism must be re-thought. Cities are found in the Egypt, Meroe, Axum, Oyo, Jene-jeno, and other places. Some are huge, 50 square kilometers, and with tens of thousands of inhabitants (as in their example of Old Oyo).


Liu’s chapter is both a report on her work at the site of Erlitou, a reprise of the some of the central ideas of her recent book with Chen Xingcan (2003), and a discussion of aspects of early urbanism and states in China. In the last decade or two our knowledge of the archaeology of China has exploded, because Chinese archaeologists are now publishing in English, having studied in England or the USA (like Liu Li who is a professor in Australia), and because so much work is being done in China. This chapter discusses the site of Erlitou, about 300 ha, and its estimated population of around 24,000 in the period 1900–1500 B.C.E. Some have thought that this is the late capital of the Xia dynasty of the much later historical records, but the whole question of correlating dynasties with the archaeological record is debated by Chinese archaeologists. Liu discusses areas of craft production, both of high status items like bronzes, more utilitarian wares, and also the procurement of more distant resources by Erlitou’s rulers.

Sarah Nelson sketches findings at Kyongju, capital of the Silla state of Korea, ca. 57 B.C.E.–935 C.E., a modest city of about a million inhabitants, influenced by the Tang dynasty of China in various ways and the historical records of the site and state. Laura Lee Junker reviews the evidence for large maritime cities whose growth and nature depended less on their hinterlands, apparently, than on their connections to trade with China and India. The large if dispersed population of Melaka depended on ships of rice from Burma for basic subsistence. Some important cities like Srivijaya, much mentioned in historical sources, defy discovery.

Considerably more is known about the cities depicted in “Urban Centers of the New World,” Storey’s next section, which includes chapters by John

Janusek and Blom have worked and published recent volumes about the site and state of Tiwanaku. They resume the question about how Andean and South American cities were or were not regal-ritual cities, that is, centers of ceremony and of governance but not densely populated. Whereas they find that Tiwanaku and other cities were “magnet centers of feasting and ceremony” (2006:234), there were also residential neighborhoods, areas of craft production, and a diversity of people at Tiwanaku, some of whom were related (being members of macro-extended families or *ayllu*) to those in the countryside. If there were not professional traders at Tiwanaku, goods were exchanged in times of pilgrimage, celebrations of the rituals of state, and feasting.

Rice reviews the problems and gains in understanding the population of Maya cities (Culbert & Rice 1990). Although the largest Maya cities “are at the low end of [population] density when considering the range of preindustrial cities” (G. Storey 1992), they are far from being vacant ceremonial centers. Some Maya cities were planned as “cosmograms,” reflecting Maya beliefs that cities were, in effect, the cosmos, with an axis connecting the heavens with the underworld (north and south portions of the site), and ball courts and complexes were arranged in quadrants by *sacbe* (raised thoroughfares).

Teotihuacan, in the Basin of Mexico, is perhaps the archaeologically best-known city in the world (see Cowgill 2007), but in this volume little of this richness is displayed. Rebecca Storey summarizes in her chapter a small part of her important bio-anthropological work at Teotihuacan on population growth then demographic crisis. Gorenflo reviews the early surveys of Sanders, Parsons, and Santley (1979), which allow a picture of urban growth and change at Teotihuacan and its region.

The last section of the book is entitled “Cross-Cultural Synthesis,” but the two essays, including the last chapter by Deborah Nichols that I have already discussed and the penultimate chapter by David Small, “Factoring the Countryside into Urban Populations” (2006) do not provide anything like a synthesis. Small’s chapter is a reminder that cities require countrysides for food, people migrate from the countryside to cities, and most importantly that people in the countryside in their various settlements with their distinctive social organizations often resist giving cities what they need. Small presents five very brief case studies, the longest on the Maya city of Copan. He does not resume Rice’s chapter’s question of whether the “collapse” of Late Classic Maya cities might be a result of urban-rural tensions.
In sum, this book provides disparate observations about aspects of the populations of preindustrial cities. Most of the chapters are either fragments of other debates, or they presuppose knowledge of the cities’ structures, origins, and changes in order to place the demographic issues in context.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CITIES

If the concluding chapters in Storey’s volume offered little in the way of synthesis, Monica L. Smith’s volume, *The Social Construction of Ancient Cities* (2003c), employs no synthesizer at all. Instead, Smith (2003a) provides a valuable and well-written prologue that not only introduces the chapters but also lays out some new and pertinent concerns for the study of ancient cities. This book began as a symposium at the Society of American Archaeology in 1999, and some of the chapters seem inevitably dated to a reviewer writing nearly ten years later.

Smith presents two major theses and one controversial claim about ancient cities. First, she argues that cities are significantly constructed by households and neighborhoods, and the survival of cities depends on the urban interactions that ensure benefits for citizens beyond the managerial capacities of rulers. This bottom-up approach to cities is naturally in the mainstream of modern anthropological thinking.

Second, Smith contends that “ancient and modern cities are the result of a limited range of configurations that structure action in concentrated populations” (2003a:2) and that “components of cities in the past and present are similar” (2003a:4). These similarities are as follows:

1. there is no real boundary between an “urban edge” and the hinterland of cities, and there is an economic interdependence between cities and hinterlands;
2. some hinterlands, however, are very distant, and exotic goods got from hinterlands and through long-distance trade function as social markers;
3. city life is attractive to bucolics;
4. there is a new organization of space in cities, with broad avenues and plazas, architecture that is symbolic of the urban order, and neighborhoods that form around occupational specializations;
5. people exchange information in cities, and this leads to innovations;
6. there is a certain consensuality in cities as inhabitants find they are better off when they exchange goods;
7. new identities are open to people in cities;
8. the countryside is restructured in response to urban needs and demands.

But what is a city? Although Smith (wisely) does not define the city, she cites approvingly Childe’s list of ten traits of cities and then discusses six of
them. She finds those traits listed by Childe “elastic” (2003a:9), so that there is a perceptible difference between urban and hinterland activities, namely a qualitative distinction between city and non-city. This is the “you know it when you see it” (2003a:9) definition of a city, rather like the U.S. Supreme Court’s definition of pornography. Furthermore, Smith does not think there is only one cause for the origin of cities, with many push and pull factors (2003a:11, like disasters in the countryside, war, or ideology) operating. Surprisingly, as least for me, Smith asserts that “cities do not require a state level of political authority to exist and thrive” (2003a:12).

In my review of the chapters in this volume, I return to Smith’s claim that ancient and modern cities are similar sorts of things, that cities are constructed from the bottom up, and that there are cities without states. Although in Smith’s book there is no organization of chapters by geographical area I impose one here for the purpose of this review.


Emberling’s presentation of his research at Tell Brak in northern Mesopotamia or modern Syria at the SAA meeting in 1999 must have been dramatic. For decades the received wisdom was that the first Mesopotamian cities appeared in the southern part of Iraq, the first or at least best known
city being Uruk, acknowledged as a city in the Middle Uruk period at about 3500 B.C.E. Now, work at Brak has shown that the site was about 45 hectares in the Early Uruk period (around 4000 B.C.E.) and about 100 hectares at the time Uruk first flourished. In the years after the SAA meeting much work has been done at Brak, including new settlement surveys of the region. Emberling thinks that people from the countryside migrated to Brak and came to form a community of citizens. This very Weberian theme of identity formation in cities fits well Smith’s ideas of the “social construction” of cities.

Zeder’s chapter on sites in northern Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C.E. continues her work on the “feeding of cities” in Mesopotamia (e.g., Zeder 1991). Dense populations of people need to be provisioned by farmers in the countryside. Increasing reliance on domesticated animals is key to the provisioning of cities. She discusses how the “lower town” at Tell Leilan, that is, the residential, non-elite section of the site, relied on pigs, which constituted about 50 percent of the sources for meat. In the “upper town” 34 percent of the sources were also pigs, but in this elite section there were, in addition to a lot of sheep, also some gazelles and wild fowl, apparently the preferences of the privileged.

Kathryn Keith’s chapter moves down in time to the early second millennium and south to the heartland of Mesopotamia. Her work is an excerpt from her dissertation (1999), which is an exhaustive treatment of households and neighborhoods in Old Babylonian cities. Keith employs both archaeological materials on the nature of houses and the plan of sites and texts, many previously unstudied, which report on activities of the householders. Many important observations result: “kitchens” do not have to be in any particular room and can be in courtyards or even on roofs; if some houses do not seem very large, although their owners appear to be wealthy (as depicted in texts), this is because rich individuals owned houses in both the city and countryside and even in other cities. The size of a single house is not an indicator of the wealth of the owner. Keith also discusses how neighborhoods are constituted and the kinds of materials supplied by palaces and temples which were in turn owed obligations by citizens.

The New World section includes Cowgill’s essay on Teotihuacan, one of many he has written recently (e.g., 2007). In keeping with the theme of the book, he summarizes data about apartment complexes and enclaves of foreigners. He meditates about the “attractiveness” of the city, which is also characterized by a lack of sanitation facilities and the high mortality of citizens (which was discussed by Rebecca Storey in the first volume under review).

In the first of two lengthy and informative chapters on Maya cities, Yaeger (2003:23) considers Xunantunich, which was “not a densely nucleated city,” a kind of “imagined community” (using Benedict Anderson’s [1991] well-worn term). For Yaeger this means that folk in the hinterland were connected by ritual and exchange in Xunantunich and so formed part of its community. Houston et al. stress that there is in fact no word for city in Mayan
and that cities are referred to as places of residence of the ruler. Consistent with Rice’s chapter in Storey’s book and Yaeger’s chapter, which note the lack of urban density, the authors adopt the term “ruralized cities.” This chapter focuses on the royal foundation of the city of Piedras Negras, the moral authority of the ruler, and failure of that authority which led to its collapse.

The two chapters on South America explore different themes. Moore’s chapter on Chan Chan is about the famous “ciudadelas,” the locations of royal burials of kings who maintained institutionalized power after death, and how the site lacked a center. The “social order . . . was expressed by concealment, and the constructed labyrinths [ciudadelas] . . . hid the apotheosis of kings” (2003:97). This chapter, like Houston et al., is not about how neighborhoods constructed behavior in cities. The other chapter on South America is by Attarian, who reports his dissertation research at Mocollope, a small site in the Moche culture area that precedes the Moche city and state. He presents four hypotheses that needed testing and then got tested. Nearby small sites were abandoned as Mocollope grew, pottery styles at Mocollope changed. This is taken as an “ethnogenesis,” a new form of identity constructed by the migrants who moved into the town.

The chapter by McIntosh and Keech McIntosh is one of many that one or the other or both have written on Jenne-jeno (e.g., Susan McIntosh 1999). They discuss how the first millennium site in the Middle Niger, perhaps up to 100 hectares in size, and perhaps with 10,000 people, shows little sign of any central authority, and there may have been resistance to such central power. Lacking vertical stratification, there was only horizontal stratification (and specialization). Power presumably lay in “occult access to knowledge” (2003:115). This is the first example in this book of what Smith considers as a city without a state.

The other example of cities without states is in Smith’s chapter on Indian walled cities. These cities (or towns?) form “small worlds.” Smith means by this that there were “links” among the various segments of citizens, that “social stability” increased in these sites, and that the sites themselves were “attractive to large numbers of people” (2003b:270). These walled settlements of the “Early Historic period,” ca. first few centuries C.E., could be quite large, over 100 ha, but Smith finds “few other data to support an interpretation of hierarchical social organization” (2003b:279). However, there is evidence of long-distance trade, and some level of management might be inferred from the fortifications themselves. If there were rulers (and thus a state?), Smith still finds the walled cities constituted an “architecture of consensus” (2003b:282). Territorial states emerged soon after this period.

The chapter on China by Chen Shen takes us to the Western Zhou, 771–221 B.C.E. This was a time of “feudal states,” meaning not much in the way of territorial states, but micro-states, which were walled and in which marketplaces were significant institutional features alongside palaces and state-run enterprises. It was in this period, that Confucian traveling
knight-intellectuals went among city-states (or micro-states) to offer their advice about how states should function.

This book provides interesting if disparate studies of cities that were regal-ritual in nature, those that were densely populated, and those in which mercantile activities were fundamental. Several chapters are concerned with how ideological transformations that justified kingship and the state occurred in cities. Although Smith has claimed that cities can exist without states, this does not describe most of the cities discussed in the volume (and is debatable in the other cases; see discussion of von Falkenhausen below). Smith’s advocacy of city life as offering “benefits” and reflecting “consensus” to citizens tends to contradict her proposition that ancient cities are like modern ones, since many or most studies of modern cities reflect on the poverty, misery, and disease among the majority of urban dwellers.

**THE ANCIENT CITY**

*The Ancient City: New Perspectives on Urbanism in the Old and New World*, edited by Mesoamerican archaeologists Joyce Marcus and Jeremy Sabloff (2008), was developed from a conference in May, 2005, in Washington, DC, USA. The editors had the resources to bring in senior scholars from the U.K. and Denmark as well as noted American archaeologists. Almost all of the veteran participants have written many essays and books on their favorite ancient city as well as other studies of cities. The resulting book is informative and authoritative if also, well, stodgy, hardly glancing at modern themes about ancient cities, such as landscape studies or on the construction of identities in cities. Although the editors focus on new research from excavations and surveys, this book is poorly illustrated. The editors regret that the richness of images presented at the conference could not be reproduced in this publication. Had they set up a website so that the illustrations could be displayed, this matter could have been addressed easily.

The book is divided into four parts: “The City’s Past and Future” (which consists of the editors’ introduction); “Overviews and Commentary on the Case Studies,” which includes “broad overviews” by Colin Renfrew (2008) and Bruce Trigger (2008) and discussions of the case studies by Mogens Herman Hansen (2008) and Karl Butzer (2008); “Case Studies”; and finally “Central Themes and Future Directions,” that is, the editors’ own final thoughts.

The introduction by the editors (Marcus & Sabloff 2008a) is not quite as essentialist as the book title conveys, the ancient city. The title is of course a reference to Fustel’s book, *La cité antique* (1864), and the editors discuss his idea that ancient cities (meaning those in Greece and Rome) were founded through common worship of gods and ancestors; cities were centers of ceremony and ritual. Although the editors do not agree with this, they write that “diversity is not infinite” and so one can justify the type of “the ancient city” (2008a:4).
The editors review much literature on the study of cities, especially four models of cities developed by the University of Chicago sociologists working in the 1920s and 1930s. However, they do not cite Max Weber, whose work on cities was the inspiration of the Chicago sociologists. They also do not follow the influence of these sociologists on other Chicagons, notably Robert Adams, and also Paul Wheatley (although they cite Wheatley’s neo-Fustelian emphasis on the foundation of the city in ceremony). They also do not cite M. I. Finley’s many essays and books on ancient cities, in part as a commentary on Weber’s view of “consumer cities” in antiquity, and the copious literature that refers, rebuts, and otherwise comments on Finley (Raafalaub 1990).

The editors recite a range of definitions of the city. They find that cities have a sense of placeness (which notion is central to Weber’s work on cities), they are large, dense, and crowded, and in them there is a differentiation of roles, “heterogeneity,” hierarchies of various sorts, a central focus. Cities are in defensible locations, are symbolic of order in an unruly landscape, are a “microcosm of the cosmos,” and have a relation with the countryside.

As to the last, although the editors cite various Chicagons who discuss rings of land use in and around cities, they do not consider the works of von Thuenen, who first delineated such land use, not the various studies of locational geographers Christaller, Loesch, and Berry (who was at the conference but apparently declined to submit a paper for the volume; Berry & Wheeler 2005), although these are obviously known to the editors. The introduction is a partial history of research on ancient cities.

The editors devote a short but welcome section to “native” or emic views of cities. They briefly cite Yoruba, Aztec, Zapotec, and Maya terms and concepts (but see Houston in Smith’s book for a different view of Maya words for city). Since they are New World scholars, they do not consider Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Indian, Chinese, or other interesting ideas about ancient cities (but see comments below on von Falkenhausen & Wheatley).

Marcus argues, as she has done in several other places, that “city-states” are the products of the collapse of large, territorial states. This does not work well in my view (which she does not cite here, Yoffee 1998, 2005, for what it may be worth), since, for example, neither Greek nor Mesopotamian city-states devolved from territorial states. She prefers the term “micro-state” to the offending term of “city-state.”

Colin Renfrew’s overview, “The City through Time and Space: Transformations of Centrality,” is in sympathy with Monica Smith’s notion that preindustrial cities have much in common with modern cities. He provides his own trait list of commonalities of cities that includes fortifications, neighborhoods, axial principles of layout, temples, palaces, craft production areas, burial places, and places for games and assemblies. He does note, however, that there are exceptions to the list; for example, Harappan cities “fall outside the generalizations usually made about urban society” (2008:50). Renfrew cites and expands on his earlier notions of “peer-polity interactions” among “early state modules.”
Bruce Trigger, critically ill and unable to attend the conference, submitted an essay, “Early Cities: Craft Workers, Kings, and Controlling the Supernatural” (Trigger and another contributor to the volume, Craig Morris, subsequently died, and the book is dedicated to them). If Trigger agrees with Renfrew on the commonality of cities, ancient and modern, it is because of their “psychic unity” (which he also discusses in his recent book [2004]).

The other two essays in this section are described as commentaries on the subsequent case studies. Mogens Herman Hansen (“Analyzing Cities”), editor of the big book on city-states (2000), presents a familiar critique of trait-list approaches to the definition of cities and notes that only two chapters in this volume do not mention city-states, Morris’s chapter on the Inka, and von Falkenhausen’s on first millennium China. His references to Weber and Finley, even if only in passing, remind us of their importance. Hansen finds some cities, for example in the Maya region, to be dispersed, whereas cities in other regions are quite densely populated.

Karl Butzer’s essay, “Other Perspectives on Urbanism: Beyond the Disciplinary Boundaries,” is much more than a commentary. “Cityscapes project more than power, wealth, and style. They also reflect cultural values and the rituals of public, social behavior, while accommodating the pushes and pulls of social segregation and aggregation” (2008:82). Although Butzer does refer to some of the case studies in this volume, he writes about cities from Aix-la-Chapelle to Antioch and Axum. He advocates that “urban archaeology should not be part of a Western meta-narrative” (2008:83) in which bureaucracies, power, and “Eurocentric rationalism” are the main “commonalities” of cities. For Butzer, for example, the “Islamic city has no…counterpart in the ethnographic present” (2008:91). Those who think that “the city” is more or less the same thing, everywhere and through time, miss the most interesting qualities of cities and their histories.

Section three consists of ten case studies, the first two on Roman cities. Janet DeLaine (2008, in “Between Concept and Reality: Case Studies in the Development of Roman Cities in the Mediterranean”) compares three cities with diverse origins, Ostia, near Rome, Lepcis Magna, originally a Phoenician colony on the Libyan coast, and Ephesos, in Anatolia. She depicts the transformations of the cities through “Roman global identity...a unifying concept of the city, but through the filter of local tradition and realities...all forms of identity were simultaneously possible within the urban-based empire of Rome” (2008:118). Michael J. Jones (2008) discusses new Roman cities in “Urban Foundation, Planning, and Sustainability in the Roman Northwest Provinces.” Although the Romans thought they were bringing civilization (civitas) and civilized living (urbanitas) to the barbarians, “tribal leaders” shared “the political and material benefits of contact with the empire” (2008:139). According to Jones, “aristocracy created Roman cities” (2008:140).

In “A Tale of Two Cities: Lowland Mesopotamia and Highland Anatolia,” Elizabeth Stone (2008), the most frequent commentator on
Mesopotamian cities (and see Van De Mieroop [1997] for an indispensable overview of Mesopotamian cities), compares two sites she (and her teammates) have excavated, Mashkan-shapir in southern Mesopotamia, dating to around 1850 B.C.E., and Ayanis in Turkey, an Urartian site of the first millennium B.C.E. She finds the former, which was founded by a king of the city of Larsa as a second capital and northern fortress against his Babylonian enemies, to exhibit “corporate power strategies,” that is, have various centers of power and authority. Ayanis, on the other hand, represents “exclusionary” strategies, meaning under the control of a king and his court.

In comparison to Stone’s chapter, which focuses on two sites, and mainly on the new finds at Ayanis, Kathryn Bard (2008) presents a broad overview of Egyptian cities (in “Royal Cities, Cult Centers, Administrative Towns, and Workmen’s Settlements in Ancient Egypt”). Egypt consists basically of the delta and the narrow strip of floodplain from Cairo to Aswan, and this may be considered as a whole as, according to Barry Kemp, “one large city.” Indeed, the ancient word for Egypt, Kemet, is formed with the hieroglyphic sign for city! For the most part these cities functioned as a network directed by the king and his court.

Similarly, Jonathan Mark Kenoyer (2008) in “Indus Urbanism: New Perspectives on Its Origin and Character” and Lothar von Falkenhausen (2008) in “Stages in the Development of ‘Cities’ in Pre-Imperial China” present tours d’horizon of cities in South Asia and China. Kenoyer, a leader of the Harappa excavation team who has written extensively about Indus cities (e.g., 1997, 1998), focuses on the site and challenges gradualistic scenarios of its development. Kenoyer emphasizes his previous suggestions that the various mounds constituting Indus sites are loci of competing elites and their followers, and that there is “not a single central-administrative center” (2008:209) in these cities.

Von Falkenhausen’s chapter is one of the most interesting and provocative in the volume. For von Falkenhausen there are no “full cities” until the time just before the first imperial organization in China (beginning in 221 B.C.E.). That is, previous “cities” had no distinctive legal status (a position of Weber’s), meaning that they didn’t stand “culturally apart from surrounding rural areas” (2008:224) nor were these “cities” centers of commerce with citizens independent from the ruler’s court. There is an irony in his argument: von Falkenhausen rightly discusses distinctive Chinese ways of delimiting cities, but then adopts a Western approach to the definition of Chinese cities. Thus, Anyang (Yinxu), a site of more than 30 square km at about 1200 B.C.E., with a population of more than 100,000 and with extreme degrees of stratification and specialization was, for von Falkenhausen, not a “full city” (2008:212).

But why cannot early cities in China simply be different from later cities in China and also different, in significant respects, from cities elsewhere? Von
Falkenhausen’s own discussion leads, it seems to me, to this conclusion. He writes that spatial control by rulers in the early cities was less important than “ritual enactments” that “reaffirmed the internal hierarchy of human relationships within kin groups” (2008:230). This follows the views of K.-C. Chang (1981) who stressed the distinctiveness of early Chinese cities. Von Falkenhausen points out that early Chinese palaces and monumental buildings did not require large investments in labor and material, and this meant that the early cities could be (and were) ephemeral. The transitory nature of Shang (and pre-Shang) capitals also depended on the fragility of power of the rulers of the cities of the second millennium. Even the enormous might of these rulers could not be maintained and reproduced for much more than a century.

Chapurukha M. Kusimba (2008), whose chapter in Smith’s edited volume I have already reviewed, discusses here too “Early African Cities: Their Role in the Shaping of Urban and Rural Interaction Spheres.” He begins with the same themes as he did in the Smith volume, namely that those who thought that the environment and diseases “discouraged” African urbanism are not up-to-date. He focuses on the relations of cities with the countryside and with the role of trade in the growth of cities, especially in East Africa, both with the Indian Ocean communities and internal trade with their hinterlands.

K. Anne Pyburn (2008), in “Pomp and Circumstance before Belize: Ancient Maya Commerce and the New River Conurbation,” maintains that “commercialism [w]as a stimulus to the development of ancient Maya cities” (2008:249) though it was not a prime mover. Even in small sites with abundant natural resources, the amount of imported goods is impressive and thus “consumption” must be explained. From her work in Belize she considers the nature of “smallholders” (Netting 1993), who had incentives to produce surplus. Problems ensued when elites’ needs for goods affected the basic subsistence strategies of these smallholders.

Kenneth Hirth (2008) argues that the concept of cities as “integrated autonomous communities” or “bounded communities” does not fit cases in Aztec and pre-Aztec central Mexico (in “Incidental Urbanism: The Structure of the Prehispanic City in Central Mexico”). His chapter should be read in conjunction with von Falkenhausen’s on China, since both insist on native or emic delineations of city (and have the documents to do that), and they insist that Western concepts are inappropriate. Of course, the largest cities in the region, like Tenochtitlan, are densely nucleated (with 100,000 or more people), have central palaces and temples, marketplaces, sumptuous homes, and neighborhoods. Most cities are, however, much smaller (ca. 10,000 people) and were parts of an altepetl, a polity that included often non-contiguous areas. Residence was not the defining matter of a citizen, and more important were the obligations to the altepetl. Xochicalco, ca. 650–900 C.E., was four square km, with a central core consisting of a palace,
ball courts, marketplace, and administrative building, but there were also outlying “system mounds” that were administrative complexes for the cellular, “segmental and heterarchical” nature of the altepetl.

Urbanism was “incidental” and “epiphenomenal” in Central Mexico, since cities were the by-product of administrative units and corporate responsibilities that were not necessarily defined by residence. Although Hirth claims that there is no word for city in Nahuatl (2008:280), it seems that names for an altepetl could also describe the capital of the polity, and there were words for city (Michael Smith, personal communication). In Hirth’s example, this seems the case both for the administrative unit and the city that crystallized within it (as the Xochicalco example seems to show). Although I am not a specialist in Mexican history, I would like to note, for the sake of comparison, that there is only one word for city in Mesopotamian languages (uru in Sumerian, ālu in Akkadian), and it refers to large and small settlements and entire city-states. Hirth notes that Xochicalco was “segmental” in structure, with various units of authority. Also, in Mesopotamia there were semi-autonomous elites who had responsibilities to the central government, but whose elders made decisions in local legal matters and sometimes worked to subvert the wishes of the rulers. Perhaps it is Hirth’s idea that “urban character” (2008:275) requires a highly centralized and geographically tightly bounded structure that leads to his conclusions of Mesoamerican emic uniqueness.

Craig Morris’s chapter (2008), “Links in the Chain of Inka Cities: Communication, Alliance, and the Cultural Production of Status, Value, and Power,” is a portrait of the site of Huanuco Pampa, a three-square-km site with 497 storehouses in rows which he excavated and also of La Centinela, which he had studied. The former was an “administrative city” founded by the Inkas, and it was visited by many people bringing tribute and witnessing ceremonies in the main plazas. The resident population may have been outnumbered by transients. La Centinela was the capital of a region conquered by the Inka. They were both part of an enormous chain of sites linked “to produce patterns of human interaction that added status to individuals and value to goods” (2008:321). Morris is gently skeptical of calling “very large architectural complexes . . . predating even the use of pottery” in the Andes “cities” (2008:320), but there is no doubt that in the Inka empire cities were critical nodes of governance.

The final chapter, “Cities and Urbanism: Central Themes and Future Directions,” is by the editors, Marcus and Sabloff (2008b:325), who decline to “recapitulate the results . . . and insights in” foregoing chapters. They advance certain main themes “that should be productive avenues for future research” (2008b:325). These concern urban planning, the constituent parts of cities such as neighborhoods, the history of cities, specialization in cities, the relation of cities to their countryside, and how useful texts can be alongside archaeological evidence. Although there is little new theoretically
in this list, the learned editors provide a variety of interesting snapshots of ancient cities.

CONCLUSION

It is appropriate to conclude with an appreciation for the substantial gain in knowledge represented by these three edited volumes. However, the worth of any collection of essays depends greatly on the quality of the concluding synthesis and critical comparison of examples presented, and the editors of these volumes, in one way or another, avoid these responsibilities.

Although I cannot provide a synthesis of 46 chapters in this review, I do wish to point out some aspects of the study of ancient urbanism that are important subjects in anthropological theory but are not well represented in these volumes. First, the cities portrayed in these volumes for the most part seem abstractions, lifeless, and unconcerned with the lived experience of citizens. Many of the chapters and the editorial introductions and commentaries, too, tend to be functionalist, viewing cities as providing a benign cohesion of their parts. But everything we know about cities, including what is said or implied in many chapters, is that they are composed of significant differences in neighborhoods, ethnolinguistic groups, migrants, and above all classes, and these differences lead to tensions, struggles, violence, and forms of cruelty. Warfare, a fact of life in every city and every state, is largely absent from these pages.

Whereas most anthropologists are concerned with how space is socially constructed (as Monica Smith has admirably set as the focus of her volume), in these essays we seldom meet the everydayness of social life, how urban landscapes are constructions of domination, what meaning materials have in people’s lives, how imagination takes place through the sensory input of material forms, how practices reproduce or transform social structures, how people are members of each others’ worlds. James Deetz (1977) demonstrated how archaeologists could write history in the study of nails, knives, pipes, lamps, jewelry, and other “small things.” Have urban archaeologists forgotten this enduring lesson?

The cities in these chapters, most of which are written by card-carrying anthropologists, are curiously under-theorized. It is not only that we miss references to *habitus* and *doxa* from Bourdieu, actor network theory from Latour, or how ancient materialist-idealist debates are being zestfully dissolved in current anthropological thinking about material culture. We need to know about the active role of materials and monuments in shaping lives and thoughts, which can be seen most recently in the urban studies of Dawdy (2008) and Beard (2006).

Although Monica Smith asserted that modern and ancient cities were much alike in their “city-ness,” this still needs to be explored in at least
two perhaps dialectical ways. First, we must heed Karl Butzer’s caution that it is all too easy to transpose Western categories of city-ness on non-Western, pre-industrial cities. This caution includes a qualitative judgment that city-ness can become an abstract and empty category, whereas the color and form of invented and distinctive institutions in cities, the brilliant art and architecture along with the smelliness and noisiness, the filth and alternately swampy condition of cities, and the very shape of cities that reflect cosmologies are just the most interesting things about them.

Second, any comparison of early cities with modern ones needs to be taken seriously. We can learn from our colleagues in historical archaeology (like Nan Rothschild, see above, and Cantwell and diZerega Wall [2001]) and in urban geography (Bridge & Watson 2000) how to imagine cities as loci of alienation, degradation, and repression, as well as of stratification and social mobility. We need to appreciate cities as locations of ruins, vacant spaces, and abandoned areas, as well as of public ceremonies that intend to co-opt subaltern beliefs and rituals. We must also envision how ancient cities, like modern ones, are embedded both in their own countrysides and in a larger world of cities. If, in the end, as Wheatley has suspected, early cities are—in the most important ways—not like modern cities, at least the comparison will lead us to explain why this is the case.

Cities are not things or essences but points-of-entry into modern archaeological, general anthropological, and historical topics of what changed in the “urban revolution,” a revolution that is far from over. It is good to build on the traditional ways of studying cities, as these volumes depict, but one also anticipates the infusion of newer ideas, fresh work by scholars whose perspectives have not been overdetermined in traditional archaeology graduate programs. Let interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary conversations among those studying urbanism flourish.

Finally, I have limited my remarks to the archaeological studies in the three volumes. There are naturally other archaeological studies of cities, and I have indicated some of them as well as a few studies of urbanism in various fields that are relevant to the study of ancient cities. These three volumes can perhaps best be regarded as signposts on a long road to making ancient cities less invisible, and their investigation, for lack of a better word, plausible. There’s a lot to do.

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