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**Baghdad, 1849.** Part of “the River Euphrates from Hit to the Kuthah River and the River Tigris from Sammara to the Abu Hitti Canal...” Source: Francis Rawdon Chesney (1835-1849), *The Expedition for the Survey of the Rivers Euphrates and Tigris, Carried on by Order of the British Government*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans. Public domain image, reproduced courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collections.

## Urban Origins

Geography 350, *Introduction to Urban Geography*

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When and where did the first cities appear? Did cities give rise to civilization, or were cities simply the byproduct of social, cultural, and political transformation? What can we learn from ancient cities that will help us understand the relationship between cities and social change today?

These are simple questions. Yet answering them proves to be ... well, it's delightfully complicated and occasionally contentious. But these are timeless issues that we can't ignore. Each century, each generation, poses distinct questions about its origins, and endeavors to find better evidence that will help us understand the past of cities. And as contemporary societies struggle to preserve past cities threatened by present settlement, economy, development, trade, and war, some of the simplest historical questions become ever more elusive. We have much to do in order to try to understand what Alexander Stille has called the future of the past.<sup>1</sup>

### The Earliest Cities

#### *Çatal Hüyük*

For many years, conventional wisdom dated the earliest urban civilizations to the eastern reaches of the fertile crescent stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.

Mesopotamia -- the 'land between the two rivers' of the Tigris and the Euphrates, in the southern portion of present-day Iraq -- was initially settled some 10,000 years ago after the end of the

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most recent Ice Age. After a long period of struggles to improve cultivation techniques in the fertile river valleys, archaeologists believed, an 'agricultural revolution' allowed the production of a surplus that eventually laid the basis for an 'urban revolution' about 5,500 years ago (3,500 before the current era, or BCE). At its peak, the largest of the Mesopotamian cities, Ur, may have had as many as 34,000 people within the old walled city, and perhaps ten times that number in the surrounding region of 'greater Ur.'<sup>2</sup> As with other cities of Mesopotamia, Ur was socially heterogeneous, with a detailed specialization of labor, and substantial differences in wealth and power between an elite class and the remainder of the population. There was evidence of quite a sophisticated society. At first the innovations were simple: "The earliest tablets from Ur are mere lists and tallies: they record amounts of flour, bread, beer, livestock, men's names, the gods and their temples -- bare factual notations for

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Stille (2002), *The Future of the Past*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

<sup>2</sup> E. Barbara Phillips (1996), *City Lights: Urban-Suburban Life in the Global Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 86.

enabling the community to keep track of quantities that might otherwise be uncertain or escape notice.”<sup>3</sup> Scientific innovations accelerated, however, with the development of “permanent notations and signs” that made it possible “to act at a distance through agents and factors, to give commands and make contracts...”<sup>4</sup> The innovations of writing and quantification advanced with innovations of power and control. The

“control of such activities was at first largely in the lands of a priestly class, freed from the constant necessity of manual labor, and increasingly conscious of the mediating functions of mind. By progressive degrees of abstraction and symbolization, they were able to turn the written record into a device for preserving and transmitting ideas and feelings and emotions that had never taken any visible or material form. By means of such records, the rulers of the city lived a multiple life: once in action, again in monuments and inscriptions, and still another in the effects of recorded events upon the minds of later people, furnishing them with models for imitation, warnings of danger, incentives to achievement. Living *by* the record and *for* the record became one of the great stigmata of urban existence....”<sup>5</sup>

*Mesopotamia  
became known as  
“the cradle of  
civilization.”*

All of the evidence of innovation, hierarchy, and organized power led archaeologists to view Mesopotamia as the ‘cradle of civilization.’ The precise origin of this term is unknown, but

“Perhaps one of the first to express it was Sir Henry Rawlinson on April 8, 1867, during a discussion at the Royal Geographical Society in London.

Following a paper on Mesopotamia by surveyor J.B. Bewsher, the president of the society invited comment from other fellows. Rawlinson rose to declare enthusiastically, ‘The country to which Lt. Bewsher’s paper referred, was the cradle of civilization. In it were first cultivated ... the natural sciences and that study of art which afterwards spread through the world.’ His notion, and the cliché, took root.”<sup>6</sup>

This conventional wisdom was shattered about forty years ago, however, and in the ensuing years urban histories and archaeologies have been in turmoil. The simplest questions that have endured for centuries persist, but have become more difficult to answer. The proximate cause of the shattered consensus on the Mesopotamian “urban revolution” was the discovery and subsequent excavation of Çatal Hüyük in modern-day Turkey. Beginning in the early 1960s, James Mellaart led a team of archaeologists who excavated a large and well-developed neolithic<sup>7</sup> community:

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis Mumford (1961), *The City in History*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> Mumford, *City in History*, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Mumford, *City in History*, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin Black (2004), *Banking on Baghdad: Inside Iraq’s 7,000 Year History of War, Profit, and Conflict*. New York: Wiley, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> “Neolithic” comes from “neo” (from the Greek *neos*, new) and the Greek *lithos*, stone. The neolithic designates the new stone age, from about 6,000 to 3,000 BCE. This era of human culture brought the widespread use of

“The vast plain of Konya is rich in ancient sites, but though a few were recorded ... no systematic survey of the plain was made until 1951, when the author ... began his Anatolian survey with the Konya plain. Although the mound of Çatal Hüyük was noted in the distance in 1952, dysentery and lack of transport prevented its more formal discovery ...

On a cold November day in 1958, just before nightfall, the author, accompanied by Mr. Allan Hall and Mr. David French, reached the double mound of Çatal Hüyük. Much of the eastern (Neolithic) mound was covered by turf and ruin-weed ... but where the prevailing south-westerly winds had scoured its surface bare there were unmistakable traces of mud-brick buildings, burned red in a conflagration contrasting with patches of grey ash, broken bones, potsherds and obsidian tools and weapons. To our surprise these were found not only at the bottom of the mound, but they continued right up to the top, some 15 metres above the level of the plain.”<sup>8</sup>

Mellaart and his colleagues returned a few years later with larger archaeological teams, and the accumulated evidence rapidly began to destroy the Mesopotamian, urban-cradle-of-civilization consensus. Çatal Hüyük is situated on a high mountain plain, and had few of the environmental riches that fostered the kind of agricultural surplus enjoyed by the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia. But Çatal Hüyük dates to 7,500 BCE, and perhaps even earlier. Archaeology was thrown into turmoil as evidence trickled out from Çatal Hüyük, and as analysts struggled with its significance. Compared with the substantial population of Ur and other Mesopotamian cities, for instance, Çatal Hüyük had at its peak perhaps 6,000 people living in a densely-settled area of 32 acres. Was Çatal Hüyük, then, nothing more than a village, a small, failed precursor to the true “urban revolution” that succeeded four thousand years later in Mesopotamia? If so, how do we make sense of the remarkable findings at this supposedly insignificant village?

“The wealth of material produced by Çatal Hüyük is unrivalled by any other Neolithic site. Moreover, not being a village but a town or city, its products have a definitely metropolitan air: Çatal Hüyük could afford luxuries such as obsidian mirrors, ceremonial daggers, and trinkets of metal beyond the reach of most of its known contemporaries. Copper and lead were smelted and worked into beads, tubes, and possibly small tools, thus taking the beginnings of metallurgy back into the seventh millennium. Its stone industry in local obsidian and imported flint is the most elegant of the period; its wooden vessels are varied and sophisticated, its woolen textile industry fully developed. At Çatal Hüyük we can actually study the transition from an

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polished stone implements, the taming of animals, the development of pottery, weaving, and the wheel, and the cultivation of crops.

<sup>8</sup> James Mellaart (1967), *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia*. London: Thames and Hudson Limited, p. 27.

aceramic Neolithic with baskets and wooden vessels to a ceramic Neolithic with the first pottery. ... ”<sup>9</sup>

*What is a City?*

Drawing any comparisons between Çatal Hüyük and the cities of Mesopotamia immediately exposes the difficulty of drawing clear-cut distinctions. Although in Roman times it was common to distinguish the socio-cultural notion of *civitas* (city, civilization, citizenship) from its physical manifestation (the *urb*) archeologists have often combined these ideas to develop criteria for identifying cities. The most common criteria include permanent residence, a relatively large population, a high density of settlement, and social heterogeneity or diversity. But there are alternative rules: economic position, and functional role as a trading or market center; and “another approach assumes that a city exists only when there are cultural ingredients considered essential to urban life -- fine arts, exact sciences, and in particular, writing. In this view, a collection of people -- no matter how large -- does not constitute a city unless these characteristics are present.”<sup>10</sup>

*In Roman times, it was common to distinguish social and cultural ideas of **civitas** (city, civilization, citizenship) from the physical features of the **urb** (urban, urbanization)*

Questions of definition are at the heart of archaeological debates over the emergence of the first cities. As the anthropologist George Cowgill observes, “‘City,’ ‘urban site,’ ‘urban society,’ and ‘urbanization’ are often undertheorized, and it is easy to find publications that leave these terms undefined and assume that we all know what they mean. Often a site is simply labeled a city or a society is called urban without the author explaining why,”<sup>11</sup> and in many cases authors implicitly equate ‘the urban’ with whatever aspect of social and political development -- such as the emergence of organized state structures or class relations -- that is the primary focus of investigation. Cowgill goes on to caution that

*Criteria for identifying cities: permanence, population, density, and diversity.*

“It is notoriously difficult to agree on a cross-culturally applicable definition of ‘the’ city, but we cannot do without definitions altogether. One mischievous property of the English language is that routine use of the definite article encourages us to speak unthinkingly of ‘the’ city ... This leads us toward reification and essentialization of categories and creates unnecessary conceptual difficulties. It is far better to think of ‘cities’ or ‘a’ city, but never of

<sup>9</sup> Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük*, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> George L. Cowgill (2004), “Origins and Development of Urbanism: Archaeological Perspectives. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, 525-549, quote from p. 526.

‘the’ city.’<sup>12</sup>

*Continua and Contingency*

*The emergence of cities is best understood on a continuum.*

Definitional uncertainty can be frustrating, particularly when it seems to derail an effort to answer the simplest of questions: when and where did the first cities emerge? The comfortable, mid-twentieth century answer (3,500 BCE, Mesopotamia) seems to have collapsed into abstract academic cacophony. But two crucial considerations help us to understand what is known about the history of urbanization, and why the scholarly debates matter.

**First**, the emergence of cities can best be understood on a *continuum*: from the Latin, something capable of being divided indefinitely, as is thought of space and time. There is still considerable dispute on whether Çatal Hüyük qualifies as a ‘real’ city, but no scholar can afford to ignore its importance in understanding the transition from rural to urban settlements. Çatal Hüyük is indisputably evidence of “proto-urbanization,” and two other archaeological finds have pushed the timeline even farther back. A recent excavation in present-day Israel, Wadi-al-Natuf, is believed to be the world’s first permanent settlement, 11,000 to 12,000 BCE, with well-developed homes and storage facilities; there is also some evidence of critical agricultural innovations at Wadi-al-Natuf. Jericho is another significant ‘proto-urban’ settlement on the

continuum between agricultural villages and cities. Kathleen Kenyon began excavating Jericho in the 1950s, and unearthed a series of ruined city walls and remnants of previous generations; “Finally, some 70 feet down, they unearthed a substantial settlement, the first Jericho -- a Neolithic community, inhabited perhaps as early as” 8,000 BCE.<sup>13</sup>

*The emergence of cities was geographically contingent -- conditional upon processes that varied from place to place.*

A **second** consideration emphasizes contingency as we try to determine the trajectory as settlements became larger, more sophisticated, and more unquestionably urban. Contingency is not a retreat in the face of an inability to explain, but rather a recognition that probability, chance, and context matter. From the Latin *Contingere*, (“to touch”) contingency involves something that is likely but not certain to happen, or something *dependent* or *conditional* on a probable but not certain event. For the case of urban origins, contingency

means that context matters. Cowgill, who warns us against thinking of ‘the’ city, offers a contextual, contingent urban definition:

“No single criterion, such as sheer size or use of writing, is adequate, and it seems best to use a somewhat fuzzy core concept rather than to try to establish criteria

<sup>12</sup> Cowgill, “Origins and Development,” p. 526.

<sup>13</sup> Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 83.

that will clearly demarcate all cities from all non cities. I vaguely define a city as a permanent settlement within the larger territory occupied by a society considered home by a significant number of residents whose activities, roles, practices, experiences, identities, and attitudes differ significantly from those of other members of the society who identify most closely with 'rural' lands outside such settlements."<sup>14</sup>

Keeping these two considerations in mind -- continua and contingency -- scholars do agree on several dominant "hearths" of urbanization, which developed independently in regions where the possibility of an agricultural surplus was a coincident (if not necessary and sufficient) condition: Mesopotamia (about 3,500 BCE); the Indus River Valley in present-day Pakistan (about 2,300 BCE, dominated by the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro and with some trade networks to the Sumerian Empire in Mesopotamia); the Huan Ho (Yellow River) Valley in Northern China (about 1,500 BCE, dominated by the large Shang Dynasty cities of Cheng Chou and An Yang); and Mesoamerica (present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and other parts of Central America, where the Olmec, Maya, and Aztecs developed large cities at least as early as 600 BCE).

Since the late 1970s, many scholars have recognized two additional hearths of urbanization: the Peruvian Andes, where Pampa de las Llamas-Moxeke, on a desert plain 350 km north of Lima, dates back to at least 1,500 BCE, the high point of many of the Sumerian cities; and ancient Egypt, where Thebes and Memphis date back to at least 3,000 BCE. Until recently, scholars viewed Egyptian settlements as either insignificant, or simply part of the western extension of a network of settlements that originated in Mesopotamia. Recent evidence has generated discussion of the sharp divergence in urbanization in the context of different political circumstances: Egypt was long unified politically, and "Internal peace ... meant that there was no need to occupy the same site continuously to justify massive investments in a city's defensive fortifications. ... the lifespan of the largest city, the capital, was relatively short. Each pharaoh was free to locate a new capital at any site he selected for his tomb."<sup>15</sup> In Mesopotamia, by contrast, urbanization involved the emergence of a series of autonomous, competing city-states.

## **Cities and Social Change**

Do cities matter?

The most enduring and interdisciplinary questions that stretch across urban geography, archaeology, history, and sociology are: do cities give birth to civilization, innovation, and social change? Or are they incidental byproducts of civilization and social transformation? What is the relationship between urbanization and social change?

One of the most prominent archaeologists of the last century, V. Gordon Childe (1892-1957), spent many years supervising excavations in Mesopotamia, and his findings were largely responsible for the consensus view of this region as the 'cradle' of urban civilization. Childe's fieldwork led him to emphasize the catalytic role of agriculture in the development of cities.

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<sup>14</sup> Cowgill, "Origins and Development," p. 526.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Knox and Linda McCarthy (2005), *Urbanization*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 26.

Childe interpreted his evidence to suggest that the transition from nomadic hunting and gathering to food cultivation and the domestication of animals laid the basis for cities: once an agricultural revolution allowed the production of a surplus, then settlements could and did grow larger; the production of larger surpluses allowed an elite to emerge that was not directly engaged in agriculture. The ability to store and trade the surplus spurred scientific innovations in

*Childe's "POET" analysis of the urban revolution: population, organization, environment, and technology.*

measurement and storage, while new political means emerged to supervise the allocation of the surplus and its benefits. Childe interpreted the evidence to theorize a full-fledged "urban revolution" in Mesopotamia around 3,500 BCE, involving four interrelated factors: population (larger numbers enabled by an agricultural surplus); organization (the emergence of ruling elites to control the surplus, and specialists such as craftspeople, metallurgists, and scribes employed to track the surplus); environment (a good physical setting, such as a fertile river valley and floodplain, capable of yielding a consistent

surplus); and technology (innovations that first allowed a surplus were then deployed to organize and manage the surplus).<sup>16</sup> Childe's analysis of these interdependent factors is often summarized as the "POET" complex.

Childe's thesis was deeply influential during the last two decades of his life. But shortly after his death, several developments raised critical questions. First, Kenyon's excavations at Jericho pushed the timeline for early urbanization much earlier than predicted by Childe's model derived

*Childe's thesis was questioned by: 1) new excavations at Jericho and Çatal Hüyük, 2) Jane Jacobs' trade thesis, and 3) Lewis Mumford's emphasis on culture, politics, and spirituality.*

from the experience of Mesopotamia. Second, Mellaart's excavation of Çatal Hüyük offered an even more direct challenge to the Childe thesis. Çatal Hüyük, a large city-like settlement on a high mountain plain without the agricultural abundance possible in a fertile river floodplain, seemed to violate many of Childe's predictions.

A third development came from scholars who were not directly engaged in archaeological fieldwork, but who spent considerable time interpreting and evaluating the mounting evidence from a variety of excavations. Jane Jacobs interpreted Mellaart's evidence from Çatal Hüyük as supporting a theory of cities directly at odds with Childe. For Jacobs, "the city becomes the independent variable, explaining the development of

agriculture -- not the reverse."<sup>17</sup> Cities emerged as trading centers, and were situated at the nexus of crucial trade routes or near the sources of prized commodities; city-dwellers survived even in comparatively inhospitable environments by trading valuable goods for food with their distant trading partners. Over time, agricultural innovations were diffused by trade. Jacobs'

<sup>16</sup> V. Gordon Childe (1950), "The Urban Revolution." *Town Planning Review* 21, 9-16.

<sup>17</sup> Phillips, *City Lights*, p. 88.

*trade thesis* does not necessarily mean that Childe's interpretation of Mesopotamia was wrong; but it does suggest that the long, slow, evolutionary path by which agriculture laid the foundations for hierarchically-organized cities was only one path of urbanization.

But if agriculture and trade provide alternative paths to the rise of cities, there are likely other paths. Lewis Mumford, one of the most influential urbanists of the twentieth century, challenged the exclusive focus on material economic factors: culture, politics, and symbolism are not, for Mumford, dependent variables that can be fully explained on the basis of economics. The first cities certainly served practical needs, but the driving forces for a fixed and continuous settlement were fundamentally sacred (such as respect for and burial of the dead). Mumford viewed spirituality and meaning as the root of the formation of villages, and he saw Childe's evidence in Mesopotamia in a different light. As opposed to Childe's description of an "urban revolution" that implied a sweeping away of old processes and patterns, Mumford saw continuity. "The rise of the city, so far from wiping out earlier elements, actually brought them together and increased their efficiency and scope. Even the fostering of non-agricultural occupations heightened the demand for food and probably caused villages to multiply, and still more land to be brought under cultivation."<sup>18</sup> For Mumford, the dynamic innovations of agriculture and urbanization must be understood in relation to the fundamental spiritual and cosmological impulse that brought the first village settlements, and then eventually created the conditions for an urban "implosion":

"What happened ... with the rise of the cities, was that many functions that had heretofore been scattered and unorganized were brought together within a limited area, and the components of the community were kept in a state of dynamic tension and interaction. In this union, made almost compulsory by the strict enclosure of the city wall, the already well-established parts of the proto-city -- shrine, spring, village, market, stronghold -- participated in the general enlargement and concentration of numbers, and underwent a structural differentiation that gave them forms recognizable in every subsequent phase of urban culture. The city proved not merely a means of expressing in concrete terms the magnification of sacred and secular power, but in a manner that went far beyond any conscious intention it also enlarged all the dimensions of life. Beginning as a representation of the cosmos, a means of bringing heaven down to earth, the city became a symbol of the possible."<sup>19</sup>

*From 'Classical Urbanism' to the Rise of European Urbanism and Colonialism*

Most Western accounts of urban geography dutifully review these debates, and offer some kind of acceptable synthesis before moving on to a grand tour of the roots of European urban expansion. The story usually begins with the Greek city-states in the heroic age described by Homer (up to 1200 BCE), and the privileged role of the acropolis (a fortified palace, temple, and fort complex) on a hill above the agora (the public market). After intense rivalry between Athens and Sparta (431-404 BCE), expansion by Macedonia and internecine wars weakened the network, Greece was made a Roman province in 146BCE. But the culture had a deep influence

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<sup>18</sup> Mumford, *City in History*, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Mumford, *City in History*, p. 31.

on Rome, which linked cities as military outposts, points of control, cultural center, and trading hubs in an expanded Mediterranean empire. The empire reached its peak around 200BCE, and over the next seven hundred years went into a long period of decline; Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410, and by the Vandals in 455 and 476; the latter date is normally taken (rather arbitrarily) as the “fall” of the Roman Empire, which ushered in a period of comparative isolation for European cities in the middle ages. Interconnections were severed, but cities remained important in their own regions, as protection from rural invaders and as centers for the institutions of the Catholic church. Merchant cities began to emerge in northern Europe and around the Adriatic in the 12th century, with a new secular merchant class inclined toward entrepreneurial innovation. Residents of the growing *burg* (from the Latin *burgus*, ‘town or small city’ a medieval term referring to the living and storage areas for traders that grew up around the separate area for each Catholic bishop) came to be called *burghers*, and eventually the *bourgeoisie*. The 16th century calls for reform of the Catholic church -- the ‘Reformation’ which spread across Europe and encouraged scientific innovation and eventually colonial exploration -- prompted a backlash, creating a dynamic tension as the Counter-Reformation revived Baroque art, in which the Jesuits saw the potential for a renewed, strengthened, and reinvigorated Catholicism. By the time this sweeping history lands us in the sixteenth century, the narrative describes Rome and other European centers being remade by Baroque urban design principles as the Reformation-induced scientific advances lead the Spanish and Portuguese to extend the European urban system into the world’s periphery, with the creation of a Latin American urban network between 1520 and 1580.

### **The Past, Today and Tomorrow**

The classical Western narrative of urbanization is valuable and important, and it has shaped much scholarship on the development of cities in the Americas. Unfortunately, its claim to the mantle as ‘the’ history of cities is fatally flawed. The last generation has brought a vibrant outpouring of new geographical research on the origins of cities, and some of this new scholarship has begun to raise crucial questions on the subsequent historiographies of urban development. Three considerations have been most important.

**First**, epistemology matters. Our historiography of urban geography in the twentieth century sheds light on some of the most important theoretical debates on the history of cities. In the conventional view, “it is widely believed that ‘classics’ is the academic discipline furthest away from modern politics. It is not merely supposed to inhabit the ivory tower but to be in its topmost storey.”<sup>20</sup> But politics intrude at every step. At the intersection of historical urban geography and archaeology, the major fault line of methodology separates the empirical, physical archaeologies of patient excavation from the interpretive schools based on historical texts and other symbolic sources of evidence. There are widely divergent ways of conceptualizing the “observable, measurable” phenomena at the heart of positivist and analytical-urban-geographic approaches, and indeed much of the logic of Childe and other archaeologists was quite compatible with the structuralist wave that swept through anthropology

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Bernal (1994), “The Image of Ancient Greece as a Tool of Colonialism and European Hegemony.” In G. C. Bond and A. Gilliam, eds., *Social Construction of the Past: Representation as Power*. London: Routledge, p. 119, quoted in Peter J. Ucko (1995), “Archaeological Interpretation in a World Context.” In Peter J. Ucko, ed., *Theory in Archaeology: A World Perspective*. London and New York: Routledge, 1-27, quote from p. 1.

and linguistics in the 1960s. Phenomenological approaches are at the heart of current questions about the role of “cities as cosmograms or sacred centers”: “In some regions, the clear close adherence of many cities to an overall plan, contemporary texts, or both, provide overwhelming evidence for meaningful overall planning, although the reasons and meanings behind the planning may not be obvious.”<sup>21</sup> And in other areas the empirical evidence (and, even more important, its interpretation) remain more uncertain: “...the use of city layouts to express such concepts [cosmology and religious symbolism] is less clear in other parts of the world, and there seems to be great variation. Kemp (2000), for example, discounts cosmic aspects to planning in New Kingdom Egypt, and he reminds us that one should approach each case with skepticism, remembering how easily one can deceive oneself with coincidences that seem too good to be merely accidental.”<sup>22</sup> But even in the impossible scenario of consensus, in which geographers, anthropologists, and archaeologists agree on a shared methodology and standards of proof,

*The past will always  
have a future, because 1)  
what we know about the  
past depends on  
epistemology, 2) the past  
is not really ever past:  
sometimes ancient cities  
are “underneath”  
contemporary  
settlements as well as  
today’s political  
disagreements, and 3)  
cities of the past may be  
able to teach us about  
the possibilities of  
tomorrow’s cities.*

uncertainty persists. The entire body of knowledge about the origin of cities is built upon a foundation of archaeological investigation and interpretation that required choices: much is known about places where major investments have been made to undertake the required excavations, whereas vast areas of the past remain unexplored and thus ‘unknown.’ This empirical-historical tautology has changed a great deal in the last generation: George Cowgill provides a comprehensive review of the best current archaeological evidence now coming out of Sub-Saharan Africa (where R. McIntosh has been developing a rich base of evidence on the inter-relations among small city-like settlements along the Niger River in West Africa), the Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley (where there is an active debate as to whether the political organizations that developed between 2600 BCE and 1900 BCE qualify as true ‘state’ entities), China (where archaeologists are continuing to study the origins and morphology of urban settlements in the north while also investigating evidence in other regions), and many other sites that were ignored or neglected. But these efforts take a great deal of time. Conventional paradigms can be challenged

relatively quickly, but accumulating the body of evidence and interpretation required to assert consensus -- or even to sustain a knowledgeable recognition of the plurality of contingent trajectories of urban origins along the continuum from agricultural settlements to cities -- can take several generations.

**Second**, the past is not. The past is inescapable, and inextricably bound up with innumerable aspects of how individuals and societies deal with the present and future; individuals, groups,

<sup>21</sup> Cowgill, “Origins and Development,” p. 536.

<sup>22</sup> Cowgill, “Origins and Development,” p. 537.

and institutions vary widely in terms of propensity to recognize the interwoven, interpenetrating character of time. But understanding the origins of cities has enormous relevance today. Contemporary settlement routinely collides with the physical evidence of ancient cities. Steven J. Solarz, a former U.S. Congressman from Brooklyn, New York, has a nice house on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey, and not long ago he told the *New York Times* that “It blew my mind to find out that the parliament building of the first federation in history, which served as an inspiration for the framers of our own Constitution, was being excavated 15 minutes from my house...”<sup>23</sup> Teams of Turkish and German archaeologists are excavating the site of the ancient Lycian League, including a parliament building where elected members of the league met between the 8th and 12th centuries BCE. The *Times* dutifully noted that “The Lycian League was mentioned twice in the Federalist Papers, once by Alexander Hamilton, once by James Madison, so it could safely be said that it entered into the history of the formation of the United States.”<sup>24</sup> Other aspects of contemporary change are explicitly tied to the past -- as attempts to revere or honor it, or alternatively to commodify and profit from particular visions and understandings of the past. Martin Hall offers a valuable example, drawn from the international hotel group, Sun International, and their efforts to construct a combination hotel-resort and archaeological site, a “Lost City ... modeled on a ruin, imagined as destroyed three thousand years ago. The architecture of this resort is a study in post-modernist image play. Behind the design is a myth, concocted by the Lost City’s California-based design team, which has a nomadic tribe journeying from northern Africa to a secluded valley in modern-day Bophuthatswana.”<sup>25</sup>

**Third**, there is a more fundamental interplay between the present and the past. The past has become a repository of alternative lessons for issues of pressing concern, igniting fierce debates. To the degree that urbanization in the last two centuries has been nearly synonymous with industrialization, cities figure prominently (but implicitly) in the scientific-political struggles over contemporary environmental issues such as global warming.<sup>26</sup> Jared Diamond, perhaps the only Pulitzer Prize-winner who is publicly described as a geographer, looks to the past in a comparative framework to understand the circumstances of collapsed societies. “The monumental ruins left behind by these past societies” -- the Maya cities in Central America, the Harappan Indus Valley cities, Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean, many others -- “hold a romantic fascination for all of us. We marvel at them when as children we first learn of them through pictures. ... Yet the builders vanished, abandoning the great structures that they created at such great effort. How could a society that was once so mighty end up collapsing?”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Bernstein (2005), “A Congress, Buried in Sand, Inspired One on a Hill.” *New York Times*, September 19, A1, A4, quote from A1.

<sup>24</sup> Bernstein, “A Congress,” p. A1.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Hall (1994), “Great Zimbabwe and the Lost City.” In Peter J. Ucko, ed., *Theory in Archaeology: A World Perspective*. London and New York: Routledge, 28-45.

<sup>26</sup> Even the language of these debates is politically charged. Frank Luntz, the brilliant pollster and consultant for U.S. Republicans, has sternly advised his clients to avoid the term “global warming,” and to emphasize the uncertainty of the science on the question of *global climate change*. “Warming” describes a particular outcome, but “change” allows much greater flexibility of interpretation, because there has always been, and always will be, climate change of some sort. And of course this change may be good or bad, depending on who you are, where you are, what you do, and how you approach the future.

<sup>27</sup> Jared Diamond (2004). *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Viking, p. 8.

It's a profound question. It will require that we learn more about urban origins, and the links between ancient cities and today's challenges. We have a lot of work to do to understand the future of the urban past.