



World archaeology

Archaeology: Defining a City

Phil Perkins

What is a city? In the very few early settlements that have been extensively investigated in Southwest Asia, such as Çatalhöyük, it is possible to discern the form of settlements and their societies at a time before cities developed. Çatalhöyük could be called a village, or perhaps a town, but it doesn't have a scale and structured society that is found in later cities.

Trevor Watkins

Ian Hodder has produced a book, *The Leopard's Tale*, and the subtitle designates Çatalhöyük as a 'town' in inverted commas. So you have to learn to pronounce the word 'town' with inverted commas.

Phil Perkins

Professor Trevor Watkins is based in Edinburgh University. He specialises in Near Eastern pre-history.

Trevor Watkins

It's a real puzzler because the conventional model has been of village farming societies or village farming economies, and it patently isn't a village. But the question then is what is it? And for quite a long time people have looked for signs of social or political hierarchy in societies, which is where complex gets fairly muddled because people have looked for complexity in hunter-gatherer societies, assuming that complexity will be a social hierarchy. But one of the things that Ian Hodder is most clear about after they had been working there for sixteen years now is that there is absolutely no sign of any social distinction. The problem then becomes how do you envisage a society of that size which is almost urban. It's bigger than Jericho, for example, when Jericho was a Bronze Age city. Nobody is uncomfortable about calling Jericho a city in the Bronze Age, but Çatalhöyük is bigger and has a much denser population.

Phil Perkins

So, Çatalhöyük is not a city. It may be large and dense when compared to other cities like Jericho, but is there an absolute size that cities need to achieve before they can be called cities? Chris Scarre is Professor of Archaeology at Durham University.

Chris Scarre

Abu Salabikh is a settlement in Mesopotamia where the estimated population size is something like two thousand, three thousand, which is hardly bigger than a large village in modern Britain. So you have got to kind of scale it down in terms of absolute size, at the same time as recognising that what we are looking for isn't simply size. Size is part of it, but it is also its position in a hierarchy of settlements, a

network of settlements of different sizes, and the sorts of functions that these places perform in terms of government functions or marketplaces for exchange or manufacture.

Phil Perkins

So it's not just scale, density and social complexity, but also a place where social complexity is focused and projected on to the surrounding territory. What is this like on the ground? Excavations at Hierakonpolis, a site one hundred kilometres south of Luxor in Egypt, show how a large settlement of ten thousand people was organised. Dr Renee Friedman of the British Museum.

Renee Friedman

At Hierakonpolis we are not really seeing a time when there wasn't a strong leader. So it does appear that the temple is kind of the centre. You have administrative buildings around that. And then you start to get the houses around that. And then to one side you have all your industrial areas. There is quarters to this town. It's very much ordered. So we have to, at least for Egypt, perhaps re-think this development from a leaderless society to one that is sole-led because in Egypt certainly, being led is the characteristic, is the hallmark of being Egyptian. You loved your Pharaoh. He made the world go round. He kept everything in order.

Phil Perkins

Size and social complexity are important. But how do we actually define cities? Michael Smith is based at the University of Arizona. He specialises in Mesoamerica.

Michael Smith

Archaeologists tend to use one of two definitions of the city, of what is urban, and these are the demographic approach and the functional approach. The demographic approach fits our sort of Western conception of what a city is. It goes back to the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1930s. It says that a city is a permanent settlement with a large population, with a dense population, and also evidence of social complexity, whether that is occupational specialists or ethnic groups or social classes. Now, that definition fits our modern notion of what a city should be and it fits some ancient settlements. However, if we look at Mesoamerica, there is only a couple of sites in the whole of Mesoamerica that would qualify as cities under that definition. The Aztec imperial capital, Tenochtitlán, would qualify. It had a couple of hundred thousand people over quite a large area. The large classic period metropolis Teotihuacán would qualify, but many of the Maya cities would not qualify. The alternative functional approach to urbanism is better suited to non-Western areas, where there is a greater diversity of urban forms, and the functional definition defines a city as a place that had activities and institutions that affected a larger hinterland. So, you had things like religious activities, political activities, economic processes. If they happen in a city, and they affect an area outside the city's boundaries, we call them urban functions. And by the functional definition then, of course, the great Maya settlements were cities, and this affects Aztec cities outside of Tenochtitlán.

Phil Perkins

So, we need to look for evidence of religious and political organisation as well. What is more, the power of the city extends into the surrounding territory, forming a state. And cities and states go together. What kinds of evidence can we find for these

abstract notions of political power and the state? A good example is the Narmer Palette found in Hierakonpolis. Dr Renee Friedman.

Renee Friedman

The Palette of Narmer was our earliest evidence for the unification of Egypt because you have the king wearing the white crown, the bowling-pin crown, of Upper Egypt, smiting someone who would appear to come from the Delta. So it showed Upper Egypt, or the Nile Valley, triumphing over the Delta people, which makes it a – what’s been called a ‘proto-kingdom’. And then there is another proto-kingdom based on Abydos and another one based on Nagada and somehow these coalesced. We think that Nagada was defeated. Perhaps a coalition of Abydos and Hierakonpolis got together and thrust out Nagada because a lot of the symbolism that the Nagada kings used falls away. We don’t see it again. But the symbolism that the Hierakonpolis kings used, and the Abydos kings used, continue. So we think that maybe there was a dynastic marriage because we don’t see any evidence of a battle between the two. And once you have got all of Upper Egypt unified, then you can go and smite the Delta because somebody in the middle couldn’t go north without making sure that the south was, you know, not going to attack them from behind. But I think it was something that went on in spurts. I think these proto-kingdoms reached certain crisis points.

Phil Perkins

There are a number of reasons for the formation of cities. One suggestion is that cities and states are formed through the force or agency of an individual.

Chris Scarre

One very powerful argument, though by no means the only argument for the formation of states and cities, is that people are forced to come together in these coalitions, you might say, in order for security, basically. And certainly there are many cases, well we know there is a formation of what we call secondary states, that is state forms, and all the communities round it have to form into more organised societies themselves in order to be able to resist this very powerful centrally organised polity, really, in the middle. And you wonder whether one of the pressures bringing people together into states and making them obedient, as it were, to the dictates of central government and not just walking off and doing their own thing, is that they have to go along with that in order for their own protection. So they may be coerced from within by the authorities, central authority. They may be coerced from without by people who would take advantage of them if they were not part of this consolidated powerful group.

Phil Perkins

But is physical force, or the protection from it, the only factor?

Chris Scarre

It’s easier in some ways to understand the argument about the coercion or the threat of violence, to understand how that brings people together into a city or a state. Equally it’s interesting to note how some important early cities or early states had a religious component. And in the absence of direct evidence as to exactly what processes formed them, it may be that it is the power of some sort of religious authority that brought them together. But think of the ideology or religion surrounding the king. And this idea of the establishment of a state religion – and what you have is a state

religion which associates a king with certain gods, initially Ra in the Egyptian pantheon – and to what extent that is an engineered kind of situation. A religion which suits the monarchy is actually, perhaps, a religion abstracted from a rather less coherent set of beliefs, perhaps regionally different beliefs, throughout Egypt in the pre-state period, and is sort of brought together, formalised, and formalised in such a way that the king, the monarchy, the elite, the central state, is at the apex of a, you know, religious kind of structure as well as of a political structure.

Phil Perkins

Do we get similar situations in other parts of the world?

Chris Scarre

One example is the city of Teotihuacán in Mexico, which is the largest city before European contact in the Americas, which has at its heart a massive pyramid built over what was originally a natural cave. And that cave has an incredibly important religious significance, so perhaps it was the power, the religious authority conveyed by that, which brought people to this developing state, this developing city. And then, over the course of time, secular and religious power are consolidated and what you end up with in Teotihuacán is a city which is laid out on a grid plan. In fact it develops in one form and then at one point in its history all the residential areas are laid out in a grid pattern, which is an enormous undertaking. It's a very impressive event in that it must mean that the thousands, or tens of thousands, of people who had been living there must have been willing to be displaced and re-settled in the grid plan form. So these powers which may be religiously at least sanctioned, do have, you know, huge potential to guide people and to make people respond in certain ways or tolerate certain things, if you want to put it that way.