The Evolution of the Ancient City: Urban Theory and the Archaeology of the Fertile Crescent

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Reviewed by Pamela R. Willoughby
Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta (Edmonton, AB)
pam.willoughby@ualberta.ca

Archaeologists and historians are still fascinated by key transformations in world prehistory and history. These include the biological and cultural evolution of the first humans, as well as the origins of agriculture, and ultimately the evolution of cities and complex state societies. The appearance of the latter corresponds with the beginnings of the historical record; for the first time, people create documents and inscriptions reflecting their own perceptions of the world. Thousands of years later, epigraphers can decipher and understand many of the surviving texts. Using this information along with archaeological data, we have a much better perspective on the emergence of cities than about any event in earlier history.

Alexander Thomas is a sociologist, but an unusual one, from my perspective. Rather than concentrating on aspects of modern life, he expresses an interest in the emergence of state societies and their most notable achievement—city life. For those of us in the western tradition, city and civilization are interchangeable. We cannot conceive of one without the other. But cross-cultural studies in archaeology and history suggest that cities are not required for complex societies to develop. So how, then, did the city come into existence? In order to answer this question, in this book Thomas takes what he labels an inter- and cross-disciplinary approach to the evolution of the earliest cities in the heartland of early civilization, Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia is literally the land in between the rivers—in this case, the Tigris and Euphrates—of modern-day Iraq. This is not the region in which plants and animals were first domesticated; that took place in the Fertile Crescent, which extended from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Zagros Mountains. Bereft of basic resources, Mesopotamia nevertheless was the first centre of evolution of social complexity.

In the introduction, Thomas addresses the definition of discipline, as well as the notion of disciplinary boundaries. In order to understand the evolution of cities, he must make use of information from many disciplines—archaeology, anthropology, geography, history, and sociology, to name a few. There is also the concept of urbanism to consider; urban life seems to appear before the city does. In chapter 1, "Social Science and the City," Thomas discusses the major theories of evolution of the city. He points out that this has largely been the purview of archaeologists; urban sociologists have not been interested in this question. He focuses on classic theories from the mid-20th century, such as that of V. Gordon Childe. He created a trait list of features associated with cities in particular and civilization in general. These include a large and dense population; division of labour; full-time specialists; an agricultural surplus given to the ruling elite; the elite or ruling class itself; monumental buildings; writing and numerical systems; the presence of an artisan class; and long-distance trade. A lot of archaeological work in the later 20th century was to test ideas like those of Childe. This chapter also gives a geographic introduction to the Fertile Crescent and to Mesopotamia.

Chapter 2, "Parameters of Social Evolution," deals with what Thomas calls the parameters of social evolution. He outlines basic concepts such as culture and environment. In chapter 3, "Evolution and the City," he discusses the evolutionary prerequisites of urbanization. He discusses the evolution of human societies from earliest occupants of the Near East up to the Upper Palaeolithic, when modern humans dispersed out of Africa and successfully colonized

the globe. He focuses on the two cultures or time periods right before the emergence of Neolithic agriculture. Named the Kebaran and Natufian, they show the existence of settled village life well before the Neolithic, along with extensive cereal use. But all the cereals are wild varieties, not domesticated. One other thing of note, he puts dates into years BC (Before Christ), not BCE (Before the Common Era). BCE is the preferred, more neutral, term, especially in the part of the world which saw the emergence of at least three major monotheistic religions.

Chapter 4, "The Change," deals with the transition to farming; this took place in the Fertile Crescent between 12,500 and 8,500 BC. With hindsight, it is described as the first great transformation in human society. For almost 99% of our existence, humans have made their living by collecting wild plant foods, by fishing, and by hunting. The Natufian period shows evidence of permanently settled villages, storage pits, and hundreds of (often elaborate) burials. The technology for cereal processing is there—flint sickle blades for harvesting seeds and mortars for grinding them into flour. Clearly something is changing, but domestication of plants and animals can only be demonstrated in the archaeological record through morphological changes, which might have taken thousands of years to appear. Key skeletal changes in animals, as well as differences in their age profiles (the presence of many immature animals) show that some degree of management was in place by the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period.

In chapter 5, "Rural Villages," Thomas discusses cultural developments from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B to the end of the Halafian period around 5,100 BC. Thomas points out that the "agricultural village did quite well without the city" (p. 84). Small-scale villages existed, where most people had the same job—subsistence farming. But by the time the Halafian and Samarran emerge, there appear to be regional cultural systems. Thomas argues that the Halafian is interpreted as a style of pottery rather than a culture (p. 106). But most archaeologists see it as the product of a cultural network; when pottery was made and decorated using the same design template, it implies the existence of a regional cultural system with particular norms of behaviour.

Chapter 6, "Rise of the City," discusses developments from the end of the Halafian to the end of the Jemdet Nasr period around 2,900 BC. This period is the one associated with the emergence of cities and city-states, what archaeologists still refer to as the urban revolution. Major centres emerge, including ones that lend their names to cultural periods: Ubaid and Uruk (also known as Erech or Warka). Another important centre was Ur—home of Abraham, who was patriarch to the three great religions of the modern Middle East. Thomas points out that these cities had many of the same institutions that one sees in modern cities (p. 132). These include temples (religious structures), commercial centres where goods were produced and distributed, the specialization of labour, evidence of social stratification (in residences, burials), and a dense population.

Chapter 7, "The Dawn of History," discusses the early Bronze Age in Mesopotamia, from around the 3rd millennium BC onwards. At this time, the first written documents were created; and complex individual city-states dot the landscape. There are also signs of the emergence of regional states, such as Sumer, and, eventually, of empires. Chapter 8, "The City in the World," discusses the mature world system of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. In chapter 9, "Rethinking the City," Thomas tries to summarize the trajectory of the evolution of urbanism, and what this might offer in the way of lessons for urban theory and theorists. Thomas concludes that cities evolved as a function of urbanism. There is still confusion about the role of elites in the emergence of cities, but long-distance and regional trade still remain key features. He concludes that cities and urbanism reshaped society in ways we are still living with today.

As an archaeologist who deals mainly with prehistoric cultures, I was intrigued by the idea of a sociologist trying to understand how we see the evolution of complex societies. The value of archaeology is its temporal focus—we look at things in deep time. Thomas took it from the opposite direction, asking if we could go back from the present in order to understand urban origins. He does a good job summarizing Mesopotamian culture history and the evidence for the emergence of the first cities. Sociologists and other social scientists should read this book, in order to understand how history may have begun in this core area. But similar processes took place in many different parts of the world, at different times. Primary states evolved in Mesopotamia, but also in the Harappan region of modern Pakistan / India, in ancient China, in both highland and lowland Mesoamerica, and in the coast and mountains of Andean South America. While the specific path to city life and/or civilization differed, the end products were quite similar.