

The evolution of urban society in mesopotamia



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Where and when did the first urban societies appear? Were the earliest cities a prerequisite for the development of civilization or merely by-products of it? These are fundamental questions that are attempted to be answered in studies of the ‘urban revolution’, which is defined as “emergence of urban life and the concomitant transformation of human settlements from simple agrarian-based systems to complex and hierarchical systems of manufacturing and trade.” (Gotham 2007) For decades now, many anthropologists, archaeologists and historians have accepted that the ‘cradle of civilization’ was situated in the Fertile Crescent, a vast stretch of land which extends from the eastern Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. More specifically referred to is Mesopotamia, meaning “land between the rivers” in Greek, lying in the basin of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Mesopotamia is indeed the oldest site that provides evidence of a complex and urban society, such as writing, grand architecture, and bureaucracy. It contains all the characteristics necessary to support the social, economic, and religious needs of a large and sedentary population. Although there is no exact definition for an urban society, scholars have established a myriad of different criteria to classify societies. One of the earliest, and most important, lists of characteristics used to evaluate whether a society can be described as urban was V. Gordon Childe’s ten-point model in his seminal article “The Urban Revolution”. His analysis of these different, yet related, factors is often summarized under the acronym “POET”: population, organization, environment and technology (Wyly 6: 2008). For this essay, I will focus on these four criteria and how the ancient societies in Mesopotamia satisfied them.

First of all, the growth and density of a population depends on the food supply available, which is restricted by the natural resources available to the inhabitants. Mesopotamia was blessed as a rich agricultural area between its two rivers. It had very favourable geographical characteristics as a flat and alluvial land. As a consequence of its consistent elevation, the Tigris and the Euphrates flowed relatively slowly. The lack of natural dykes or barriers to the rivers caused the yearly flooding. The waters consistently overflowed their banks and deposited a rich layer of silt onto the plains. Since the ground in southern Mesopotamia was extremely fecund, people were able to regularly grow an abundance of crops which could support a considerable population. According to Elvin Wyly (1998), “ 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).” It was from the environment that social surpluses were made possible, meaning farmers were able to produce annually more food than what was necessary to sustain him and his family.

However, the annual flooding of the plains was often a mixed blessing. Although the fertility of the soil was caused by centuries of silt deposits transferred from the river beds, the flooding could also be unpredictably catastrophic. In an instant, rivers could destroy crops and wipe out entire communities and their inhabitants. Once the hordes of neighbouring peoples settled in adjacent to the waterways, it became necessary for them to join together in a form of collective management to protect their settlements and livelihoods from flooding. This collective management of the flood waters

and the social surplus associated with it formed the rudimentary conditions for the progression of Sumerian civilization. Childe (1950: 8) makes this point clear when he notes, " At the same time dependence on river water for the irrigation of the crops restricted the cultivable areas while the necessity of canalizing the waters and protecting habitations against annual floods encouraged the aggregation of population. Thus arose the first cities—units of settlement ten times as great as any known Neolithic village." These novel agricultural innovations of controlled irrigation and canalization served as catalysts for the broader societal changes. By providing a consistent social surplus, the populations of the earliest cities in Mesopotamia were able to rapidly increase in absolute terms and also in the density of their settlement. The greater numbers of people provided the basis for specialization and hierarchical institutions. The largest Mesopotamian city Ur, which was built on a tributary of the Euphrates, had a maximum population of 34, 000 in the old walled city, and possibly more than 340, 000 when its surrounding regions are included (Wyly 2008: 2). This is an astounding number for a settlement during this period. Among the rivers and streams, the Sumerian people built the first cities along with irrigation canals which were separated by vast stretches of open desert or swamp where nomadic tribes roamed. Communication among the isolated cities was difficult and at times dangerous. Thus each Sumerian city became a city-state, independent of the others and protective of its independence. This demonstrates that the development of cities and states were inextricably linked, as one was necessary for the formation of the other.

This irrigation cultivation and food surplus released certain members of the population from manual labour. The economic and political transformations that brought about early complex societies were largely due to the production of a social surplus by commoners, which enabled the formation of political differentiation and the complex division of labour. Thus began the process of social stratification and the formation of different social classes, perhaps the most significant change incurred by the Urban Revolution “ 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.” (Wylly 2008: 2). A strict hierarchy began. At the top were the land-owning elites, consisting of nobles, priests and the military, who controlled the distribution of the surplus. Next, there were specialists such as craftspeople, metallurgists, and scribes employed to track the surplus. At the bottom were the powerless peasants who supported the entire economy on their backs. Smith (2009: 10) notes that “ Sir Leonard Woolley (1954) was directing excavations at Ur, where he uncovered evidence for many craft specialists in the residential neighborhoods.”

The power of the elites was symbolized and consolidated by the construction of grand public monuments. “ Every Sumerian city was from the first dominated by one or more stately temples, centrally situated on a brick platform raised above the surrounding dwellings and usually connected with an artificial mountain, the staged tower or ziggurat.” (Childe 1950: 14). Granaries and workshops were attached to these temples allowing the concentration of food and wealth to be held in the hands of a relative few.

The ability to store and trade the surplus spurred scientific innovations in measurement and storage, while new political means emerged to supervise the allocation of the surplus and its benefits. According to Childe (1950: 16), new technologies and innovations emergence directly from the need to manage and organize the surplus. The priests and bureaucrats of Sumerian temple invented the first type of writing, in the form of Sumerian cuneiform, as a way of accounting and recording the resources and revenues collected as tribute from the commons. The invention of writing led to the development of other “ exact and predictive sciences—arithmetic, geometry and astronomy”. The use of writing and sciences for administrative purposes by the state is one of the hallmarks of a more complex, urban society.

George Cowgill (2004: 535) claims that “ If the first cities were deliberately created, it is likely that they were new kinds of settlements that arose abruptly, rather than old kinds of settlements that gradually grew so large that they became qualitatively as well as quantitatively different.”

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