

Editorial: where do cities come from and where are they going to? modelling past ...

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Where Do Cities Come From and Where Are They Going To? Modelling Past and Present Agglomerations to Understand Urban Ways of Life

Urbanism in the past and present remains hotly debated in academia and the media. We can think of a series of successfully conducted projects in the last few years: for example, the Copenhagen Polis Centre project; the Reception of the City in Late Antiquity ERC project (Cambridge, UK); the ongoing UrbNet project (Aarhus, Denmark); the Social Reactors Project (Colorado USA). To these now the Dutch Universities OIKOS network can also be added, and if this was not enough the Guardian has recently launched a series “ Guardian Cities” in the UK media. Yet fundamental questions such as “ What is an ancient city? when can we say that a nucleated settlement has become a city? Why sometime a city prevails over others and why eventually it declines?”; are still widely open and lively debated question, that have not received a definitive answer yet especially with reference to central Italy, and Rome in particular.

The long-term trajectory of Rome is quite well-known and established from the early supremacy within *Latium vetus* in pre-historic and early historic times, to the emerging power in Italy, during the Republican period, and finally the dominance over the Empire, in the first few centuries of our Era before the final collapse around the end of the fourth century AD. However, the contributory factors and the determinants of this trajectory, which took “ a slightly shabby Iron Age village” to become the “ undisputed hegemon of the Mediterranean” are still very much questioned [1](#). In this editorial I will

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discuss features of *urbanism/urbanization* by presenting the current debate on the ancient city, also with reference to the recent Cambridge University Press book by Arjan Zuiderhoek [2](#), which summarizes and discusses extensively previous approaches. Then I will discuss the contribution of this special Research Topic and I will indicate further possible points of debate.

Already in the Bronze Age, but more commonly with the advent of the Iron Age, in the Near East, in Europe but also in the Americas, many regions become organized in small independent political units, generally defined as city-states [3](#). Since the classic work by Fustel de Coulanges, *La Cité Antique*, published in 1864 [4](#), the debate on the characteristics and the origin of the ancient city has been immense, but the scholarly and at the same time agile book by Zuiderhoek, help us navigate into this dense and intricated subject [5](#). On one hand, Zuiderhoek discusses classical models of the ancient city, such as those elaborated by:

- 1) Fustel de Coulanges [6](#): based on a primordial, Indo-European notion of private property, originated in claims of land control and household possession through the cult of ancestors [7](#);
- 2) Max Weber [8](#): contrasting the modern-medieval city economy to the ancient household economy [9](#);
- 3) Moses Finley [10](#): conceptualizes the ancient city as a consumer city (greatly influenced by Max Weber) to explain the ancient world's relative economic underdevelopment, in comparison with medieval and early modern Europe.

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As observed by Zuiderhoek, in stressing the contrast with antiquity, all these three famous and influential models were interested in emphasizing the exceptionalism of Western European medieval cities, from which the unique development toward capitalism, the Industrial Revolution and modern liberal society would have emerged [11](#).

Besides these fundamental and influential models of the ancient city Zuiderhoek discussed all major models of urbanism developed by past and current scholarship, that can be summarized and integrated with further discussion as follow:

1. The demographic model can be based either on settlement size, with urban setting recognized above the threshold of 10, 000 individuals or in the case of ancient cities, 5, 000 [12](#); the density/nucleation principle, according to which “ cities are places where a certain energized crowding of people takes place” [13](#)); or the demographic composition of the population with the alternative models of the “ graveyard,” in which high urban mortality rates due to dirty and overcrowded environments, especially among infant/children, require immigration to explain urban growth) [14](#) and “ demographic transition” model, according to which higher fertility rates, led by early cessation of breastfeeding, could overweight high urban mortality rates, allowing for population survival and reproduction and eventually the demographic and economic growth [15](#).

2. More classic, the socio-economic model, characterizes urbanism by specialization of labor, social stratification and complementarity between the

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consumer city and the producing countryside, that is the market economy [16](#)

3. The model of urban environment and/or urban Landscape, based on the appearance of the ancient city, “ with the presence of central squares or plazas, paved streets, defensive walls and gates, public architecture for religious, political or ceremonial/ entertainment purposes and some element of town planning. It is perhaps in this sphere that the intuitive understanding of a settlement as ‘ urban’ (we know it when we see it) is strongest” [17](#).

4. The political model, according to which “ Greek and Roman cities were political communities, which possessed the institutions required for autonomous collective decision-making” [18](#).

5. The ritual and identity model according to which cities were communities not only for full members of the political body (*civitas*) but a wider group of people, including women, children, freedmen, resident foreigners and slaves, that were effectively non or semi-citizens but would find unity and interactions in the comprehensive and inclusive action of the city rituals and festivals [19](#). While religion has often been connected to power as a mean of coercion and ideological control (*Religio Instrumentum Regni*), from ancient classical authors [20](#) to Niccoló Macchiavelli's treatise [21](#), Jorg Rüpke is developing a new dynamic way of looking at religion as a mean of actively creating power and the changes that led to early states societies [22](#).

To these models identified by Zuiderhoek, now has also to be added the “ house society” model, originally developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss and since <https://assignbuster.com/editorial-where-do-cities-come-from-and-where-are-they-going-to-modelling-past-and-present-agglomerations-to-understand-urban-ways-of-life/>

elaborated on by numerous scholars, also with reference to Mediterranean Bronze and Iron Age societies [23](#) and to Central Italy [24](#), in particular. This model emphasizes the role of the family as an institution, with related anthropological and social practices such as marriages, hereditary rights etc. and seems to offer the missing link between egalitarian pre-urban societies and stratified and hierarchical urban developments, also being a key factor, in a dialectic manner, for the creation of state institutions. This view, reminiscent of Karl Marx and Friederich Engels perspectives [25](#), had already been suggested by Renato Peroni [26](#) and Andrea Cardarelli [27](#), in their elaboration and definition of proto-urban societies and seems most promising.

Zuiderhoek's book, these discussions and the rich literature of comparative studies on urbanism [28](#) demonstrate that while the debate on what is an ancient city is still very much open and far from being resolved, it is still possible to identify some common traits and or common trajectories that characterize settlements and communities across a great variety of historical and/or chronological settings. However, much of the discussion of these themes, within historical and archaeological circles, has been on a discursive or qualitative level, therefore it is often difficult to harmonize the different models that have been applied to date into a consistent empirical and/or theoretical framework. A new approach to settlements throughout different contexts should now be within our grasp, however, thanks to both the ease with which information can be disseminated and the facilities that recent developments in IT offer us to model, analyse, and statistically test data. As

suggested by Monica Smith “ the capacities for human interaction in concentrated locations are exercised within a limited set of parameters” [29](#), that should be possible to study quantitatively. Zuiderhoek seems to be skeptical about these interdisciplinary and quantitative comparative approaches to urbanism and urbanization that “ may eventually be able to arrive at some universal understanding of urbanism” [30](#). Differently I believe that qualitative discussion and comparative quantitative approaches are not alternative but complementary and it is still possible to keep details about cultural-historical specificity within wider comparative perspectives. In this sense Zuiderhoek underestimates a whole tradition of studies from the pioneering work by Louis Wirth [31](#) to the more recent contributions by Michael Batty [32](#), both discussed and presented in the recent quantitative approach to Central European urbanism by Oliver Nakoinz [33](#).

The quantitative comparative approach presented in this Research Topic, allows us to connect recent developments in archaeological research with those in other disciplines, including economics, anthropology, sociology, and social ecology, not only enabling us to add historical depth to our models of urbanism, but also to connect understanding about cities in the past and present, offering opportunities to predict their evolution and improve policies in the future. Probably given my personal background and expertise, the collection is slightly biased toward Mediterranean cultures and classical civilizations, with a special focus on Italy, but probably this is not totally a bad thing since classical civilizations lay at the origin of Western culture,

therefore understanding them better is also understanding ourselves a bit better, as long as we are aware of this potential bias and perspective.

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