

Cities and Civilizations:
Examining the Historical Impact of Urbanization on Humanity

Robert Ranstadler

History 233

Professor Slezak

June 24th, 2012

The development of early nomadic hunter gathers into ancient agrarian settlers was essential to the evolution of mankind. The early settlements that began to take shape twelve to six thousand years ago, across the Middle East and Northern Africa, eventually gave rise to domestication, migration and modernization. In a relatively short period of time, this developmental process led to the creation and cultivation of more sophisticated population centers such as city-states, villages, towns, and capital cities. Throughout each step, humanity continued to evolve and develop essential skills like written language, laws, mathematics and science. Many civilizations made the push to urbanization in a unique fashion while some borrowed ideas from other successful societies. Regardless of their methods, all of these groups also had to deal with the negative byproducts associated with each step forward. Thus, every society that has reaped the fruits of “city life” has also had to address class warfare, civil unrest, communicable diseases, and the imminent danger of savage raiders seeking wealth and power. Cities would not have developed without industrious civilizations and society would not have evolved without cities. However, this essential dynamic has also caused a great amount of suffering and strife in the wake of progress and urbanization.

The First Settlements

Three major cultural revolutions have occurred in the entire breadth of human existence. Each of these milestones had a direct impact on the creation and development of what we now refer to as the modern day city. Although the earliest traces of *homo erectus* go back for millions of years, the first revolution did not occur until approximately 10,000-6000 B.C. The Agricultural Revolution marked a significant leap forward in human development. Domestication of animals and crops allowed ancient nomads to develop and refine agrarian lifestyles. Combined with the implementation of more sophisticated tools and skills, this

eventually led to the creation of the first permanent human settlements in the Middle East, Northern Africa and the South Asia.¹

A relatively brief period of time later, two other major revolutions took place. The Urban and Industrial Revolutions (3000 B.C and 1750 A.D.) had a tremendous role to play in the development of cities. According to Reilly:

In the broadest historical perspective, the urban revolution is one of the three most significant changes in human history. Only the agricultural revolution 5000 years before it, and the 'industrial revolution' 5000 years after it, changed the world as much. The urban revolution created what we call (for good and ill) "civilization."²

The Urban Revolution saw the refinement of skill sets into the first official occupations that were not directly involved with the production and cultivation of food. This also led to the creation of many other modern institutions and disciplines such as civic bureaucracy, social stratum, jurisprudence, commerce, mathematics, science and organized religion.³ Undoubtedly, the Industrial Revolution also had a key part to play in all of these aspects as well. However, in the interest of applicability and brevity, only the dual paradigms of the first two major revolutions will be covered in this paper.

Early Developmental

All of the earliest civilizations had one thing in common when they first made the decision to trade their nomadic lives for that of farmers and herders: water. Water was a necessary part of life; outside the directly obvious benefits, it was also needed to sustain domesticated animals and irrigate valuable crops. Every major society settled around or near an immediate water source. In 3500-2500 B.C., early settlements began to appear in the Arabian Peninsula and Southwest Asia adjacent to the Euphrates and Indus Rivers (respectively). Within

a thousand years, several more settlements began to take shape in adjacent areas next to the unpredictable Tigris River and in eastern Asia on the shores of (what is now) China's Yellow River. Other cultures also took hold a short time later, further to the west, next to Northern Africa's predictable Nile and the Iberian Peninsula's fertile Mediterranean Sea region. Meanwhile, in the western hemisphere, settlements also took shape near the coastal locations of the central and southern Americas.⁴

From 3500 B.C. to 200 A.D., these initial settlements developed into the larger hubs of the familiar cultures that we identify with today. The first significant departures from simple villages were the Sumerian and Mesopotamian city-states. Constructed out of agrarian, economic and political necessity, these walled settlements were the answer to the volatile flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers of the Fertile Crescent. Intricate canals provided relief from flood waters, solid walls provided protection from aggressive neighbors, and massive temples dominated the center of each settlement to abate civic unrest through organized worship of local deities.⁵

It has also been discovered that the first major deviation between simple city structures also occurred at roughly the same period of time in northern Africa. Reilly notes that, "The Egyptians were blessed with the easier and more reliable of the two rivers. The Nile overflowed its banks predictably... and required only simple canals that tapped the river upstream and [into] the natural drainage of the Nile Valley."⁶ Consequently, the Egyptian city of Akeheton was much different than the neighboring Sumerian city of Ur, for instance. Akeheton had no major immediate rivals and, thus, needed no wall. Additionally, the ever-predictable Nile did not require the construction of intricate canals. Religiously, the Egyptians worshipped their patron

gods of nature, while the Mesopotamians and Sumerians feared the punitive wrath of the river gods.⁷

The Evolution of the City-State

As time progressed, cities (and the people residing both in and outside of their walls) began to take on different shapes and functions. This isn't to say that the city-state did not still persist as humanity continued to evolve. Rather, several cultures refined the size and scope of the ancient city-state while simultaneously developing larger classical commercial urban centers and imperial capital cities (with the latter two eventually giving rise to what is commonly recognized as the modern day city). While outside city walls, small bands of barbaric nomads observed those privileged masses within the cities with jealousy and contempt.⁸

Athens, one of the most striking examples of the classical city-state, was the intellectual and philosophical seat of classical Greece. Built in the fifth century B.C., Reilly points out that it was Aristotle that said of Athens, "men come together in the city to live; they remain there in order to live the good life."⁹ This desire to stay within the walls of Athens was more patriotic than practical, however. Reflective of the Athenians interests in debate, democracy and philosophy, the accommodations of Athens were utilitarian at best.¹⁰ Vital infrastructure, such as sanitation, took a back seat to the construction and glorification of public meeting places and religious forums such as the Acropolis, Agora and Ecclesia.¹¹

Alexandria, in comparison, was vastly different than Athens. Opulent and majestic, Alexandria was ironically founded by a student of Aristotle (Alexander the Great) and served as the classical capital city of Northern Africa. Reveled at the time as the pinnacle of humanity's social and economic achievements, Alexandria was a highly evolved metropolis that embraced many aspects of the ancient city-states of the Arabian Peninsula while simultaneously

incorporating Athenian philosophical and academic overtures. It is from Alexandria that many familiar modern day designs take their roots. Sophisticated harbors and bustling city streets were the status quo in Alexandria. The city also contained a great theater, library and Agora which sat adjacent to a great port where riches were traded on a daily basis. Many of these qualities were so significant, in fact, that they were later incorporated into the transformation of Rome and many of its conquered provinces.¹²

Other large cities in various parts of the globe also developed quickly during the late classical and early traditional periods. The Mauryan empire gave rise to the majestic city of Pataliputra in what is now modern day India, and the Qin and Han Dynasties erected a number of impressive capitols during China's Warring States Period.¹³ In both cases, the cities of eastern Asia and Asia Minor began to highlight an important overall trend that would extend through the Middle Ages into feudal Europe. Small groups of farmers and merchants had developed into wealthy land owners and aristocratic guild members. This change brought with it an abundance of wealth and influence but was underscored by the suffering of the poor. Eventually, much would fall to pieces at the hands of savage raiders from the North and the religious European zealots that emerged from those barbarian invasions of the Western Roman Empire.¹⁴

Essential as the city was to human development, one could argue that the evolution brought with it many unwanted evils. For every step forward, it seems that mankind has been forced to take two steps back. The democracy of the Athenian Greeks was punctuated by the destruction and pillaging of Corsica at the hands of the Romans; the marvels of Roman industry and ingenuity were razed by savage barbarians; and Constantinople ironically fell to western Christians that were attempting to protect it from their perceived enemies.¹⁵ Throughout all of

this, many societies shared a great deal of similarities and differences that forever changed humanity and the world in which it thrives.

Notes

1. Kevin Reilly, *The West and the World: A History of Civilization from the Ancient World to 1700* (Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), 3-6.
2. Reilly, *The West and the World*, 6.
3. Ibid., 6-7.
4. Ibid., 43-66.
5. Ibid., 56-58.
6. Ibid., 56.
7. Ibid., 58.
8. Ibid., 127-128.
9. Quoted in Kevin Reilly *The West and the World*, 128.
10. Reilly, *The West and the World*, 129-130.
11. Kevin Glowacki, *The Ancient City of Athens* (The Stoa: A Consortium for Electronic Publication in the Humanities, 2004).
12. Reilly, *The West and the World*, 130-133.
13. Ibid., 148-150, 203.
14. Ibid., 254-267.
15. Ibid., 212, 266.

Bibliography

Glowacki, Kevin. *The Stoa: A Consortium for Electronic Publication in the Humanities*, "The Ancient City of Athens." Last modified 2004. Accessed June 24, 2012.

<http://www.stoa.org/athens/sites.html>.

Reilly, Kevin. *The West and the World: A History of Civilization from the Ancient World to 1700*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997.