THE CITY IN HISTORY

by

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Since antiquity, the city has been a symbol of man's advancing civilization. The term civilization derives from the Latin root civis, a city dweller; from urbs, or city we get urbane as well as urban. On the other hand, pagan and rustic come from the Latin for peasant, paganus or rusticus; boor from the Dutch for farmer, boer; heathen from the Old English for one who dwells on the heath.[1] Rural men cannot have contributed much to the developing meaning of those words, but their message is clear.

More than this, historians have generally seen cities as "the nursuries of freemen," Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier thesis notwithstanding.[2] Some of the earliest lessons in democratic procedure were learned in the city-states of ancient Greece; the revival of urbanism in the 11th century along the Mediterranean and in northern Germany contributed to the decline of feudalism and flowering of the Renaissance; in modern times and conditions that urbanism fostered -- an open class system, mass literacy, and so on -- in turn provided the basis for popular government.[3] Little wonder that for many scholars, the "invention" of the city ranks second only to the "invention" of agriculture as man's most significant step from primitivism.

The details of how it all began are shrouded in uncertainties. At some point in his unrecorded past, approximately seven thousand years ago, man ceased to be a nomad and settled permanently in small communities. The species homo sapiens has inhabited the earth for about 30,000 years. Only for a short part of that time, less than one-fourth of the whole, has its life style even remotely approximated what we associate today with civilization and culture.

However staggering the implications of those earliest communities, they were but reflections of a development still more fundamental. Before there could be cities there first had to be the capacity to live in cities. Community living represents an artificial mastery of the natural environment, and nothing is more basic in defining such mastery than man's freedom to stay in one place rather than foraging constantly for the wherewithal to sustain life. The first great revolution, the precursor of all that followed, was the cultivation of plants. Our ancestors learned to raise a crop before they learned to build a town.[4]

Wheat and barley were probably the earliest grains to be systematically produced: they were relatively easy to grow, resistant to decay, and high in food value. Together with the domestication of a few farm animals, they introduced the novel concepts of abundance and surplus. From the produce of the soil came the basis for human beings to formalize their family institutions (farming meant that for the first time children had a useful function to serve), to develop stationary habits, and finally to increase in numbers.

This is not to suggest that the discovery of agricultural techniques resulted directly in the founding of agricultural villages. For an unknown period crop-growing men continued their nomadic habits, clearing a wood and harvesting a few crops before moving on. But the logic of their skill dictated its own response. Just as their first discoveries taught them to wait on the seasons before they harvested, so the refinements taught them to wait longer, and finally to remain. It happened unobtrusively, a decision over time that time more than man controlled.

The more extended the period of residence in a place the larger the group that must have congregated, and the greater its experience with the possibilities of cooperative enterprise, whether to dam a stream, or dig a ditch, or protect the food supply against predators. Men lost their taste for wandering when it meant leaving behind what they had helped to create. Perhaps they simply craved company. In any event they stayed, and the agricultural village was born.

As long as virtually the entire community was involved in the quest for food, the social form continued to be preurban, or "folk."[5] The settlements could not have grown to be very large, only a few hundred inhabitants or so, when its sole function was agriculture, nor can there have been specialization of labor when the efforts of all were required to produce grain to last through the barren months. At this stage techniques were still rudimentary, and the use of outside power sources to supplement man's muscle still unknown. Even the permanence of their settlement was a relative thing. Since the earliest farmers knew nothing about fertilization and conservation, they quickly exhausted the soil that fed them, and had to move periodically to start the village anew in more fertile surroundings. In such an environment no one could be spared from the common labor of survival, which in turn meant that there could not be a class system, a literate elite, a permanent governing body, a differentiation of function between merchants, artisans, and priests. The city as a concept implies not only a large and dense population, but a heterogeneous population. It was still centuries in the future.

Several factors contributed to the evolution from folk society to pre-industrial society, and, with it, the appearance of man's first cities. As suggested, the pivotal element was an increase in agricultural surplus, freeing some men from labor in the fields.[6] But this is to put in a deceptively simple way what in fact was a highly complicated process. What caused the surplus, aside from the skills men inevitably acquire in cultivating their standard crops? The obvious answer is technology, as reflected in the development of a science of metallurgy based upon bronze, the improvement of the plow and wheel, the harnessing of animals to supplement man's strength, and later the application of independent power sources -- wind and water -- to supplement both.[7] And yet that is only part of the answer. It fails to explain why technology appeared and prospered in some places centuries before Christ, while the late 20th century finds others still without the most rudimentary techniques for efficient farming. Expertise is clearly a correlate of two other factors: an environment favorable for technology to take hold, and a relatively complex social organization enabling the agricultural surplus to be appropriated and distributed by non-producers.

As for the appropriate environment, scholars offer a standard description that common sense as much as research supports. It includes mild climate, fertile soil, abundant water supply, relative freedom from attack, access to travel routes (which in turn means exposure to people of different cultures, with new ideas), a wide trading area, and topographical contours encouraging dense inhabitations.[8] This is not to suggest that the list applies equally to all of the areas where man's earliest cities appeared. The Incas in Peru and Aztecs in Mexico hardly inhabited equivalent areas in terms of climate or topography, and the freedom from attack enjoyed by Egyptian cities was hardly shared by those in Mesopotamia. It does, however, define in broad terms the essential milieu for urban civilization to appear.

The third requirement -- relatively sophisticated mechanisms for social control -- is perhaps the most obvious. What is involved in the emergence of cities, after all, is not simply that some men cease tilling the soil, but that the majority who continue to do so assume the burden of feeding them. It means that arrangements exist to transport food from the hinterlands to storage places, and further arrangements to distribute it from there to those who consume it. To a degree, at least, it means the beginnings of specialization of labor, as between those who actually farm, and those who mine metals and work them into implements for farmers to use. In the most immediate sense, these are all functions of political control. They reflect not only the ability to organize men, but if necessary to coerce them. Only societies with recognized ruling elites capable of enforcing their mandates are in a position to accomplish it.

This is what Robert Adams had in mind when he wrote that "The rise of cities . . . was pre-eminently a social process, an expression more of changes in man's interaction with his fellows than in his interaction with his environment."[9] The existence of food surpluses by no means guaranteed that city growth would occur. It was a "necessary" precondition, not a "sufficient" one. Many primitive peoples squandered their bounty in high living or in wasteful religious rituals. Only with the coming of political control, putting the foodstuffs at the disposal of a leader who in turn dispensed them to other non-producers, did urban development begin. As the process continued it was possible to feed more priests, more functionaries, more artisans, thereby setting the city on the route to becoming a place of temples and grand public buildings.

Of course any elite must have an ideology to legitimize its status and invest its word with authority. Men do not naturally turn over part of their harvest to support others, nor do they freely surrender their wealth in taxes and tithes. They do so in obedience to authority, which itself -- to the extent it is stable -- proceeds from a shared ideology. Until modern times, the ideologies that justified power were almost always rooted in religion. The leader was both king and high priest, and his lieutenants servants of God as well as the state. In the final analysis, their subjects obeyed them because it was devine will that they do so. Whatever further persuasion they needed came from the army, the bulwark of political power.

Considering the range of expertise which went into creating even the earliest cities, it is understandable that many scholars add as a further precondition that the ruling elite had to be literate. Gideon Sjoberg, for one, convincingly argues that nothing weighed heavier in the development of cities, nor better defines the difference between a folk and pre-industrial urban society, than the substitution of a written for an oral tradition.[10] With the ability to read and write men were in a position to develop the sort of sophisticated political mechanisms they needed to organize a complicated social organism out of its disparate parts.[11] They were also spurred to an unprecedented level of creativity in the arts and sciences, itself necessary for cities to grow. The clearest indication of the shift from one form of civilization to another is in the records left behind by a small group of literate men as a continuing account of human endeavor.

The preconditions for urbanization to occur were satisfied first in the broad river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, where the earliest cities arose some five and a half thousand years ago. Shortly afterward, within three or four hundred years, cities also appeared in the Nile delta. Whether they represented separate creations, or diffusions from the Mesopotamian culture, is a subject of scholarly controversy. The most likely answer is a bit of both. Egypt enjoyed many of the same advantages as Mesopotamia, and likely traveled a parallel historical route, but at the same time it was probably aware of an influenced by the Mesopotamian example. . . .[12]

As they developed the great cities filled a variety of functions. They were administrative centers, of course, places where the elite congregated to maintain contact with each other -- thus facilitating the work of government -- and to share in the cultural and material bountry to be enjoyed there. (It cannot have been an inconsiderable factor that the military made its headquarters at the seat of government, affording protection from dangers internal and external.) They were also centers of religion, and increasingly of commerce, manufacturing, art, science. Then as now, they encompassed all that was most advanced in the world that produced them, and in the sections where poverty and decay festered, all that was most debased.

The preindustrial cities generally expanded in size and influence through a process of imperial domination. From exercising effective control over the territory immediately adjacent to them, their influence spread to outlying regions. Rival cities came into contact at that point, one to be conquered and subjugated, the other to digest its gains. In the extraordinary cases a successful city's influence might extend far beyond regional or ethnic boundaries. Babylon, for example, founded in 2000 B.C., was master of the entire Tigris-Euphrates valley by 1800 B.C.[13]

By the same token, a variety of factors limited how large they could grow, or the sway they could exert. Techniques for working the land were after all still inefficient and labor intensive (it required the effort of an estimated fifty to ninety cultivators to feed one city dweller) making agricultural surpus at best a tenuous concept.[14] Transportation facilities to bring in food from outlying districts were equally backward. Cargoes could be shipped long distances by camel caravan or over waterways, but it was a practical option only for relatively light, relatively high value material. The produce to feed the city had to be hauled in on pack animals, on cumbersome ox-drawn carts with rigidly attached wheels and axles, often even on the backs of human bearers. None of these methods was effective over more than short distances.

When gains did resume, it happened in a different part of the world -- in Greece and Rome -- under a different social order. The classical civiilizations which cast their light on far corners of the world for more than a thousand years, from approximately 600 B.C. to 400 A.D., benefited from two categories of change. Technology was a key factor, above all the substitution of iron for brass and copper as man's basic metal. While no precise date attaches to the "Iron Age" (techniques for working the metal were evidently known as early as 1200 B.C. in western Asia, but not until the time of the Greeks in Europe), its coming had enormous implications.[15] Not only was iron cheaper and more readily available than anything known before, it was many times more efficient. Iron plows, for example, dramatically increased the farmer's productivity in tilling the soil, and iron wheels his range in shipping produce to urban markets. In

another sense the term Iron Age symbolizes the whole array of inventions, some of them only indirectly involving the metal, that came together more or less at the same time to push out the limits of human capability. They included vastly improved sailboats which drew the greater part of their power from the wind; winches and pulleys in manufacturing; improved systems of irrigation; the use of alphabets rather than symbols in writing. Each was like a lever lifting the boulder in the way of further urban development.

Far more difficult to measure, but no less important, were the social and cultural changes that Greece and Rome fostered. The greatness of those civilizations, to put it too simply, was in discovering the worth of individuals. They put man at the center of his universe, liberating his energies to dare, and achieve, what in a previous era would have been unthinkable. Plato and Aristotle, Horace and Livy, symbolize a triumph of human spirit, and so do the cities they inhabited.

Nobody is quite sure about the precise size of the great cities of antiquity. Using two standards -- the physical area of excavated cities, and the likely number of inhabitants per building -- it is possible to hazard a few guesses. The earliest cities in Mesopotamia and Egypt probably contained between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants, excluding full-time farmers.[16] Their subsequent growth did not take them much beyond that. Sir Leonard Wolley, the excavator of the fabled Ur in Mesopotamia, put the population in the walled "Old Town" at 34,000 shortly after 2000 B.C. But, cities did well if they had as many as 10,000 or 15,000 inhabitants.

Nor were they impressive in physical size. Ur encompassed about 220 acres; Karkemish in Syria about 240 acres; the walled area at Myceneae only about 12 acres.[17] Or to use a different measure, the Greeks (who if anything would be too generous in their calculations) reported that Thebes at the height of its splendor measured scarcely 14 miles in circumference.[18] Even mightly Babylon, shortly before its fall to the Persians, was enclosed by only 11 miles of wall.

It is not surprising that cities did remain compact, for aside from all other considerations, they were effectively circumscribed by the distance people could walk and hear. Plato may have been unrealistic in fixing the optimum size of the city as the number one man could address, but it probably mattered that the entire population be within reach of some central rallying signal, whether bell or drum.[19] More than this, water for daily consumption had to be carried in by hand, which meant that a household could only locate as far from the nearest supply as a woman on foot was able to transport it. Such limitations obviously affected population. Without modern methods of sanitation and hygiene, only a given number of people can squeeze into a restricted space.

Although the data is much more impressive for the Greek and Roman era, even here there has tended to be considerable over-statement. Periclean Athens during the fifth century B.C. was a marvel of man's inventiveness and genius, but it had a population of only between 120,000 and 180,000.[20] Syracuse and Carthage may have been a bit larger. As for Rome, the greatest creation of Western man until that time, its population in the second century A.D. numbered not 1,000,000, as scholars long believed, but more likely something in the vicinity of 300,000.[21]

The collapse of the Roman Empire sharply reversed the trend to more and larger cities. Urban places that had seemed on the verge of flowering into centers of culture and commerce shriveled into insignificance as the Germanic invaders destroyed their trade routes to the outside world. (Rome itself withered to a community of barely 20,000 by the end of the eighth century.)[22] This is not to bandy the phrase "Dark Ages" to evoke an image of European civilization in deep and cataclysmic eclipse.[23] There is a difference between cities in decline and the demise of cities. While many did atrophy into merely fortified outposts, others survived as conservatories of the ancient arts and sciences, preserving for another day the knowledge that had been laboriously acquired over the centuries. The traditional callings could be found there -- merchants and artisans, soldiers and statesmen -- so that even if at a reduced level the forms and functions of urbanism survived. Moreover, such centers as Constantinople, Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad flourished in other parts of the world, making their own immense contribution of man's advancing civilization.

The dawn of a new era, and the beginning of the end for feudalism, came in the tenth and eleventh centuries with the revitalization of trade between the city-states of Italy (notably Venice, which benefited in the respect from its large Greek colony), and the Byzantine and Arab empires at the far end of the Mediterranean.[24] It was made possible in the first instance by the fact of increased political stability in Italy, deriving in part, at least, from the successful thrust for power by the cities themselves. The limits of that power, on the other hand, as well as the limits of medieval agriculture, encouraged the city-states to channel their energies into trade. Unable to impose effective control over their hinterlands, or in view of the low per capita and per acres yield of agriculture to prosper by confining their business to a restricted vicintity, they looked outward for opportunities denied them at home.[25] They looked to the riches of the east.