

# On the origins of cities in the Near East and their implications today

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## **Abstract**

As long as humans were hunters and gatherers, the means of production were collectively owned. Societies and people did not accumulate personal wealth and storage of food merely aimed to ensure survival during seasonal shortages. However, this changed when the first humans around 12 000 years ago started other activities than hunting and gathering, like agriculture. A few millennia later, the first urban settlements gradually appeared, originally possibly in the Near East, as a result of a number of factors like a surplus of agricultural production. This allowed some people to become specialized in non-agrarian activities. Other conditions which promoted the appearance of the first cities were innovations and new technologies, especially in relation to agricultural production, transport both over land as well as on water, as well as the appearance of administrative and political structures. This paper reviews the evidence whether urban bias in human development may be as old as the first urban settlements themselves. Further, the paper aims to review whether attitudes and values by the early urban residents were value laden negatively towards rural people.

Keywords: Urban and rural development, Cities, City origins, Near East, Urban bias

## **Introduction**

As long as humans were hunters and gatherers, the means of production were collectively owned. Groups of the population living together could get reciprocal rights to the resources of other groups by asking permission. Societies and people did not accumulate personal wealth and storage of food merely aimed to ensure survival during seasonal shortages. However, this changed when the first humans around 12 000 years ago started other activities than hunting and gathering, like agriculture (Salamini *et al*, 2002). Until a few decades ago, it was the general opinion that plants and/or animals were domesticated before the population became sedentary. However, during the last decades, some research has suggested that at least in some places people started some form of sedentary life before plants and animals were domesticated. It was probably a long and interactive process over many hundreds, if not thousands, of years before sedentary forms of life became common. Some 3 000 to 4 000 years later, the first people started to live in more densely structured settlements, which however probably for many centuries if not millennia still retained much of the properties of rural areas. Cities and urban settlements therefore started to appear very gradually indeed, originally possibly in the Near East, as a result of many interrelated factors, e. g. a surplus of agricultural production which permitted some people to become specialized in non-agrarian activities like smiths, masons, commerce, trade and transport-related activities etc Other conditions which promoted the first cities were innovations and new technologies, especially in relation to agricultural production, transport both over land and on water, as well as the first appearance of administrative, political and religious structures.

Documentation on the origins of the first urban settlements is scanty to say the best. No firm evidence has yet been produced as to where urban settlements might first have appeared. Many claim that Mesopotamia would have been the origin of cities. Certainly, urban

settlements like Eridu, Ur and Uruk were well established by 3 000 B.C. and may have had their first origins at least one or two thousand years earlier. Another very early urban settlement was Halaf, in the extreme northern river basin of Euphrates in present day Syria on the border to Turkey. Other Near Eastern regions with cities more than 5 000 years ago are, of course, Egypt, while Jericho has been assumed to be a city by 6 000 years B.C. Catalhöyük in Anatolia (Turkey) may have been as old as, if not older than, Jericho, as estimates of the former indicates that it flourished due to its rich obsidian deposits from around 6 500 to 5 550 B. C. E. Catalhöyük thus demonstrates that cities may have developed outside the so-called Fertile Crescent, for long thought to have provided a unique environment for the creation of the first Near Eastern cities (Cessford, 2005; Hodder, 2007; Jacobsen, 1981; Maisels, 1990; Maisels 1999; Yoffee, 2005). In addition, other regions of the world like the Indus valley with Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, eastern China and Meso-America may have provided hearths for urban settlements as early as those mentioned in the Near or Middle East. Thus the arguments will certainly continue for years and decennia if they ever will be settled.

Although sources, which deal with the origins and development are legio (plentiful), their scientific value are generally very doubtful indeed. Among the best, or less unreliable, are the cuneiforms, Bible and other religious scriptures, while there are many other ancient writings as well. Written records, appearing in several regions of the Near East around 3 000 B.C. are generally considered to be the most reliable of source materials, although they also often have to be treated with suspicions, as many authors of texts, of course, had other reasons than attempting to document as correctly as possible their society and its characteristics. Archaeological evidences therefore often contribute with decisive clues where other evidences are lacking or weak. Other developments of crucial importance were inventions like irrigation as well as inventions in improved modes of transport like the wheel and the ox-cart as well as the domestication of animals like horses, donkeys and oxen as animals for transport all provided the basis for societies which produced an increasing surplus to become specialized in economic activities and could thus move away from subsistence to a barter economy. In addition, improved skills in water transport, like the construction of boats which were sufficiently strong and stable to sail on big seas like the Mediterranean, the Black and the Red Sea and on the oceans, as well as in navigation greatly enhanced the appearance and increasing role of trade and exchange of all sorts and thus contributed to specialization of economic activities between humans and societies.

In addition, other factors of importance for the establishment of the first non-agricultural settlements, i. e. factors based upon the production out of what the land could produce, were related to the appearance of the first non-agricultural activities like salt production, iron production, the appearance of smiths and iron making, as well as craft-skills like making weapons, tools and utensils, horse-shoes etc, leather-works, as well as the first appearance of hierarchies in society with chiefs, with or without religious and/or administrative functions. Over several millennia, a slow and gradual process of specialization among different groups of human population thus took place in different forms of agricultural activities like various forms of cereal production, vegetable production wherever climate and other conditions so allowed as well as domestication of animals and plants apart from what had been since time immemorial the basis for human life, hunting, fishing and gathering. Probably most people did several of these activities at the same time and specialization thus appeared only after many generations, maybe over millennia.

These processes resulted in some people producing a surplus of some products while others produced surpluses of other products, which thus created the basis for exchange. Originally not organized, such exchange with time started to become more and more organized. Barter

and trade started to appear. Other phenomena of importance were inventions of all sorts from the simplest household utensils to relatively advanced means of land and water transport. Further, religion and worship with time became more and more structured. They certainly have their origins back into times when all humans were hunter-gatherers. Developments in the leadership of communities of course equally go way back to times when all humans were hunter-gatherers, as some people already then were more skilled than others in leading their communities and therefore took the leadership of their neighbors. As a result of these slow processes over thousands of years, increasing specialization of livelihoods between human beings gradually developed. Everyone somehow started not to do everything as they had done (although most certainly, most people were still skilled in and continued to do many activities). This, together with many other conditions like geomorphologic features, soils, hydrology, climate etc (probably) laid the basis for some places to start to grow more than others. The specific causes and contributions of each of these numerous factors may have varied, at least to some extent, from one place to another. In many settlements, an increasing number of people therefore started to earn their living from other activities than the land, including handicrafts, trade, transport, administration and leadership, religious activities etc. All these developments laid the foundations for the appearance of settlements in which the inhabitants to a greater or lesser degree were specialized in their economic activities and thus did not all produce (all) their own food-supply but instead started to exchange some products and services with each other. The first signs of trade and markets thus appeared at the same or at different times as the appearance of the first non-agricultural settlements, what would be called towns, cities and the first urban settlements had been created.

## **Purpose**

This introduction to human history aims to stress the necessity to search the roots of urban settlements and cities for human development. It should have been the purpose of this paper to determine the origins of urban settlements and of rural-urban divide as well as of an urban bias in society. However, this might be an arduous task and may rather require several studies over a lengthy period. Therefore, the **purpose** of this paper is limited to show that there are strong indications that urban bias in human development is as old as urban settlements themselves. Further, lack of proof that there was **not** an urban bias in early urbanizing societies may be used as one indication of the existence of an urban bias. Further, it is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that there are also strong indications that sometimes attitudes and values by urban residents early during the process of urbanization turned out to become value laden negatively towards rural people. Finally, a basic condition which determines when events do occur is how those events are defined. Thus, definitions do constitute crucial steps in all research activities.

## **The Origins of Cities: a rural-urban divide and an urban bias**

The genesis of studies on rural-urban interrelationships and sometimes a rural-urban divide which may result in an urban bias in society and in scientific research was traced back more than 200 years by Mick Moore (1984) with the emergence of the classical political economy in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Moore noted that the Minister for Overseas Development Judith Hart in her review of Michael Lipton's seminal book on urban bias (Lipton, 1977)

“complained at the allocation of excessive space to discussion of ideologies of urban bias in the work of classical and early Marxian political economists. Their world was too different from the contemporary Third World for their ideas to have any current relevance, while the real task was to get on and do something about urban bias today. Impatience with what might appear as

purely academic indulgence is at the very least understandable in a Minister for Overseas Development. One might easily agree with Judith Hart that the classical political economists provide no guide to action in the modern world. Yet it would be a mistake to believe that the works of the classical can safely be ignored by those attempting to understand and evaluate the kinds of ideas about urban (or rural) bias propounded by Michael Lipton and other contemporary scholars whose work is discussed below.” (Moore, 1984, 5).

The impatience in addressing the urban bias in development projects of the poor part of the world may thus have neglected the importance of taking into account the heritage of the first human civilizations also upon the society of the third millennia. Michael Lipton, Mick Moore and others thus traced the origins of the rural-urban divide and of urban (or rural) bias in contemporary society and in scientific research back two centuries to the classical political economists like Sir James Steuart (1767) and Adam Smith (1776). However, neither they nor any other contemporary researchers of development appear to have considered searching for the origins of rural-urban divide and of urban bias in society at large (as well as in research) further back in history than to the industrial revolution and the growth of modern sciences some 200 years ago.

The search for the origins of urban settlements and of an rural-urban divide as well as for the origins of an urban bias in human life and human development at large should therefore not be limited to the appearance of the industrial revolution two or three centuries ago, nor to the scientific revolution one or two centuries earlier but should be searched/linked to the origins of human non-agricultural production as well as the numerous inventions which provided the foundation for specialization of economic activities away from land- and natural resource-related economic activities which, all together and/or in various combinations allowed the subsequent appearance of the first non-agricultural settlements. Whether first towns, cities and urban settlements were created in the Near or Middle East, the Fertile Crescent, the Indus valley, eastern China, in North, Meso- or South America, still remains debatable. Numerous publications have been devoted to this topic over the last 50 or 100 years and advancing this topic is such a huge task that it might require teams of several researchers.

For this paper crucial assumption to the subject is that these processes of specialization of human economic activities also brought with them attitudes towards their own proper society as well as other societies. – It is our hypothesis that the transition away from societies which made their survival on the land and its natural resources of various kinds towards societies in which its inhabitants to a smaller or larger degree were not earning their (direct) living from land and its natural resources at the same time produced attitudes of superiority and inferiority regarding their own society as well as toward the other societies. – The origins of a rural-urban divide and of an urban bias in all human development must be searched in these processes which are crucial for all subsequent development of human societies.

In his seminal work, *Origins. The Ancient Near Eastern background of some modern Western institution (1996)*, William Hallo notes,

By contrast the nomadic or semi-nomadic mode of life that continued to co-exist side by side with urban agglomerations seemed a rude throwback to more primitive ways, or at best an occasional test of manly virtues and martial strengths to offset the debilitating ease of the urban setting. An Akkadian poem of the late second millennium B.C. sums up the latter aspect in the context of seven irresistible weapons presented to the divine Erra and urging him into battle in the following words:

“Arise, get up!  
 Are you perhaps going to stay in the city like a paralyzed old man? .....  
 Are we to fear and tremble as if we did not know battle?  
 Taking the field of manhood is like a holiday!  
 The city-dweller, though he be a prince, can never eat enough.  
 He is despised and slandered in the talk of his own people.  
 How is he to match his strength with him who takes the field?  
 Let the prowess of him who stays in the city be ever so enormous-  
 How is he to overpower the one who takes the field?  
 The finest city food cannot compare with field rations.  
 The sweetest light beer cannot compare with water from the goatskin.  
 The palace (erected on) a high terrace cannot compare with the warrior’s  
 pallet.  
 Warlike Erra, take the field, brandish your weapon!” (Hallo, 1996, 1-2)

Hallo further notes that the unanimity of designation in cuneiform contrasts with the situation in other ancient Near Eastern traditions, where there are many terms for ‘city’ and few for ‘countryside’ ... Suffice it to summarize the lexical evidence in its own right: on the one side a diffuse, (p. 4) subjective, functional diversity of descriptive terms for the country-side, reflecting the urban point of view and a succession of different linguistic strata; on the other, a single term for the city, reflecting a common distinctiveness that apparently out-weighted whatever external differences that apparently outweighed whatever external differences divided the cities of one age or place from another.” (Hallo, 1996, 3-4). Concerning the city in Sumer it

had its aetiology, though as it happens the mythical version of urban origins as preserved in the ‘Sumerian Flood Story’ seems to refer to the first cities as ‘capitals’ in Civil’s translation (op cit, 5)

Hallo further quotes the “Sumerian Flood Story”, the Mesopotamian versions of the deluge, dated by Hallo to have occurred about 2 900 B. C. E.:

The firstlings of those cities, Eridu, she (Nintur) gave to the leader  
 Nudimmud,  
 the second, Badtibira, she gave to the Prince and Sacred One,  
 the third, Larak, she gave to Pabilsag,  
 the fourth, Sippar, she gave to the gallant Ulu.  
 The fifth, Shuruppak, she gave to Sud.

Moving some three thousands years ahead to the height of the times of the Roman empire, a decisive step in human movement towards creating the ‘modern’ cities of the third millennium C. E. was taken with the expansion of the main ‘missionary’ movements, Christianity and Islam. These religions, especially the first, provided decisive stimulus for the growth of the cities. The former, which originated with Jesus preaching in virtually exclusively rural environments, got a crucial ‘turn-around’ when Paul, Barnabas and others started to address urban communities all over especially the north-eastern shores of the Mediterranean. The urban world might today have had a dramatically different, minor, appearance had it not been for the efficiency as missionaries of Paul and his associates. Wayne Meeks was among the first to write about the almost exclusively urban character of the Pauline missionary activities, e. g. “Pauline Christianity .... was entirely urban.” (Meeks, 1983, 8), “the mission of the Pauline circle was conceived from start to finish as an urban movement”, (op cit, 10). Meeks throughout this volume thus underscores the urban character of the Paul’s mission:

“This life as an artisan distinguished him [Paul] both from the workers of the farms, who, slave or free, were perhaps at the very bottom of the social pyramid in antiquity, and from the lucky few whose wealth and status depended on their agricultural estates.” (op cit, 9)

“... it was the ethnarch of Nabataean king Aretas IV who tried to have Paul arrested in Damascus (2 Cor. 11:32). It is evident that Paul had stirred up this official hostility not by meditating in the desert nor by wandering from village to village, but by preaching in flourishing Hellenistic cities such as Petra, Gerasa, Philadelphia, and Bostra, ...” (op cit, 10)

“... within a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement. So it remained, from the dispersion of the ‘Hellenists’ from Jerusalem until well after the time of Constantine.<sup>10</sup> The movement had crossed the most fundamental division in the society of the Roman Empire, that between rural people and city dwellers, and the results were to proved momentous.” (op cit, 11)

Many authors have since then repeated the message of Wayne Meeks, e.g. Rodney Stark (1996; 2005; 2007) who among other topics deals with the rise of Christianity from originally very insignificant dimensions in Galilee and in Judea to become a major religion only a few centuries later. Stark relates his research on the origins of Christianity to its relationship with the society at large. He argues for Christianity to have its origins not in the poor and marginalized but in the middle and upper classes, especially in the cities and among converted Jews. Stark concludes that “(e)arly Christianity was primarily an urban movement” (Stark, 2006, 2) and notes that the word pagan (in latin *paganus*) originally meant “ ‘rural person’, or more colloquially ‘country hick’ “ (ibid). Christianity quickly advanced in the cities of the eastern part of the Mediterranean while rural people mostly remained unconverted. The word pagan therefore quickly became synonymous with a rural, unconverted person and became negatively loaded. Stark further notes, that “many factors were involved in the triumph of Christianity” (Stark, 2006, 8). Critiques by classicists have also contributed significantly to our understanding how we humans look upon ourselves and upon other societies. Value-loaded expressions like rural people as poor, uneducated, even vulgar, stupid and brutish, are not uncommon in both Greek and Roman texts as papers to a conference in 2004 demonstrated. The editors of the papers published in 2006 noted that in

“the heyday of structuralism, scholars would have felt no discomfort at thinking about city and country as a binary opposition. City and countryside could be considered structural devices to organize opposing values: if the city is good, educated and refined, the countryside is boorish, stupid and vulgar. If the countryside is pure, authentic and truthful, the city will be polluted, corrupt and deceitful.” (Rosen & Sluiter, 2006, 3-4).

Today, such values are more common in poorer societies, whereas it has sometimes though far from always disappeared or has been suppressed in western societies. The interaction and interdependence of cities and countryside of the city-states in the antiquity is well documented. These interrelationships sometimes were positively loaded but also frequently characterized by negative attitudes by urban people upon rural people. It should for example be noted that the word urban and the name Urban signify “well-educated”. These attitudes sometimes persist also today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as seen in publicity campaigns of fashion

houses with smartly dressed women called “urban girl” or a young couple with the heading “urban love”. No company has yet headed such campaigns “rural girl” or “rural love”.

## **Conclusion**

The origins of cities and urban settlements (certainly not appearing within a few decades but during several millennia) still remain obscured in the societies of the past some 6 000 to 10 000 years ago, possibly in the Ancient Near East of Egypt, Mesopotamia and other parts of the so-called Fertile Crescent as well as in neighbouring regions like in Anatolia as well as in the Indus valley, eastern China and the Americas. The interrelationships and interdependences of urban settlements upon their surrounding countryside frequently have created value-loaded attitudes, both positive and negative. The inherited past with its attitudes and values is frequently not observed or understood by people today, including educated people in Western societies, which therefore merits further studies in order to better get to know ourselves and our heritage.

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