Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences **ISSN 2347-5374 (Online)**
Sch. J. Arts Humanit. Soc. Sci. 2015; 3(2B):433-434 **ISSN 2347-9493 (Print)**

(An International Publisher for Academic and Scientific Resources) DOI: 10.36347/sjahss.2015.v03i02.014

A Note on Existing Definitions of Ancient Urban Cities

Daniel E. May
Wolverhampton Archaeology Group. Paget Road, Wolverhampton, WV6 0DU, UK.

***Corresponding Author:**
Daniel E. May
Email: dmay@harper-adams.ac.uk

Abstract: One of the problems of existing approaches used to define ancient urban cities is that they are not general enough to include the range of urban cities in the world that were populated in the past. The aim of this short note is to propose a meta-approach with higher level of abstraction and with the potential to address this problem.
Keywords: Ancient Urban Cities; Definition of Urban Cities.

Critical Assessment of Existing Definitions of Ancient Urban City

It is well recognised the fact that the concept of ancient urban city is ambiguous and difficult to define because it involves a number of dimensions that are not always present in the archaeological record. Nonetheless, definitions that have been used in archaeological research can broadly be classified in two groups, namely: formal; and functional [1].

Formal definitions are based on physical characteristics of a settlement such as size and population density. From this point of view, urban cities are identified when their sizes are larger and more densely populated than previous settlements. For example, a major shift in population distribution and density occurred in the period 4200-3500 BC in the alluvial plains of Lower Mesopotamia. This change is reflected in different sites considered as urban cities such as Uruk which grew from 100 ha to the large size of 400 ha [2]. Likewise, in the period 4500-3500 BC there was an increase in settlement size in which clustered villages along the Nile became large settlements in Upper Egypt at sites such as Naqada and Abydos [3].

Formal definitions have been criticised for two reasons. Firstly, they only provide a description of urban cities but they don't consider other aspects such as functionality and their development. In order to show this, note that it may be argued that size is a good indicator of the origin of ancient urban cities located near rivers. This is because this location favoured agriculture, food surplus and population growth leading to urban settlements. However, investigations made in the site of Hacinebi (an urbanised colony of Mesopotamia during the Uruk period) have revealed that this site was strategically located at the juncture of two important trade and communication routes in the Euphrates River [4,5]. This evidence suggests that ancient urban cities were not necessarily located near rivers for agricultural purposes, but to develop functional activities such as trade. This example illustrates the fact that the use of size as a criterion for urban cities does not inform about the forces that triggered urbanisation. Secondly, most of the existing formal definitions are considered as arbitrary because they are based on morphological models of cities that are biased toward early work in Southwest Asia, Egypt and Mediterranean (Stein, 1998; [1]). For example, the layout of the capital city of Amarna in Egypt indicates a society grading from poor to rich that is reflected in the spread of house sizes [3]. The city was divided into a number of zones, being the central one the zone containing the main palaces, temples to the sun, and administrative buildings. This layout, based on a hierarchical model of social distribution, does not fit the layout of urban cities located in other parts of the world such as urban centres of the early period of Indian history. According to [7], these centres follow a mandala form (i.e. a geometric representation or model of the cosmos) and are, consequently, related to the Hindu religion.

On the other hand, functional definitions are based on the nature of activities or institutions in a society. These functions include trade, political administration, manufacture, and religion, among others. The advantage of functional definitions is that they have the potential to overcome the problems related to formal definitions. For example, archaeological evidence has revealed that the Mycenae city had socio-political stratification, and its main functions were political, trade and religion [8].

Likewise, the Patzac city in Mesoamerica had an epicentre (i.e. concentration of temples, palaces, and other buildings in the central area of the site) suggesting urban administration and political functions [9]. Given these functions, both cities can be classified as urban, even when Patzac has a small size of 10 ha.

Other approaches that have been proposed to define ancient urban cities have considered both physical and functional characteristics. An example is the one proposed (and still used) by [10]. This approach was introduced with the purpose of distinguishing between earliest cities and villages, and is based on ten criteria. They include the size of cities; population differentiation; taxation; monumental public buildings; writing systems; artistic expression; and trade of row materials, among others. This approach is useful because it considers physical and functional criteria. However, its main weakness is that some of the criteria reflect models of ancient urban cities in determined regions such as Mediterranean and Southwest Asia. As a consequence, this approach is not the most suitable one to inform about urban cities in other regions (e.g. non-Western region). For instance, archaeological evidence has revealed that the Kota Cina city in Indonesia did not have monumental buildings and writing systems. Nonetheless, this city had an important functional role in terms of trade suggesting that this place was urbanised [1]. In recognising the disadvantage of existing approaches to inform about urban cities located in non-Western regions, some archaeologists have adopted a typology proposed by [11]: Heterogenetic and orthogenetic cities. The former are places of conflict of differing traditions, heterodoxy, interruption and destruction of ancient traditions. These cities are less monumental; have evident evidence of manufacture activity; are based on market oriented economy; and the main force that generates this type of cities is population density [12]. In contrast, orthogenetic cities are associated with stability and ritual. These cities are more monumental for political or religious functions; the economic activities are redistributive; and the authorities control food surplus by means of taxation and tribute [1]. According to this typology, Kota Cina corresponds to an urban Heterogenetic city.

In considering the current critical assessment of some of the existing approaches that have been used to describe ancient urban cities, it is concluded in this note that none of them are general enough. This calls for a meta-approach with higher level of abstraction able to identify all types of ancient urban cities in all parts of the world. From a personal point of view, an approach of this nature is the one that considers a range of physical and functional criteria, and each criterion is assigned a score based on a predetermined scale. This scale would assign a higher score to the criterion that reflects a significant difference between a site and the previous rural settlement located in the same area or in the proximity. In this approach, an ancient urban city would be defined as the one in which at least one of the criteria is assigned a higher value with respect to a referential score.

REFERENCES

1. Miksic JN; Heterogenetic cities in premodern Southeast Asia. World Archaeology, 2000; 32(1): 106-120.
2. Matthews R; Peoples and Complex Societies of Ancient Southwest Asia. In Scarre C: The Human Past. Third Edition, London, Thames & Hudson, 2013; 432-471.
3. Connah G; Holocene Africa. In Scarre C: The Human Past. Third Edition, London, Thames & Hudson, 2013; 350-391.
4. Edens C, Edens JP; Marks of Distinction: Anatolian and Mesopotamian Communities at Late Chalcolithic Hacinebi. Paper presented at the 1997 annual meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research; 1997.
5. Pearce J; Investigating Ethnicity at Hacinebi: Ceramic Perspectives on Style and Behavior in 4th Millennium Mesopotamian-Anatolian Interaction. PalŽorient, 1999; 25(1): 35-42.
6. Stein GJ; Heterogeneity, Power, and Political Economy: Some Current Research Issues in the Archaeology of Old World Complex Societies. Journal of Archaeological Research, 1998; 6(1): 1-44.
7. Noble AG; Using descriptive models to understand South Asian cities. Education About Asia, 1998; 3(3): 24-29.
8. Alcock S, Cherry JF; The Mediterranean World. In Scarre C: The Human Past. Third Edition, London, Thames & Hudson, 2013; 472-517.
9. Smith ME; City Size in Late Postclassic Mesoamerica. Journal of Urban History, 2005; 31(4): 403-434.
10. Childe VG; The urban revolution. The Town Planning Review, 1950; 21(1): 3-17.
11. Redfield R, Singer R; The Cultural Role of Cities. Economic Development and Social Change, 1954; 3(1): 335-372.
12. Hlaing AA; The Coexistence of Orthogenetic and Heterogenetic City Cultures at Ancint Maruk-U. SRDJ, 2011; 2(1): 119-139.