How do you solve a problem like the city?

J. Andrew Dufton

University College London <a.dufton@ucl.ac.uk>

The ebbs and flows of archaeological scholarship often see trends come and go, with big questions giving way to more fine-grained analysis only to, in turn, feed back into new, sweeping narratives. Thinking about the ancient city is no exception. Recent works from across the spectrum of archaeology and ancient history show a desire to draw new connections amongst urban sites in the same region, to explore similarities between regions, and even to interrogate the extent of similarity between settlements of drastically different periods and places.

The cities of the ancient Mediterranean have been noteworthy for their relatively small role in these debates. Looking, for example, to the contents of some of the key comparative volumes of the last 20 years, Greek, Roman, or Phoenician cities are often an afterthought to some of the larger theoretical developments.[1] A tally of dedicated chapter contributions across only four such volumes yields six chapters (three Greek, three Roman) on what we might consider the Classical world out of a total of 50 regional contributions.[2] A further five include coverage of Aegean Prehistory, Egyptian sites, and a single city (Jerusalem) of the Mediterranean Levant. Such a disconnect is surely due at least in part to disciplinary structures, wherein the archaeology of the Classical world is often detached from anthropological approaches (as in North America) or larger archaeology departments focused on prehistoric, European, or non-western materials (as is the case in much of continental Europe). Regardless of the historical causes for these divisions, scholarship on the Mediterranean world would benefit from a greater integration with these wider disciplinary trends and a willingness to think big about how ancient cities relate to wider questions of what it is to be urban.

This extended review covers three recent works that incorporate the cities of the ancient Mediterranean into a wider, global conversation: *The Life and Death of Ancient Cities* (Woolf 2020), *Cities: The First 6,000 Years* (Smith 2020), and *Broken Cities: A Historical Sociology of Ruins* (Devecka 2020). All three books have something unique to offer to these broader

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[1]   Terrenato (2020) also points to this lack of Classical engagement with a wider comparative turn in his review of Smith's *Cities*.

[2]   Figures here are drawn from the edited volumes M. L. Smith 2003; Marcus and Sabloff 2008; Creekmore and Fisher 2014; Yoffee 2015. In each case, synthetic discussion was omitted from the chapter totals.

351

debates, and each adopts a different approach to comparison or big history. *Life and Death* follows a long-form narrative of the history of urban settlement. *Cities* moves more thematically to find the basic features that characterize city life. *Broken Cities* relies on a very specific analytical window, the ruin, to interlace ideas from the texts of ancient Greece and Rome with medieval Baghdad and the colonization of the Americas. I review each title in turn and then move on to wider themes that come into focus across all three works. Taken collectively, they raise interesting questions about the scale of analysis appropriate for comparative study and the relevance of the modern world to the ancient past (and vice versa). Even more, they challenge future writers on the city to consider the inevitability of urban life and, equally, the inescapability of urban social inequality.

The Life and Death of Ancient Cities: A Natural History

The first book reviewed here is Greg Woolf's (W.'s) *The Life and Death of Ancient Cities: A Natural History* (henceforth, *Life and Death*). "We are embarked on an urban adventure," the text begins (3), and thus W. sets the stage for a long-view history, unfolding chronologically from the first migrations of anatomically modern humans. The narrative of *Life and Death* is structured into four parts. After the foundations of urban life have been explained, *Life and Death* narrows considerably into a story of the cities of the Mediterranean basin, making the work the latest offering in a long tradition of Mediterranean-wide studies such as Broodbank's *Making of the Middle Sea* (2013), Horden and Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea* (2000), and Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949). W. reminds us from the outset that Mediterranean urbanism was far less grandiose than the modern buildings and monuments inspired by the Classical style. Regular interactions with neoclassical architecture in western cities can skew our appreciation of the scale of the buildings of the Classical past. *Life and Death* thus seeks to present a "more sober account" of the cities that emerged in an ancient world best suited to life in villages (13). To this end, W. makes a deliberate attempt to divorce the growth and withering of the ancient city from the history of the rise and fall of the Roman world that too often serves as a proxy for urban development (8); the story begins long before Rome and finishes after the fall of the Roman west. *Life and Death* also introduces a new, explicitly evolutionary agenda. By this, W. does not mean a teleological set of sociocultural stages that all settlements pass through on the path to progress; most cities happened by accident rather than design (419). Rather, W.'s evolutionary perspective draws from biological sciences and asks what benefits various aspects of city life provided to inhabitants. Why did people first abandon a migratory lifestyle for more permanent settlement (50–54)? Why might local peoples, Phoenicians, and Greeks have come together in forming a new coastal outpost (153–55)? What was the benefit to inhabitants of a city in the Roman period of elaborate monuments, given cities had existed for such a long time without (308)? These are big questions, and *Life and Death* presents an ambitious and far-reaching re-evaluation of Mediterranean urban civilization, drawn from archaeology and historical sources, together with a new openness to ideas from the life and social sciences.

The work begins with the earliest examples of urbanism and sets forward the conditions or traits of the human species that set us on a path to city life (Part I: "An urban animal"). After laying out the broad ambitions of the book (Chapter 1), W. gets into the evolutionary reasons behind the development of various global urbanisms (Chapter 2). The independent development of cities across the globe, at various periods, is due not to

any genetic disposition but rather to a series of pre-adaptations that ended up being useful to urban life. We are, according to W., "accidentally urban" (24). The three adaptations that get the most attention here and in subsequent chapters involve how we eat (particularly our flexible, omnivorous diet), how we move (the opportunities of bipedalism), and how we get along (the entanglement of human relations and also human/non-human interactions) (28). How these factors contributed to human populations settling down is recounted in Chapter 3, and W. does a good job here of walking through the piecemeal developments and pre-urban sites – places like Jericho, Çatalhöyük, and Göbekli Tepe – that set the stage for the world's earliest cities (52–54).

These first three chapters effectively prepare the way for the appearance of some of the earliest Mesopotamian cities, around 4000 BCE, whose history W. tells primarily through the example of Uruk (Chapter 4). The account of first cities such as Uruk or Tell Brak (see Smith, below) deals with some of the conditions for a shift to urban life and with the high costs of urbanization, including a large commitment of labor, surplus supplies (especially agricultural production), and necessary demographic growth (73). Chapter 5 effectively points out that much more energy has been expended by scholars on urban origins than the dynamics at play in the spread of urbanism (85), which must be understood not through a basic idea of diffusion but by identifying the "competitive advantages" offered by a commitment to urban society (86). Several hypothetical questions about these advantages are posed (86, 92) but not explored in full. We might add the question of whether any competitive advantages benefitted society as a whole or only the small subsection best able to cash in on a new way of living; the connection between urbanism and social inequality serves as a recurring theme of all three works reviewed here. One major opportunity presented by urbanism to which W. gives full attention is the connection and interaction that characterized the Bronze Age world system (Chapter 6), and the shared diplomacy and cultural koine that structures and gives shape to inter-city interactions. *Life and Death* does well throughout Part I to concentrate on the "complicated and precarious" early stages of city-building (109). For every example of a city that succeeded we might expect many other settlements made a shift toward urbanism and promptly failed (76), even though we rarely see these moments of experimentation. Furthermore, there are many stops and starts to urban systems, even in places such as Syria or the Indus Valley where city life was established, and then forgotten, only to be established yet again (100), getting to the fragility of much early urbanism.

Part II ("An urban Mediterranean") picks up the narrative with the burgeoning cities of Minoan Crete and the Mycenaean city-states and carries us roughly to the beginning of the 4th c. BCE. Chapter 7 introduces the Aegean Bronze Age – although one could argue the cities of the Levant or Egypt are equally worthy of discussion within the "The first Mediterranean cities" – and sets the stage for the Bronze Age Collapse. Chapter 8 dedicates a few pages to the interlude between the urban systems of the Late Bronze Age and those emerging in the first millennium, before introducing the "mariners" (here W. means primarily the Greeks and Phoenicians) and "chieftains" (local Iron Age peoples) involved in the first migratory efforts and the development of a new type of Mediterranean city. Up to this point, W. acknowledges some of the problems with earlier understandings of this process of urban colonization, particularly the anachronism of considering ancient migrations entirely according to modern colonial paradigms (156) and the erasure of the mixed communities (Greek, Phoenician, local) involved in the formation of new

settlements. There is very good reason to argue that these early settlements had far more in common than the differences long implied by a Greek or Phoenician cultural affiliation.[3]

The section that follows, however, reads much more like a rather conventional history, one that centers on the sites of the Aegean world at the expense of a more holistic perspective. Etruscan urbanism in the Italian peninsula (Chapter 9) is described as a roughly contemporary phenomenon, one connected to wider Mediterranean trends but also essentially driven by local power dynamics (175). That developments in the geographically central Italian peninsula are described as the actions of "western pioneers" belies a primacy placed upon the east that is made even more explicit as W.'s narrative progresses. I expect many readers will be unconvinced that the Mediterranean became a "Greek lake" during the mid-1st millennium (Chapter 10), at least not if the focus is shifted away from the traditional disciplinary confines of the Aegean to some of the other areas – North Africa, southern Iberia, Sardinia, the Levant, and Egypt before the conquest of Alexander – where Greek contact was certainly present but Greek culture by no means dominant.[4] The claim that Greeks "dominated the seaways" from the 8th c. BCE (205–6) is questionable west of the Italian peninsula and along much of the southern Mediterranean coast. Note, for example, the diverse cargo of the Xlendi shipwreck found off the coast of Malta and dating to the 7th c. BCE: associated finds show connections to North Africa, Malta, and Sicily; not, in other words, exclusively or primarily Greek content.[5] The significant role of Punic naval and economic prowess is further reinforced by the series of treaties between Carthage and Rome from the 5th c. BCE to the start of the Punic Wars,[6] not to mention the lack of Greek settlements along the southern Mediterranean littoral west of Cyrenaica and the Iberian coast south of Emporion.

Nor does the latest archaeological evidence support the somewhat simplistic statement that Greeks were the primary vectors for the spread of "olive cultivation and much else" (205). The edited monograph *Colonial Encounters in Ancient Iberia* is referenced in support of this claim, but the chapter in that volume by Buxó (and his work elsewhere) suggests that olive cultivation in southern Iberia in fact began in the late 7th or early 6th c. BCE alongside Phoenician contact; in the north, a similar process began in areas of Greek colonization from the 6th c. BCE.[7] The earliest evidence remains ambiguous and is visible only at very small scales; the practice only fully takes hold under Roman control.[8] Local grapes were harvested for food from the Neolithic, and their active cultivation for wine began with the Phoenician colonization of the 8th or 7th c. BCE; wine from Greek cities like Massalia appeared in the north of the Iberian peninsula from the 6th c. BCE.[9] In North Africa, work at the Tunisian site of Althiburos presents yet more evidence for non-Greek origins, in this case a specifically indigenous development of grape and olive cultivation from the 9th c. and 7th c. BCE respectively; evidence for early production

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[3]   See Hodos 2009; van Dommelen 2005.

[4]   See López-Ruiz 2022 for an essential counterpoint to W.'s narrative.

[5]   Anastasi et al. 2021.

[6]   Whittaker 1979. The treaties are later discussed by W. (262–63).

[7]   Buxó 2009, 159–61; for the volume, see Dietler and López-Ruiz 2009.

[8]   Buxó 2009, 165.

[9]   Buxó 2008, 147–48.

facilities for wine or oil remain elusive.[10] Future works at other, comparable sites are likely to complicate this picture further still.

Chapter 11 ("Networking the Mediterranean") does an effective job of acknowledging the local peculiarities of urban life (209) but still leans heavily on the Greeks for many wider phenomena such as communal architecture or temple building (216). Chapter 12 then outlines the gradual materialization of states centered around existing cities and the implications of this political awakening on city foundation, urban management, and Greek political thought. W. also briefly introduces the Achaemenid Empire (239–42), largely as a counterpoint to the Mediterranean (meaning, effectively, Greek) city-state. Taken together, the chapters of Part II present the weakest case for W.'s evolutionary model. If such an approach is to provide new insights on the rise of a specifically Mediterranean city, more work is needed to interrogate other cultures on an equal footing to those that have, thus far, overwhelmingly dominated the scholarly discourse.

Part III ("Imperial urbanisms") turns to the connections between cities and empires and moves chronologically into the Roman world. Given W.'s vast body of work on questions of empire, identity, and urbanism, it is unsurprising that the chapters of Part III contain some of the most stimulating passages of *Life and Death*. Chapter 13 sets up the role of the city-state as a key building block of empire (253), a role that perhaps explains the resilience we see in most Mediterranean cities from the 8th c. BCE onwards in the face of wider political conflict (255). The combination of demographic growth in Europe and political growth in the Mediterranean world only ensconced the centrality of the city-state further (270). Chapter 14 traces these changes, with a strong focus on W.'s expertise in pre-Roman Gaul (268), to provide background to a new set of relations between city and empire established under Alexander (275). It is from this period on that city-states became a fundamental tool of imperial management by providing opportunities for the mobilization of manpower, taxation, and governance that would have been difficult, if not impossible, in other circumstances (280).

From here, Part III moves into a series of chapters on key functions of, or developments within, imperial Mediterranean cities. W. starts with monuments (Chapter 15) and a vital reminder that although open public spaces adorned with monuments, statues, and inscribed texts were an essential part of the cities of the Greek and Roman worlds, this form of monumental urbanism was in fact unsustainable and has a much shorter history than the Mediterranean city more broadly (289–90). There must have been a value or benefit provided by this monumental push, especially given that communities had succeeded for centuries without building cities of marble. W. makes the convincing claim that monumental projects were specifically geared towards encouraging citizen participation (through interaction with monumental spaces) and involving urban populations in governance (through patterns of competitive monumental construction and dedication) (309–10). Chapter 16 turns to yet another key element in imperial urbanism, the foundation of new settlements – an act fundamentally about controlling people (and, by extension, labor) and land (328). In the Roman case, foundation was often an unsteady process, most markedly in the colonization of the Italian countryside, and W. quite rightly points to the great variety of forms and experiments that are elided into the shared Latin term of *colonia* (324–26). The overarching difference from earlier examples of Mediterranean colonization is that in

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10   Sanmartí et al. 2012, 34.

the Roman case, a deliberate choice was made to found cities *without* founding independ-ent city-states (325). This was ultimately to do with the Roman practice of ruling through cities (Chapter 17). By the time of the rise of Roman power, an extensive Mediterranean urban network allowed Rome to make use of existing institutions rather than creating the tools for governance *ex novo* (347). These adjustments to Rome's imperial governance were not part of a clear plan, but rather a response to emerging problems with the spread of Roman territory (349).

The extent to which "empire was in the end good for cities" (344) is debatable, and W.'s comments here align with an optimistic take on urbanism presented by Smith in her work (see below). Certainly a case could be made that rising inequality or an unsustainable monumental focus may in fact have doomed many urban communities, leading to the con-traction in urban centers that followed. As Chapter 18 reminds us, the Roman urban apo-gee is just one in a series of Mediterranean settlement systems, each often separated by significant discontinuities or periods of decline (357). A modest growth in the number of cities should not obscure the fact that most of these places remained relatively small (365), and many did not expand much in size or population from pre-Roman levels (371). W. is seemingly right to suggest that the imperial urbanism of the Roman period may in fact represent "the maximum level of urbanization that could be sustained in the region, given the technology of the day" (375).

The final section (Part IV: "De-urbanization") provides a narrative tension between *Life and Death*'s earlier claims of a Classical Mediterranean that was never particularly urban and the loss of urbanism at the end of antiquity. W. begins at the height of the urban world, with the great megalopoleis (Chapter 19). A key difference between the great cities of the Roman world and those that came before them was their ability to draw resources from a vast region, a feature that made large cities sustainable but also created new chal-lenges for their inhabitants and rulers (383). The urban growth of a metropolis like Rome occurred directly at the expense of its neighbors (385); this inequality at the heart of the Roman urban system thus further highlighted the importance of imperial power in founding and supporting metropoleis. The network changes of the postclassical period (Chapter 20) included a reduction of the geographical area covered by the urban network and a shrink-age of the reach of the Mediterranean's great cities (405–6), a shift in urban ideals away from a need for monumental projects (407), and the development of regional, rather than Mediterranean, networks (410). These changes were inextricably connected to the fragmentation of the Roman state. In particular, as cities lost some of their political and eco-nomic control, they also lost some of their appeal for migrants; this resulted in a reduction in new immigration, which had always been responsible for high population figures, and ultimately in a collapse in the aggregate urban population (409, 413). When seen from a longer perspective, however, the resilience of the key nodes in the urban network is strik-ing; W. notes the cities that were most prominent in antiquity – such as Rome, Athens, Istanbul, Marseilles– remain important urban centers today (416).

Life and Death is, overall, a considerable feat of scholarship, and W. should be com-mended for taking on such a task. The evolutionary perspective presents a deliberate new framing of the early history of Mediterranean cities, one that is well suited to empha-sizing some of the alternative paths to urbanism that W. acknowledges (162). Failed attempts at early cities are often hidden from the record (186), be they early settlements that may have set the stage for places like Uruk or Mediterranean villages where the

356

need for more consolidated living never developed.[11] *Life and Death* effectively walks a tightrope to present a cohesive history of the Mediterranean city – its successes and failures, its frailty and restraint in all but a handful of exceptional examples – without falling back into the grand narrative of the rise and fall of the Classical city the work strives to leave behind. At its best, W.'s natural history reintegrates these more modest places and unconventional histories into the discussion. However, this balance is not always entirely successful. The book's reification of some of the more traditional aspects of the ancient city, particularly its unbalanced preference for the Greek world in the 1st millennium BCE, feels like a missed opportunity to fully embrace the multiple narratives possible, or perhaps even expected, within an evolutionary framework. The stage is set for a Mediterranean history where numerous, interconnected strands of urban development are all possible, but this can only be achieved if the primacy of examples like Athens, Corinth, and Syracuse is adequately balanced with different and yet equally Mediterranean trajectories at places like Utica, Ashkelon, Sardis, Tharros, Tyre, Kition…

On a practical level, unexpectedly frequent grammatical and typographical errors scattered throughout *Life and Death* suggest the text would benefit from additional copyediting in future print or online versions. Most of these issues have little impact in isolation (and need no further attention here), and yet taken collectively, they do begin to detract from the overall strength of the work, particularly in cases where meaning or factual detail has been directly compromised. See, for example, the reference to the "Armana letters" (Amarna) (98); the "Mehjeda River" (Medjerda) flowing to the port of Utica (303); the provision of Rome with a "fire bridge" (brigade?) in the 1st c. BCE (381). Images are generously provided throughout, but a greater attention to captions might similarly have caught mistaken image identifications, as with the inversion of the images for Figure 34 and Figure 35 that results in mismatched images/captions for the Roman theater at Alexandria and the Severan imperial palace at the Circus Maximus in Rome, respectively.

Life and Death remains, despite these concerns, a thought-provoking work containing a number of stimulating avenues for future research. The synthesis provided by W. and the novelty of its evolutionary perspective will most certainly set the tone for explorations of the cities of the Mediterranean world in the years to come.

Cities: The First 6,000 Years

A second recent work also tackles the beginnings of cities, this time from an explicitly archaeological perspective. Monica Smith's (S.'s) *Cities: The First 6,000 Years* (henceforth, *Cities*) traces the history of the city from budding proto-urban settlements in Mesopotamia to the present day and offers some far-ranging observations about the commonalities of urban life. The city, according to S., burst forth as a paradigm-busting form of connectivity, a new way of communication and interaction between people in close quarters. Much like the creation of the internet, which she uses as a point of comparison, urban life was so persuasive, it irrevocably transformed the world for all involved (17). The longevity of the cities discussed here is due at least in part to the fact that, despite significant

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[11] An inverse observation has been made regarding our understanding of the Late Antique city, where it is the cities that failed that have dominated the discussion. Those that succeeded are still occupied today, and thus far more difficult to properly understand in earlier periods. See Christie 2012.

differences of time and space, all urban sites share key characteristics or social functions. *Cities* uses some key themes – infrastructure, consumption, socioeconomic class – as a way of exploring what it means to live in a city and how cities have shaped (and will continue to shape) human existence. The overall arc of the narrative is accessible and engaging, and only a scholar of S.'s extensive background could have harnessed the array of archaeological sites, modern comparanda, and urban theory necessary for the task. An additional immediate impression is the degree to which the author's own "sense of excitement and vexation that I feel from my own city [Los Angeles]" (13) has shaped the text. In the acknowledgements she notes the project was more fun "than just about anything I've ever done" (263), and this appreciation for the material is unmistakable in the conversational, disarming prose. The book clearly has a large, general audience in mind, but I can equally see it finding a place on a variety of course reading lists and personal bookshelves.

Cities begins with an explanation of the scope of the work and the personal reasons behind this approach (Chapter 1). Importantly, in the first pages there is a flexible definition of the surprisingly slippery concept of the city that allows for chronological compression. The world of *Cities* relies on diverse characteristics associated with urban sites, such as a dense, multi-ethnic population, a diverse economy, a range of clearly defined functional spaces or neighborhoods, multifunctional open spaces, and an interdependence for the provision of basic needs (12). This allows the author to move between places without getting bogged down by the question of how urban, or not, any specific example may be. These functional or spatial traits also form the basis of comparisons; essentially, all cities have the same component parts and, therefore, we might recognize in the past many of the same features we see today (Chapter 2). To illustrate this point, S. uses the colonial encounters between Spanish conquistadors and the Mexica or Inka cities of Central and South America (23) – an interaction I return to in my coverage of the work of Devecka, below.

From these points of commonality, *Cities* moves to the archaeology of ancient cities (Chapter 3). The book adopts an enthusiastically archaeological perspective, and one of its great strengths throughout is the close engagement with excavated materials, architectural change, and the physical traces of past urban life. S. draws on her vast experience in the field, and this approach differentiates the work from more historical or philological approaches to urban comparison. Archaeological discovery is balanced here between moments of exciting revelation – as with a personal anecdote on the unearthing of an ancient handprint surviving between two courses of bricks during excavations at Sisupalgarh, India (47) – and the realities of systematically clearing, excavating, recording, and cataloguing deep stratigraphic deposits in often challenging environments. There is an excitement about the archaeological process here that mostly avoids the trope of the intrepid archaeological explorer, as the text acknowledges the romantic and yet also problematic circumstances surrounding the scientific rediscovery of some of the earliest urban settlements.

Chapters 4 and 5 describe life before cities and provide some of the conditions leading up to the development of urban centers. Complex ritual sites like Göbekli Tepe or Stonehenge required the coming together of disparate communities on a temporary basis, setting the stage for more permanent living in closer quarters. In both cases, the archaeological evidence paints a picture of a constant renewal of the ritual landscape: the construction of new monuments, the deliberate destruction or burial of others (71–72).

S. imagines a fictional leader at Göbekli setting forth a plan for the latest construction to tease out the conversations and negotiations that must have been involved in these efforts (73) – this is a first glimpse of the figure of the middle manager she returns to later in the text. The journey to urbanism ends in sites such as Tell Brak, covered in detail by S., that hold a justifiable claim to the status of the world's first city. S.'s coverage of Tell Brak emphasizes the discovery of the site and the confluence of factors contributing to its foundation. However, the text also hints here at some of the negative repercussions of a transition from village to urban life. A need for increased surveillance in urban settings, for example, speaks to the emergence of talismans or stylized eyes as a means of "watchfulness by proxy" (78). The observation that some of the first urban sites (at least in a Mesopotamian context) were established as much out of a sense of communal vulnerability as any great opportunity provided by the environment (86) introduces further questions about the fragility of early urban life. S.'s narrative thus corresponds well with the experimentation and failure involved in W.'s evolutionary perspective.

S.'s "urban building blocks" (Chapter 5) introduce a new thread of urban inevitability. She identifies four ancestral elements involved in the formation and maintenance of urban life: the use of language, human mobility and migration, our dependence on objects and the material world, and the use of architecture in placemaking (90). The importance of mobility and of entanglement with the material world invoked by S. align almost directly with two of the characteristics of W.'s "urban animal." It is useful in both cases to place urban developments within a larger perspective of what it means to be human, but at times this chapter's explorations of anthropological thinking would gain from a renewed focus on the connections between these human traits and the cities themselves.

The following chapters get to the heart of S.'s urban comparison by interrogating a series of far-reaching themes: infrastructure (Chapter 7), consumption (Chapter 8), and the middle class (Chapters 9, 10). These topical chapters form the framework connecting the story of *Cities*. Chapter 7 provides the helpful concept of infrastructure as a type of "materialized dialogue" (129). The visible presence of roads, walls, drainage, and other infrastructural needs signals to visitors and inhabitants alike that they are in an urban space. S.'s infrastructure also serves as a physical reminder of past conversations between city dwellers about the function of a city or the needs of its residents. The result of any single decision is necessarily structured by the memory and physicality of all previous choices. As S. succinctly states, "the wall is already *there*, so what shall we do with it?" (129). Managing infrastructural developments also introduces the elusive figure of the urban planner. Oversight of planning is explored briefly, drawing largely on the (comparatively) modern example of the settlement of Houston (145–49); future work might run with these ideas to bring the scattered evidence for specifically ancient examples into conversation with each other and perhaps also with their modern equivalents, a social history (of sorts) of urban planning.

In Chapter 8 attention shifts to the question of consumption, and the archaeological evidence comes to the fore. The display of only a small number of selected objects in museums obscures the sheer scale of consumption in both ancient and modern urban contexts. *Cities* convincingly demonstrates that people in cities have always made, used, and consumed a vast array of goods (152). A desire for disposable culture, public display, and abundance is not a specifically urban development, but the manufacturing capabilities of cities result in a far greater speed of consumption than would otherwise be possible. The problem of trash,

accordingly, is not strictly a modern issue but rather an urban condition (156). Aside from the trash, S. highlights the benefits of the heightened availability of goods and resources. Some perks are tied directly to modern experiences most readers will recognize, such as the convenience of take-out food or street vendors. The prose here moves effectively from ancient to modern examples, from Angkor to Pompeii to Tenochtitlan to Manhattan (167–69). Consumption is also at the heart of creativity and entrepreneurship, features S. again equates predominantly with city life.

The group responsible for both the bulk of consumption and the production of goods, the middle class, is at the heart of the subsequent chapter (Chapter 9). Urban life, and more specifically writing, facilitates the appearance of a new class of middle managers that S. suggests hold an outsize role in the cycle of consumption, production, and innovation that structures urban developments (200).[12] Middle-class city life is not without its issues, and Chapter 10 outlines some of these expressly middle-class concerns. S.'s observation that excess anxiety is another condition of life in the city (221) will certainly resonate with many readers. The point is made even more universal with the inclusion of specific examples, such as the codification of house construction requirements that set forth expectations for moral neighborly behavior within the Sanskrit *Arthaśāstra* text of the 3rd c. BCE (219).

The final two chapters return to the bigger picture and the ways in which the interconnectedness of cities has resulted, certainly in the present but also in some past contexts, in a world of recognizable and interchangeable urban spaces (Chapter 11). The longevity and stability of this urban network over the first 6,000 years leads S. to a reasonably rosy outlook on the next 6,000 (Chapter 12). Concerns of system collapse or unsustainably high populations, *Cities* argues, should take note of the number of major modern cities occupied continuously for millennia (253), as well as the lasting role of the city as a key space of human creativity and innovation. S.'s view over the *longue durée* shows us that even should an urban center collapse or undergo a period of contraction, a nearby city will absorb the influx of population, and urban life will continue (253–59). The work acknowledges in passing that city life is not without its hardships but, as with the internet, S. concludes that we collectively have no intention of ever going "offline" (240).

Cities would benefit from a more direct and detailed coverage of the other classes of people who are equally present in cities of all periods and likely hold a drastically different understanding of the hardships S. acknowledges.[13] There are some fleeting hints at the grim underside of urban life – class tension, prostitution, panhandling, homelessness – but often these are framed solely as an inconvenience or nuisance for middle-class inhabitants rather than as subjects of a social history worthy of similarly detailed attention (214). The very specific coverage of slums somewhat incongruously invoked in Chapter 5 alongside more evolutionary concerns (108–13) merits expansion into a full chapter on the darker aspects of social inequality that may be inherent in urbanism. Such a dialogue would form an effective counterpoint to the urban middle classes of Chapters 8 and 9. In other places, the text obliquely acknowledges different social classes without directly engaging with how various aspects of identity shape our urban experiences. That construction

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[12] Writing, and with it bookkeeping and taxation, has long been seen as a key condition for the development of urbanism. See, for example, Childe 1950; Weber 1958.

[13] See the assorted contributions in Mayne and Murray 2001.

managers "were probably the most chagrined" by the collapse of a partially constructed pyramid at Meidum, for example, unintentionally negates the workers whose lives were more immediately at risk in favor of a middle-class narrative (210). A discussion of the Code of Hammurabi similarly touches upon the ways in which wealth and status consistently create and reinforce inequality, but only as a passing comment in a wider discourse on how laws structured urban interactions (192–94). When the freed slave Trimalchio from Petronius's *Satyricon* is discussed, it is in the service of a point about conspicuous consumption and middle-class anxiety rather than as a comment on how social mobility is often intentionally and unintentionally impeded by urban communities (212).

On the whole, S. has undoubtedly made deliberate choices to strike a balance between sweeping history and local specificity. For the most part *Cities* achieves this equilibrium successfully while also engaging with a far wider audience than many works with a narrower topical scope. That *Cities* can take the reader from the earliest ritual centers to global New York, Los Angeles, or Shanghai within a single, coherent history is to the author's considerable credit. The ease with which S. moves from past to present across the globe, from archaeology to anthropology to architectural or urban theory, belies the vast body of knowledge at the heart of the work. Helpful contextual details introduce individual sites or case studies from specific excavations and may trick the reader into underestimating the scope of the argument and the audacity of the comparison. Pulling out the long-term similarities between urban centers sometimes requires an assumption that, at their core, many things will continue to be the same. *Cities* plays to these positives and continuities. The concluding phrase, "Cities are here to stay, for good," hints at both the permanence of cities and also their immense benefits (262) – even while such a bullish picture might be at odds with the immediate concerns of many who call cities home. That some cities might fail or that urbanism creates as many losers as winners is necessarily elided by *Cities* to fit the wider view presented in the work of the city's longevity.

Broken Cities: A Historical Sociology of Ruins

The final work under review, Martin Devecka's (D.'s) *Broken Cities: A Historical Sociology of Ruins*, focuses explicitly on urban failures and the traces left behind. From the outset, D.'s work marks a significant departure from W.'s focus on long-view narrative or S.'s curiosity with the commonalities between examples. *Broken Cities* seeks to demonstrate the differences in the ways ruins have been understood and, in the process, to provide an alternative to modern archaeology's claims of being an exclusive lens through which we interpret the past (more on this below). Four chapters, each dedicated to a single historical example (Athens, Rome, Baghdad, Tenochtitlan), provide not a treatment of the ruins of the cities themselves, as one might expect from the table of contents, but rather a discussion of the way each of these societies – or at least the predominantly male, largely elite subset represented in the textual corpus – thought about the ongoing threat of ruination. Each chapter provides stimulating insights into D's selected case studies, such that a reader with narrow chronological interests would still benefit from a more targeted engagement. The real strength in *Broken Cities*, however, lies in bringing these examples together into a single overarching history "of how urban civilization… has come to grips with the apparent fact that cities are ruinable" (9).

Chapter 1 considers the paradoxical nature of Greek thinking and writing about ruins, with a focus on the fate of Classical Athens. The term "ruins" in *Broken Cities* refers

primarily to the surviving traces of destruction or depopulation of an entire city and not to more localized cases of abandonment or decay; based on this (macro-scale) definition, the Greek mainland was effectively free of ruins throughout the Classical period (10). Such an observation seems initially to be at odds with the numerous and heated intercity conflicts recounted by the likes of Thucydides. D.'s argument here relies on a skillful interpretation of the adjective *anastatos*, often translated simply as "ruined" but also carrying the meaning "displaced" in certain contexts (16). Even when cities were sacked or destroyed, and populations enslaved, the physical spaces themselves were usually reoccupied in short order. Ruination, in other words, was countered by resettlement (17), and thus lasting ruins were impossible in the prevailing thought of the period (36). The idea of the ruin nonetheless occupies a fundamental role in literary and historical thinking. The hardships of displaced populations are well noted, and hence the ruin forms a key representation of the potential disasters of war. The act of ruination (or displacement) might even be treated as a form of ethnogenesis (15).

That the physicality of ruins still holds a central role – as evidentiary justification for Thucydides's focus on the Peloponnesian War (22), or as a possible visual staging for Euripides's Trojan plays (26), for example – implies that inhabitants of the Classical Greek world would have had some understanding of what this type of destruction meant for the built environment and perhaps even how the ruins of a city faded over time. Yet the analysis of Athens presented here passes over some of the potential benefits of interacting more closely with the material record. The debate on the Oath of Plataea, for example, can be better understood by looking not only to a clause setting forth the deliberate preservation of any destruction wrought by Persian forces (32–33; Lycurg. *Leoc.* 81) but also to the material traces of reconstruction or preservation efforts after the conflict. Kousser has convincingly argued that many temples were left in ruins for the first 30-odd years after the Persian sack of the Acropolis and that, even after reconstruction, fragments of the ruined structures were deliberately curated and displayed within the walls of the citadel.[14] Athenian thought (as expressed in texts) and action (as shown in the fragmentary material record) exist not as a binary but rather in dialogue, where ideas and literary tropes about ruination were reinforced by the continued presence of physical reminders of past conflicts, even in spaces that had been repopulated or reconstructed.

Chapter 2 turns its focus to Rome and the role of ruins in conceptions of empire in the Late Antique world. The ruination of cities as a practice of empire was, by the time of the expansion of Roman power, already well established. What sets Roman attitudes apart from earlier imperial episodes of city razing, according to D., is the degree to which the Latin literary tradition shows a self-consciousness about Rome's ruin-making (37). This longstanding literary awareness begins with accounts of the destruction of early adversaries such as Carthage, Corinth, and Numantia; *Broken Cities* includes a good array of authors and textual forms here to demonstrate the important role of ruins in thinking about Rome's future, particularly in moments of crisis (49). The ruin takes on a special significance by Late Antiquity, however, as assorted writers seek to justify the abandonment of an increasingly failing Rome (54). In the case of Augustine and other Christian thinkers, the call is for good Christians to shift their loyalties from earthly places (such as Rome) to the divine

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[14]   Kousser 2009, 270–71.

sphere, the City of God (50–51). The Romano-Gallic poet Rutilius Namatianus approaches the issue from a different perspective, but his elegiac poem *De reditu suo* nonetheless relies on the ruination of Rome and the Italian countryside as a validation of Rutilius's own choice to leave Rome for the region of his ancestral estates (51–54).

Rome unquestionably saw dramatically reduced populations following the Byzantine-Gothic wars of the 6th c. CE. However, the city's continuous occupation and architectural longevity call into question D.'s certainty that it indeed ended up "ruined" by the mid-6th c. (55) – at least in the sense of depopulation or widespread abandonment for which the term has been employed by *Broken Cities* in relation other sites. The extent to which spoliation represents Romans "working actively to destroy their city, not restore it" (58) also warrants further questioning, particularly in reference to the large body of scholarship on both the practicalities and the underlying ideologies of architectural or sculptural reuse in the Late Antique and Byzantine worlds.[15] Relying almost solely on the strong literary rhetoric surrounding Rome's downfall risks obscuring some of the multifaceted motivations for spoliating earlier buildings and monuments we might see through a parallel attention to the materials. The adaptations and abandonments of monuments or neighborhoods during this period undoubtedly created a much-changed cityscape, but Rome remained a sort of city nonetheless. The inclusion of some of the archaeological materials from this period, following the example so effectively demonstrated by S., would help to temper the literary language of ruination with the lived reality of the city.

Chapter 3, on Baghdad, postclassical ruins, and the Islamic cityscape, traces the role of ruins in the Islamic tradition. D. notes that Early Islamic cities served almost as a form of physical argument against the Classical past, in particular through a form of urban planning that favored adaptation and mobility rather than permanence and at times explicitly rejected resettlement of earlier sites (63, 71). And yet, despite this initial anti-urban bias, the expansion of Islam in the Middle East was accompanied by a period of city-foundation in the 7th and 8th c. CE (70). New Islamic settlements existed, however, in a landscape already well populated with older urban sites, and so a convincing explanation was needed for these grand remnants of past societies. In the work of historians like Ibn Khaldun, ruins served as a means to learn about mistakes from the past and condemn the frailty of the present (62), abandoned architecture thus serving as a form of historiography (76). In the Quran, the meaning of ruins went beyond just a form of historical evidence; they were also a "system of signs made by god for us to know him better" (64) that communicated an explicit warning, the traces of local apocalypses in places that had not fully accepted the message of the prophet (65).

This chapter further problematizes the questions of scale and spoliation that have been raised elsewhere within *Broken Cities*. Islamic writers such as Al-Muqaddasi recorded neighborhoods in cities such as Kufa already falling into ruin by the 10th c. CE (77). Rather than being read as a symbol of the imminent demise of these cities (as local ruination was treated at Rome, to a degree), examples of localized decay are contrasted with the growth of other cities or other neighborhoods (77, 81), an attention to scale that resonates with the more cyclical ebbs and flows of urban populations at the heart of S.'s *Cities.* Spoliation also holds a special role in the interaction between Early Islamic and pre-Islamic architecture and reinforces a fraught and adversarial relationship between

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[15] For example, Elsner 2000; Kinney 1997; Kinney 2001; Saradi 1997.

ruins and contemporary Islamic materials (76). In D.'s words, "on this point, at least, what gets torn down is more important than what gets built" (76), an idea that he relates to both the reuse of architectural materials and the demolition of earlier structures. When spoliation went well, as in the case of the removal of worked stone from Byzantine Hira for the reconstruction of the mosque at Kufa, the act of removal served as an effective metaphor for the triumph of Islam over other monotheistic religions (73). However, equally often the act of spoliation or outright destruction was unsuccessful. Such was the case with the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur's failed attempt to destroy the great Sassanian palace at Ctesiphon, as recorded by the 9th-c. polymath al-Tabari (74–76). Ruins in the Islamic world regularly proved surprisingly durable, and an ill-timed attempt to erase a ruin could unintentionally reinforce the idea that the traces of the past remained more powerful than the leaders of the present (76).

For a final example, *Broken Cities* moves chronologically closer to the present day with the destruction of the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan by the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés (Chapter 4). The Renaissance saw a new appreciation of ruins as a source of information about a shared ancient past; this communal history, in turn, contributed both to the growing humanist ideals of the era and to new nativist, nationalistic narratives (91, 94). However, this burgeoning understanding of a European civilization built on ruins – and placed in direct opposition to the barbarism responsible for the destruction of the monuments of the Greek and Roman past (90, 106) – was challenged by the first-hand involvement of Cortés and his contemporaries in ruin-making in the Americas. Literary accounts of the destruction of Tenochtitlan, from the texts of Cortés himself through to later writers, fluctuate between expressions of regret for the needless (yet somehow also justified) destruction of a civilized capital to questionable descriptions of a pre-contact landscape without any true cities in the first place. D.'s attention to detail within the latter category is especially helpful; for example, the humanist de Salazar describes Aztec temples as *cierros* (hills) rather than temples, downplaying their architectural nature (109). The Abbé Raynal goes even further, denying that ruins visible in the Spanish colony were evidence of pre-conquest cities at all (111).

The writings of Cortés have featured in all three works reviewed here, usually as a demonstration of the readability or commonality amongst cities even from drastically different cultural spheres. Cortés's words also play a central role in D.'s discussion as they attempt to justify the destruction of a city Cortés describes as one of the wonders of the earth (100), and D.'s text presents a full and nuanced picture of Cortés's motivations. *Broken Cities* posits that at the heart of Cortés's mounting frustration – and increasingly violent tactics – was a fundamental lack of understanding of how the Mexica understood ruins and, consequently, a shortage of appreciation for the critical differences between Mexica practices and those of contemporary Europe (101). Ruin-making, particularly the destruction of temples or other monuments, functioned as an essential part of Mexica warfare and set apart conquest from other types of conflicts (such as raids for captives) (103). Early efforts by Spanish forces to encourage a Mexica surrender whilst preserving the core of the city were thus ineffective, even though similar tactics had been successfully employed in a European context. The decision to raze Tenochtitlan was made only after a series of failed attempts at other strategies, and yet only through the demolition of the heart of the city were the Mexica coerced into surrender. In this way, Cortés and the Spanish rediscovered almost entirely accidentally the power of destruction so vital to eliminating rivals in ancient Rome (113–14). In the process, Tenochtitlan "provided a paradigm for the modern making of ruins." (114)

Taken collectively, the urban vignettes of *Broken Cities* cover a striking range of primary texts and confidently trace a different type of discourse on ruins and ruination. The conventional or traditional take on ruins tends to neutralize their value; in D.'s own words, ruins "tell us about what other societies were like, but say nothing about how our own society might be" (117). A key takeaway from the text – reiterated in the Epilogue with reference to modern ruin narratives like Dresden or Detroit – is that ruins must be treated as a part of a long-term process, one still unfolding "in a long present" (119). This observation is well made and firmly situates *Broken Cities* somewhere between the grand narrative of W. and the comparative emphasis of S. The conceptual shift from ruins as past events to ruination as something all city dwellers are contributing to daily also opens the door to some of the bigger questions introduced by D. The extent to which ruins serve primarily elite interests (4, 120) jumps out as one such line of enquiry. The power dynamics of ruination often feature a tension between top-down forces driving decay and local appropriations of abandoned spaces. Acknowledging the ubiquity of ruination, as D. suggests, would help us to better understand some of the bigger questions of who is making ruins, and who is using them.

Broken Cities' challenge to a modern archaeology that confines ruins to "belonging exclusively to the past" (121), often artificially sealed in the imagination by "a catastrophic, punctual event" (118), is less convincing. Archaeological approaches to memory and studies of the history of antiquarianism have for some time questioned the supremacy of modern, western conceptions of the past and acknowledged different ways of situating past materials (including ruins) within a longer-term perspective.[16] Similarly, the growing field of contemporary archaeology and the related topics of ruination and decay all demonstrate an active scholarly community questioning the processes of ruin-making using a comparable, long-term framework.[17] The narrow "archaeological" view of ruins as things confined to the past presented in *Broken Cities* is undoubtedly problematic, but it is also questionably archaeological – it is, in fact, directly at odds with the ideas of many active archaeologists. D. can be excused to some extent for this slightly outdated impression of the concerns and techniques of archaeological practice. As already outlined, much of the archaeology of the Classical Mediterranean that is the focus of *Broken Cities*, particularly at urban sites, has too often functioned as an entity distinct from larger disciplinary trends or comparative dialogues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the chapters on Baghdad and Tenochtitlan engage more directly with the archaeological literature. Rather than a call against an archaeology of ruins in favor of a narrowly textual approach, we might more constructively see this as a call for greater integration of the archaeology of the Classical city with some of the key theoretical developments on ruination happening elsewhere. Those working on the treatment in antiquity of objects or architecture from an even more distant past will most certainly benefit from a greater awareness of the rich potential of literary representations of ruins so thoroughly demonstrated by *Broken Cities*.

Some future questions for comparative urban history

Life and Death, *Cities*, and *Broken Cities* each present a very different sort of narrative of the urban developments of the ancient world. Nonetheless, some persistent themes and

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16   Anderson and Rojas 2017; Schnapp 2013; Van Dyke 2019.

17   For example, González-Ruibal 2019; Harrison and Schofield 2010; Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014.

lingering ideas emerge across all three books that indicate how future works might best take up the challenge of writing big, comparative, urban histories. I finish here with two primary questions arising from their collective review – one about the scale of analysis and the other about the degree to which we can rely on modern examples to think about the ancient past – before ending with some thoughts on the inevitability, or not, of city life.

What is an appropriate scale of analysis?

A first question relates to the scale of analysis used for urban comparison, a point that carries both geographical and chronological implications. Geographically, all three works rely on a wide view when selecting examples. For W.'s *Life and Death* the narrative remains primarily fixed on the Mediterranean world, putting the text into direct dialogue with other Mediterranean-centric works. In using this frame of analysis, *Life and Death* strikes a balance between big trends and local examples, in order to move "away from individual urban histories to the shape of grand patterns, and how they emerged" (355). D. pushes the geographical bounds for comparison still further by considering a single phenomenon across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. *Cities* is the boldest of the three, moving seamlessly among global examples to pull out common threads of the urban experience.

Questions of scale also have chronological consequences, and here the overall timespan covered by each work has a real impact. For example, S.'s recurring use of the internet as an analogy for the development of urbanism is compelling but also has implications that are sometimes obscured within *Cities'* text. The internet burst forth within a single generation, whereas urbanism developed over anywhere from decades to millennia, through a series of stops and starts, in villages and communities that may not have realized they were inventing anything new at all. Notably absent from *Cities'* discussion is the site of Çatalhöyük, a Neolithic settlement in central Turkey with distinctive abutting households and a dense ritual and visual record that has dominated discussion of proto-urbanism in the region. Places like Çatalhöyük, or the comparable site of Çayönü in eastern Turkey, fall somewhere between recognizably urban and non-urban, and they thus provide a convenient stopping point between the communal ritual largesse of sites like Göbekli Tepe and budding urban centers like Tell Brak, Uruk, or Ur. *Life and Death* devotes more coverage to these proto-urban places to demonstrate the ways in which "pre-urban landscapes around the world were littered with the building blocks for urban projects." (75) However, even here there is an unresolved friction between the steady nature of urban development (52) on the one hand and the speed of a "violent, disruptive, dislocating" urbanization on the other (74). This tension further reinforces how little we still understand about this moment of transition, the speed of change, the mechanics of early foundation, and the actions of the first city-builders – uncertainties that will be understood drastically differently if we try to comprehend them over a decade, a generation, a century, or a millennium.

Many subtleties are observed when focusing on a smaller scale (either spatially or chronologically) that have the potential to complicate these broad urban snapshots. For example, the occupation of Carthage under Roman rule may read as "the Romans just took over without so much as a name change" (as it is described in *Cities* (254)) when considered from a long-term perspective, but this glosses over a much more complicated history. The process of abandonment and refoundation of the city over a century later illuminates the importance of failed cities, or ruins, for contemporary Republican politics

and for the way Rome imagined its own power (as discussed by D. (40–41)). The physical transformation of the Punic Byrsa into the monumental core of the new Roman colony also demonstrates the sometimes aggressively destructive tactics used by the Roman state to impose its own urban ideal.[18]

This need for a balance between global comparison and local detail, chronological scope and historical specificity, is best demonstrated in the accounts of Spanish invaders first encountering the world of the Mexica featured in all three works. W. and S. focus exclusively on the recognizability of New World cities to Old World invaders, a sign that certain aspects of urban life were identified immediately, even without any additional cultural context (*Life and Death* (18), *Cities* (23)). D. provides a much more nuanced and complicated take on these interactions through a close reading of the colonial texts of the period. Explicit comparisons between Tenochtitlan and Spanish cities such as Seville or Cordoba were made not simply to familiarize the reader of these colonial texts by using the shared components of city life. Rather, these sites were selected specifically as places that had been reconquered by the Spanish from Islamic rule and then reintegrated into the Christian world (97). A similar conquest and subjugation of Tenochtitlan *without* its destruction should thus have been conceptually possible, leading to the frustration of Cortés with the intransigence of the Mexica and, ultimately, to the violent devastation of the city. That the three works under review can fruitfully play off each other, S. and W. providing a larger narrative and D. some of the rich, local detail, demonstrates that there is ample room for many scales of analysis in comparative urban thinking.

Can we look to the modern world for inspiration?

A second point revolves around the extent to which we might meaningfully compare cities from different periods, particularly the cities of the modern and pre-modern worlds. For D., an occasional mention of modern ruins grounds *Broken Cities* and highlights the wider significance for his sociology of ruins (114–21). However, the potential connections between contemporary and ancient city life arise as a real point of disagreement between S. and W., who adopt almost entirely contradictory approaches to the use of modern comparanda. W. cautions us repeatedly about the dangers of looking to examples from a post-industrial world when dealing with the ancient past. I have already noted his wariness in thinking about ancient colonization according to paradigms from the European colonization of the developing world (156). To this we can add a resistance in *Life and Death* to drawing too heavily on later understandings of imperialism or empire, particularly given the tendency of modern appropriations of the Classical past to muddy the waters by implying far more similarities than actually existed (253). On the cities themselves, the text again speaks firmly against any type of diachronic comparison: "It is very tempting to use modern experiences of giant cities an [sic] analogies, but it [sic] many ways ancient megalopoleis were quite different." (401)

For W., the ancient past represents an urban life "utterly unlike our own" (358), where "no middle classes patronized a dozen varieties of national restaurants" (402). Yet in *Cities* these same middle classes receive comprehensive coverage (Chapters 9, 10). Beyond this one socioeconomic group, *Cities* regularly invokes modern places to better ground the interpretations of archaeological sites. S.'s choice to organize the work thematically

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18   Fentress 2021.

(in contrast to the chronological structure of *Life and Death*) allows her to effectively work from a global, diachronic perspective and to pull out many of the commonalities that cut across urban life, as everyday as buying your lunch from a street vendor (167–69) or worrying about the commute from point A to point B (140–45). At its most effective – as in the discussion of a shared concern about waste management that ranges from the ancient Mesopotamian toilet demon Shulak to early 20th-c. Los Angeles (133–140) – *Cities* paints an evocative picture of what it means to be a city dweller. This makes earlier archaeological examples more meaningful and contextualizes seemingly modern phenomena within a much longer historical trajectory. However, this big-picture thinking also requires a willingness to flatten some of the cultural specificity of individual examples, obscuring the consequential differences between times and places in favor of the similarities.

There are of course consequences of the choice to move between ancient and modern examples. The shifting concerns of contemporary society can quite easily affect how a reader might interact with or understand ancient examples. At the time of writing, the spread of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 coronavirus has resulted in a further wave of global infection, with subsequent lockdowns and social distancing measures. Reading *Cities*' predominantly appreciative description of the many perks of life in cities seems at odds with our recent lived experiences during a global crisis often felt disproportionately by urban inhabitants. Similarly, the increasingly obvious signs of a growing climate emergency and the lack of sustainability of many (often western) cities jars with some of S.'s extrapolation of modern implications from ancient evidence; this is most notable when the comparisons obscure the significant differences between the scale of consumption in ancient examples and the overpopulation of the present day. I question whether we can embrace the archaeological view that more trash is "not an embarrassment but … a celebration" (160) or "a small price to pay for the stretching of creativity, of satisfaction, of intensity of feeling" (181) without also recognizing the ways in which current consumption practices, trash production, and water usage will not be sustainable over the coming decades.

Regardless of these potential pitfalls, the repercussions of this type of wide-ranging, comparative writing seem entirely worthwhile if we are to move the dialogue forward. Bringing ancient sites into modern urban discourse makes the past more comprehensible and helps academics communicate the excitement of the city to larger and more diverse audiences. Making links between the ancient and the modern also connects more qualitative or narrative works such as those under discussion here to a body of emerging quantitative and spatial approaches to urban comparison that often draw specifically from modern metrics.[19] This in turn presents an opportunity to create new interdisciplinary partnerships between historians, philologists, archaeologists, geographers, and urban anthropologists. *Cities* and *Broken Cities* both succeed in generating provocative new ideas in large part because they are willing to take these risks and look for the wider implications of their respective narratives in a way mostly eschewed by W.'s more traditional focus and unequivocal rejection of modern comparison.

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[19] Michael E. Smith has been one of the key figures calling for the integration of ancient and modern urban studies, see M.E. Smith 2009; 2011; 2012; 2020. For more specific case studies implementing quantitative measures to facilitate comparison, see Dennehy et al. 2016; Hanson and Ortman 2017; Lobo et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2016.

Are cities inevitable, warts and all?

A final theme emerging across these works relates to the inescapability of some of the key features of urban life. *Cities* and *Life and Death* may differ on how cities came to be and how deliberate the choices of the first urbanites were, but they concur that we began a long, irreversible journey the moment we first started to live in dense quarters (*Life and Death* (76), *Cities* (15–17, 244, 262)). The authors reviewed here may also disagree about many aspects of how cities function. And yet all three works introduce, to varying degrees, certain baseline considerations or unavoidable social realities for living together in urban settings. In *Life and Death* and *Cities*, the urban constants are the power differentials between those with resources and those without, and the necessary loss of personal freedoms that accompanied a shift first to sedentism and then to denser and denser cohabitation (*Life and Death* (52), *Cities* (246, 261)). *Broken Cities* represents this same power differential with a focus on the elite interests behind the ruination and urban failure that forms an essential part of urban life (120).

Must any of these observations *always* be the case? Graeber and Wengrow's recent argument against the inevitability of urban inequality (and hierarchical societies more generally) has already generated a significant dialogue.[20] One could, in time, equally draw attention to counterfactuals for many of the overarching observations made in comparative works such as these: places where cities never materialized despite all the right conditions, cities without key features like infrastructure or civic administration, even cities and entire urban systems that failed completely. These potential disagreements only speak to the complexity and consequence of the questions. With few easy answers and so many possible examples to draw from, the debates on whether cities are inevitable and what characterizes city life will surely continue. These three stimulating works serve as a compelling illustration of the benefits of archaeology and ancient history engaging directly with these challenges.

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[20]   Graeber and Wengrow 2021, particularly Chapter 8 ("Imaginary cities").

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