



Book reviews

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Michael E. Smith, *Urban Life in the Distant Past: The Prehistory of Energized Crowding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Xviii + 350pp. 83 figures. 17 tables. £100.00 hbk.

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Michael E. Smith's new book *Urban Life in the Distant Past: The Prehistory of Energized Crowding* distils the author's years of thinking about human settlements and urbanism; it adds to Smith's many contributions to the subject and to the ever-expanding literature on ancient cities. The book is not a history of what V. Gordon Childe called the 'Urban Revolution', or a thesis on the evolution of cities, or a tour of famous cities of antiquity, but a presentation and consideration in eight chapters of multiple strands of evidence on, ideas about and interpretations of ancient settlements and their human communities. There is a conscious and reflective social-scientific approach, which generates and makes use of quantitative data to draw positive and comparable conclusions. The tone is erudite, succinct and sometimes polemical.

Smith begins by discussing sociological and functional definitions of 'city' and 'urban'. Rather than providing new definitions, he casts a wide net, recognizing that a broader consideration of 'settlements' enables more comparisons to be made across time and space. Thus, the book considers and compares settlements along the lines of form and function, size and population density, organization and economics, and their impacts on inhabitants and dwellers around. Case-study one on Maya Tikal explains how the site has been interpreted by some as not urban and by others as urban. Case-study two on Çatalhöyük, on the other hand, shows a densely populated area with few functional urban features.

Chapter 2 discusses the book's guiding idea of 'energized crowding', which Smith argues is 'the most important concept for understanding and explaining urban life in the past (and the present)' (p. 3). The principle of this is that, since cities and urban areas concentrate population, they also increase instances of interaction and magnify their results; energized crowding stimulates social and economic change. The concept derives from the architectural historian Spiro Kostof and is put to work throughout *Urban Life in the Distant Past*.

In chapter 3, Smith applies the concept of energized crowding, characterizing cities as social reactors. As populations grow, interactions increase, and settlements must change accordingly. Three main consequences are identified: an increase of interaction stress, the creation of communities and neighbourhoods and economic

growth. Interaction stress can lead to architectural and social innovations, including the construction of public or communal areas that help create identities in common, and more private areas such as houses and neighbourhoods that limit interaction. Smith applies conclusions from the work of Jose Lobo and Luis Bettencourt on settlement scaling theory to suggest that, because of energized crowding, rates of 'output' increase in a superlinear rather than a straight linear relationship as a population grows (p. 90).

The relationship of cities and states is discussed in chapter 4. Smith argues that cities can develop without states, in chiefdoms, for example, although states he suggests do need functional cities of some kind, whether permanent or temporary. A case-study on Cahokia supports this view of non-state urbanism. Case-studies of the Swahili city-states and Huanuco Pampa similarly illustrate the discussion of city-states and empires. Other purpose-built ancient settlements are discussed by expanding on Kevin Lynch's notion of 'the city as a practical machine'. Thus, Smith discusses permanent settlements including the workers' compound of Amarna, temporary sites including 'camps' and cyclically occupied sites such as medieval European 'Thing sites', used for political assemblies. Case-studies on Persepolis and Chang'an demonstrate the power of central planning, in particular for monumental urban cores but sometimes for whole settlements, that demonstrated the power and ideology of rulers.

In chapter 5, Smith argues that the level of commercialization of a settlement was fundamental to how a city worked and how its people experienced it. To measure commercialization, Smith identifies 16 economic features, such as imported goods, retail marketplaces/shops, coins and so on, and tabulates these for each of the 29 case-studies (some data is presented in Appendix A). On this measure, sites are roughly divided into highly, moderately and somewhat commercialized economies and uncommercialized economies. Pompeii scores 16/16 and Catalhoyuk 1/16; here we can visualize the relative complexity and 'feel' of the urban experience.

Another crucial point in *Urban Life in the Distant Past* is that settlements often display elements of top-down planning and bottom-up generative processes. These two elements and their interplay are introduced in case-study seven in chapter 3, Black Rock City, and is discussed at length in chapters 6 (top-down) and 7 (bottom-up). Black Rock City is interesting as a temporary but recurrent 'bottom-up' settlement which later required top-down intervention as the number of visitors increased. In contrast, case-study 25 on Olynthus clearly demonstrates how a centrally planned city could be modified by its inhabitants after initial construction. Case-study 28 on Ur, in chapter 8, also illustrates these two processes.

The final chapter recaps some of the book's explicit conclusions and also indicates possible future directions for research. Around these comes discussion of other themes: heritage and the ownership of the past, trade in antiquities and the poetry of ruins, which feel only loosely related to the main elements of the book. The case-study of Viking heritage site of Fyrkat, with its reconstruction of Viking buildings, adds colour to the discussion. There is also an additional review of the author's scientific, quantitative and comparative approach, which builds on points already made in chapters 1 and 3.

Urban Life in the Distant Past is an important book, which shows Smith's deep engagement with urban history and theory and introduces the notion of energized crowding as a central factor in settlements and settlement change in the pre-modern

period. While always stimulating, it is not always a straightforward read. This is perhaps an inevitable outcome of such a wide-ranging discussion, which brings together so many ideas in one volume. However, what does hold the book together is the judicious use of case-studies (29 of them), which present and discuss settlements as far back as the palaeolithic and from around the globe. These box features are not decorative but play a key role in explicitly fulfilling the comparative element of the book, each one ending with a section of ‘comparative insights’. Smith is explicit in his methods and follows a quantitative approach which enables comparisons even between ancient and modern cities.

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Stuart Jenks and Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz (eds.), *Message in a Bottle. Merchants' Letters, Merchants' Marks and Conflict Management in 1533–34. A Source Edition*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. 257pp. €86.00 hbk.
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This volume prints for the first time a consignment of merchants' letters whose contents are as remarkable as the circumstances surrounding their fate and rediscovery. Written in Antwerp and Brussels in late spring and early summer 1533 and destined for addressees in England, this batch of roughly 30 letters was entrusted to a certain Adrian Johnson of Antwerp for delivery, but fell victim to an act of privateering (or piracy, depending on your perspective) that sent shockwaves throughout the region. Lübeck privateers seized Adrian Johnson's ship on 19 August along with five other vessels while they sailed off the coast of Kent, hauling the cargo (which included the bag of letters) back to Lübeck. While an array of international actors argued over the fate of the cargo, the mailbag somehow wended its way into the city archive with its letters unopened. There it languished for some half a millennium until 1994, when Stuart Jenks chanced upon the items, convinced the resident archivists to cut them open (a story recounted with aplomb in the first footnote) and set upon the task of editing them for publication. The result is a source edition of great value, reproducing a diverse set of letters and ancillary materials that shed new light on the economic and commercial relationship between two of the most important metropolises in Europe at the time. In their content, personal asides and often intimate tone, the letters themselves offer fascinating perspectives on the individual social and cultural concerns of their authors, both male and female, and their contemporary anxieties and daily lives. From a lowly apprentice writing to introduce his friend to his master to powerful mercers, importing goods worth several hundred pounds a year, penning honest missives to their wives, the letters offer a tantalizing snapshot into mercantile and civic society in the early sixteenth century.

Printing a diverse set of letters written in difficult hands and multiple languages meant both editors had much to exercise them, so there are no fewer than three separate introductions to this volume. Different, one might almost say competing, approaches to transcription in English, German and Dutch academic circles are