CHAPTER 2

THE ORIGINS OF URBAN LIFE

Five thousand years of urban history and perhaps as many of proto-urban history are spread over a few score of only partly exposed sites. The great urban landmarks Ur, Nippur, Uruk, Thebes, Helopolis, Assur, Nineveh, Babylon, cover a span of three thousand years whose vast emptiness we cannot hope to fill with a handful of monuments and a few hundred pages of written records.

LEWIS MUMFORD, THE CITY IN HISTORY

The origins of urban life—the period when humankind was transformed from hunters and gatherers to city dwellers—is shrouded in the distant past. Yet we know that cities and urban civilizations appeared in many different areas of the world independent of one another in the relatively recent past. Urbanization, or the building of and living in compact, densely populated places, appeared as early as 10,000 years ago. Continuously used, densely populated settlements can be found in the Middle East dating back over 6,000 years, the Indus River Valley in India dating back over 4,000 years, and the Yellow River Valley of China (circa 2000 BC). The origins of the earliest urban settlements are shown in Table 2.1.

The population of ancient cities was small by present-day standards. The great city of Ur, home of Abraham, likely had a population of 65,000 in 2000 BC, when it was the largest city in the world. At its peak in the fifth century BC, classical Athens, the birthplace of Western art, architecture, and philosophy, had no more than 150,000 inhabitants. Until the late Middle Ages, no European city could compare with ancient Rome, which housed more than 1 million people in the first century AD.

Lewis Mumford, the great scholar of urban history and culture, has suggested that the first human settlements were cities of the dead—the thanatopolis. The dead were the first to have a permanent dwelling (the caverns and mounds where Paleolithic hunters buried their dead). Men and women would return to these ritual spaces to worship their ancestors, and it is here that humankind first drew pictographs and paintings of not only animals for the hunt but also formalized figures of...
The first germ of the city, then, is in the ceremonial meeting place that serves as the goal for pilgrimage: a site to which family or clan groups are drawn back, at seasonable intervals, because it concentrates, in addition to any natural advantages that it may have, certain ‘spiritual’ or supernatural powers, powers of higher potency and duration, of wider cosmic significance, than the ordinary processes of life.

Several ancient cities possessed remarkable structural features that made urban living not only possible but also quite comfortable. The residential space of Mohenjo-Daro in ancient India was built on a grid street system that made maximum use of space and included an open sewer system to carry away waste and rainwater. Baked clay sewer pipes and roofing tiles have been unearthed at the site of this early city that are identical to the materials used in modern construction. Two-story houses were constructed around a central courtyard with balconies on the second floor. The courtyard provided private space for families but also allowed air to circulate through the building—important for the hot climate of the region. Jericho, in ancient Israel, possessed a system of canals that facilitated the irrigation of fields outside the city. However, it is easy to overemphasize these special cases. Many ancient cities were plagued by unsanitary housing conditions and streets, and these problems would increase as cities grew in size.

The citizens of the early towns lived an urban life that was fragile. Precariousness was, perhaps, an inevitable consequence of the growth of cities. According to Gideon Sjoberg, cities were the sites of power. In order to be secure, it was necessary for early cities to exercise their strength and dominate the hinterland (the relatively less developed area outside the boundaries of the large city). Then, in order to prosper, it was necessary to expand the hinterland sphere of domination. As sites of wealth, ancient cities were protected by fortifications, and warfare between cities was quite common (Sjoberg, 1960). Average town citizens lived under the constant threat of attack by bands of warriors or armies from other towns. Often victors simply killed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Approximate Date</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Nile River Valley</td>
<td>3200 BC</td>
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<td>India</td>
<td>Indus River Valley</td>
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<td>Yellow River Valley</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Yucatan Peninsula</td>
<td>200 BC</td>
</tr>
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SOURCE: Adapted from Ivan Light, Cities in World Perspective (New York: Macmillan, 1983).
off or enslaved defeated city populations and then burned the city to the ground. In the book of Judges in the Old Testament, we read, “And he took the city, and slew the people that was therein, and he beat down the city, and sowed it with salt” (Judges 9:45). Once salt has been spread on farm fields, the land can never again be used to grow crops.

We have many accounts of the destruction of early cities in the writings that have come down to us from the earliest urban civilizations. The Old Testament book of Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah, who was a court official

### Box 2.1

**Lamentations of Jeremiah**

How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary!

She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks; she hath none to comfort her among all her lovers; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies.

Judah is gone into captivity because of affliction, and because of great servitude: she dwelleth among the heathen, she findeth no rest: all her persecutors overtook her between the straits.

The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn feasts: all her gates are desolate: her priests sigh, her virgins are afflicted, and she is in bitterness.

Her adversaries are become the head, her enemies are at ease; for the Lord hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions; her young children are gone into captivity before the adversary.

And from the daughter of Zion all her beauty is departed: her princes are become like harts that find no pasture, and they are gone without strength before the pursuer.

Jerusalem remembereth in the days of her affliction and of her anguish all her treasures that she had from the days of old; now that her people fall by the hand of the adversary, and none doth help her, the adversaries have seen her, they have mocked at her desolations.

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.

For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water; because the comforter is far from me, even he that should refresh my soul; my children are desolate, because the enemy hath prevailed.

**SOURCE:** Lamentations 1:1–7, 1:12, 1:16 (the Old Testament, King James Version)
in Jerusalem when the city was conquered by the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. In Lamentations, the ancient Hebrews lament the loss of their city from their exile in Babylonia (see Box 2.1).

After ancient Troy fell to the Greek armies led by Achilles, the Trojan men were killed or taken into slavery, and the women were parceled out to the victorious Greek warriors. In Euripides’ great play *The Trojan Women*, Hecuba, the former queen of Troy, speaks to the audience and describes the events in Troy shortly after its capture (see Box 2.2). These two stories illustrate the unhappy fate of the inhabitants of the early cities in the face of war among competing city-states.

The domination of urban settlements by rulers in search of wealth and treasure led, in turn, to increased trade and commerce, as well as continued conflict as the new city-states sought to exercise power over the countryside. Early urban existence constituted a drama involving such interwoven spheres of everyday life as agricultural production, regional and foreign trade, military conquest and rule, and the pursuit of arts and sciences based on the relative success of economic and political activities. In his great work *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford asks us to consider the implications of this history when he notes that the civilizations that survived this period of human history were those that were the most warlike and able to destroy their competitors (Mumford, 1961).

Most discussions of early cities focus on the division of labor and economic activities around which the concentrated population was organized. In this way, city life is presented as a progression from limited to complex specialization of work and functional organization. Not only were cities the locus of agriculture, trade, and manufacturing; they created *social spaces* that had religious meaning and significance. Cities did not simply appear because certain fundamental economic activities had matured. Cities had to be produced, or constructed, by humans through the conscious intent of individuals and groups. In ancient societies, urban settlements were built using a shared set of symbols and a model of space that was inherently meaningful to each group (Lagopoulos, 1986). Early cities, such as Ur in ancient Sumer, were produced using cosmological codes that mandated geometrical relations between the city and the heavens, such as an east-west axis, and within the city through geometrical arrangements of the buildings. In this way, the built environment of even the earliest urban settlements had important social, political, and religious connections that created a sense of shared history and identity among the urban inhabitants.

Religious codes distinguished between sacred and profane spaces and endowed particular structures and spaces with the protection of the gods. Around 500 BC, the Etruscans, ancestors of the Romans, built cities by first plowing a “sacred furrow” as a large enclosure in a religious ceremony. The city could be built only within this space, signifying the sacred domain, separated from the profane space of the rest of the world. Only later, in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe, did cities first appear without religious or cosmological codes guiding the construction of space. At
this time, and continuing to the present day in Europe (and the United States), the meaning of a building (such as a bank) corresponded to the function it performed in the society with no necessary connection to any particular social or religious meaning. In contrast, in the earliest human settlements, and through at least the time of the medieval city, there was a strong connection between buildings and the way...
individuals living within the city conceived of the meanings of those buildings (such as the sacred treasuries at Delphi and Olympus in ancient Greece; Pedley, 2005).

As the sociospatial perspective suggests, the ancient city was the combined product of political power, economic functions, and overarching symbolic meanings that expressed deeply held beliefs of the inhabitants.

**ANCIENT URBANIZATION**

Social scientists are interested in the origin of cities because the process of early urbanization holds insights into the origins of social structure. In particular, the origin of the first urban communities provides clues for understanding how complex social relations arose and how strong bonds were maintained among residents who were often unrelated. The best-known theory of the rise of cities was proposed by V. Gordon Childe (1950, 1954). According to Childe, the first cities developed a form of social organization that differed from rural society in many respects and provided the social basis for modern life.

Childe viewed the development of society in terms of distinct stages and considered the emergence of urban life as a critical evolutionary phase in the rise of modern civilization. City building was part of an “urban revolution” that also brought a set of special social relations that are characteristic of modern life. The first step toward an urban society occurred when hunting and gathering societies shifted to food production in relatively stable and sedentary groups. Once the urban revolution began, civilization progressed and evolved to more complex forms of social life sustained by an urban economy based on trade and craft production. Childe is principally responsible for the idea that urbanization develops through specialization of work and the separation of different functions through increasing interdependence of societal tasks. These social relations were considered different from those found in rural society, and they provided the basis for modern civilization.

Childe’s account of early urbanization was quite influential and may be accurate as a descriptive interpretation of ancient city life based on evidence from cities in Mesopotamia. But it is important to recognize that what Childe has done is to describe the findings of contemporary discoveries in early cities. It is not a theory of the origins of urban life. Note that it is not possible to find any one feature of the early city (described in Box 2.3) as an essential prerequisite for the development of any other feature. Like other models of its day, it asserted an evolutionary view of development according to which civilization passes first through the stage of hunting and gathering, then to agriculture, and finally to urban-based economies, with an ever more complex and interdependent form of social organization leading to a contemporary “modern” stage.

But we know that urbanization is also characterized by uneven development, and other evidence suggests a discontinuous process of development. Archeologists have
The Urban Revolution

In “The Urban Revolution,” V. Gordon Childe noted that the development of the first cities was marked by a number of important innovations, including the following:

**Increased population size and density:** By 3000 BC Nineveh, Ur, Uruk, and other Sumerian cities each had as many as 20,000 persons, larger than other human settlements up to that time.

**Concentration of agricultural surplus:** Farmers living in the region controlled by the city paid a tithe, or tax, to an “imaginary deity or a divine king” to support soldiers, priests, and other officials.

**Public works and monuments:** Irrigation projects built by the state (through labor required of all citizens) allowed farmers to produce an agricultural surplus; the cities were dominated by temples (ziggurats) rising from a stepped brick platform.

**Specialization of labor:** The production of an agricultural surplus freed individuals to perform the specialized tasks required of artists, craftspeople, merchants, soldiers, and priests.

**Invention of writing:** Systems of writing and numerical notation were necessary to keep track of commercial accounts and tax payments.

**Social stratification:** Priests, military leaders, and other officials formed a ruling class and were exempt from manual labor; workers and craftspeople were “relieved from intellectual tasks” but were guaranteed safety within the city.

**Development of the arts:** Artists and craftspeople developed sophisticated styles and traditions in the decorative and fine arts with the depiction of persons and animals.

**Development of sciences:** Sciences were developed to predict, measure, and standardize to assist in the production of agriculture and the keeping of tax records (arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy).

**Membership:** Participation in the community was based on residence and was no longer dependent on kinship.

**Long-distance trade:** Raw materials not available in the local area were imported for craft production and religious ceremonies.

SOURCE: V. Gordon Childe, “The Urban Revolution.”
known for some time that signs of civilization, such as the production of pottery in quantity or the use of writing, coexisted with the development of agriculture rather than appearing at the later stages of agriculturally based societies as evolutionary theories maintain. Because of the need to create a livelihood on marginal agricultural lands, early residents of towns innovated alternative economic activities, including trade, full-time craft work, and even religion, yielding products that could be exchanged for essential goods, thereby providing the basis for a city-based economy that could survive on trade. And many early cities disappeared when the natural resources required to support concentrated populations became depleted.

While the social division of labor and its growing complexity certainly contributed to urban development, economic factors alone did not produce the first cities. The market by itself can never provide adequate control or guidance—regulation—for social organization. In fact, the classical sociologists Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber all showed that everyday actions in a market society generate problems and conflict that call for regulation by political and cultural means. “The most important of such problems were the construction of trust or solidarity (stressed by Durkheim), the regulation of power (Marx and Weber), and the provision of both meaning and legitimation for social activities so prized by Weber” (Eisenstadt and Shachar, 1987:50).

**CLASSICAL CITIES**

The earliest cities in Mesopotamia and in China were built according to complex belief systems and symbolic codes, as shown by city gates devoted to specific deities that were oriented to the cardinal points of the compass (north, east, south, and west), and a street layout that would prevent spirits from moving directly to the center of the city. In ancient Greece, cities were constructed according to a cosmological code that incorporated sacred spaces and religious symbols linked to the pantheon of Greek gods. The city of Athens was built to honor the goddess Athena, and all buildings followed geometrical design principles in accordance with the “golden mean.” In the center of the circle that encompassed the city was the agora, which was not simply the marketplace but the public hearth or *hestia koine*, the center of the community. Over a period of two hundred years, the agora at the base of the acropolis took form as public buildings—courts, libraries, temples, gymnasium—gradually surrounded the open area, creating an enclosed space where the public life of the city was focused. The public hearth was considered to be the *omphalos*, the center of the world.

Visitors would pass through the agora along the Panathenaic Way, walk past the *stoa* (public marketplace), and then ascend the *propylaea*, the gateway to the sacred temples at the top of the acropolis, designed and built by the architect Mnesicles from 430 to 420 BC. Robin Rhodes (1995:53) describes the ascent of the acropolis:
“Its architecture, in concert with the Panathenaic procession, progressed step by step from the west, from the realm of the secular, the human, the realm of stories, of human explanation, to the elemental religious experience of divine epiphany at the east side of the temenos, at the front of the major temples to Athena.” Most striking of all, as visitors approached the great stairway on the Acropolis, they would pass the columns of the first temples, destroyed by the Persian armies in 480 BC, which were built into the walls as a reminder of this earlier history.

Active participation in all parts of public life was the central organizing concept for Athenians, and urban space within Athens was overlaid by a political code that supplanted the earlier cosmological/religious one. The radial street network emanating from the center of the *omphalos* would connect all citizens to the central public space. This development is very different from both the early grid network found in cities in the Indus Valley and the haphazard organic growth of urban settlements in Mesopotamia. Radial development was dictated not by the economic concern of easy access to the market but by the political principle that all homes should be equi-distant from the center because all Athenian citizens were equal. Within the center
were placed the citizen assembly hall, the city council hall, and the council chamber, all structures linked to the institution of city politics.

Classical Rome was constructed on a model developed from an imperial code that stressed grandeur, domination, and (eventually) excess. The construction of urban space in Rome was based not on the political equality of its citizens but on the military power of the state and, later, the ambitions of the emperors. Functional space within the Roman Forum was embedded in a larger, meaningful space governed by political and cultural symbols.

Initially, the buildings of the Republican Forum at the center of Rome were built on a human scale and formed the focal point for social interaction, public ceremony, and political activity within the city. As the empire expanded and the republic was replaced first by a dictatorship and then by a monarchy, Rome was refashioned by the imperial code to a gargantuan scale. The city of Rome became a physical representation of the empire itself. Monuments and public buildings were constructed to honor the personal accomplishments of each emperor. At its height in the third century, imperial Rome contained a population of more than 1 million people, many of them slaves (including clerks, accountants, and foremen in addition to laborers). It encompassed a total area of 8 square miles, much of which was given over to public space. The majority of the population lived in the 46,000 *insulae* (apartment buildings). These buildings were typically three stories tall and contained five apartments, housing five to six people each. There were only 4,000 private homes within the city. Eight aqueducts brought the more than 200 million gallons of water needed to service 1,200 public fountains, 926 public baths, and the public latrines. The streets were narrow, twisting, and dark, averaging 6 to 15 feet wide; the largest street was just 20 feet wide. The city fire department consisted of some 7,000 men. The Circus Maximus, where chariot races took place, seated more than 100,000 people and was surrounded by taverns, shops, and eating places. The famous Colosseum rose more than 180 feet above the city and seated more than 80,000 people.

Rome differed from Athens and other Greek city-states in that it was the capital of the first urban civilization, with roads linking the city to administrative centers across Europe and the Middle East. These cities served as centers of political power, economic control, and cultural diffusion. By AD 200, more than 5 million people lived in Roman cities. As the empire prospered, the 1 million or more residents of Rome lived off the great wealth that poured into the city. Eventually the center became known for decadence and idleness. At one time, a full 159 days out of the Roman year were declared public holidays! Of these, ninety-three days, or one-fourth of the entire year, were devoted to games at the emperor’s expense. Alongside this parasitic existence emerged immense urban problems that we commonly associate with the modern city: the deterioration of housing, widespread poverty, public corruption, and a dangerous lack of proper sanitation facilities and other services for residents.
With the expansion of the empire, Rome increasingly became a city of contrasts, with vast differences between the rich and the poor, a society wedded to spectacle and consumption rather than commerce and trade. By AD 300 the emperor Constantine moved the capital of the empire to Constantinople, and Rome began a long period of decline. The ebb and flow of human civilization, and of the urban centers that serve as the symbolic markers of those civilizations, are both remarkable and sobering. In many cases we have only the briefest of archeological evidence and written information about the earliest urban civilizations. Babylon, perhaps the best known of the Old Testament cities, lay buried for centuries beneath the sands of Iraq. Baghdad, the largest and wealthiest city of the early Middle Ages, was destroyed in the 1300s and has never achieved the dominance and influence of the earlier era. As shown in Table 2.2, the history of urban civilizations represents an ongoing cycle of growth and decline and, in many cases, permanent end due to the ecological damage that urban civilization has brought to many areas of the globe.

**Urbanization After AD 1000**

After the decline of centralized control from the Roman Empire beginning in AD 500, urban space in Europe was reclaimed by the countryside and a new form of feudal relations developed. Towns needed to defend themselves in the absence of a central authority. Many became small, fortified settlements—like the walled hill towns of central Italy—while in northern Europe, small towns survived only in the shadow of the medieval castle. The level of urbanization was low in Europe during the Middle Ages, and few places exceeded 10,000 in population. In contrast, the cities of Asia, the Near East, and what is now Latin America prospered during this same period.

Most historians contend that the cities which emerged after AD 1000 were the products of powerful national rulers and the success of regional trade rather than the result of social relations that were uniquely urban in nature, as Childe’s theory might suggest. City life remained precarious and depended on social relations emanating from state power. It was not until the seventeenth century, with the rise of capitalism in Western Europe, that urban life appeared to be propelled by forces emerging from within cities themselves. In China, for example, towns were organized by the state under the infallible rule of the emperor and for the principal purpose of administration. These were secular kingdoms united under a political hierarchy to harness the economic wealth of the countryside. Under the imperial capital, the provincial capitals were dispersed throughout the kingdom, and under these were clustered the still smaller county capitals of the Chinese empire. Commerce and trade combined with the power of the state to produce the great towns of the Orient.

Much the same story characterized the Middle East, which also contained places with populations that eclipsed those in Europe after AD 1000. With the coming of...
Islamic hegemony, cities appeared that solidified the control of territory under the Muslim rulers, or caliphs. Islam also took over older cities built by the Romans, such as Constantinople. To these it added two types of “new” towns across North Africa and the Near East. *Villes créées* were fortress cities constructed by Islamic rulers as administration centers, and *villes spontanées* arose as trading centers constructed without preconceived plans but sanctioned by the caliph. Ibu Batutah, the famous Arab traveler of the fourteenth century who journeyed from his home in Morocco

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location / Date</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rome AD 100</td>
<td>650,000</td>
<td>World’s largest city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600–800</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>Invasion by German tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>Exile of popes to Avignon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>Pope Sixtus and the rebirth of Rome</td>
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<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>120,000</td>
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<td>Mexico City</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>Capital of Aztec Empire</td>
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<td>1524</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>Destruction by Spanish conquistadors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>Colonial center of Spanish empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baghdad 765</td>
<td>480,000</td>
<td>Establishment of caliphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>900</td>
<td>1,100,000</td>
<td>First city of 1 million persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>1400</td>
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<td>Sacked by Tamerlane, 1401</td>
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<tr>
<td>1650</td>
<td>30,000</td>
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<td>Peking 1200</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>Capital of Ming dynasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1350</td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>670,000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>London 1500</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1700</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>6,480,000</td>
<td>Largest city in the world</td>
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*SOURCE:* Adapted from Ivan Light, *Cities in World Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1983). Population estimates rounded to the nearest 10,000.
to India and China and back, noted the presence of numerous caravansaries along the route from Baghdad to Mecca, dating from the eighth century. The Seljuk sultan ‘Alā al-Dīn Kayqubād (1220–1237), renowned for the rich architectural legacy and court culture that flourished under his reign, constructed many caravansaries along roads linking the Anatolian capital to important trade routes. At the peak advance of the Ottoman Empire under Süleyman the Magnificent (1520–1566), a number of subcapitals emerged, including Bursa in Asia and Edirne in Europe. Both cities had remarkable vaqûfî with mosques, bazaars, medresas, imarets, and the caravansaries to accommodate traders, pilgrims, and an increasing number of visitors (Hutchison and Prodanovic, 2009). Thus Islamic society possessed a robust system of cities and communication, but these were all products of state-directed territorial expansion and administration. As in the Chinese case, the rulers needed cities to control the territory and commerce of the hinterland.

The experience of India during this same period (from 1000 to 1700) demonstrates the combined role of royal administration on the one hand, and the importance of local trade on the other, in the sustenance of Oriental cities. As elsewhere in Asia and the Middle East, the size and well-being of Indian cities were a consequence of the power of central state authority rather than of social relations emanating from the urban community itself. Fernand Braudel (1973:413) provides an interesting illustration of the dependency of the city on the power of the state in his examination of India during the seventeenth century: “The example of India shows how much these official towns were bound up with the prince—to the point of absurdity. Political difficulties, even the prince’s whim, uprooted and transplanted the capitals several times. . . . As soon as its prince abandoned it, the town was jeopardized, deteriorated and occasionally died.”

When a Mogul prince left Delhi on a journey to Kashmir in 1663, the whole town followed him because they could not live without his favors. An improbable crowd formed, estimated at several hundred thousand people by a French doctor who took part in the expedition. Can we imagine the multitudes of Paris following Louis XV during his journey to Metz in 1744?

Finally, in Latin America, the Aztec and Inca civilizations achieved impressive heights during this same period. Indeed, the first Spanish conquistadors to enter the city of Tenochtitlán were overwhelmed. Although many undoubtedly had visited Cordoba and Granada, among the largest cities in Europe, none had ever seen a city as vast as the capital of the Aztec Empire. Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), the leader of the Spanish forces, described the city in a letter to Charles II (see Box 2.4).

Yet these places remained closely connected to the agricultural relations of the hinterland, and social relations within the city were still organized by family clans. Murray Bookchin (1974:7–8) notes that while Tenochtitlán may appear similar to the modern city, this resemblance “rests on its lofty religious structures, its spacious plazas for ceremonies, its palaces and administrative buildings. Looking beyond these
This great city of Temixtitlan [Mexico] is situated in this salt lake, and from the main land to the denser parts of it, by whichever route one chooses to enter, the distance is two leagues. There are four avenues or entrances to the city, all of which are formed by artificial causeways, two spears’ length in width. The city is as large as Seville or Cordova; its streets, I speak of the principal ones, are very wide and straight; some of these, and all the inferior ones, are half land and half water, and are navigated by canoes. All the streets at intervals have openings, through which the water flows, crossing from one street to another; and at these openings, some of which are very wide, there are also very wide bridges, composed of large pieces of timber, of great strength and well put together; on many of these bridges ten horses can go abreast.

This city has many public squares, in which are situated the markets and other places for buying and selling. There is one square twice as large as that of the city of Salamanca, surrounded by porticoes, where are daily assembled more than sixty thousand souls, engaged in buying and selling; and where are found all kinds of merchandise that the world affords, embracing the necessaries of life, as for instance articles of food, as well as jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, precious stones, bones, shells, snails, and feathers. There are also exposed for sale wrought and unwrought stone, bricks burnt and unburnt, timber hewn and unhewn, of different sorts. There is a street for game, where every variety of birds in the country are sold, as fowls, partridges, quails, wild ducks, fly-catchers, widgeons, turtledoves, pigeons, reed-birds, parrots, sparrows, eagles, hawks, owls, and kestrels; they sell likewise the skins of some birds of prey, with their feathers, head, beak, and claws. There is also an herb street, where may be obtained all sorts of roots and medicinal herbs that the country affords. There are apothecaries’ shops, where prepared medicines, liquids, ointments, and plasters are sold; barbers’ shops, where they wash and shave the head; and restaurateurs, that furnish food and drink at a certain price. Every kind of merchandise is sold in a particular street or quarter assigned to it exclusively, and thus the best order is preserved. They sell everything by number or measure; at least so far we have not observed them to sell anything by weight. There is a building in the great square that is used as an audience house, where ten or twelve persons, who are magistrates, sit and decide all controversies that arise in the market, and order delinquents to be punished. In the same square there are other persons who go constantly about among the people observing what is sold, and the measures used in selling; and they have been seen to break measures that were not true.

structures, the city in many respects was likely a grossly oversized pueblo community.” Integration around the agricultural economy was so complete that Aztec cities did not develop money but retained a barter system. Just as in the Orient, commercial and craft activities carried on within Tenochtitlán could not explain either its immense physical space or the size of its population. The principal role of the city was to serve as the center for the Aztec rulers and their administrative functions.

It was not until the late Middle Ages in Europe that towns acquired political independence from the state. For Max Weber, the key to city life was the creation of an independent urban government that was elected by the citizens of the city itself. Classical Athens and early Rome were two examples. Weber believed that in the late Middle Ages, Europe also developed cities of this type. The urban community consisted of three elements: a fusion of the fortress and the marketplace where trade and commercial relations predominated; a legal court of its own that had the authority to settle local disputes; and partial political autonomy that allowed residents to elect authorities who could administer daily affairs (Weber, 1966).

If European cities of the later Middle Ages enjoyed some degree of political autonomy, it was relatively short-lived. By the eighteenth century, nation-states had acquired control of territory, and the commercial-trading economy was global in scale, thereby making individual places dependent on one another. Weber’s remarks about the city were meant to suggest that there may once have been uniquely urban social relations that characterized city life and helped to transform society from a rural, agriculturally based system of social organization to one that is considered “modern.” For example, urban life was sustained by a mode of social organization that, when compared to rural areas, consisted of greater emphasis on specialized jobs, the decline of family authority and the rise of contractual and political relations, and a replacement of the strong ties binding people together based on kinship with those based on the interdependence of sharing the same fate as the city. In addition to Weber, other classical sociologists developed ways of studying the contrast between premodern and modern societies. Ferdinand Tönnies, for example, called this the shift from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft, or the change from a traditional society based on trust and mutual aid to a modern one in which self-interest predominates. Emile Durkheim considered modernization to be a change from a society based on mechanical solidarity, or a low degree of specialization, to one based on organic solidarity, or a high degree of specialization and interdependence. We will return to these ideas in Chapter 3.

**THE MEDIEVAL ORDER AND THE RENAISSANCE CITY**

Just as classical cities developed around the agora and the forum, the medieval city also included an important symbolic space in the center. Buildings on each side of the central square represented the dominant social, economic, and political interests in medieval society: the cathedral, the town hall, and the merchants’ hall and trade
guilds. Medieval cities often competed with one another for economic and political dominance, and many were protected by city walls. Because the walls prevented the cities from expanding outward, the cities built upward, and by the late Middle Ages, four- and even five-story buildings overhanging crowded streets were not uncommon. As trade prospered, cities grew more crowded—and so did the problems of poverty, crime, poor sanitation, and ultimately disease.

By the mid-1500s, Rome had been restored to its position as the capital city of the Catholic world, and it grew in size and significance as trade and commerce in cities across Europe produced a new merchant class with the wealth and leisure time necessary to support pilgrimages to this most holy of sites. But continued growth and an aging infrastructure produced a medieval city of narrow streets, overcrowded housing, and massive traffic problems; in the last decades of the sixteenth century, nearly 450,000 pilgrims traveled to Rome each year. Pope Sixtus V (1585–1590) began an ambitious plan of urban redevelopment. Edmund Bacon (1967:117) described the plan that would create Renaissance Rome:

Sixtus V, in his effort to recreate the city of Rome into a city worthy of the church, clearly saw the need to establish a basic overall design structure in the form of a movement system as an idea, and at the same time the need to tie down its critical parts in positive physical forms which could not easily be removed. He hit upon the happy solution of using Egyptian obelisks, of which Rome had a substantial number, and erected them at important points within the structure of his design.

The seven holy pilgrimage sites within the city were linked by broad boulevards, providing for a new sense of movement and spatial ordering within the city. This plan for urban redevelopment was celebrated in engravings by the leading artists of the day. Implementing this plan would take more than sixty years and result in the destruction of neighborhoods of crowded medieval housing, but it produced a new city that would attract pilgrims from across Europe. New squares were built and monuments erected to symbolize the power of the church.

The redevelopment of Rome served as a model for urban planning during the Renaissance. New squares would be constructed with monuments to historical events and public figures; boulevards would connect these urban spaces with one another and direct traffic through the city. Older housing, now a crowded eyesore, would be demolished to make way for urban development. The design of the new metropolis would be replicated in Renaissance cities across Europe and would later serve as a model for urban planning in many other areas of the world, including Detroit and Washington, DC (Girouard, 1985).

In retrospect, it seems clear that the force which propelled the development of cities in Europe after the late Middle Ages did not involve the same process of urban planning.
growth that led to the urban civilizations of earlier centuries. When we examine the historical record put forward in Table 2.3, we realize that the expansion of urban civilization in Europe was a direct consequence of the rise of capitalism and industrialization. It is this change that defines the development from the relatively autonomous urban community in Europe of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the large industrial and postindustrial cities that we know today.

**CAPITALISM AND THE RISE OF THE INDUSTRIAL CITY**

Throughout the world, especially in North Africa, Asia, and the Near East, cities were the sites of vigorous trade and the economic activities associated with commerce. However, trade by itself did not sustain the rise of cities in Western Europe. Distinguishing the developing towns of the late Middle Ages from other such places was the emergence of capitalism based on a money economy.

The economy of the feudal manor, for example, was characterized by *simple commodity production*. Craft products were produced for exchange, and the owners were the producers of the products. Exchange took place among owners/producers and could be facilitated using any object or service that was equivalent according to
the cultural judgment of the society. This barter system prevailed for several hundred years in Europe after the fall of Rome and existed elsewhere in the Middle East and Asia.

In the later Middle Ages, beginning in the twelfth century, the general and accepted use of money and a fully developed commodity market within the city that was regulated by local government allowed the people with capital to hire both labor and resources to produce goods. The classical sociologist Karl Marx was the foremost student of the rise of capitalism. He called the type of economy made possible by capital and city regulation of markets extended commodity production. Unlike simple commodity production, which ended in the exchange of goods or services, extended production began with money, or capital and, after production and exchange, ended with still more money, which was then invested in a new cycle of accumulation.

In this manner, commercial relations supported the accumulation of capital, and cities with such economies began to prosper beyond anything experienced up to that time. Social and cultural values changed in the cities to sanction the pursuit of wealth through the accumulation of money. For example, the early Catholic church prohibited the loaning of money, except within restricted guidelines, and limited the role of banks (Vance, 1990). In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Present Location</th>
<th>Estimated Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BC 1200</td>
<td>Memphis</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600</td>
<td>Nineveh</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>450</td>
<td>Babylon</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>Patna</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 100</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>650,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>350</td>
<td>Constantinople</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600</td>
<td>Constantinople</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800</td>
<td>Changan</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>900</td>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Cordoba</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>450,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100</td>
<td>Kaifeng</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>440,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
<td>Hangchow</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300</td>
<td>Hangchow</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>430,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400</td>
<td>Nanking</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>490,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>Peking</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>670,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>Peking</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>710,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>Peking</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>1,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>2,320,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>6,480,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Adapted from Ivan Light, Cities in World Perspective (New York: Macmillan, 1983).
swept away these cultural and social restrictions on the free flow of investment, providing a cultural basis for capitalist development (Weber, 1958). Once that point had been reached, the accumulation process spilled out into the surrounding area as the new money-based capitalist economy penetrated relations in the countryside. The history of the Occidental city, as Braudel, Weber, and Marx all agreed, became the history of capitalism.

The full impact of the changes described by these three authors may be best understood by looking at the location and size of the largest cities in Europe from 1050 to 1800 (roughly the period from the onset of the Middle Ages to the start of the Industrial Revolution). The population figures presented in Table 2.4 illustrate the shift of economic activity and urban life from southern Europe to the north. In the early Middle Ages, the largest urban areas were found in the Moorish empire in Spain and in the early Italian city-states. By the 1500s the influence of the Moorish empire was declining, and the early textile manufacturing cities of the north were ascending. Soon thereafter, the port cities of the Hanseatic League made their appearance. By 1800, the metropolitan centers of the new European powers and the cities of the industrial north predominated.

As Adam Smith and Karl Marx noted in their complementary works, *The Wealth of Nations* and *Das Kapital*, industrial capitalism would forever change the nature of social relations and set in motion the powerful economic forces that would transform human society. Occupations became specialized, and the division of labor grew ever more complex as mercantile capitalism was replaced by industrial capitalism. Aided by emergent nation-states, the political and legal relations of capitalism began

### Table 2.4 Largest Cities in Europe, 1050 to 1800

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cordoba</th>
<th>Palermo</th>
<th>Grenada</th>
<th>Paris</th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Rome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1050</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
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<td>110</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1330</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1650</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Population shown in thousands.
SOURCE: Adapted from DeLong and Shleifer (1992) and based upon the work of Bairoch, Batou, and Chèvre (1988) and Russell (1972).
to dominate the countryside in Europe. To be successful, the emerging forms of capitalism required the legal justification of private property, and this would result in the “commodification” of urban space and many other aspects of society. All this buying and selling meant that many new markets were formed and existing ones expanded, providing people with even more ways to make money.

Land, for example, once held only by the nobility and the church, became a commodity that could be purchased by anyone with money. A real estate market developed that divided up and parcelled out land for sale. A second market, this one for labor, emerged as the serfs, who had been bound to their masters by feudal traditions, were freed only to become commodities in the new system of wage labor. As feudal relations of dependence and reciprocity were broken down by capitalism and the pursuit of monetary accumulation, immense numbers of people were forced out of rural farming areas and into cities, where they looked for work by selling their labor for a wage on the labor market. They would become the urban proletariat, as Marx defined them: persons who possessed only their labor to sell.

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution, this “urban implosion,” or shift of population from rural to urban places, reached truly astounding proportions. According to Lewis Mumford (1961), the cities of the late eighteenth century contained relatively few people, numbering less than 600,000. By the middle of the nineteenth century, capitalist industrialization had created cities of a million or more across Western Europe. The most dramatic changes were experienced in England and Wales, where the scale of industrialization and capitalist development was most advanced. According to Geruson and McGrath (1977:25), urban counties in Britain grew by 30 percent between 1780 and 1800 and again by approximately 300 percent between 1801 and 1831. Commercial and industrial counties experienced a net population increase of 378,000 between 1781 and 1800 and an additional 720,000 between 1801 and 1831. At the same time, agricultural counties lost 252,000 people during the first period and lost 379,000 between 1801 and 1831.

Census figures at the time of the nineteenth century were not always accurate. Nevertheless, Braudel (1973:376) suggests that around the turn of the century, several regions in Europe tipped their population balance from rural to urban, especially in England and the Netherlands, a truly momentous occurrence. In short, for the first time in history, several nations changed from populations that were predominantly rural to ones dominated by urban location, and this is why the urbanization process in Western Europe after the 1700s was so significant.

By the seventeenth century, destitution had been accepted as the normal lot in life for a considerable part of the population. Without the spur of poverty and famine, people could not be expected to work for starvation wages. Misery at the bottom was the foundation for luxury at the time. As much as a quarter of the urban population in the bigger cities, it has been estimated, consisted of casuals and beggars; it was this surplus that made for what was considered, by classic capitalism,
to be a healthy labor market, in which the capitalist hired labor on his own terms or dismissed workers at will, without notice and without concern for what happened to the worker or the city under such inhuman conditions. In a memorandum dated 1684, the chief of police of Paris referred to the “frightful misery that afflicts the greater part of the population of this great city.” Between 40,000 and 65,000 were reduced to outright begging. There was nothing exceptional about Paris.

By the middle 1800s, Western Europe possessed many industrialized cities. What was life like there? The cities that emerged in the nineteenth century, unlike the ancient places, were not conceived according to some overarching symbolic meaning, such as religious or cosmological codes. Development was a haphazard affair. Individual capitalists did what they willed, and real estate interests operated unchecked by either legal code or cultural prescription. Land was traded like other goods. About the only clear pattern that emerged involved the spatial separation of rich and poor. The industrial city of Western Europe became the site of a clash of classes: the workers against the capitalists. Observing the excesses of the time and the utter devastation visited on working-class life by the factory regime of capitalism, Karl Marx (1967) recognized that class struggle would become the driving force of history. It was left for Friedrich Engels, Marx’s close friend, to document in graphic terms the pathological nature of uneven development characterizing urban growth under capitalism in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (Engels, 1973 [1845]).

![Manchester from Kersal Moor (1852)](image_url)

*FIGURE 2.3 Manchester from Kersal Moor (1852). Many engravings were made of William Wyld’s famous painting showing the first industrial city. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s description of the city: the smoke from the factories was so thick that you could not see the sun at midday. SOURCE: Courtesy of The New York Public Library/Art Resource, NY. Used with permission.*
In a chapter titled “The Great Towns,” Engels describes the typical slum found in the industrial city:

Every great city has one or more slums, where the working class is crowded together. True, poverty often dwells in hidden alleys close to the palaces of the rich; but, in general, a separate territory has been assigned to it, where, removed from the sight of the happier classes, it may struggle along as it can. These slums are pretty equally arranged in all the great towns of England, the worst houses in the worst quarters of the towns; usually one- or two-storied cottages in long rows, perhaps with cellars used as dwellings, almost always irregularly built. These houses of three or four rooms and a kitchen form, throughout England, some parts of London excepted, the general dwellings of the working class. The streets are generally unpaved, rough, dirty, filled with vegetable and animal refuse, without sewers or gutters, but supplied with foul, stagnant pools instead. Moreover, ventilation is impeded by the bad, confused method of building of the whole quarter, and since many human beings here live crowded into a small space, the atmosphere that prevails in these working-men’s quarters may readily be imagined.

Engels’s description of Manchester is more graphic: “The people of Manchester emphasize the fact whenever anyone mentions to them the frightful condition of this Hell upon Earth; but what does that prove? Everything which here arouses horror and indignation is of recent origin, belongs to the industrial epoch.” Engels’s account includes rivers polluted with the intestines of slaughtered cattle and other manufacturing waste, which came from the giant factories that towered over residential areas of the city as well as unimaginable housing conditions:

Right and left a multitude of covered passages lead from the main street into numerous courts, and he who turns in thither gets into a filth and disgusting grime, the equal of which is not to be found—especially in the courts which lead down to the Irk, and which contain unqualifiedly the most horrible dwellings which I have yet beheld. In one of these courts there stands directly at the entrance, at the end of the covered passage, a privy without a door, so dirty that the inhabitants can pass into and out of the court only by passing through foul pools of stagnant urine and excrement . . . The first court below Ducie Bridge, known as Allen’s Court, was in such a state at the time of the cholera that the sanitary police ordered it evacuated, swept, and disinfected with chloride of lime.

Engels was not alone in his condemnation of conditions in the industrial city. Many books were written in the nineteenth century cataloging the hardships caused
by industrialization, including Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* and Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People in London*. These works, and many more, described what Booth called “the problem of poverty in the midst of wealth.”

**SUMMARY**

Our survey of urban history shows that the growth of cities and urban life has been a discontinuous process, marked by the rise and fall of great cities and urban civilizations. Events of the last several centuries, particularly the rise of industrial capitalism in the West and the European colonialization of the globe, has resulted in a world system of cities with highly developed urban centers in many countries, while in many other countries people confront a continual struggle to meet the basic necessities of life—patterns of development that are discussed in more detail in Chapters 10–11.

We know that urban spaces are meaningful spaces, and that the earliest places of human habitation had important symbolic meanings. So too was the development of ancient and classical cities based on religious and social meaning, while the great cities of the Renaissance reflected a new sense of order, based on the rediscovery of perspective and a new science of urban design, often used to demonstrate the power and prestige of the government and monarchy. The industrial metropolis of the nineteenth century would be based on a new social and symbolic order, where the pursuit of profit would override the earlier religious and social order, and everyday life would run its course in the factories, workhouses, and tenements of the industrial city.

In the chapters to follow, we will see that many of the ideas associated with modern life have their origins in observations made about industrial cities. The problem of uneven development—the graphic contrast between the wealthy and the poor, for example, and the contradictions between progress and misery—remains very much at the center of the urban dynamic in cities around the globe. On the one hand, the city represented hope to all those laboring under meager conditions in the countryside. It was the site of industrialization and the great dream of modernization and progress. On the other hand, the powerful forces of urbanism dwarfed the individual and crushed the masses into dense, environmentally strained spaces. In time, the built environment of the industrial city would replace that of the feudal town. The city rhythm, so unlike that of the country, would replace earlier cycles of life dominated by nature. Life was worth only as much as the daily wage it could generate. The processes of urbanization and capitalism that created large cities in Europe during the nineteenth century also thrived in the United States at the same time, and in many ways, US cities were governed by the same dynamic.
KEY CONCEPTS

thanatopolis
agora
Childe hypothesis
rise of capitalism
simple commodity production
extended commodity production
urban implosion
forum
industrialization

IMPORTANT NAMES

V. Gordon Childe
Lewis Mumford
Gideon Sjoberg
Max Weber
Karl Marx
Friedrich Engels
Henry Mayhew
Charles Booth

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. V. Gordon Childe’s description of the urban revolution is often said to be an evolutionary theory. What does this mean? What factors did Childe believe were necessary for the urban revolution to take place? What evidence have other scholars used to critique his theory?

2. The roles of culture and political power were important for the development of both Athens and Rome, yet these forces produced two very different patterns of urban settlement. What might account for the differences between Athens and Rome, and for the changes that took place in the development of republican and imperial Rome?

3. Early cities were built by groups using a distinctive set of symbols and a model of space meaningful to the group. Explain how the redevelopment of Renaissance Rome by Pope Sixtus V followed these same ideas.

4. The well-known saying that “city air makes one free” dates from the development of European cities in the medieval period. What does this saying represent? Why was it important for European cities to develop political autonomy from the surrounding economic and political system?
5. The rise of the industrial city in Europe is linked to the development of capitalism. Discuss two characteristics of early capitalism and show how this influenced the growth of the industrial city.

6. Urban historians have long debated whether capitalism resulted in better living conditions for the average worker. What evidence do we have from the development of the industrial city to answer this question?