

## The Origin and Evolution of Cities

**Urbanism** is the process through which cities grow. There are a variety of definitions of cities. For instance, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, an **urbanized area** (UA's) comprises one or more places ("central place") and the adjacent densely settled surrounding territory ("urban fringe") that together have a minimum of 50,000 persons. However, this definition only pertains to the U.S.; other countries have different standards. Confusion over the definition of "city" is a problem.

Historically, it was relatively easy to define the differences between urban and rural settlements because cities were surrounded by walls. The removal of the walls and the rapid territorial expansion of cities during the modern period, as well as the changing nature of agriculture (e.g., agribusiness) have blurred the distinction of the physical differences between cities and urban areas. Today, urban settlements are defined by legal boundaries, a continuously built-up area, or as functional area (e.g., a core and its hinterland). The legal definition of city varies around the world but is significant because legally defined cities have certain sorts of political power such as the ability to raise taxes, provide services, and have their own elected officials. Sometimes, in the U.S., a city surrounded by suburbs (which are also cities) is defined as a central city. But when and where did these cities first develop?

### Historical Patterns of Urbanization

After the invention of agriculture around 12,000 years ago, populations grew and people migrated outward from the early agricultural hearths, carrying their knowledge of farming with them. Settlements became more sedentary; languages diffused and diversified. Apparently, no governmental authority existed beyond the village. These **egalitarian** societies persisted long after agriculture was introduced.

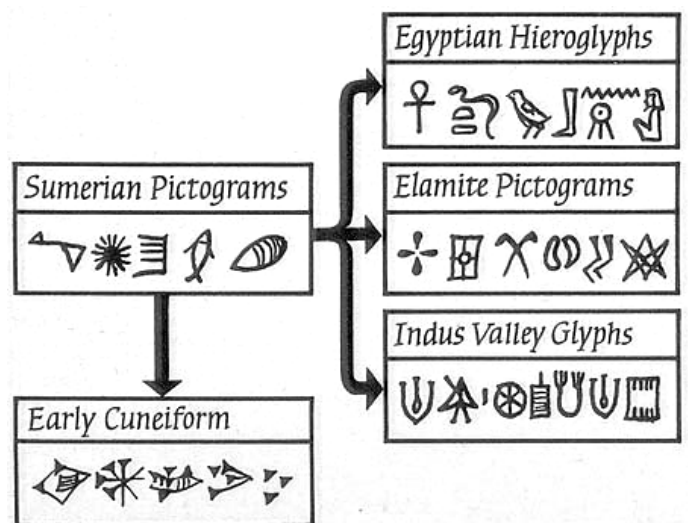
The first cities occurred when one member of an agricultural village focused totally on non-primary production activity. The definition, of course, would not fit contemporary cities at all, but in the analysis of the evolution of cities, we must understand that cities are functional places not necessarily defined by size like the Census Bureau's definition. Cities in ancient times were mostly associated with the formation of the state. By some accounts, the existence of an **early state** can be deduced from the presence of a centralized political hierarchy with at least three levels of administration. For example, a dominant urban center could develop, where the power was likely concentrated, and two levels of settlement below it. The period between 7,000 B.C. and 5,000 B.C. is called the **formative era** for both the development of states and urbanization in Southwest Asia. Toward the end of that period there was a large state along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (Mesopotamia), with a number of cities

including Ur. The egalitarian society had become a stratified society. Now there were priests, merchants, administration, soldiers, farmers, artisans and slaves. Other areas where urbanization occurred very early were the Indus Valley, the Nile Valley, and the great valleys of China. Urbanization also developed in Central America, the Maya Aztec area, and the Andean area of South America. These early cities were theocratic, where the rulers had divine authority and were in essence, "god-kings."

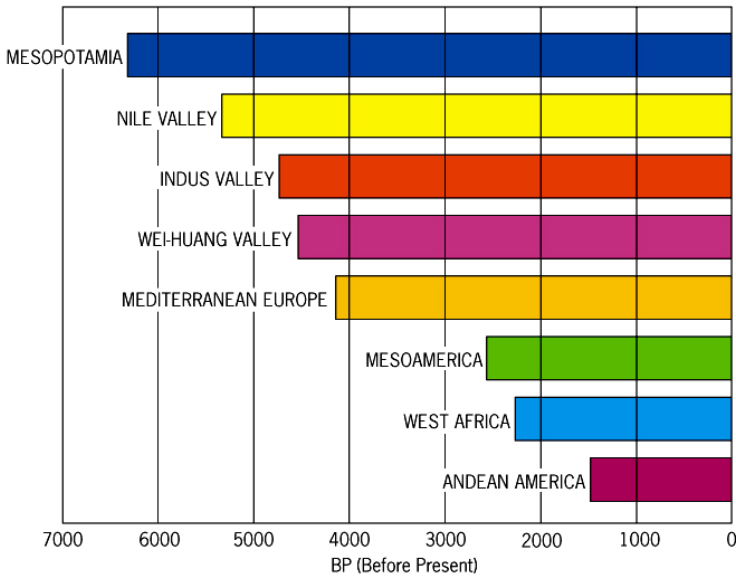


An artist's rendition of the city of Ur

The ancient city was the organizational focus of the state. Urban growth required an **urban elite**, a group of decision makers and organizers who controlled the resources, and sometimes the lives of others. They would create a political system or structure that would govern the population. From the collection of taxes, to the building of fortified walls for protection, to the codification of laws, the urban elite brought order and control to these societies. They were most likely the ones to invent writing and recordkeeping (e.g., accountants). Writing also enabled them to preserve their traditions and history.



## THE EARLIEST CIVILIZATIONS

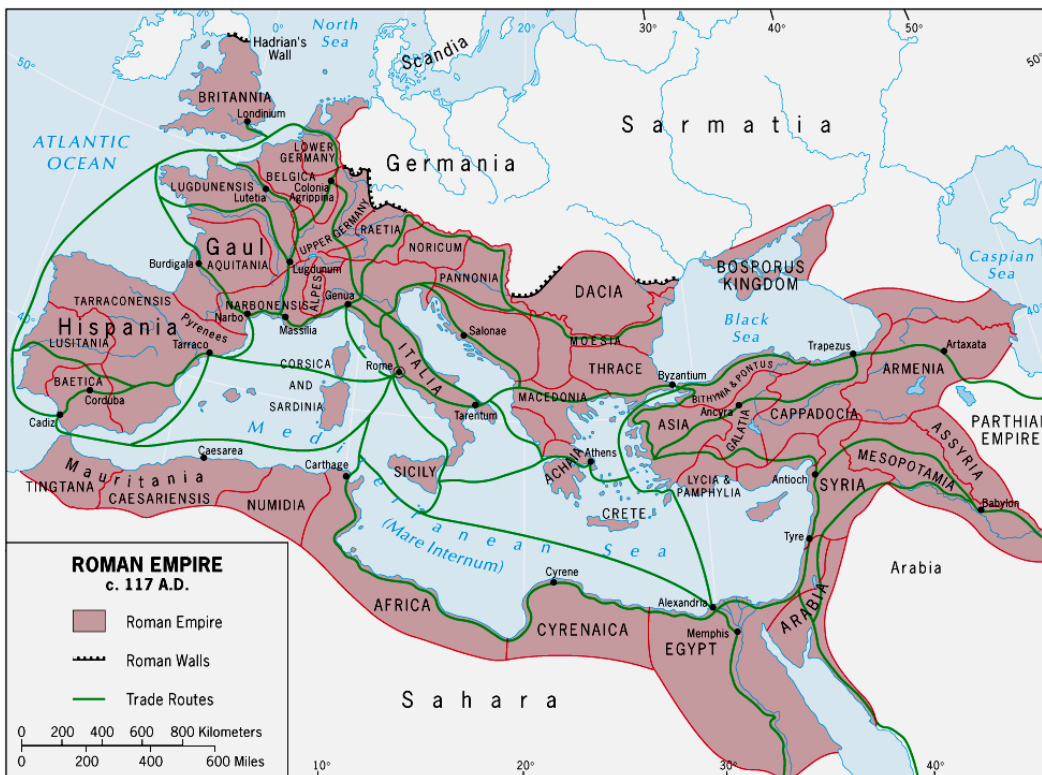


Greeks had public spaces – **agoras** (meaning market) – in which they debated, lectured, judged each other, planned military campaigns, and socialized.

Priests and officials often resided in substantial buildings, but the ordinary citizens lived in mud-walled houses tightly packed together and separated by narrow lanes. They had no waste-disposal or sewage facilities and people threw their garbage into the streets. This, in turn, led to disease and kept their populations relatively small. The cities of Mesopotamia and the Nile valley may have had between 10,000 and 15,000 inhabitants after nearly 2,000 years of growth and development.

The ancient city expanded from southwest Asia through Greece to Europe. Greece had a network of more than 500 cities and towns, not only on the mainland but also on the many Greek Islands. Every city had an **acropolis** (*acro* = high point; *polis* = city), on which the most impressive structures – usually religious buildings – were built. The

The Roman Empire developed massive urban systems based on a **transport network** that would move goods from Hadrian's Wall separating Britain from Scotland, to the upper middle Nile, to the Red Sea coast and the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf. Greek imprints were seemingly everywhere, for example, the cities were arranged in a rectangular grid pattern. The notion of an open market found expression in the Roman city's Forum, the focus of public life. The Romans expanded on Greek theater to build the world's first great stadium, the Coliseum in Rome. The collapse of the Roman Empire was accompanied by the disintegration of its transport system and the decay of many of its cities. The weakness of the now-fragmented empire was evident in the invasion of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain & Portugal) by the armies



of the Moorish Empire of North Africa. The Muslim invasion helped galvanize Europeans into action; the invaders were halted as they were about to enter southern Italy, and the Christian counterthrust began. Soon the Crusades beginning in the 11<sup>th</sup> century carried the battle to the heartland of Muslim power (Middle East), and old trade routes were reopened.

**Environmental determinism** can be partially attributed to Western Europe's resurgence. The so-called Medieval Optimum brought warmer times, expanded farmlands and pastures, opened northern water for fishing, and allowed several cities such as Paris, Amsterdam,

Lisbon, and Venice to revive. With more efficient weapons and the invention of gunpowder (by way of the Chinese), cities faced threats they had not confronted before. Since walls and moats could no longer protect them, extensive fortifications were constructed. Once built, they could not be easily moved, so they built upward.



Medieval City Walls and Guard Towers, Canterbury, UK

But the great days of Europe's medieval cities were numbered. During the *Little Ice Age*, much of Europe (and many other places around the world) turned colder, got drier, and made life very difficult for the peasants as well as the city-dwellers. Farmlands dwindled, pastures shrank, crops failed, and desperate peasants fled the barren countryside for the cities. Cities became more slum-ridden, unsanitary, and depressing. Epidemics, fires, crime, and social dislocation prevailed. Four-story merchants' homes still remained in the cities, but most residents were only able to live in cramped apartments.

### Classifications of Cities

Among the most widely discussed models was that of Gideon Sjoberg in 1960, who argued that cities should be viewed as products of their societies, and could be divided into four categories: (1) **folk-preliterate**; (2) **feudal**; (3) **preindustrial**; (4) **urban-industrial**. This view places cities on a continuum reflecting societal development. During *feudal* times, a European city was little more than a town, its houses modest, and its streets unpaved. The medieval revival brought with it the rise of the *preindustrial* city through the consolidation of political power and the expansion of states were reflected in the growth of the cities. The dominant aspect of the preindustrial city was the imposing complex of religious (e.g., cathedrals) and governmental structures at its heart. When Europe entered its *urban-industrial* age, the high-rise buildings of financial and commercial organization (e.g., skyscrapers) took over the dominant position in the urban cores.

Focusing on preindustrial cities, Sjoberg stated that they were similar in form, function, and "atmosphere." But

clearly, not all of these types of cities were the same. In Muslim cities, with their impressive central **mosques**, the surrounding housing was less variable than in Europe, and commerce and crafts were concentrated within a **bazaar**, much greater than anything in Europe. In Africa, no religious or governmental structures dominated the townscape the way they did in preindustrial European or Muslim cities. Also, "preindustrial" cities did, in fact, possess industries – they just weren't the mass-producing (Fordist), urban-industrial cities.



Contemporary Cityscape of Medina, Saudi Arabia

Eventually, one of the cities within a state would become preeminent. Another geographer, Mark Jefferson, called them **primate cities**, and defined them as, "a country's leading city, always disproportionately large and exceptionally expressive of national capacity and feeling." There are many examples of primate cities today: Paris, Mexico City, London. However, Jefferson's notion is rather imprecise in that cities like Athens, Lisbon, Prague, and Amsterdam may no longer be disproportionately large, but they remain self-consciously expressive of the cultures they represent.

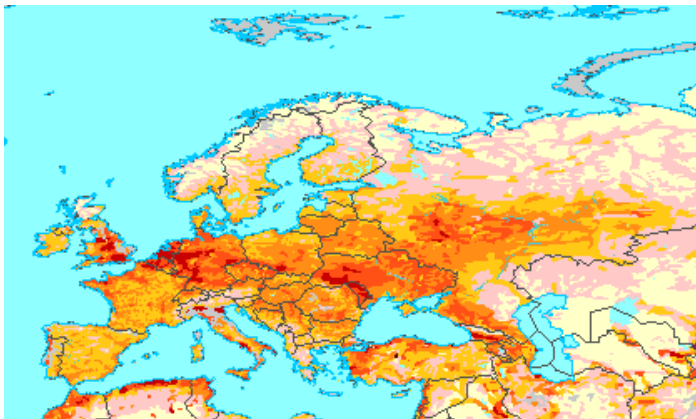
### The Global Spread of Urbanization

While European cities were growing and changing, urban places were arising and developing elsewhere in Eurasia. A giant **urban banana**, a crescent-shaped zone of early urbanization extending across Eurasia from England in the West to Japan in the east including cities like London, Paris, Venice, Constantinople (Istanbul), Kabul (in Afghanistan), Jaunpur (in India), Xian (in China), and Kyoto (in Japan). Note that many of the cities were located along the "interior" along the silk and spice trade routes. All that was to change, however, when European maritime exploration and overseas colonization ushered in an era of oceanic trade. The era of the great seaports had arrived – not only in Europe, but also in the rest of the world. In Asia, places like Bombay (now Mumbai), Madras (in India), Singapore, and Tokyo gained prestige. Key cities in international trade like Cape Town in South Africa, and New York City emerged.

The trade networks commanded by the European powers (including the slave trade) brought unprecedented wealth to Europe's burgeoning medieval cities; places like

Amsterdam, London, Liverpool, Lisbon, and Seville. Successful merchants built ornate mansions and patronized (supported) the arts. The **mercantile city** took on similar properties such as a central square, which became their focus; fronted by royal, religious, public, and private buildings displaying wealth and grandeur. Streets leading to these central squares formed connections of commerce and the beginnings of what we call "downtown" today. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, these mercantile cities became the nodes of a widening network of national, regional, and global commerce; establishing much of what we see today in terms of state borders and routes of trade.

When the Industrial Revolution emerged by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new global distribution of cities was already in place. In Europe especially, the 18<sup>th</sup> century brought bitter cold during the worst years of the "Little Ice Age," and the now-mercantile cities were engulfed by desperate immigrants (many who were peasants from the countryside). Cities had to adapt to the mushrooming populations and factories, the expansion of transportation systems, and the construction of tenements (cheap, cramped apartments) for the growing labor force. The **manufacturing city** now emerged, first in the British Midlands, where a combination of labor, coal, iron, and sea ports made it a perfect site for industrialization. As manufacturing diffused westward, some cities, such as Paris and Amsterdam, retained their historic centers. However, most cities became unregulated jumbles of activity.



Private homes were engulfed by factories, and open spaces became refuse dumps. Water supplies were inadequate and often polluted. Living and health conditions were usually worse than they had been in medieval times! The soot-covered cities of the British Midlands were appropriately called "black towns." In time, however, conditions improved as a result of government intervention, new laws, and the introduction of city planning and **zoning** (e.g., land reserved for residential, commercial, or industrial use only). As opposed to the age of the mercantile cities, the concentration of European population and urbanization extended inward once again, only this time it closely followed the coal deposits. In fact,

Europe's main population concentration still displays these ribbon-like extensions eastward; a lingering reminder of a past era.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the American manufacturing city grew rapidly, often with poor planning and excessive immigration leading to the rise of slums and ghettos. During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the manufacturing cities around the world stopped growing. As the nature of manufacturing changed (e.g., deindustrialization, the new international division of labor, etc.), many factories were repositioned; making "rustbelts" out of once-thriving industrial districts.



While cities in the developing world have been growing at unprecedented rates, the now demographically-stagnant cities of the industrialized world are changing in different ways. Modern means of transportation and elaborate road construction has permitted the dispersal of urban population in a process that made suburbanization the hallmark of the **modern city** in America (European cities experience far less suburbanization). Even the modern city has not stabilized, as some see what is often referred to as **postmodernism** in the cities of technologically advanced societies. This term is used because parts of such cities are increasingly separated from their own historical and industrial roots that long shaped their development. Instead, the architecture and design is developed for entertainment and consumption, as opposed to facilitating production as it had been in the past.



**Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans - postmodern architecture doesn't hold itself to one specific design or purpose**