

7

WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

The Emergence of Early Cities

1120L



A HISTORIAN'S JOURNAL ENTRY / BY ANITA RAVI

The development of agriculture led to the creation of cities. Once people figured out how to grow large quantities of food, store it for future use, domesticate animals, and irrigate crops, they could stay put and stop roaming.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT





The world's largest cities in 2250 and 1200 BCE.

More people settling in a single place led to more complex societies and cultures. But just what does complex mean? How was life in cities different from life on farms?

Let's first look at where these early cities were located.

This map tells me that most of the world's largest cities were established in the Middle East by 2250 BCE. Scientists have been able to estimate the populations of these cities based on a number of features uncovered at archaeological sites in these areas: How many houses were there? How many rooms were in each house? How big were the food storage rooms? And how many kilns or stoves were in each location?

In Cynthia Stokes Brown's essay, *Agrarian Civilizations: Introduction*, she argues that all early agrarian civilizations shared some important characteristics. They all had monumental architecture: that is, grand buildings that screamed: "Look at us! We are great!" They all developed a social structure in which an elite helped organize and rule society, while others became specialists (merchants, pottery makers, fishermen), and the majority of the population remained farmers. They all developed systems

of writing. It is through writing and the things they built that we can learn about what humans did and the things that were important to the inhabitants of Earth's first cities. So what do artifacts and written documents from these places tell us about life in cities?

WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT EARLY CITIES FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The first artifacts I will look at to figure out what they might tell me about city life are the Olmec heads (image on the following page).

Why these? They are actually the earliest artifacts we have from Mesoamerican cities, which, by the way, are not represented in the map on the left. These heads were created around 900 BCE, which is much later than the foundation of the first cities in Afro-Eurasia. In fact, after a bit more research on the Olmec, I learned that their civilization was the first in Mesoamerica, founded around 1400 BCE. Based on my earlier research into early farming sites, I knew I would also be able to find artifacts of more complex societies in Mesoamerica because evidence of corn crops was also found there, and a precondition of early cities is complex agriculture.

These heads can tell us a lot about the early Olmec civilization. The first piece of evidence I can uncover is that these heads were made from stone. Based on the facial features, I can conclude that these are statues of Olmec people and not their god or gods. How do I know that? I am drawing this conclusion based on the fact that these heads are not all the same. It also looks like they have some sort of helmet on and the helmets are decorated differently. The second thing we know is that the heads are quite large, as big as 20 feet high and 20 feet wide. Since they are made of stone, this means they are quite heavy. My research also tells me that the stone used to make these heads came from the Tuxtla Mountains, which are about 60 miles away from the closest Olmec city. According to Michael Coe, an archaeologist who worked at one of the most important Olmec cities, these ancient artists chose some of the large boulders from the bottom of these mountains to make these heads. We still have no idea whether the heads were carved near the base of the mountains, or moved back to ceremonial platforms and carved there. And how did they transport these heavy boulders? I know that there were no native beasts of burden in this area of North America. There were no horses or mules, which were brought by the Spanish and Portuguese hundreds of years later, and no llamas. There is a river about 25 miles from the mountains that flows down to one of the Olmec cities, but there is no evidence of carts with wheels on which to haul these boulders. So just getting these boulders across 60 miles took tremendous time and effort.



Olmec Heads.

Why does this matter? What can these heads tell us about how complex life had become for the Olmec? First, a large group of people had to travel to the mountain on foot, and then sever boulders from the mountains using tools. These boulders then had to be transported from the mountains to the river and down the river to the city. It is estimated by Coe that it would take up to 2,000 people to carry the colossal heads overland. After the boulders were delivered to the carving site, a group of stone craftsmen had to design and carve the heads, again using tools specifically designed for this purpose by toolmakers. Once the heads were carved, they then had to use some form of technology to lift the heads onto the platforms. The manpower and time dedicated to producing the stone heads tells me that the Olmec were doing well enough that they could spare hundreds of men to do this work, and that there would be enough food for these men on their journey to and from the mountains. The heads were clearly valued by the elite, and possibly the clergy, because they had to organize this whole effort. Stone carvers, toolmakers, laborers, artists, rulers, and religious clergy all had to work together to make this happen. The heads tell us that Olmec society had evolved to create these specialized roles and that in order to function effectively, they had to cooperate and work together.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT EARLY CITIES FROM WRITTEN TEXTS

In addition to monuments like the Olmec heads, we are fortunate to have written texts from many of these early cities. In *Agrarian Civilizations: Introduction*, Stokes Brown argues that writing probably developed as an early accounting system in order to keep track of trade. Symbols were developed to represent different things and people, and in

some cultures, alphabets then replaced those symbols. Early texts were written on stone tablets and sometimes etched on the walls of caves. Some of the earliest texts in existence come from the Middle Eastern civilization of Mesopotamia. Scribes in ancient Sumer, where one of the first cities in the world was located, wrote the passage below.

From Mesopotamia: The Sumerian Goddess Inanna Looks After the City Agade (About 2000 BCE)

*So that the warehouses would be provisioned
that dwellings would be founded in the city,
that its people would eat splendid food...
that acquaintances would dine together,
that foreigners would cruise about like unusual birds in the sky...
At that time, she filled Agade...with gold,
Delivered copper, tin, and blocks of lapis lazuli to its storehouses...
Its harbor, where ships docked, was full of excitement...
Its king, the shepherd Naram-Sin, rose like the sun on the holy throne of Agade...
Its city wall touched heaven, like a mountain...
Ships brought the goods of Sumer itself upstream [to Agade],
The highland Amorites, people ignorant of agriculture,
Came before her there with spirited bulls and spirited bucks,
Meluhhans [from the Indus valley, and] people of the black mountains,
Brought exotic wares down to her...
All the governors, temple administrators, and land registrars of the Gude'ena
Regularly supplied monthly and New Year offerings there.
(qtd. in Chapman16)*

This is a remarkable document. Let's start with the title: *The Sumerian Goddess Inanna Looks After the City Agade*. The title alone tells me that 1) A religion had developed among the Mesopotamians; 2) The goddess mentioned here is interested in protecting the city of Agade and making sure it prospers. The first few lines of the document mention "warehouses," "dwellings," and "splendid food." These words suggest to me that this was a wealthy city, a place of abundance. The fact that warehouses are mentioned tells me that they had lots of things to store, or rather, they had more than they needed. The goddess is credited with filling those warehouses with precious items such as gold, copper, tin, and lapis lazuli (a type of stone). Each of these items had to be mined from the ground and then refined into something usable, which tells me that mining had been developed. The text goes on to mention trade and the presence of "foreigners:" "The highland Amorites" and the "Meluhhans" from the Indus

Valley. The harbor, where ships docked, is also mentioned and from the line “full of excitement,” I can gather that it was a busy port. I am thinking that people came to the city of Agade from towns close by and far away for trade and to make offerings to this goddess. The final sentence tells me that all of these people came with “offerings” monthly and for the New Year. Agade must have become a center of religious worship and, it seems, a center of trade and exchange. People from other cities and other places also worshipped this goddess and traveled by sea and land to come to Agade to celebrate and worship there.

The second text I am going to look at is a code of law called Hammurabi’s Code and it is also from Mesopotamia. We now refer to this document as the very first code of law developed by man, and it was developed for the city of Babylon.

Hammurabi’s Laws Seek To Uphold The Social Order In Babylon (About 1700 BCE)

1. *If a man accuses another of murder but cannot prove it, the accuser shall be put to death.*
8. *If a man steals, he shall repay thirtyfold. If he hasn’t the money, he shall be put to death.*
15. *If a man helps a slave to escape from the city, he shall be put to death.*
117. *If a man sells his wife or child to settle a debt, they shall work in the house of the buyer for three years, and regain their freedom in the fourth.*

My first reaction upon reading this brief excerpt of Hammurabi’s Code is that the law was harsh in Babylon! They had absolutely no problem with the death penalty. The title of this document tells me that these laws are meant to uphold the “social order,” meaning these are laws that help resolve issues among the people of Babylon. If you lived in Babylon then you could be “put to death” for stealing, helping slaves escape, and falsely accusing someone of murder. The first law — false accusation of murder — is interesting because it relies on the use of evidence: if you’re going to accuse someone of murder, you have to have evidence they did the crime. If you didn’t have adequate evidence, you would be “put to death.” The second law listed above tells me that, in Babylon, you could be forgiven for stealing if you could pay back the person you stole from at a rate of 30 times the value of what you stole; however, if you didn’t repay what you stole, you would be “put to death.” It is also interesting that a man could sell his wife or child to settle a debt, which tells me that women and children had monetary value and no real rights of their own. Slavery was clearly a core part of the social structure since a person could be “put to death” for helping a slave escape.

Listed below are a few more laws from the Code:

129. *If a man’s wife is caught lying with another man, they shall be bound and thrown into the water. If the woman’s husband spares her life, the king shall spare the life of the man.*
132. *If the finger has been pointed at a wife because of another man, though she has not been caught lying with him she shall throw herself into the sacred river for her husband’s sake.*
141. *If a wife goes out, plays the fool, ruins her house and belittles her husband, he may divorce her; or, if he prefers, he may marry another and keep the former wife as his maidservant.*
142. *If a woman hates her husband and says: “You shall not have me,” her past shall be inquired into. If she had been careful and was without past sin; and her husband had been going out and greatly belittling her, she has no blame. She shall take her dowry and go back to her father.*
145. *If a man’s wife does not give him children, he may take a concubine.*

These laws all deal with marriage relationships and more specifically, cheating, lying, and bearing children. I guess we could call this the earliest form of divorce law. I find number 142 the most interesting of this set. It says that a woman can leave her husband if she “hates him” and is “without sin,” if he’s been going around badmouthing her. Yet the other laws in the set give her no rights. In fact, if she is even accused of adultery by another man, she has to “throw herself into the sacred river.” It is interesting to me how these very early laws seemed so focused on specific behaviors between women and men. It tells me that the men who wrote these laws were really micromanaging relations between women and men, with an eye toward the hyper-regulation of women’s activities in order to maintain the social order.

Listed below are a few more laws dealing with relations among men:

195. *If a man strikes his father, they shall cut off his hand.*
202. *If a man strikes the cheek of his superior, he shall receive sixty strokes with an oxtail whip.*
204. *If a common man strikes a common man on the cheek, he shall pay ten shekels of silver.*

205. If a man's slave strikes the son of a gentleman on the cheek, they shall cut off his ear. (qtd. in Chapman18)

These four laws very clearly maintain a social structure in which people must respect their elders and bosses. Also, there are different consequences for stepping out of line if you are a "gentleman" versus a "common man." The "gentleman" gets a small fine for hitting someone from a lower class than him. The "slave" gets an ear cut off for hitting the "son of a gentleman." I imagine if a slave hits the gentleman himself, he's probably put to death.

What does Hammurabi's Code tell me about the complexity of early cities? The specific details outlined in the excerpts above tell me that a very elaborate legal system evolved by 1700 BCE in Babylon to help regulate relationships among the thousands of people who lived there. The elite who wrote the code were very concerned with maintaining a social order that included "gentlemen," "common men," women, slaves, and children. The fact that death was a common punishment in this code of law tells me this was a culture obsessed with making sure no one stepped out of line.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT COMPLEXITY AND EARLY CITIES

What do the documents from Mesopotamia and the Olmec heads from Mesoamerica tell me about life in the world's earliest cities? Overall, religion and laws were designed by humans to create order in daily life. Whether it was through giving thanks to the gods for wealth or mediating relationships between men and women, a key component to early cities were these man-made systems of order. These laws were probably written by a small group of elites who rose to rule these cities, and maintaining a social hierarchy was extremely important to them. They were undoubtedly prosperous and wealthy, and thus naturally interested in staying at the top. So the legal and social systems they created did exactly that. The celebration of life through the arts, literature, and religion were also important components of early cities. As people were freed from the daily grind of farming for existence, they sought ways to express their creativity and to celebrate their success. Art and architecture were expressions of that success.

Working Bibliography & Notes

Image of Olmec heads courtesy of Bickley, Mary, and Sharon Cohen. "Landscape Teaching Unit 3.5 Early Complex Societies in the Americas 1800-500 BCE." *World History for Us All*. PDF file, 7.

Map of the world's largest cities in 2250 and 1200 BCE courtesy of "Big Era Three." *World History For Us All*. Web.

Chapman, Anne. World History for Us All. "Landscape Teaching Unit 3.3 River Valleys and the Development of Complex Societies in Afroeurasia 4000-1500 BCE." *World History for Us All*. PDF file.

Cover image: Ruins of Ur, Iraq. Courtesy of David Lee/Corbis.

This short journal entry is an example of how historians go about exploring important questions and looking at new information. They use a mixture of historical documents and the writings of other historians to inform their thinking. All sources are listed in the working bibliography.