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Cities and Urban Centers

Definitions, Challenges, and Attractions

> The city is something more than a congeries of individuals and of social conveniences: streets, buildings, electric lights. . . . The city is, rather, a state of mind.
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> Park (1925, 1)

> The city often represents a locality and dense settlement of dwellings forming a colony so extensive that personal reciprocal acquaintance of the inhabitants is lacking.
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> Weber ([1921] 1958, 65)

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What could entice a person to live in a "colony so extensive" that one is often surrounded by strangers? City life, modern and ancient, presents myriad complications. Urban dwellers are beleaguered by crowding and the problems it entails—the possibility of emotional and social alienation; the potential for squalor, vermin, and noxious odors; the health threats caused by inadequate sewage disposal, water contamination, and the sheer proximity of others. Nevertheless, people made cities work for them, and over hundreds of years they remade them, remodeled them, and renewed them. The fact that ancient Maya cities persisted for many centuries clearly demonstrates that these places exerted a magnetism that smaller settlements could not bring to bear. How did people make cities not merely livable but attractive? How did cities lure people to them? How did they render themselves irresistible?

This book takes the position that people from a variety of social positions—farmers, women of commerce, royalty—exercise a degree of agency in shaping the enticements upon which a city's viability rests. I begin this introduction by exploring the complications of cities and probing the notion that both very powerful and less powerful people actively shaped cities. I then discuss the definition of city and other key terms. Later in the book I explore new demographic data that shows that some Maya cities were in fact quite densely settled, a finding that should effectively defuse lingering controversy over whether Maya centers should be classified as cities.

In the final part of this introduction I present four attractions that entice people to live in cities: neighborhoods, multiplicity, built form, and economy. Neighborhoods meet a range of social challenges, in part by providing a sense of familiarity and distinction amid a sea of anonymous faces. This book presents a uniquely fine-grained case study of neighborhoods in a Maya city. Multiplicity refers to the intermingling of large numbers of widely different people. Chance encounters between people of different occupations and different levels of wealth do not just give zest to social life, they afford chances to expand social networks and social capital. I argue that spatial layouts and social milieus in Maya cities were fertile ground for such encounters. Regarding built form, Maya cities contained a range of civic spaces that hosted compelling ceremonies and made favorable symbolic and aesthetic impressions, perhaps drawing people to cities and giving them reasons to stay, to tolerate and even enjoy close proximity to many neighbors. Finally, many urban economies featured marketplaces that streamlined exchange while also providing entertaining spectacles.

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Central Issues

Urbanism refers to a condition in which people are both socially distant and physically close (Wirth 1940, 752). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Georg Simmel argued that the condition of urbanism has a profound psychological effect (see also Milgram 1970). In particular, Simmel (2002, 14) maintained that unceasing contact with multitudes of strangers encouraged a "negative type of social conduct." To conserve emotional energy (and to avoid getting scammed!) people had to cultivate a blasé attitude and a bearing of aloofness and reserve. For Simmel, urban life produces a state of mind very different from that of village life, a state of mind that many well-known

literary and scholarly figures—Nietzsche, Ruskin, Spengler—found repulsive. Though people in cities might gain freedom from the cumbersome kinship commitments that come with village life, some have argued that such emancipation comes with a price tag of anomie: a lack of identification with others and a sense of rootlessness in the absence of traditions. Robert Park, whom I quoted in the epigram, established an entire research tradition—the Chicago School of Sociology—dedicated to understanding how people adapt to and even overturn the psychological, social, and economic problems of urbanism. Research on cities has burgeoned since then, and scholars have systematically documented other problems. Social inequality looms large here, and I will have quite a lot to say about it (see chapter 5). Comparative research on contemporary cities shows that as settlements grow, crime rates increase 15 percent more than the growth rate of the settlement's population (Bettencourt and West 2010, 913). Such scalar factors probably operated in the past as well (Ortman et al. 2015).

Urbanism also creates health problems. Cholera plagues cities that lack plumbing or other sanitary measures. Furthermore, crowding, a basic condition of urban life, spreads disease (measles, rubella, smallpox, influenza; Trigger 2003, 123). Archival data indicate that before the industrial revolution, which brought improvements in public health, urban populations such as those of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London and imperial Rome had high mortality rates and low life expectancy compared to the rural areas surrounding them (Finlay 1981; Russell 1958). Bioarchaeological data from medieval Denmark show that epidemic disease had a greater impact in cities than in rural areas (Peterson et al. 2006). In tropical lowland cities such as those of the ancient Maya, warm temperatures exacerbate problems associated with poor water quality (Miksic 1999). Studying the effects of poor health, demographers of early modern European cities coined the Law of Urban Natural Decrease (De Vries 1984; Wrigley 1969), which states that pre-industrial cities could not maintain stable population levels without constant migration from rural hinterlands.

Since the New World lacked most of the kinds of diseases, infections, and epidemics that afflicted densely crowded cities in the Old World, some have assumed that pre-Conquest New World cities had better mortality rates (McNeill 1976). In 1519, when the Spaniards first laid eyes on Tenochtitlan, the very densely populated Aztec capital in the Basin of Mexico, they remarked on its exceptional cleanliness (Diaz del Castillo 1956; see figure 1.1 for a map

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of Maya and Mesoamerican cities mentioned in this book). Rebecca Storey's (1992a, 266) bioarchaeological analyses from the non-Maya first millennium CE city of Teotihuacan show, however, that "the effects of dense population upon mortality and health where public sanitation systems are inadequate are likely to be fairly uniform across environments and cultures." Though epidemics of the specific diseases in Old World cities may not have tormented people at Teotihuacan, infection and malnutrition were common and often chronic in this densely populated center. The population of Teotihuacan, just like that of London and Rome, would have declined without in-migration (Storey 1992a, 266).

Skeletal analysis from Maya cities such as Tikal (Haviland 1967) and Copan (Whittington 1989) reveals generally poor health (see also Saul 1972), although the small size of skeletal samples from rural areas prevent a comparison. At Copan, a very densely populated city that has provided the largest sample of burials in the Maya region (600 individuals), child mortality was high and enamel defects in deciduous teeth indicate that infants suffered from disease and malnutrition (Storey 1992b). Recent isotopic analysis of large samples of skeletons from ancient Copan shows that between 20 percent and 40 percent of the city's residents came from outside the city (Miller 2015), thus supporting the notion that urban centers required migrants. Haviland (1967) proposed that health declined as population density increased at Tikal (see also Storey 1992b, 166). Although Wright and White (1996) argue that burials in Maya cities show no consistent evidence for a deterioration of health over time, they agree that the Maya experienced a health burden similar to that of other complex preindustrial cities.

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Given these problems with urban life, George Cowgill (2003a) and others (Fletcher 1995) have asked how cities persist. What motivates people to move to them? Why do they put up with urban problems? How do they create lives of meaning and value amid a variety of potential discomforts and inconveniences? Each of these questions gets at the experience of the actual people who lived in them (A. Smith 2003). In archaeology, one finds a broad literature on cities, and cities rightly deserve attention for many different reasons. The most cited work about ancient complex societies is Gordon Childe's 1950 paper about cities: "The Urban Revolution" (Smith 2009, 3). Childe's paper is popular because several of the processes critical to his understanding of cities—the relationship between cities and states, the development of occupational specialization, the production and extraction of

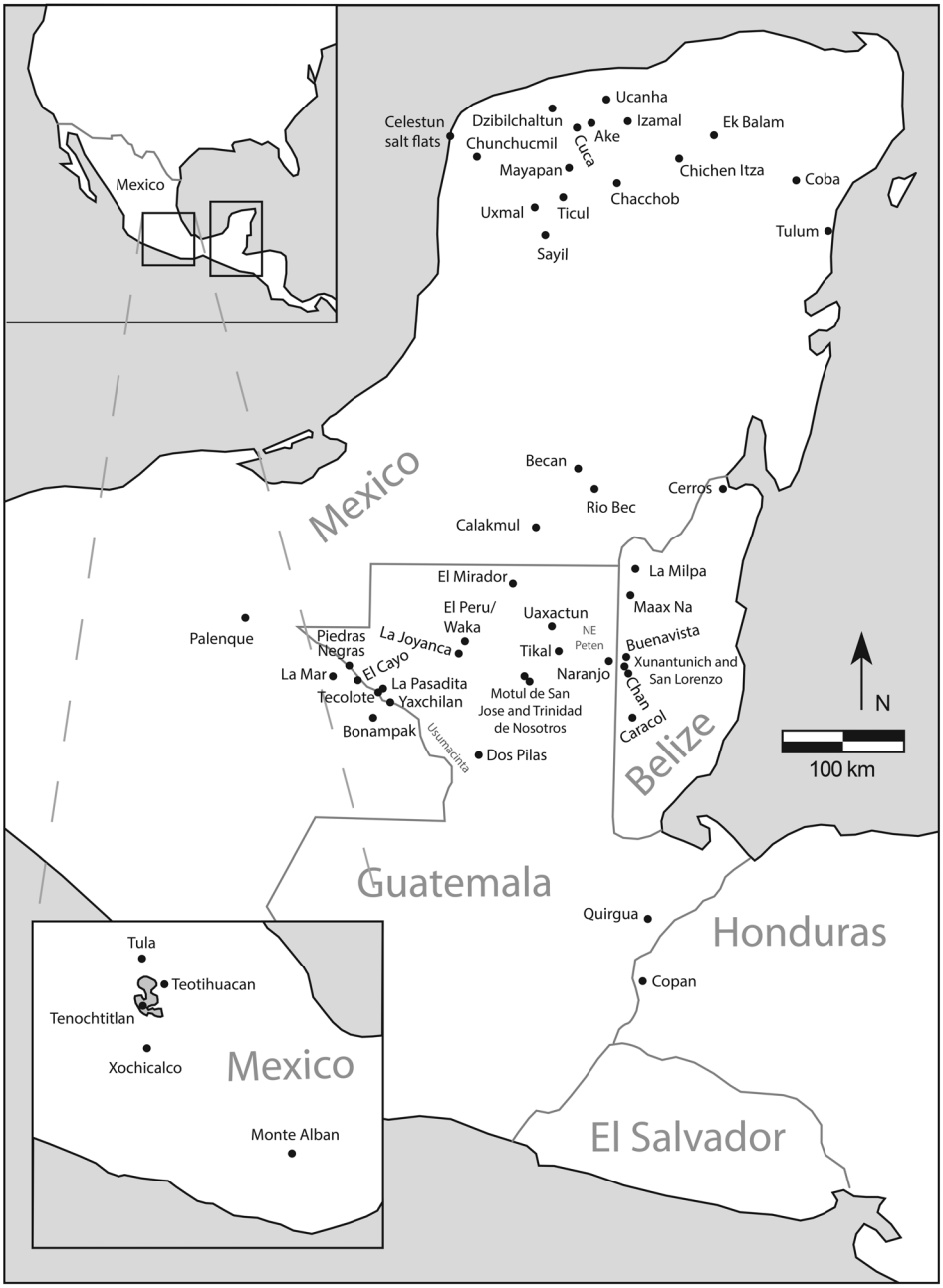

Figure 1.1. Maps showing most locations mentioned in the text.

surplus, the emergence of social classes, the intensification of long-distance trade, and the creation of monuments—continue to motivate research today (see also Smith 2009, 11–13). Childe (1950, 9) explicitly excluded the Maya from his discussion of cities, a decision I return to in the following chapter.

After Childe, an equally important realm of questions centering on catchment analysis and links between city and hinterland (see, for example, Dahlin et al. 2005) emerged from processual archaeologists' interests in sampling and regional approaches (e.g., Binford 1964; Hole et al. 1969). Researchers interested in comparative perspectives focus on the broad variety of cities and why some cities thrive and others do not (Marcus and Sabloff 2008, 25). Some aspects of ancient cities, such as density, sprawl, fluid boundaries, economic opportunity, wealth inequality, consumption of luxury goods as status markers, development of neighborhoods, and placement of monuments, also characterize modern cities, thus making comparative studies of premodern cities relevant to contemporary questions and vice versa (Fletcher 2009; Ortman et al. 2015; M. L. Smith 2003, 6). Undoubtedly, as more and more of the world's population moves from rural areas to cities, understanding how cities create wealth, poverty, happiness, waste, knowledge, and crime (Glaeser 2011; Jacobs 1969) has direct effects on our well-being.

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Despite the abundance of fruitful questions about ancient cities, this book sticks to the question of why people chose to live in them and how they made them livable. By focusing on the decisions and lives of city dwellers, it links itself to other attempts to envision ancient societies as the product of willing participation from a wide array of actors. Discussing cities in ancient Middle Niger, McIntosh (2005, 149–150) notes that the vast majority of urban dwellers are "members of ordinary households" and that cities would not exist without their labor, economic production, and attendance at ceremonies. For the ancient Maya, the notion that people *chose* to produce cities is legitimate because ancient Maya leaders probably did not have the means to coerce large numbers of people to move to cities or stay in them (Inomata 2004; cf. de Montmollin 1989, 87–93). I return to the question of coercion in chapter 6. As I discuss in chapter 2, many ancient Maya did not live in large cities. Those who did choose to live in cities must have felt that cities had something good to offer (M. L. Smith 2003, 2), something valuable enough to mitigate the downsides of urban life.

By beginning from the premise that people could have chosen not to live in cities—that people could have done otherwise—this book aligns itself

with a pillar of practice theory as elaborated by Anthony Giddens. Giddens (1984, 9, 14) defined agency as an actor's ability to choose; to "intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs." Though such a choice may not produce the outcome that the actor intended, Giddens and other writers (Scott 1985, 1990) have developed persuasive arguments that even some of the most oppressed actors, such as prisoners, can act otherwise. All actors have at least some knowledge and control over their physical bodies and gain a degree of empowerment from such human resources (Sewell 1992, 10).

A wide array of ancient actors, not just leaders, willingly participated in the creation of cities. Monica Smith (2006, 109) has phrased this well:

> There has been a tendency to view cities as being primarily inhabited and directed by elites. . . . But the willing presence of [non-elites] is a necessary component of political action. . . . In considering the appeal to ordinary inhabitants, I propose that the workings of urban centers were the product of negotiation, compromise, and consensus among many different individuals and groups.

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In this book I follow Smith's perspective, which is also visible in other work (e.g., Joyce 2009). Although the socially heterogeneous nature of cities (see below) suggests that there might be no such thing as what Trigger (2003, 121) called an "ordinary person" or what McIntosh called an "ordinary household," it is difficult to find a decent shorthand term for such people. The term commoner also falls short since it implies a specious homogeneity among the people compressed into this category (Lohse and Valdez 2004, 3). Nevertheless, I use the term when I can't find a substitute.

Asking what people found attractive about cities and how they created lives of meaning and dignity under adverse conditions does not mean that that this book takes an exclusively bottom-up perspective. Such a perspective privileges the decisions of people at or near the bottom of the social pyramid, but a holistic view requires attending just as much to choices and strategies of people at the top of the hierarchy. If, as Monica Smith and Art Joyce have emphasized, urban life resulted from negotiations between and among elites and non-elites regarding resources and cultural meanings, then elites are just as important as anyone else in cities. In Maya cities, there are always at least two parties to a negotiation; recent work on ancient Maya cities makes this quite clear.