

# THE RISE OF CITIES IN EURASIA

Posts on *The Dawn Of Everything*: [Link](#)

Chapter 7 of *The Dawn Of Everything* shows that the rise of agriculture around the world shows a pattern similar to that of the Fertile Crescent, discussed here. To be sure, the mechanisms vary, the staple foods vary and the mix of foraging and farming vary, but in each case, people slowly domesticate plants and farm animals, and switch between hunting and gathering and agriculture, and work out methods for sharing resources. There is not a single linear story, just a general increase in the amount of farming and a reduction in foraging over a span of several thousand years.

Chapter 8 takes up the rise of cities. The standard story is that when people live in large groups they need a hierarchical organization, like monarchy. One of the main points Graeber and Wengrow make is that merely living together in large numbers doesn't imply any particular form of political organization, or that there is anything we would recognize as political organization. In Chapters 8 and 9, we get a look at the various ways people lived together in the earliest large groups we have uncovered so far.

The earliest large settlements, tens of thousands of people, seem to date back about six or seven thousand years. These early settlements have some things in common. They seem to be laid out in an orderly way, in grids or circles, and smaller subdivisions. Where we have written records, there are grand statements of civic unity, and often the residents refer to themselves in terms like *The Sons And Daughters Of the City*. We see evidence of infrastructure, like roads, market places, meeting spaces, and ritual spaces. We also see some cities with more advanced infrastructure, storage facilities, drainage and sewer systems, and open spaces.

There is evidence that people came from all over to live in these cities. The standard story says for most of human history people lived in groups based on kinship, so members lived mostly with an extended family. Gradually these groups accreted into cities. The authors have a different theory.

There is an obvious objection to evolutionary models which assume that our strongest social ties are based on close biological kinship: many humans just don't like their families very much. And this appears to be just as true of present-day hunter-gatherers as anybody else. Many seem to find the prospect of living their entire lives surrounded by close relatives so unpleasant that they will travel very long distances just to get away from them. P. 279-80

These escapees would naturally look for pleasant places to live, places with abundant foraging and hunting, and most important, other people.

Rather than replicate the authors' description of these early cities, I will give links to sites describing them. These have good descriptions, with maps and photographs of the sites and objects found there. Here I give only limited discussion focused on political arrangements as described by the authors.

#### Megasites

The earliest large settlements we know about now are in Ukraine, founded 6-7,000 years ago and occupied for hundreds of years. Here's a description of one called Nebelivka.

This article agrees with Graber and Wengrow that there is no evidence of a central authority, or rulers or large wealth or class disparities. The settlement seems to have some form of self-government, possibly through communal meetings at the assembly houses. The article also notes that other excavators think the sites were not

occupied year round. Instead they think it was used part of the year, or regularly by groups of pilgrims.

## Uruk

Uruk is thought to be the first large city in Mesopotamia. There are settlements there dating back to at least 5000 BCE, and the city emerges around 3500 BCE. The city and the kingdoms associated with it, Assyria and Babylonia, are mentioned in the Bible, a fact that led 19th Century archaeologists to search for them. Here's a long Wikipedia entry on Uruk, worth reviewing just for the pictures.

Graeber and Wengrow claim that the earliest incarnations of Uruk were not monarchies. They base that assertion on the lack of the visible signs of monarchies: "palaces, aristocratic burials and royal inscriptions, along with defensive walls for cities and organized militia to guard them." P. 298. These do begin to appear later, around 2800 BCE. This seems to conflict with the Wiki entry, which is based on a Sumerian document dated around 2800, the Sumerian King List. It may be that a lot of the early history of this area mixes myth and fact. Some of it reminds me of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and it may be that the early histories are attempts to justify the monarchy.

We know a lot about Uruk because they developed cuneiform script around 3500 BCE. Excavators have found vast amounts of written material, enough to form a good idea of the social organization of the city. It appears that there were local councils and councils of elders and other groups, so that everyone had some kind of representation. These councils continued in different forms long after kings took over the primary role of rulers.

## Mohenjo-daro

Mohenjo-daro is a city on the Indus River in Pakistan. It dates back to about 2600 BCE, and was abandoned about 800 years later. There are pictures and description in this Wikipedia

entry. There are two levels in the city. The most striking building here is a gigantic pool located on raised brick structure in the upper part of the city. You can see it in this short National Geographic video.

There isn't much evidence of wealth inequality in the early part of the city's history. Graeber and Wengrow tell us that there is no evidence of wealth or power in the upper city. In the lower city we find jewelry and other signs of wealth everywhere, and not concentrated in a few sites. There are also tools and craft equipment all over the lower town, but not in the upper town.

The upper town seems to be focused on the baths and other public buildings. The authors speculate that the people who lived the residents sought purity rather than wealth or power. They suggest that residents of the upper town constituted a proto-caste, a precursor to the Brahmin caste, and that the residents of the lower town were grouped into other castes. They say there is no evidence for kings or other charismatic leaders in this town or in the other towns in the area. They speculate that these cities had some form of communal governance.

Eventually the townspeople moved to the higher level. Apparently a few people began to accumulate great wealth, as the later residences on the upper level are grander, and have craft spaces attached. And then the city was abandoned.

## Taosi

The first three cities seem to have begun without kings or powerful figures like priests. The fourth city, Taosi, in northern China, seems to have been formed under a hierarchical system. Taosi dates back to about 2200 BCE, a millennium before the first named dynasty, the Shang. Here's a fascinating report from Chinese authorities, tying Taosi to the Emperor Yao, previously thought to be fictional.

Here's the Wikipedia entry. The article says that Chinese archaeologists believe that the

city collapsed after a rebellion against the ruling class. Graeber and Wengrow acknowledge this possibility. They agree that there was a rebellion, as evidenced by pits with human remains showing torture and murder. But then the city walls were razed, and the city expanded and remained for another 200 years. They suggest that the overthrow of the elites was followed by a prosperous and more egalitarian period.

Next we look at some Mesoamerican cities.