

REVIEWS

***Urban Life in the Distant Past: The Prehistory of Energized Crowding.*
Michael E. Smith. 2023. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
\$130.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-00924-904-1. \$130.00 (e-book),
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Michael E. Smith has been a prolific scholar of premodern urban studies for decades, and he describes the present book as “the culmination of a career of comparative research on early cities” (p. xv). It presents a wealth of information on early cities in a synthetic and comparative framework, analyzed with a consistent methodology that embraces clear definitions, quantification, and statistical analysis. For those reasons and others, scholars interested in early cities and urbanism will find the book to be essential reading, and it deserves a wide audience.

To say that this is a book about premodern cities, however, buries the lede. Smith examines all types of human settlements and embraces broad concepts about “cities” and “urbanism,” emphasizing that one’s definitions should depend on the questions to be investigated. He also posits that smaller settlements not normally considered to be cities can show many “urban-like” features and processes.

The subtitle of Smith’s book gives the central argument: “The most important concept for understanding and explaining urban life in the past (and the present) is energized crowding” (p. 3). Smith defines energized crowding as a process that occurs when large numbers of face-to-face social interactions take place within a settlement. In his words, these interactions “amplify the results of individual social interactions, resulting in a variety of social and economic changes and outcomes, both positive and negative” (p. 35). Shifting the focus to scale and interaction avoids sterile arguments over what constitutes a city.

The correlation between social scale and complexity has long been recognized, as has the transformational impact of large-scale aggregation as seen in early cities. Smith goes beyond the generalities, however, to draw on formal theories with quantitative predictions, known as social-scaling theory. Using that framework, he looks at the relationship between settlement scale and political organization (cities and states), the organization of neighborhoods within cities, and the activities of households within cities and neighborhoods. He explores 29 case studies, ranging from modern camps to ancient cities of many forms, to illustrate the arguments that he builds. Some of these choices of case studies are expected (Angkor, Mohenjo-daro, Teotihuacan, Tikal, Ur), whereas others are novel—Black Rock City, the Burning Man camp in the Nevada desert, and “Thing Sites” in northern Europe—and provide examples of energized crowding that serve as analogies for processes in premodern settlements.

Smith characterizes his approach to settlements as being based on social-science methodology informed by a realist epistemology. He also argues, correctly in my view, that archaeological interpretation relies fundamentally on analogy to transform data into models of human life in the past. He explicitly avoids, however, incorporating topics like religion beyond nods to functionalist arguments about enhancing group solidarity. He criticizes scholars who view the study of identity and gender as essential to understanding early cities, on the grounds that these concepts cannot be operationalized and translated into empirical observations. That, to my mind, smacks more of positivism than realism. Although religious thought, identity, and gender often may not be directly observable in archaeological remains, considering them can be important and may give rise to topics that can be

measured and quantified. If we acknowledge that facets of life such as religious ideas and ideals, identity, and gender are important in the modern world, we can argue by analogy that they must have been important in ancient societies. To ignore them generates cities occupied by “faceless blobs,” to use a famous expression. If we want households and cities with faces, we need to go beyond functionalist models of organic wholes and think about social categories based on gender, class, and ethnicity, among others.

Smith states explicitly that his “focus in this book is not the origins of the earliest cities”; instead he concentrates “on how premodern cities and settlements were organized, how they worked, and how they fit into their regional and societal contexts” (p. 55). Fair enough, but a consideration of the earliest cities illustrates the importance of identity and religion, the topics Smith eschews, to understanding global urbanism prehistorically. For example, recent studies of early Mesoamerican cities show that ritual events were the bases for early aggregation that resulted in the growth of settlements and the first steps toward urbanization. Moreover, the first urban centers were most often newly formed communities resulting from the aggregation of people of diverse identities.

Identity, broadly defined, may also be important to understanding energized crowding. The concept of energized crowding allows analysis and comparison of interaction across settlements of varying sizes and of societies of differing levels and types of organization. Social interactions at any scale, however, rarely take place randomly; they are structured by language, ethnicity, kinship, age, gender, and even religion. To be fully used in the context of early cities, the concept of energized crowding needs to be framed by a consideration of how groups interact with one another and how those interactions change in urban settings.

The book is the first in a new series published by Cambridge University Press in collaboration with the Centre for Urban Network Evolutions (UrbNet) at Aarhus University in Denmark. UrbNet has, until now, focused on ancient urban studies in the classical world and Europe. The widening scope of their interests, as shown by this book, promises new and interesting contributions to the comparative study of ancient urban settlements.

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***After Dark: The Nocturnal Urban Landscape and Lightscape of Ancient Cities.* Nancy Gonlin and Meghan E. Strong, editors. 2022. University Press of Colorado, Louisville. xvi + 296 pp. \$76.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-64642-259-3. \$61.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-64642-260-9.**

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This book is the third in a series dedicated to thinking about night in the past. It is set apart from its predecessors (*Archaeology of the Night: Life After Dark in the Ancient World*, 2018, edited by Nancy Gonlin and April Nowell; and *Night and Darkness in Ancient Mesoamerica*, edited by Gonlin and David M. Reed, 2021) by its focus on “lychnology” (defined as “the study of ‘pre-modern lighting devices’” [Gonlin, p. xv]) and on urban environments, which together produce the “nocturnal light-scape[s]” of the subtitle. The examples of lighting devices include lamps, such as those depicted in tombs at Deir el-Medina, Egypt (Meghan E. Strong), and recovered archaeologically at Tiwanaku, Bolivia (John Wayne Janusek and Anna Guengerich); torch-blocks at Samothrace, Greece (Maggie L. Popkin); and fire boxes and cedar torches at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico (Robert S. Weiner).