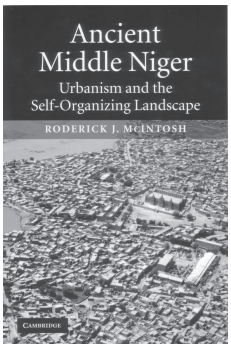
Book Review



Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape. *By Roderick J. McIntosh*, Case Studies in Early Societies 7, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 278 pp., ISBN 0521012430 (paperback), 052181300X (hardback). Price 19.99 £ (paperback), 50.00 £ (hardback).

Hierarchy is bad but heterarchy is good. Elites are bad ("social parasites", *p. 150*) but specialists are good. Old-fashioned models of early urbanism (in which cities are places of "powerlessness, misery, and oppression", *p. 209*) are bad, whereas vague complex systems models are good. States and centralized power are bad ("coercive institutions cast their filthy pallor over the land", *p. 214*), but local native traditions emphasizing respect and peaceful interaction are good. Urban citadels are bad, but clustered cities are good. These are some of the main points in this disappointing account of urbanization at Jenne-jeno and other sites in the Middle Niger region of Mali.

I found *Ancient Middle Niger* very difficult to read, partly because of a plethora of unscholarly value judgment, and partly because of the constant use of idiosyncratic and distracting prose techniques (for example, numerous Exclamatory Phrases! (with (multiple) levels of (confusing) parenthetical clauses), and (also) Strange Capitalization Practices!). I'm not sure if this is a deliberate postmodern ploy, or just plain old bad writing (aided by bad editing). The speculative tone, sloppy inferences, and cryptic illustrations further slow down the reading process. If I had not agreed to write this review, I would have stopped reading before the end of the first chapter. It is a pity that such a fascinating and important example of early urbanization does not have a better book to describe it.

On the positive side, as a non-Africanist with a comparative and theoretical interest in early urbanism I learned quite a bit about the development of Jenne-jeno. McIntosh is right on the mark when he insists that he is dealing with a different kind of urbanism than that described in many works on early cities. At Jenne-jeno there is no clear evidence for royal palaces or burials and only limited evidence for social inequality. Nevertheless, Jenne-jeno and other sites exhibit abundant evidence for specialized craft production, intensive long-distance trade networks, and concentrated populations. This non-centralized economic urbanism contrasts with the strongly centralized political urbanism found in many other parts of the ancient world. "Heterarchy", currently a fashionable term for non-hierarchical social complexity, is a key concept in the book.

In Chapter 1, "Discovery", McIntosh devotes considerable space to debunking a straw model of early states that he calls "ex astra". This label denotes a highly centralized, dreary society where elites lived well but life was "not so nice for everyone else" (this phrase is used three times on *p. 20*). I don't know of any writers who subscribe to this model, and McIntosh does not cite anyone, so it is easy for him to tear it apart. Once "ex astra" is destroyed, he presents the Middle Niger alternative, in which no one bosses anyone else around, different ethnic and occupational groups respect one another and always get along, and heterarchy and clustered urbanism flourish.

I am not convinced by McIntosh's historical explanation for why scholars have not considered alternative forms of early urbanism. McIntosh suggests they have been blinded by the biblical intellectual tradition called Yahwism: "I contend that, because of unexamined Yahwist values, they lacked the intellectual toolkit to recognize and process the evidence under their feet" (*p. 23*). Yet he provides no evidence that any of the scholars in question were influenced by this intellectual tradition. More likely, intellectual provincialism was the malady that blinded scholars to the urban traditions of the New World, Africa, and Asia. McIntosh proposes an untested and highly abstract complex systems model of social

change that he claims can explain the development of the Middle Niger type of non-hierarchical economic urbanism. Although I have great respect for this type of systems modeling, I do not find his application credible. Claims to the effect that people had "an ethos of Ecological Resilience" (*p. 149*) seem to confuse levels of analysis.

Chapter 2, "Transformed landscapes", is a detailed and, in places, technical discussion of climate, landscape, and other environmental parameters of early urbanism. The crucial point for understanding the development of Jenne-jeno is that climate, rainfall, streamflow, and alluvial processes are extremely variable in this region. In Chapter 3, "Accommodation", McIntosh presents his major interpretive models. Among the most significant is the "Pulse Model", which is discussed at length. McIntosh, however, never gives an explicit definition or description of the model. He states that "the Pulse Model deals with" certain phenomena; it "purports to deal with" other things; it "attempts" to go places; it "posits the existence" of some things; it "predicts the locations" of sites; it "requires" certain intellectual approaches; and it "is a hypothetical alternative" to other models (quotations are from *pp. 102-114*). This model could be a climatic model or a social model, but in spite of a lengthy discussion, I remain unclear about the nature of the "Pulse Model" (always capitalized). "Urban complex" (Chapter 4) is another example of an important concept left undefined.

Many of McIntosh's social interpretations rely on ethnographic data from Mande culture: "A major thrust of this book is the assertion that the peoples of the Middle Niger achieved their non-despotic urbanism and sustained that urbanism well over a millennium and a half, because of the Mande complex of core rules" (*p. 135*). To support this assertion, McIntosh must assume that Mande cultural concepts remained unchanged over millennia. A similar essentialist notion of an unchanging Maya belief system is used in Mesoamerica by scholars who want to reconstruct ancient Maya cosmology in the absence of empirical data. This kind of speculative reasoning is unconvincing in either setting. Similarly, McIntosh's use of oral tradition as a source of historical knowledge (Chapters 3 through 5) is often uncritical and credulous. I find it significant that he does not cite the work of David Henige and others who apply a critical, historiographic perspective to African oral traditions. This case is only one example in which the relevant scholarly literature is not cited sufficiently. Another case is specialization, a key component of McIntosh's urban model. He includes considerable discussion of ethnographic data on modern Mande specialists, but the archaeological literature on specialized production is largely ignored (*e.g.*, Cathy Costin's seminal works are not cited).

For me, Chapter 4, "Excavation", was the most important chapter in the book. McIntosh keeps speculation to a minimum and describes the archaeological evidence for settlement, craft production, trade, and chronology. The economic data are particularly compelling. McIntosh does go beyond the clear evidence for intensive production, however, to infer on very shaky grounds that specialists were organized into corporate groups, as they are in modern Mande society. The discussion of chronology and change through time is clear and interesting. Chapter 5, "Surveying the hinterland", is a good discussion of regional surveys in the Middle Niger region with useful comments on archaeological survey projects in general.

The final chapter, "Comparative urban landscapes", compares Middle Niger urbanism to Mesopotamia, Egypt, and north China. McIntosh makes some interesting points, particularly with respect to China, but an underlying tension that runs through the book comes to the surface here and clouds the comparative discussion. McIntosh seems to waver between two views of the uniqueness of Middle Niger urbanization. In some passages he admits that there were different types of early urbanization around the world. Scholars have concentrated far too heavily on Near Eastern and Mediterranean patterns and ignored alternative forms like Jenne-jeno. A similar argument could be made about a pervasive ignorance of New World urbanism by many writers on urban history. In other places, however, McIntosh comes close to suggesting that his model for Middle Niger urbanism is superior to other models for all ancient cities (see especially *p. 225*). In short, there is confusion between intellectual variation (different kinds of models) and empirical historical variation (different kinds of cities or societies).

It is perhaps ironic that in a volume devoted to promoting alternative views of urbanism and an appreciation of variability, McIntosh makes a number of universalistic claims such as: "Specialization, after all, is what the growth of cities — anywhere — is all about" (*p. 206*). Specialization is certainly what Jenne-jeno was all about, but this is far less the case in societies where urbanism had a stronger political dynamic. In the cases I know best — the Aztec and Maya — most cities can be viewed as political statements made by petty kings; specialized production was important in only a few of these cities. Another universalistic claim — "The essential function of the city is to reconcile corporate diversity" (*p. 16*) — does not fit with my understanding of ancient urbanism, nor is it supported by the data from the Middle Niger (in my reading of the evidence, that is; McIntosh would surely disagree).

In this chapter and others, the illustrations are a real barrier to understanding. There are numerous cryptic drawings that probably make sense to the author, but were opaque to me. Axes are not labeled, symbols are not explained, and I found many of these drawings incomprehensible (*e.g.*, *pp. 19, 30, 35, 37-39, 80, 103-107, 140-42, 156*). Many maps lack scales (*pp. 47, 48, 97, 98, 99, 124*), while others are reproduced so small that the scales cannot be read (*pp. 57, 72, 198*).

I suspect that much of my dissatisfaction with this book originates in the very different views of the nature of archaeology and scholarship held by McIntosh and myself. I cannot begin to express my opposition to his claim that, "The prehistorian's problem is to verify motivations and intentionality in the remote past" (*p. 188*). To support his interpretations, McIntosh must make unlikely assumptions (*e.g.*, Mande concepts have not changed in thousands of years) and offer highly speculative inferences. *Ancient Middle Niger* contains important data and provocative ideas about a significant case of early urbanization; unfortunately this book does not do them justice.

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