

In What Sense Can Amazonian Societies be Considered “Urban”?

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Heckenberger et al.’s use of the term “urban” to describe Amazonian societies (1, 2) must be questioned. Archaeologists typically employ one of two definitions of urbanism. According to the demographic definition a city has a large, dense population characterized by social diversity (3), whereas the functional definition of urbanism defines an urban settlement as the setting for activities and institutions (called urban functions) that affect a wider hinterland (4, 5). Urban settlements have such functions but nearby non-urban sites do not.

These relatively small Amazonian sites lack evidence for urban functions common in areas of early urbanism. They have no palaces, royal burials, administrative artifacts, or other manifestations of political control of a hinterland. They lack temples and shrines that would indicate religious urban functions. The data do not point to craft specialization or regional exchange nodes that constitute urban economic functions. In short, none of the typical archaeological signs of urbanism are present in the Amazon. Planned layouts, geoglyphs, and long-distance exchange all occur regularly in ancient non-urban societies. The Amazonian case is an example of what Colin Renfrew calls, “early societies that are by no means urban but which can nonetheless boast impressive monumental constructions and other presumably symbolic features” (6:17).

Heckenberger et al. have documented a society whose settlement organization was far more sophisticated than previously thought. But calling this village society “urban” does not help us understand that society, nor does it help us to understand general processes of early urbanization. A society does not have to be called “urban” in order to recognize it as complex, sophisticated, and important.

MICHAEL E. SMITH

School of Human Evolution & Social Change
Arizona State University

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