THE FOUNDING OF CITIES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD:
REVIEW OF CONCEPTS

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"The beginning, as every one knows, is of supreme importance in everything, and particularly in the founding and building of a city." - Plutarch, *De Fortuna Romanorum* 8.321 a-b (Plutarch 1936).

Plutarch makes this statement in the course of recounting the myth of the founding of Rome by Romulus. This well-known story was an important theme in Roman ideology and mythology. Later Roman cities were founded officially through acts of divination and ceremony (Rykwert 1976), and it must have seemed only proper to claim that the imperial capital had also come into existence through a formal, ceremonial act of foundation. Yet the archaeological and textual data do not support the historical validity of the standard myths for the foundation of Rome. In the words of T. J. Cornell, "everyone agrees that the Roman foundation story, from Aeneas to Romulus, is legendary and has no right to be considered a historical narrative" (Cornell 1995:70). Nevertheless, this myth does provide an important perspective on the Roman view of the origin and significance of their city and polity.

Was there in fact a formal act of foundation for the city of Rome or did the city simply grow in size and power? Can the archaeology be reconciled with the historical record of early Rome? These and other questions about city foundation, which occupy a lengthy chapter in Cornell's book (Cornell 1995:38-80), can also be asked about Maya cities. To what extent were Maya cities founded through formal acts of foundation and to what extent did they grow naturally? Is there a match between hieroglyphic descriptions of dynastic foundation and archaeological evidence for urban growth and transformation? Was city foundation accompanied by significant population growth? In what respects were the foundations of Maya cities similar or different to city foundations in other parts of the ancient world? In order to provide some perspectives on these and other questions concerning the foundation of Maya cities, I present comparative data from other parts of the world and describe a series of concepts that can help organize information on Maya city foundation.

CITY FOUNDATION IN THE OLD WORLD

Although there are numerous discussions of the origins and foundation of individual cities in the ancient Old World, significant bodies of comparative research on city foundation are much rarer. In this section I review research on city foundation for two urban traditions: Classical Greece, and Anglo-Saxon England. These cases provide insights that can help us understand processes of Maya city foundation.

City Foundation in the Classical World

In ancient Greece, the foundation of cities was so closely associated with the founding of polities that it can be impossible to separate the two processes. For most authors, therefore, discussions of the origins of individual cities are included in discussions of the poleis. This situation also fits many of the polities of ancient Mesoamerica, which can usefully be called city-states (Grube 2000; Oudijk 2002b; M.E. Smith 2000). Explicit references to city foundation are quite rare in Mesoamerican native historical sources, although the foundations of dynasties and polities are common themes. In many cases it is reasonable to treat such foundation accounts as also describing the foundation of cities (see Smith, this volume).

Mogens Hansen (2000:149-150) describes two ways in which poleis originated: natural growth and deliberate foundation. He suggests that natural growth is the most common pattern in Hellas, although examples of deliberate foundation receive far more attention in both ancient sources and modern scholarship. I refer to these alternatives as informal and formal city foundations.

Hansen (2000) and Demand (1990:8) divide cases of deliberate foundation into two types: colonization and synoicism. Colonization in the Greek world refers to the long-distance movement of groups who found poleis away from their homeland.[1] Although this process was rare within Hellas itself, it was widespread in the Mediterranean world and there is a large body of scholarship on the topic (e.g., Dougherty 1993; Malkin 1994; Papadopoulos 2002). Domínguez (this volume) provides a useful review of these studies. The foundation of cities and states by colonization was of great ideological interest to the Greeks, and myths of foundation played important roles in Greek literature and social identity (Dougherty 1993).

Although there are cases of city foundation by deliberate colonization in the Maya area (Martin and Grube 2000), it is not clear just how common this practice was. Several Aztec cities were founded through colonization, including Tenochtitlan, Tenayuca, and perhaps Texcoco (see Smith, this volume), although processes of natural growth were more common.

Synoicism refers to the process by which several separate settlements join together to found a new city or polity. Spiro Kostof (1991:59) defines synoicism as "the administrative coming together of several proximate villages to form a town," and Harold Carter (1983:19) defines it as "the process by which a central organizing location grew out of the needs of a dispersed rural population." Hansen and Kostof recognize two variations of city origins through synoicism. In one, a new location is chosen, resulting in the creation of a new city where none had existed previously; in the other variation, one of the existing settlements is chosen for the new city. Comparative discussions of synoicism (Demand 1990; Marcus and Flannery 1996:139-154) make it clear that it was a process driven by political goals, with environmental and economic motives playing secondary roles. Marcus and Flannery (1996:139-154) argue for the application of the synoicism concept to Monte Albán and suggest that this was a common

process of city formation in the ancient world. Their interpretation of Monte Albán has been challenged, however (see Winter, this volume), and well documented cases are rare in the New World, probably owing to the difficulty of documenting synoicism with archaeological data.

In a review of city foundations in the Greek and Roman worlds, Owens (1991:8) lists three major reasons to establish a new city: colonization, the movement of existing cities, and the commemoration of military victories by building a new victory city. Owens notes that in most cases, city foundation was a deliberate political act carried out by leaders and their followers. Religion was an important part of the process, including the consultation of oracles and the conduct of a variety of rites and ceremonies. Rykwert (1976) describes these ceremonies and their symbolism for Roman cities; see also Espinosa (this volume). One component of Roman foundation ceremonies was the creation of urban dedication deposits, and such offerings have been identified archaeologically at Roman Dorchester (Woodward and Woodward 2004). In Maya cities the remains of dedication deposits are common in public buildings (Boteler-Mock 1998; Freidel and Schele 1989), but city dedication offerings have not yet been identified. Chase and Chase (1995), and this volume, suggest that E-groups serve a role similar to Roman dedication deposits in marking and consecrating the foundation of cities.

Town Origins in Anglo-Saxon Britain

After the decline of Roman towns in Britain, the Anglo-Saxon period witnessed a gradual rebirth of towns and urban culture. After a period of ruralization some Roman towns underwent renewed growth, and other towns were established on new locations. Most of these Anglo-Saxon towns continued to exist into the medieval period. The origins and growth of these settlements are topics with a large literature (e.g., Astill 1994; Biddle 1975, 1976; Carver 1994; Dark 2004; Ottaway 1992). Several authors argue that after the Roman withdrawal from Britain, urban functions in some areas became dispersed among different settlements. For example, a single area might have a market center in one settlement, a separate fortress, and an ecclesiastical seat in a third location. Then in late Anglo-Saxon times—a period of town expansion—urban functions became concentrated in multi-functional towns (Aston and Bond 2000:58-59; Hill 1988). Thurston (2001:213-275) presents a similar analysis for post-Roman towns in Scandinavia.

Although there are very few explicit references to the "founding" of towns in this period, this literature is relevant to Maya cities in several ways. The major debate over the growth of towns in the early medieval period is between those who see commerce as the driving force in the creation and growth of towns (e.g., Hodges 2000) and others who see religious and administrative forces, as expressed in urban public architecture, as primary (e.g., Carver 1994). Astill (1994) reviews this debate in comparison with the archaeological data and reaches the following conclusion:

> "This survey has signaled the overriding importance that is attached to king, church and aristocracy for the development of towns in medieval England. It is the only urban stimulus which is common to all theoretical, or non-theoretical, approaches: those who favor the ideological interpretation of urbanism see towns as political statements which mirrored the changing character of kingship and the state; the economic theorists in contrast argue that elites used towns as the principal locale for the collection and consumption of wealth which had been extracted from the rural population in the course of their dominant relationship. (Astill 1994:65)

Carver (1994; 2001) and Astill (1994) attribute great importance to the establishment of churches, and later cathedrals, as markers of political power in Anglo-Saxon and early medieval towns. The political capital was a major category of urban settlement (emporia, or trading centers, was another). James Campbell (1979:119) points out that the seventh century historian Bede used the term "metropolis" to designate capitals of kingdoms, but not emporia.

In the absence of an official discourse of formal town foundation, the new public buildings in Anglo-Saxon Britain can be interpreted as architectural markers of the foundation of a particular kind of urban settlement, the Christian town. The builders and users of these very visible monuments were making a variety of public religious and ideological claims about society, religion, the individual, and the state. The processes of Christianization and urbanization occurred over a large area of Britain, and the similarities of the new buildings constructed in many different towns also sent messages about regional cultural integration and communication, at least at the level of the elites (Butler and Morris 1986). This situation bears some resemblance to the development of Maya urbanism, also a regional phenomenon based upon a core series—perhaps even a canon—of key monumental buildings that are found at most or all cities (Andrews 1975). Maya cities were political settlements where the king and the state religion were key institutions. In the terminology of Chase and Chase (this volume), the churches, monasteries, and palaces built in early medieval towns signaled the "ideological founding" of the settlements, a process analogous to the early construction of E-groups and other public buildings at Maya cities.

CONCEPTS AND MODELS

In this section I combine insights from the literature reviewed above with the results of the case studies in this volume to isolate key concepts in the analysis of Maya city foundation. I focus on four key topics: the type of city; formality; demography; and sovereignty.

Type of City

Most scholars agree that the great majority of Mesoamerican cities were political capitals (Hardoy 1973; Marcus 1983; M.E. Smith 2001), and this situation influenced the nature of city foundation. Even those cities with important commercial roles—such as Tenochtitlan, Teotihuacan, Chichén Itzá, or Mayapán—were also powerful political capitals. Given the close relationship between politics and religion in Mesoamerican polities, it is likely that many or most Mesoamerican cities experienced some kind of formal foundation act, with associated rituals of commemoration. The essays in this volume assemble much valuable information on formal foundation acts at Maya cities.

The capitals of empires or powerful territorial states can be expected to require more elaborate and extravagant ceremonies of foundation than the capitals of city-states. If native historical sources can be believed, Mayapán was an example of a city founded initially as a powerful capital, and one would therefore expect that its establishment was accompanied by major formal ceremonies of foundation. Tenochtitlan, on the other hand, achieved its imperial status relatively late in its history, and in fact its formal foundation occurred long after its initial settlement (see Smith, this volume). This was evidently a common pattern at Maya cities, as many of the case studies show.

The "disembedded capital" is a distinctive type of city whose foundation in ancient times was probably associated with major formal ceremonies. Disembedded capitals are "urban sites founded *de novo* and designed to supplant existing patterns of authority and administration" (Joffe 1998:549). Ancient examples were typically founded by new elites led by a strong and charismatic leader who were trying to overcome entrenched elites or bureaucratic institutions tied to existing capitals. Joffe points out that these cities were often centers for art and intellectual production that promoted the ideological goals of their founders, and that many were short-lived settlements because they were disruptive and a burden to society. Richard Blanton's (1976) suggestion that Monte Albán was founded as a disembedded capital was challenged by several scholars (Sanders and Nichols 1988; Willey 1979); see Winter (this volume) for discussion.

Formality

Formality refers to the founding of a city through a formal or official act of an administrative or religious nature. Formal acts can be defined as public acts carried out in explicit accordance with culturally specified norms. Formal acts are typically proclaimed publicly (whether orally, in written format, or through performance), and formal acts of foundation are usually carried out by kings, high officials, or high priests. Two types of formal acts are relevant to the foundation of cities: political acts and religious acts. Although these two categories were frequently combined in ancient Mesoamerica and elsewhere, it is useful to separate them for analytical purposes.

Formal political acts establish a ruler or official as in charge of a city or a polity. In the Old World, such acts typically took the form of claims that a particular ruler founded or established a particular city (Dougherty 1993). In the case of the Maya, formal political acts of foundation were phrased in terms the initial establishment of a legitimate dynasty in a specific city; Chase and Chase (this volume) refer to this kind of act as a dynastic foundation. Most historically documented cases of political foundation in the Old World were accompanied by religious ceremonies of some sort. As suggested above, few such foundation ceremonies have been documented at Mesoamerican cities. One variation of the formal political foundation occurred when an existing dynastic seat was moved from one city to another.

The formal religious foundation of a city consists of ceremonies designed to propitiate the gods and/or to establish supernatural power or protection at a particular place or places within the city (Carver 1994:19-33; Rykwert 1976). Although religious acts of foundation usually accompanied political foundations, in many cases the two types of foundation were conducted separately. In many archaeological cases, the construction of key religious buildings is seen as a signal for a formal religious foundation. For example, Coe (2003:107) points out that a new Khmer king had to signal his foundation of a capital city by construction of ceremonial waterworks, an ancestral temple, and a state temple. Similarly, Chase and Chase (this volume) argue that formal religious foundations at Maya cities involved the construction and use of E-groups (Chase and Chase 1995), and that these acts often predated political or dynastic acts of foundation by as much as several centuries. Similarly, the legendary founding of Aztec Tenochtitlan was a formal religious act (Sullivan 1971) that occurred long before the city was established as a political capital.

Our knowledge of formal acts of city foundation in Mesoamerica comes from texts and public architecture (Oudijk 2002a); see also Smitih (this volume). A key consideration in evaluating this evidence is the propagandistic nature of the claims for a foundation act. Many

descriptions of city or polity foundation were recorded long after the claimed date of the act, and it is difficult to evaluate the historical validity of such claims. Even when the evidence is contemporaneous with the act, there are numerous potential sources of bias. Formal foundations often form part of dynastic claims for legitimate rule, and thus the ideological interests of the state or ruler may favor the invention of past formal foundation acts when in reality no such event ever happened (as in the case of Rome, discussed above). Similarly, the commemoration of a formal foundation act by constructing public buildings (such as E-groups or dynastic temples) does not guarantee that the formal act did in fact take place, nor that it took place at the date indicated in textual sources. For example, it is quite clear that the actual establishment of the settlement of Tenochtitlan long predated the formal foundation act (as recorded after the Spanish conquest) by as much as a century or two (Smith, this volume).

Urban planning can provide another example of formal acts of foundation. The existence of planned layouts points to deliberate formal actions by a ruler or elite (A.T. Smith 2003; M.E. Smith 2006). It seems likely that the establishment of planned urban centers was accompanied by some sort of formal foundation ceremony. Maya cities were clearly planned settlements (Andrews 1975; Ashmore 1992; Aveni and Hartung 1987; M.E. Smith 2006) and this fact alone points to a degree of formality at their founding or at a re-founding event. Similarly, the copying of patterns or features of urban layout from earlier cities can also suggest some kind of formal foundation act. Examples include Mayapan's copying of features from Chichén Itzá, and several types of copying from ancient cities by Aztec urban planners (Smith, this volume).

Not all cities had formal acts of foundation. In some cases small settlements simply grew in size and complexity until at some point they can be considered cities. In these cases it can be impossible or at least controversial to determine the date on which these settlements became "urban." I use the term "informal foundation" to describe these cities, acknowledging that the process of urbanization may have taken a long time to develop. In many archaeological cases, however, we simply lack information about the possible existence of formal acts of foundation, and it is thus impossible to judge where these cities were founded formally or informally. A major advantage of the hieroglyphic record at Maya cities is that it provides us with explicit claims as well as indirect evidence for the foundation of cities and dynasties.

Demography

At least two demographic features are important components of processes of city foundation: the magnitude of population growth and the place(s) of origin of the population. Some cities grew rapidly from the start. The most extreme cases are cities founded on a new location; their populations grew from nothing in a short interval. Cities founded by colonization, cities moved from one location to another, and disembedded capitals all experienced rapid demographic growth of this sort, as did some of the earliest cities such as Uruk and Teotihuacan (Cowgill, this volume). Other cities grew less rapidly, or else experienced alternating periods of rapid and slow population growth. Most Maya cities probably fit in this category (Culbert and Rice 1990).

The geographical origins of urban populations influenced the foundation and growth of cities. One source of population was the natural increase of urban dwellers. This was only one contributor to population growth in ancient cities, however. High mortality and low birth rates meant that pre-industrial cities could not sustain themselves demographically and had to rely upon immigrants to maintain their population levels (McNeill 1976; Storey n.d.). At Teotihuacan and Uruk, rapid urban growth was accompanied by depopulation in their rural hinterlands

(Adams 1981; Sanders, et al. 1979), suggesting that early rulers somehow forced or induced peasants to move into these cities. Synoicism provides an alternative process for urban population growth from local or regional sources. Cities founded by colonization drew their population from outside of the local area, and this could have important impacts on local food resources and social relations between urbanites and other inhabitants (Stein 2005).

The relationship between the formality of city foundations and demography is rarely treated in the literature. Cities founded on new sites, whether through long-distance colonization or synoicism, typically had both a formal act of foundation and a major population increase. Many formal acts of foundation, however, seem unrelated to the size or demographic processes of a city. Are these dimensions truly independent, or are there subtle relationships waiting to be discovered?

Sovereignty

Because nearly all ancient Mesoamerican cities were political capitals, the range of variation in the sovereignty of newly founded cities is much smaller than in other parts of the ancient world. Mayan and other Mesoamerican cities were almost always founded as capitals of small states (Grube 2000). As suggested above, those cities that became capitals of empires or large territorial states usually grew into those roles; few were founded initially as major capitals (Mayapán may be an exception here). Mesoamerican empires were hegemonic in character, unlike the territorial (or direct-rule) empires of the Andes and parts of the Old World (M.E. Smith and Montiel 2001). As a result, there were few prominent provincial administrative cities in Mesoamerican empires. This presents a major contrast to empires such as the Inka (D'Altroy 2002) or the Roman (Garnsey and Saller 1987), in which a major form of city was the provincial administrative center, founded specifically for imperial goals.

In some colonial situations, newly founded colonial cities were independent of their homeland and in others colonial cities were founded as dependent upon or subject to their home polity (Stein 2005). Domínguez (this volume) discusses the case of Greek colonial expansion, which fits the first category here. More recent European colonial empires provided examples of the second category.

Discussion

The discussion above suggests that the type of city, formality of foundation, demography, and sovereignty are important dimensions to consider in the analysis of city foundation in the Maya and other ancient societies. An alternative formulation of some of these same issues is suggested by the Chases (this volume), who identify three types of foundation for Maya cities and polities. Their category "ideological foundation" is a similar to a formal religious foundation, but because the evidence is architectural and not textual, the formal dimension can only be hypothesized. Their category of "dynastic foundation," a textual claim for a legitimate origin of a dynasty, is identical to the category of formal political foundation as used here. The Chases' concept of "administrative foundation" parallels ideological foundation—an architectural claim or signal that suggests a probable formal act—but with a heavier emphasis on the political dimension.

The concepts outlined above and the classification presented by Chase and Chase (this volume) help illuminate the nature of city foundation among the ancient Maya. They also help

advance scholarly understanding of similarities and differences between Maya cities and processes of urbanization and those of other ancient civilizations around the world.

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[1] Stein (2005:10-11) defines colony as "an implanted settlement established by one society in either uninhabited territory or the territory of another society. The implanted settlement is established for long-term residence by all or part of the homeland or metropole's population and is both spatially and socially distinguishable from the communities of the indigenous polity or peoples among whom it is established."