

Urbanism in the Southwest? A New Perspective

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A. Two Definitions of “Urban”

1. Demographic Definition (the focus is on cities):

- Many people living closely together, with some level of social complexity.
- **Advantages:**
 - Directs attention to the largest settlements in state-level societies.
 - Easy to measure and analyze quantitatively.
- **Disadvantage:** The vast majority of nonwestern complex settlements are not considered urban; e.g., almost all Mesoamerican centers except for a couple. See Smith (2005).
- (Sanders and Webster 1988; Wirth 1938)

2. Functional Definition (includes both cities and towns):

- Urban centers are the settings for activities and institutions that affect a larger hinterland. Those activities and institutions are known as “urban functions.”
- **Advantages:**
 - Attention is focused on important political, economic, and religious processes.
 - There can be a diversity of types and forms of urban settlements, both within cultural traditions and among cultural traditions.
- **Disadvantage:** Urban functions can be difficult to document and to compare.
- (Fox 1977; Marcus 1983)

B. The Functional or Regional Perspective

The focus is on regions, not sites

- Urbanism is an attribute of regions or societies, not of individual settlements.
- Urban societies can have a diversity of types of settlements.
- The key feature is that a town or city serves to integrate a region (which is called its hinterland). This integration can be political, economic, religious, or a combination.

Urbanism is not limited to states

- In many chiefdoms or intermediate-level societies, key settlements serve as nodes that integrate regions.
- Urbanism is possible and even common in non-state societies.

C. Regions and Regional Organization

- **Archaeology:** Most archaeologists use the term “region” informally to refer to either a physiographic unit or else an area with a uniform distribution of some material trait.
- **Economic Geography:** A region is defined as the hinterland of a central place. This definition focuses on the spatial structure of flows of goods, people and ideas to and from centers. (Richardson 1979; C.A. Smith 1976)
- This nodal definition of region directs attention to the nature and spatial structure of organization and integration around centers.
- From the functional perspective, an urban center by definition serves to organize a region in some way, whether through economic, political or religious processes.

D. Urbanism is Not Limited to States

- **Chiefdoms:** Many or most chiefdom centers serve to organize regions, and thus can be considered urban places.
- **Cahokia:** Because of its size and complexity, Cahokia was an urban center by most definitions of urbanism . (Pauketat 2004)
- **Smaller Mississippian Centers:** Ritual and political activities centered on platform mounds and plazas served to integrate regions . (Lewis and Stout 1998)
- **Iron-Age Oppida:** Walled settlements without monumental architecture, their urban functions lay in the realms of craft production and exchange . (Collis 1984)
- **Anglo-Saxon Towns:** Monica Smith (2003) points out that urban settlements can survive in the “dark ages” between periods of strong state organization. The larger Anglo-Saxon towns of Britain (post-Roman, pre-medieval) fit this category. (Carver 1994)

E. “Chaco was a city” (Lekson et al. 2006:101). I disagree.

Clearly an Impressive Settlement, but What Were the Urban Functions?

- Major labor investment, large-scale ritual activities, and planning can all exist without urbanism.
- If the structures in the Canyon are considered a single settlement unit, then what region or hinterland did it organize?

Chaco’s Importance Lay Primarily in a Larger Macro-Region, Not in its Local Hinterland

- Chaco’s ritual and political significance, like its roads, extended far beyond its local hinterland.
- Accommodations for pilgrims and their activities are not urban functions.
- A settlement does not have to be a city to be an important place.
- (Crown and Judge 1991; Lekson et al. 2006; Neitzel 2003; Renfrew 2001; Stein et al. 2007)

F. Planning & Design Do Not Necessarily Signal Urbanism

- Lekson et al. (2006) use the fact that Chaco must have been “*created by design*” to argue for its urban status.
- Chaco Great Houses *do* fit at least one of the criteria for preindustrial urban planning: coordination among buildings and features (M.E. Smith 2007).
- Planning, however, is a signal of *power and organization*, not of urbanization per se (using the 2 urban definitions presented above).
- Many non-urban settlements were planned:
 1. Specialized settlements in states and empires: Roman forts, Egyptian workers villages, etc.
 2. “early societies that are by no means urban but which can nonetheless boast impressive monumental constructions and other presumably symbolic features.” (Renfrew 2001:17). Examples: Neolithic monuments on Orkney and Malta .

G. Hohokam: Classic Period Towns ?

Towns: The Large Platform Mound Sites

- Political urban functions are inferred from platform mounds:
 - Only some communities had platform mounds.
 - Platform mounds are evenly spaced within irrigation systems.
 - The largest platform mounds are located near the headgates of the major canals.
- Religious urban functions are inferred from remains of ceremonial activities on top of platform mounds (whether or not elites lived on the platforms).

Regions: Canal Systems and/or “Communities”

- Hohokam regions (i.e., hinterlands) correspond to either the canal system or the “community” (regardless of whether community organization is seen as focal or linear).
- Within these regions, platform mound sites played an important organizational role.
- (Abbott 2003; Abbott et al. 2006; Crown and Judge 1991; Doyel et al. 2000; Elson 1998; Hunt et al. 2005)

H. So What? Is This Just a Typological Exercise?

For Hohokam and Southwest Archaeology:

- A focus on urbanism directs attention to the region as an analytical unit.
- It adds a spatial dimension to considerations of social complexity.

For Research on Comparative Urbanism:

- The long domination of urban studies by the demographic definition has produced an impoverished inventory of the diverse forms of urbanism around the world.
- The Southwest adds new and distinctive comparative examples to our roster of ancient urban societies.

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