GATHERING UTOPIAS
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DAVID GRAEBER & DAVID WENGROW'S "IMAGINARY CITIES"

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THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING

A New History of Humanity

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Imaginary Cities

Eurasia's first urbanites – in Mesopotamia, the Indus valley, Ukraine and China – and how they built cities without kings

Cities begin in the mind.

Or so proposed Elias Canetti, a novelist and social philosopher often written off as one of those offbeat mid-century central European thinkers no one knows quite what to do with. Canetti speculated that Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers living in small communities must, inevitably, have spent time wondering what larger ones would be like. Proof, he felt, was on the walls of caves, where they faithfully depicted herd animals that moved together in uncountable masses. How could they not have wondered what human herds might be like, in all their terrible glory? No doubt they also considered the dead, outnumbering the living by orders of magnitude. What if everyone who'd ever died were all in one place? What would that be like? These 'invisible crowds', Canetti proposed, were in a sense the first human cities, even if they existed only in the imagination.

All this might seem idle speculation (in fact, speculation *about* speculation), but current advances in the study of human cognition suggest that Canetti had put his finger on something important, something almost everyone else had overlooked. Very large social units are always, in a sense, imaginary. Or, to put it in a slightly different way: there is always a fundamental distinction between the way one relates to friends, family, neighbourhood, people and places that we actually know directly, and the way one relates to empires, nations and metropolises, phenomena that exist largely, or at least most of the time, in our heads. Much of social theory can be seen as an attempt to square these two dimensions of our experience.

In the standard, textbook version of human history, scale is crucial. The tiny bands of foragers in which humans were thought to have spent most of their evolutionary history could be relatively democratic and egalitarian precisely because they were small. It's common to assume – and is often stated as self-evident fact – that our social sensibilities, even our capacity to keep track of names and faces, are largely determined by the fact that we spent 95 per cent of our evolutionary history in tiny groups of at best a few dozen individuals. We're designed to work in small teams. As a result, large agglomerations of people are often treated as if they were by definition somewhat unnatural, and humans as psychologically ill equipped to handle life inside them. This is the reason, the argument often goes, that we require such elaborate 'scaffolding' to make larger communities work: such things as urban planners, social workers, tax auditors and police.[1]

If so, it would make perfect sense that the appearance of the first cities, the first truly large concentrations of people permanently settled in one place, would also correspond to the rise of states. For a long time, the archaeological evidence – from Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Central America and elsewhere – did appear to confirm this. If you put enough people in one place, the evidence seemed to show, they would almost inevitably develop writing or something like it, together with administrators, storage and redistribution facilities, workshops and overseers. Before long, they would also start dividing themselves into social classes. 'Civilization' came as a package. It meant misery and suffering for some (since some would inevitably be reduced to serfs, slaves or debt peons), but also allowed for the possibility of philosophy, art and the accumulation of scientific knowledge.

The evidence no longer suggests anything of the sort. In fact, much of what we have come to learn in the last forty or fifty years has thrown conventional wisdom into disarray. In some regions, we now know, cities governed themselves for centuries without any sign of the temples and palaces that would only emerge later; in others, temples and palaces never emerged at all. In many early cities, there is simply no evidence of either a class of administrators or any other sort of ruling stratum. In others, centralized power seems to appear and then disappear. It would seem that the mere fact of urban life does not, necessarily, imply any particular form of political organization, and never did.

This has all sorts of important implications: for one thing, it suggests a much less pessimistic assessment of human possibilities, since the mere fact that much of the world's population now live in cities may not determine *how* we live, to anything like the extent you might assume – but before even starting to think about that, we need to ask how we got things so extraordinarily wrong to begin with.

IN WHICH WE FIRST TAKE ON THE NOTORIOUS ISSUE OF 'SCALE'

'Common sense' is a peculiar expression. Sometimes it means exactly what it seems to mean: practical wisdom born of real-life experience, avoiding stupid, obvious pitfalls. This is what we mean when we say that a cartoon villain who puts a clearly marked 'self-destruct' button on his doomsday device, or who fails to block the ventilation passages in his secret headquarters, is lacking common sense. On the other hand, it occasionally turns out that things which seem like simple common sense are, in fact, not.

For a long time, it was considered almost universal common sense that women make poor soldiers. After all, it was noted, women tend to be smaller and have less upper-body strength. Then various military forces made the experiment and discovered that women also tend to be much better shots. Similarly, it is almost universal common sense that it's relatively easy for a small group to treat each other as equals and come to decisions democratically, but that the larger the number of people involved, the more difficult this becomes. If you think about it, this isn't really as commonsensical as it seems, since it clearly isn't true of groups that endure. Over time, any group of intimate friends, let alone a family, will eventually develop a complicated history that makes coming to agreement on almost anything difficult; whereas the larger the group, the less likely it is to contain a significant proportion of people you specifically detest. But for various reasons, the problem of scale has now become a matter of simple common sense not only to scholars, but to almost everyone else.

Since the problem is typically seen as a result of our evolutionary inheritance, it might be helpful for a moment to return to the source and consider how evolutionary psychologists like Robin Dunbar have typically framed the question. Most begin by observing that the social organization of hunter-gatherers – both ancient and modern – operates at different tiers or

levels, 'nested' inside one another like Russian dolls. The most basic social unit is the pair-bonded family, with shared investment in offspring. To provide for themselves and dependants, these nuclear units are obliged (or so the argument goes) to cluster together in 'bands' made up of five or six closely related families. On ritual occasions, or when game is particularly abundant, such bands coalesce to form 'residential groups' (or 'clans') of roughly 150 persons, which – according to Dunbar – is also around the upper limit of stable, trusting relationships we are cognitively able to keep track of in our heads. And this, he suggests, is no coincidence. Beyond 150 (which has come to be known as 'Dunbar's Number') larger groups such as 'tribes' may form – but, Dunbar asserts, these larger groups will inevitably lack the solidarity of smaller, kin-based ones, and so conflicts will tend to arise within them.[2]

Dunbar considers such 'nested' arrangements to be among the factors which shaped human cognition in deep evolutionary time, such that even today a whole plethora of institutions that require high levels of social commitment, from military brigades to church congregations, still tend to gravitate around the original figure of 150 relationships. It's a fascinating hypothesis. As formulated by evolutionary psychologists, it hinges on the idea that living hunter-gatherers do actually provide evidence for this supposedly ancient way of scaling social relationships upwards from core family units to bands and residential groups, with each larger group reproducing that same sense of loyalty to one's natal kin, just on a greater scale, all the way up to things like 'brothers' – or indeed 'sisters' – in arms. But here comes the worm in the bud.

There is an obvious objection to evolutionary models which assume that our strongest social ties are based on close biological kinship: many humans just don't like their families very much. And this appears to be just as true of present-day hunter-gatherers as anybody else. Many seem to find the prospect of living their entire lives surrounded by close relatives so unpleasant that they will travel very long distances just to get away from them. New work on the demography of modern hunter-gatherers – drawing statistical comparisons from a global sample of cases, ranging from the Hadza in Tanzania to the Australian Martu[3] – shows that residential groups turn out not to be made up of biological kin at all; and the burgeoning field of human genomics is beginning to suggest a similar picture for ancient hunter-gatherers as well, all the way back to the Pleistocene.[4]

While modern Martu, for instance, might speak of themselves as if they were all descended from some common totemic ancestor, it turns out that primary biological kin actually make up less than 10 per cent of the total membership of any given residential group. Most participants are drawn from a much wider pool who do not share close genetic relationships, whose origins are scattered over very large territories, and who may not even have grown up speaking the same languages. Anyone recognized to be Martu is a potential member of any Martu band, and the same turns out to be true of the Hadza, BaYaka, !Kung San, and so on. The truly adventurous, meanwhile, can often contrive to abandon their own larger group entirely. This is all the more surprising in places like Australia, where there tend to be very elaborate kinship systems in which almost all social arrangements are ostensibly organized around genealogical descent from totemic ancestors.

It would seem, then, that kinship in such cases is really a kind of metaphor for social attachments, in much the same way we'd say 'all men are brothers' when trying to express internationalism (even if we can't stand our actual brother and haven't spoken to him for years). What's more, the shared metaphor often extended over very long distances, as we've seen with the way that Turtle or Bear clans once existed across North America, or moiety systems across Australia. This made it a relatively simple matter for anyone disenchanted with their immediate biological kin to travel very long distances and still find a welcome.

It is as though modern forager societies exist simultaneously at two radically different scales: one small and intimate, the other spanning vast territories, even continents. This might seem odd, but from the perspective of cognitive science it makes perfect sense. It's precisely this capacity to shift between scales that most obviously separates human social cognition from that of other primates.[5] Apes may vie for affection or dominance, but any victory is temporary and open to being renegotiated. Nothing is imagined as eternal. Nothing is really imagined at all. Humans tend to live simultaneously with the 150-odd people they know personally, and inside imaginary structures shared by perhaps millions or even billions of other humans. Sometimes, as in the case of modern nations, these are imagined as being based on kin ties; sometimes they are not.[6]

In this, at least, modern foragers are no different from modern city dwellers or ancient hunter-gatherers. We all have the capacity to feel bound

to people we will probably never meet; to take part in a macro-society which exists most of the time as 'virtual reality', a world of possible relationships with its own rules, roles and structures that are held in the mind and recalled through the cognitive work of image-making and ritual. Foragers may sometimes exist in small groups, but they do not – and probably have not ever – lived in small-scale *societies*.[7]

None of which is to say that scale – in the sense of absolute population size – makes no difference at all. What it means is that these things do not necessarily matter in the seemingly common-sense sort of way we tend to assume. On this particular point, at least, Canetti had it right. Mass society exists in the mind before it becomes physical reality. And crucially, it also exists in the mind *after* it becomes physical reality.

At this point we can return to cities.

Cities are tangible things. Certain elements of their physical infrastructure – walls, roads, parks, sewers – might remain fixed for hundreds or even thousands of years; but in human terms they are never stable. People are constantly moving in and out of them, whether permanently, or seasonally for holidays and festivals, to visit relatives, trade, raid, tour around, and so on; or just in the course of their daily rounds. Yet cities have a life that transcends all this. This is not because of the permanence of stone or brick or adobe; neither is it because most people in a city actually meet one another. It is because they will often think and act as people who *belong* to the city – as Londoners or Muscovites or Calcuttans. As the urban sociologist Claude Fischer put it:

> Most city dwellers lead sensible, circumscribed lives, rarely go downtown, hardly know areas of the city they neither live nor work in, and see (in any sociologically meaningful way) only a tiny fraction of the city's population. Certainly, they may on occasion – during rush hours, football games, etc. – be in the presence of thousands of strangers, but that does not necessarily have any direct effect on their personal lives … urbanites live in small social worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate.[8]

All this applies in equal measure to ancient cities. Aristotle, for example, insisted that Babylon was so large that, two or three days after it had been

captured by a foreign army, some parts of the city still hadn't heard the news. In other words, from the perspective of someone living in an ancient city, the city itself was not so entirely different from earlier landscapes of clans or moieties that extended across hundreds of miles. It was a structure raised primarily in the human imagination, which allowed for the possibility of amicable relations with people they had never met.

In [Chapter Four](#) we suggested that for much of human history, the geographical range in which most human beings were operating was actually shrinking. Palaeolithic 'culture areas' spanned continents. Mesolithic and Neolithic culture zones still covered much wider areas than the home territory of most contemporary ethno-linguistic groups (what anthropologists refer to as 'cultures'). Cities were part of that process of contraction, since urbanites could, and many did, spend almost their entire lives within a few miles' radius – something that would hardly have been conceivable for people of an earlier age. One way to think about this would be to imagine a vast regional system, of the kind that once spanned much of Australia or North America, being squeezed into a single urban space – while still maintaining its virtual quality. If that is even roughly what happened when the earliest cities formed, then there's no reason to assume there were any special cognitive challenges involved. Living in unbounded, eternal, largely imaginary groups is effectively what humans had been doing all along.

So what was really new here? Let's go back to the archaeological evidence. Settlements inhabited by tens of thousands of people make their first appearance in human history around 6000 years ago, on almost every continent, at first in isolation. Then they multiply. One of the things that makes it so difficult to fit what we now know about them into an old-fashioned evolutionary sequence, where cities, states, bureaucracies and social classes all emerge together,[9] is just how different these cities are. It's not just that some early cities lack class divisions, wealth monopolies, or hierarchies of administration. They exhibit such extreme variability as to imply, from the very beginning, a conscious experimentation in urban form.

Contemporary archaeology shows, among other things, that surprisingly few of these early cities contain signs of authoritarian rule. It also shows that their ecology was far more diverse than once believed: cities do not necessarily depend on a rural hinterland in which serfs or peasants engage in back-breaking labour, hauling in cartloads of grain for consumption by

urban dwellers. Certainly, that situation became increasingly typical in later ages, but in the first cities small-scale gardening and animal-keeping were often at least as important; so too were the resources of rivers and seas, and for that matter the continued hunting and collecting of wild seasonal foods in forests or in marshes. The particular mix depended largely on where in the world the cities happened to be, but it's becoming increasingly apparent that history's first city dwellers did not always leave a harsh footprint on the environment, or on each other.

What were these early cities like to live in?

In what follows we'll mainly describe what happened in Eurasia, before moving over to Mesoamerica in the next chapter. Of course, the whole story could be told from other geographical perspectives (that of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, where local trajectories of urban development in the Middle Niger delta stretch back long before the spread of Islam), but there is only so much one can cover in a single volume without doing excessive violence to the subject.[10] Each region we consider presents a distinct range of source material for the archaeologist or historian to sift and weigh. In most cases, written evidence is either lacking or extremely limited in scope. (We are still talking here, for the most part, about very early periods of human history, and cultural traditions very different from our own.)

We may never be able to reconstruct in any detail the unwritten constitutions of the world's first cities, or the upheavals that appear to have periodically changed them. Still, what evidence does exist is robust enough, not just to upend the conventional narrative but to open our eyes to possibilities we would otherwise never have considered. Before looking at specific cases, we should at least briefly consider why cities ever appeared in the first place. Did the sort of temporary, seasonal aggregation sites we discussed in earlier chapters gradually become permanent, year-round settlements? That would be a gratifyingly simple story. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to be what happened. The reality is more complex and, as usual, a good deal more interesting.

IN WHICH WE SET THE SCENE BROADLY FOR A WORLD OF CITIES, AND SPECULATE AS TO WHY THEY FIRST AROSE

Wherever cities emerged, they defined a new phase of world history.[11] Let's call it the 'early urban world', an admittedly bland term for what was in many ways a strange phase of the human past. Perhaps it is one of the hardest for us now to grasp, since it was simultaneously so familiar and so alien. We will consider the familiar parts first.

Almost everywhere, in these early cities, we find grand, self-conscious statements of civic unity, the arrangement of built spaces in harmonious and often beautiful patterns, clearly reflecting some kind of planning at the municipal scale. Where we do have written sources (ancient Mesopotamia, for example), we find large groups of citizens referring to themselves, not in the idiom of kinship or ethnic ties, but simply as 'the people' of a given city (or often its 'sons and daughters'), united by devotion to its founding ancestors, its gods or heroes, its civic infrastructure and ritual calendar, which always involves at least some occasions for popular festivity.[12] Civic festivals were moments when the imaginary structures to which people deferred in their daily lives, but which couldn't normally be seen, temporarily took on tangible, material form.

Where there is evidence to be had, we also find differences. People who lived in cities often came from far away. The great city of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico was already attracting residents from such distant areas as Yucatán and the Gulf Coast in the third or fourth century AD; migrants settled there in their own neighbourhoods, including a possible Maya district. Immigrants from across the great floodplains of the Indus buried their loved ones in the cemeteries of Harappa. Typically, ancient cities divided themselves into quarters, which often developed enduring rivalries, and this seems to have been true of the very first cities. Marked out by walls, gates or ditches, consolidated neighbourhoods of this sort were probably not different in any fundamental respect from their modern counterparts.[13]

What makes these cities strange, at least to us, is largely what isn't there. This is especially true of technology, whether advanced metallurgy, intensive agriculture, social technologies like administrative records, or even the wheel. Any one of these things may, or may not, have been present, depending where in this early urban world we cast our gaze. Here it's worth recalling that in most of the Americas, before the European invasion, there were neither metal tools nor horses, donkeys, camels or oxen. All movement of people and things was either by foot, canoe or

travois. But the scale of pre-Columbian capitals like Teotihuacan or Tenochtitlan dwarfs that of the earliest cities in China and Mesopotamia, and makes the 'city-states' of Bronze Age Greece (like Tiryns and Mycenae) seem little more than fortified hamlets.

In point of fact, the largest early cities, those with the greatest populations, did not appear in Eurasia – with its many technical and logistical advantages – but in Mesoamerica, which had no wheeled vehicles or sailing ships, no animal-powered traction or transport, and much less in the way of metallurgy or literate bureaucracy. This raises an obvious question: why did so many end up living in the same place to begin with? The conventional story looks for the ultimate causes in technological factors: cities were a delayed, but inevitable, effect of the 'Agricultural Revolution', which started populations on an upward trajectory and set off a chain of other developments, for instance in transport and administration, which made it possible to support large populations living in one place. These large populations then required states to administer them. As we've seen, neither part of this story seems to be borne out by the facts.

Indeed, it's hard to find a single story. Teotihuacan, for instance, appears to have become such a large city, peaking at perhaps 100,000 souls, mainly because a series of volcanic eruptions and related natural disasters drove entire populations out of their homelands to settle there.[14] Ecological factors often played a role in the formation of cities, but in this particular case these would appear to be only obliquely related to the intensification of agriculture. Still, there are hints of a pattern. Across many parts of Eurasia, and in a few parts of the Americas, the appearance of cities follows quite closely on a secondary, post-Ice Age shuffling of the ecological pack which started around 5000 BC. At least two environmental changes were at work here.

The first concerns rivers. At the beginning of the Holocene, the world's great rivers were mostly still wild and unpredictable. Then, around 7,000 years ago, flood regimes started changing, giving way to more settled routines. This is what created wide and highly fertile floodplains along the Yellow River, the Indus, the Tigris and other rivers that we associate with the first urban civilizations. Parallel to this, the melting of polar glaciers slowed down in the Middle Holocene to a point that allowed sea levels the world over to stabilize, at least to a greater degree than they ever had before. The combined effect of these two processes was dramatic;

especially where great rivers met the open waters, depositing their seasonal loads of fertile silt faster than seawaters could push them back. This was the origin of those great fan-like deltas we see today at the head of the Mississippi, the Nile or the Euphrates, for instance.[15]

Comprising well-watered soils, annually sifted by river action, and rich wetland and waterside habitats favoured by migratory game and waterfowl, such deltaic environments were major attractors for human populations. Neolithic farmers gravitated to them, along with their crops and livestock. Hardly surprising, considering these were effectively scaled-up versions of the kind of river, spring and lakeside environments in which Neolithic horticulture first began, but with one other major difference: just over the horizon lay the open sea, and before it expansive marshlands supplying aquatic resources to buffer the risks of farming, as well as a perennial source of organic materials (reeds, fibres, silt) to support construction and manufacturing.[16]

All this, combined with the fertility of alluvial soils further inland, promoted the growth of more specialized forms of farming in Eurasia, including the use of animal-drawn ploughs (also adopted in Egypt by 3000 BC), and the breeding of sheep for wool. Extensive agriculture may thus have been an outcome, not a cause, of urbanization.[17] Choices about which crops and animals to farm often had less to do with brute subsistence than the burgeoning industries of early cities, notably textile production, as well as popular forms of urban cuisine such as alcoholic drinks, leavened bread and dairy products. Hunters and foragers, fishers and fowlers were no less important to these new urban economies than farmers and shepherds.[18] Peasantries, on the other hand, were a later, secondary development.

Wetlands and floodplains are no friends to archaeological survival. Often, these earliest phases of urban occupation lie beneath later deposits of silt, or the remains of cities grown over them. In many parts of the world, the first available evidence relates to an already mature phase of urban expansion: by the time the picture comes into focus, we already see a marsh metropolis, or network of centres, out-scaling all previous known settlements by a factor of ten to one. Some of these cities in former wetlands have only emerged very recently into historical view – virgin births from the bulrushes. The results are often striking, and their implications still unclear.

We now know, for instance, that in China's Shandong province, on the lower reaches of the Yellow River, settlements of 300 hectares or more – such as Liangchengzhen and Yaowangcheng – were present by no later than 2500 BC, which is over 1,000 years before the earliest royal dynasties developed on the Central Chinese plains. On the other side of the Pacific, around the same time, ceremonial centres of great magnitude developed in the valley of Peru's Rio Supe, notably at the site of Caral, where archaeologists have uncovered sunken plazas and monumental platforms four millennia older than the Inca Empire.[19] The extent of human habitation around these great centres is still to be determined.

These new findings show that archaeologists still have much to find out about the distribution of the world's first cities. They also indicate how much older those cities may be than the systems of authoritarian government and literate administration that were once assumed necessary for their foundation. Similar revelations are emerging from the Maya lowlands, where ceremonial centres of truly enormous size – and, so far, presenting no evidence of monarchy or stratification – can now be dated back as far as 1000 BC: more than 1,000 years before the rise of Classic Maya kings, whose royal cities were notably smaller in scale.[20] This, in turn, raises a fascinating but difficult question. What held the earliest experiments in urbanization together, other than reeds, fibres and clay? What was their social glue? It is high time for some examples but, before we examine the great valley civilizations of the Tigris, Indus and Yellow Rivers, we will first visit the interior grasslands of eastern Europe.

ON 'MEGA-SITES', AND HOW ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS IN UKRAINE ARE OVERTURNING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM ON THE ORIGINS OF CITIES

The remote history of the countries around the Black Sea is awash with gold. At least, any casual visitor to the major museums of Sofia, Kiev or Tbilisi could be forgiven for leaving with this impression. Ever since the days of Herodotus, outsiders to the region have come home full of lurid tales about the lavish funerals of warrior-kings, and the mass slaughter of horses and retainers that accompanied them. Over 1,000 years later, in the tenth century AD, the traveller Ibn Fadlan was telling almost identical stories to impress and titillate his Arab readers.

As a result, in these lands the term 'prehistory' (or sometimes 'proto-history') has always evoked the legacy of aristocratic tribes and lavish tombs crammed with treasure. Such tombs are, certainly, there to be found. On the region's western flank, in Bulgaria, they begin with the gold-soaked cemetery of Varna, oddly placed in what regional archaeologists refer to as the Copper Age, corresponding to the fifth millennium BC. To the east, in southernmost Russia, a tradition of extravagant funeral rites began shortly after, associated with burial mounds known as *kurgans*, which do indeed mark the resting places of warrior princes of one sort or another.[21]

But it turns out this wasn't the whole story. In fact, magnificent warrior tombs might not even be the most interesting aspect of the region's prehistory. There were also cities. Archaeologists in Ukraine and Moldova got their first inkling of them in the 1970s, when they began to detect the existence of human settlements older and much larger than anything they had previously encountered.[22] Further research showed that these settlements, often referred to as 'mega-sites' – with their modern names of Taljanky, Maidenetske, Nebelivka and so on – dated to the early and middle centuries of the fourth millennium BC, which meant that some existed even before the earliest known cities in Mesopotamia. They were also larger in area.

Yet, even now, in scholarly discussions about the origins of urbanism, these Ukrainian sites almost never come up. Indeed, the very use of the term 'mega-site' is a kind of euphemism, signalling to a wider audience that these should not be thought of as proper cities but as something more like villages that for some reason had expanded inordinately in size. Some archaeologists even refer to them outright as 'overgrown villages'. How do we account for this reluctance to welcome the Ukrainian mega-sites into the charmed circle of urban origins? Why has anyone with even a passing interest in the origin of cities heard of Uruk or Mohenjo-daro, but almost no one of Taljanky?

The answer is largely political. Some of it concerns simple geopolitics: much of the initial work of discovery was carried out by Eastern Bloc scholars during the Cold War, which not only slowed down the reception of their findings in Western academic circles but tended to tinge any news of surprising discoveries with at least a tiny bit of scepticism. Even more, perhaps, it had to do with the internal political life of the prehistoric settlements themselves. That is, according to conventional views of politics,

there didn't seem to be any. No evidence was unearthed of centralized government or administration – or indeed, any form of ruling class. In other words, these enormous settlements had all the hallmarks of what evolutionists would call a 'simple', not a 'complex' society.

It's hard here not to recall Ursula Le Guin's famous short story 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas', about the imaginary city of Omelas, a city which also made do without kings, wars, slaves or secret police. We have a tendency, Le Guin notes, to write off such a community as 'simple', but in fact these citizens of Omelas were 'not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us.' The trouble is just that 'we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid.'

Le Guin has a point. Obviously, we have no idea how relatively happy the inhabitants of Ukrainian mega-sites like Maidenetske or Nebelivka were, compared to the lords who constructed *kurgan* burials, or even the retainers ritually sacrificed at their funerals; or the bonded labourers who provided wheat and barley to the inhabitants of later Greek colonies along the Black Sea coast (though we can guess), and as anyone who has read the story knows, Omelas had some problems too. But the point remains: why do we assume that people who have figured out a way for a large population to govern and support itself without temples, palaces and military fortifications – that is, without overt displays of arrogance, self-abasement and cruelty – are somehow less complex than those who have not?

Why would we hesitate to dignify such a place with the name of 'city'?

The mega-sites of Ukraine and adjoining regions were inhabited from roughly 4100 to 3300 BC, that is, for something in the order of eight centuries, which is considerably longer than most subsequent urban traditions. Why were they there at all? Like the cities of Mesopotamia and the Indus valley, they appear to have been born of ecological opportunism in the middle phase of the Holocene. Not floodplain dynamics, in this case, but processes of soil formation on the flatlands north of the Black Sea. These black earths (Russian: *chernozem*) are legendary for their fertility; for the empires of later antiquity, they made the lands between the Southern Bug and Dniepr Rivers a breadbasket (which is why Greek city-states established colonies in the region and enslaved or made serfs of the local populations to begin with: ancient Athens was largely fed by Black Sea grain).

By 4500 BC, *chernozem* was widely distributed between the Carpathian and the Ural Mountains, where a mosaic landscape of open prairie and woodland emerged capable of supporting dense human habitation.[23] The Neolithic people who settled there had travelled east from the lower reaches of the Danube, passing through the Carpathian Mountains. We do not know why, but we do know that – throughout their peregrinations in river valleys and mountain passes – they retained a cohesive social identity. Their villages, often small in scale, shared similar cultural practices, reflected in the forms taken by their dwellings, female figurines and ways of making and serving food. The archaeological name given to this particular 'design for life' is the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture, after the sites where it was first recorded.[24]
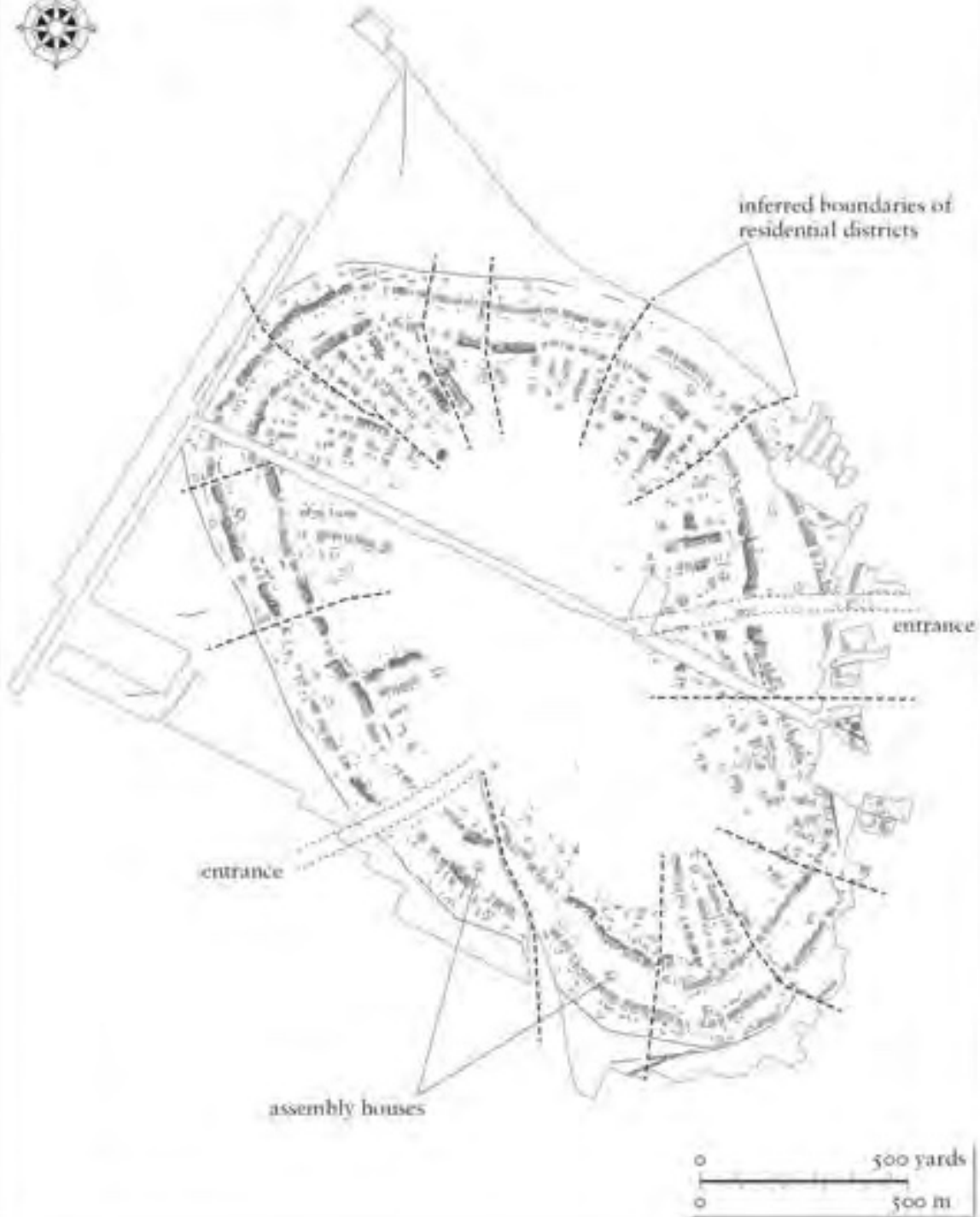
So the Ukrainian and Moldovan mega-sites did not come out of thin air. They were the physical realization of an extended community that already existed long before its constituent units coalesced into large settlements. Some tens of these settlements have now been documented. The biggest currently known – Taljanky – extends over an area of 300 hectares, outspanning the earliest phases of the city of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia. It presents no evidence of central administration or communal storage facilities. Nor have any government buildings, fortifications or monumental architecture been found. There is no acropolis or civic centre; no equivalent to Uruk's raised public district called Eanna ('House of Heaven') or the Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro.

What we do find are houses; well over 1,000 in the case of Taljanky. Rectangular houses, sixteen or so feet wide and twice as long, built of wattle and daub on timber frames, with stone foundations. With their attached gardens, these houses form such neat circular patterns that from a bird's-eye view, any mega-site resembles the inside of a tree trunk: great rings, with concentric spaces between. The innermost ring frames a big gap in the middle of the settlement, where early excavators at first expected to find something dramatic, whether magnificent buildings or grand burials. But in every known case, the central area is simply empty; guesses for its function range from popular assemblies to ceremonies or the seasonal penning of animals – or possibly all three.[25] In consequence, the standard archaeological plan of a Ukrainian mega-site is all flesh, no core.

Just as surprising as their scale is the distribution of these massive settlements, which are all quite close to each other, at most six to nine miles

apart.[26] Their total population – estimated in the many thousands per mega-site, and probably well over 10,000 in some cases – would therefore have had to draw resources from a common hinterland. Yet their ecological footprint appears to have been surprisingly light.[27] There are a number of possible explanations. Some have suggested the mega-sites were only occupied part of the year, even for just a season,[28] making them urban-scale versions of the kind of temporary aggregation sites we discussed in Chapter Three. This is difficult to reconcile with the substantial nature of their houses (consider the effort expended in felling trees, laying foundations, making good walls etc.). More probably, the mega-sites were much like most other cities, neither permanently inhabited nor strictly seasonal, but somewhere in between.[29]

Nebelivka: a prehistoric 'mega-site' in the Ukrainian forest-steppe

N

inferred boundaries of residential districts

entrance

entrance

assembly houses

0   500 yards
0   500 m

We should also consider if the inhabitants of the mega-sites consciously managed their ecosystem to avoid large-scale deforestation. This is consistent with archaeological studies of their economy, which suggest a pattern of small-scale gardening, often taking place within the bounds of the settlement, combined with the keeping of livestock, cultivation of orchards, and a wide spectrum of hunting and foraging activities. The diversity is actually remarkable, as is its sustainability. As well as wheat, barley and pulses, the citizens' plant diet included apples, pears, cherries, sloes, acorns, hazelnuts and apricots. Mega-site dwellers were hunters of red deer, roe deer and wild boar as well as farmers and foresters. It was 'play farming' on a grand scale: an urban populus supporting itself through small-scale cultivation and herding, combined with an extraordinary array of wild foods.[30]

This way of life was by no means 'simple'. As well as managing orchards, gardens, livestock and woodlands, the inhabitants of these cities imported salt in bulk from springs in the eastern Carpathians and the Black Sea littoral. Flint extraction by the ton took place in the Dniestr valley, furnishing material for tools. A household potting industry flourished, its products considered among the finest ceramics of the prehistoric world; and regular supplies of copper flowed in from the Balkans.[31] There is no firm consensus among archaeologists about what sort of social arrangements all this required, but most would agree the logistical challenges were daunting. A surplus was definitely produced, and with it ample potential for some to seize control of the stocks and supplies, to lord it over others or battle for the spoils; but over eight centuries we find little evidence for warfare or the rise of social elites. The true complexity of the mega-sites lies in the strategies they adopted to prevent such things.

How did it all work? In the absence of written records (or a time machine), there are serious limits to what we can say about kinship and inheritance, or how people in these cities went about making collective decisions.[32] Still, some clues exist, beginning at the level of individual households. Each of these had a roughly common plan, but each was also, in its own way,

unique. From one dwelling to the next there is constant innovation, even playfulness, in the rules of commensality. Each family unit invented its own slight variations on domestic rituals, reflected in its unique assemblage of serving and eating vessels, painted with polychrome designs of often mesmerizing intensity and made in a dazzling variety of forms. It's as if every household was an artists' collective which invented its own unique aesthetic style.

Some of this household pottery evokes the bodies of women; and among the other items most commonly found within the remains of houses are female figurines of clay. Model houses and tiny replicas of furniture and eating equipment also survive – miniature representations of lost social worlds, again, affirming the prominent role of women within them.[33] All this tells us a little about the cultural atmosphere of these households (and one can easily see why Marija Gimbutas, whose syntheses of Eurasian prehistory we discussed earlier, considered the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture to be part of 'Old Europe', with its cultural roots in the early farming societies of Anatolia and the Middle East). But how did these households come together in such numbers to form the great concentric arrangements which give the Ukrainian mega-sites their distinctive plan?

The first impression of these sites is one of rigid uniformity, a closed circuit of social interaction, but closer study reveals constant deviation from the norm. Individual households would sometimes opt to cluster together in groups of between three and ten families. Ditches or pits marked their boundaries. At some sites these groups coalesce into neighbourhoods, radiating out from the centre to the perimeter of the city, and even forming larger residential districts or quarters. Each had access to at least one assembly house, a structure larger than an ordinary dwelling where a wider sector of the population might gather periodically for activities we can only guess at (political meetings? legal proceedings? seasonal festivities?).[34]

Careful analysis by archaeologists shows how the apparent uniformity of the Ukrainian mega-sites arose from the bottom up, through processes of local decision-making.[35] This would have to mean that members of individual households – or at least, their neighbourhood representatives – shared a conceptual framework for the settlement as a whole. We can also safely infer that this framework was based on the image of a circle and its properties of transformation. To understand how the citizens put this mental image into effect, translating it into a workable social reality at such

enormous scales, we cannot rely on archaeology alone. Fortunately, the burgeoning field of ethno-mathematics shows exactly how such a system might have worked in practice. The most informative case we know of is that of traditional Basque settlements in the highlands of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques.

These modern Basque societies – tucked down in the southwest corner of France – also imagine their communities in circular form, just as they imagine themselves as being surrounded by a circle of mountains. They do so as a way of emphasizing the ideal equality of households and family units. Now, obviously, the social arrangements of these existing communities are unlikely to be quite the same as those of ancient Ukraine. Nonetheless, they provide an excellent illustration of how such circular arrangements can form part of self-conscious egalitarian projects, in which 'everyone has neighbours to the left and neighbours to the right. No one is first, and no one is last.'[36]

In the commune of Sainte-Engrâce, for instance, the circular template of the village is also a dynamic model used as a counting device, to ensure the seasonal rotation of essential tasks and duties. Each Sunday, one household will bless two loaves at the local church, eat one, then present the other to its 'first neighbour' (the house to their right); the next week that neighbour will do the same to the next house to its right, and so on in a clockwise direction, so that in a community of 100 households it would take about two years to complete a full cycle.[37]

As so often with such matters, there is an entire cosmology, a theory of the human condition, baked in, as it were: the loaves are spoken of as 'semen', as something that gives life; meanwhile, care for the dead and dying travels in the opposite, counter-clockwise direction. But the system is also the basis for economic co-operation. If any one household is for any reason unable to fulfil its obligations when it is time to do so, a careful system of substitution comes into play, so neighbours at first, second and sometimes third remove can temporarily take their place. This in turn provides the model for virtually all forms of co-operation. The same system of 'first neighbours' and substitution, the same serial model of reciprocity, is used to call up anything that requires more hands than a single family can provide: from planting and harvesting to cheese-making and slaughtering pigs. It follows that households cannot simply schedule their daily labour in line with their own needs. They also have to consider their obligations to

other households, which in turn have their own obligations to other, different households, and so on. Factoring in that some tasks – such as moving flocks to highland pastures, or the demands of milking, shearing and guarding herds – may require the combined efforts of ten different households, and that households have to balance the scheduling of numerous different sorts of commitment, we begin to get a sense of the complexities involved.

In other words, such 'simple' economies are rarely all that simple. They often involve logistical challenges of striking complexity, resolved on a basis of intricate systems of mutual aid, all without any need of centralized control or administration. Basque villagers in this region are self-conscious egalitarians, in the sense that they insist each household is ultimately the same and has the same responsibilities as any others; yet rather than governing themselves through communal assemblies (which earlier generations of Basque townsfolk famously created in places like Guernica), they rely on mathematical principles such as rotation, serial replacement and alternation. But the end result is the same, and the system flexible enough that changes in the number of households or the capacities of their individual members can be continually taken into account, ensuring relations of equality are preserved over the long term, with an almost complete absence of internal conflict.

There is no reason to assume that such a system would only work on a small scale: a village of 100 households is already way beyond Dunbar's proposed cognitive threshold of 150 people (the number of stable, trusting relationships we are able to keep track of in our minds, before – according, that is, to Dunbar – we are obliged to start putting chiefs and administrators in charge of social affairs); and Basque villages and towns used to be far larger than this. One can at least begin to see how – in a different context – such egalitarian systems might scale up to communities of many hundreds or even thousands of households. Returning to the Ukrainian mega-sites, we must admit that much remains unknown. Around the middle of the fourth millennium BC, most of them were basically abandoned. We still don't know why. What they offer us, in the meantime, is significant: proof that highly egalitarian organization has been possible on an urban scale.[38] With this in mind, we can look with fresh eyes at some better-known cases from other parts of Eurasia. Let's start with Mesopotamia.

societies of the Northwest Coast or, for that matter, the Māori of New Zealand.

All these cultures were aristocracies, without any centralized authority or principle of sovereignty (or, maybe, some largely symbolic, formal one). Instead of a single centre, we find numerous heroic figures competing fiercely with one another for retainers and slaves. 'Politics', in such societies, was composed of a history of personal debts of loyalty or vengeance between heroic individuals; all, moreover, focus on game-like contests as the primary business of ritual, indeed political, life.[81] Often, massive amounts of loot or wealth were squandered, sacrificed or given away in such theatrical performances. Moreover, all such groups explicitly resisted certain features of nearby urban civilizations: above all, writing, for which they tended to substitute poets or priests who engaged in rote memorization or elaborate techniques of oral composition. Inside their own societies, at least, they also rejected commerce. Hence standardized currency, either in physical or credit forms, tended to be eschewed, with the focus instead on unique material treasures.

It goes without saying that we cannot possibly hope to trace all these various tendencies back into periods for which no written testimony exists. But it is equally clear that, insofar as modern archaeology allows us to identify an ultimate origin for 'heroic societies' of this sort, it is to be found precisely on the spatial and cultural margins of the world's first great urban expansion (indeed, some of the earliest aristocratic tombs in the Turkish highlands were dug directly into the ruins of abandoned Uruk colonies).[82] Aristocracies, perhaps monarchy itself, first emerged in opposition to the egalitarian cities of the Mesopotamian plains, for which they likely had much the same mixed but ultimately hostile and murderous feelings as Alaric the Goth would later have towards Rome and everything it stood for, Genghis Khan towards Samarkand or Merv, or Timur towards Delhi.

IN WHICH WE CONSIDER WHETHER THE INDUS CIVILIZATION WAS AN EXAMPLE OF CASTE BEFORE KINGSHIP

Fast-forward now 1,000 years from the Uruk expansion to around 2600 BC. On the banks of the Indus River, in what is today the Pakistani province of Sindh, a city was founded on virgin soil: Mohenjo-daro. It remained there

for 700 years.[83] The city is considered the greatest expression of a new form of society that flourished in the valley of the Indus at the time; a form of society which archaeologists have come to know simply as the 'Indus' or 'Harappan' civilization. It was South Asia's first urban culture. Here we will find further evidence that Bronze Age cities – the world's first large-scale, planned human settlements – could emerge in the absence of ruling classes and managerial elites; but those of the Indus valley also present some uniquely puzzling features, which archaeologists have debated for more than a century.[84] Let's introduce both the problem and its key locus – the site of Mohenjo-daro – in a little more detail.

On first inspection, Mohenjo-daro bears out its reputation as the most completely preserved city of the Bronze Age world. There's something staggering about it all: a brazen modernity, which was not lost on the first excavators of the site, who didn't hesitate to designate certain areas 'high streets', 'police barracks' and so on (though much of this initial interpretation, as it turned out, was fantasy). Most of the city consists of the brick-built houses of the Lower Town, with its grid-like arrangement of streets, long boulevards and sophisticated drainage and sanitation systems (terracotta sewage pipes, private and public toilets and bathrooms were ubiquitous). Above these surprisingly comfortable arrangements loomed the Upper Citadel, a raised civic centre, also known (for reasons we'll explain) as the Mound of the Great Bath. Though both parts of the city stood on massive artificial foundations of heaped earth, lifting them above the floodplain, the Upper Citadel was also encased in a wall of baked bricks made to standard dimensions which extended all the way round it, affording further protection when the Indus broke its banks.[85]

In the wider ambit of Indus civilization, there is only one rival to Mohenjo-daro: the site of Harappa (whence the alternative term 'Harappan civilization'). Of similar magnitude, it lies about 370 miles upstream on the Ravi River, a tributary of the Indus. Many other sites of the same date and cultural family exist, ranging from large towns to hamlets. They extend over most of the area of modern-day Pakistan, and well beyond the floodplain of the Indus, into northern India. For instance, perched on an island amid the salt flats of the Great Rann of Kutch lie the striking remains of Dholavira, a town equipped with over fifteen brick-built reservoirs to capture rainwater and run-off from local streams. The Indus civilization had colonial outposts as far as the Oxus River in northern Afghanistan, where

the site of Shortugai presents a miniature replica of its urban mother-culture: ideally placed to tap the rich mineral sources of the Central Asian highlands (lapis, tin and other gemstones and metals). Such materials were prized by lowland artisans and their commercial partners as far away as Iran, Arabia and Mesopotamia. At Lothal, on Gujarat's Gulf of Khambhat, lie remains of a well-appointed port town facing the Arabian Sea, presumably built by Indus engineers to service maritime trade.[86]

The Indus civilization had its own script, which appeared and vanished together with its cities. It has not been deciphered. What survives to us are mainly short captions, stamped or incised on storage jars, copper tools and the remnants of a lonely piece of street signage from Dholavira. Short inscriptions also feature on tiny stone amulets, captioning pictorial vignettes or miniature animal figures, carved with striking precision. Most of these are realistic depictions of water buffalo, elephant, rhinoceros, tiger and other local fauna, but they also include fantastic beasts, most often unicorns. Debate surrounds the amulets' function: were they worn as personal identifiers, for passage through the city's gated quarters and walled compounds, or perhaps to gain entry to ceremonial occasions? Or were they used for administration, to impress identifying signs on commodities passing among unknown parties: a Bronze Age origin of product-branding? Could they be all of these things?[87]

Aside from our inability to make sense of the Indus script, there are many puzzling aspects of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. Both were excavated in the early twentieth century, when archaeology was a large-scale and broad-brush affair, with sometimes thousands of workers digging simultaneously. Rapid work on this scale produced striking spatial exposures of street plans, residential neighbourhoods and entire ceremonial precincts. But it largely neglected to chart the site's development over time, a process that can only be disentangled with more careful methods. For instance, early excavators recorded just the baked-brick foundations of buildings. The superstructures were of softer mud-brick, often missed or unwittingly destroyed in the course of rapid digging; while the upper storeys of large civic structures were originally of fine timber, rotted or removed for reuse in antiquity. What seems in plan to be a single phase of urban construction is, in reality, a false composite made up of different elements from various periods of the city's history – a city inhabited for over 500 years.[88]

All of which leaves us with plenty of known unknowns, including the city's size or population (recent estimates suggest up to 40,000 residents, but really we can only guess).[89] It's not even clear where to draw the city boundaries. Some scholars include only the immediately visible areas of the planned Lower Town and the Upper Citadel as part of the city proper, yielding a total area of 100 hectares. Others note scattered evidence for the city's extension over a far greater area, maybe three times this size – we'd have to call them 'Lower, Lower Towns' – long since submerged by floodplain soils: a poignant illustration of that conspiracy between nature and culture which so often makes us forget that shanty dwellers even exist.

But it's this last point that leads us in more promising directions. Despite all its problems, Mohenjo-daro and its sister sites in the Punjab do offer some insights into the nature of civic life in the first cities of South Asia, and into the wider question that we posed at the start of this chapter: is there a causal relationship between scale and inequality in human societies?

Let's consider, for a moment, what archaeology tells us about wealth distribution at Mohenjo-daro. Contrary to what we might expect, there is no concentration of material wealth on the Upper Citadel. Quite the opposite, in fact. Metals, gemstones and worked shell – for example – were widely available to households of the Lower Town; archaeologists have recovered such goods from caches beneath house floors, and bundles of them are scattered over every quarter of the site.[90] The same goes for little terracotta figures of people wearing bangles, diadems and other flashy personal adornment. Not so the Upper Citadel.

Writing, and also standard weights and measures, were also widely distributed across the Lower Town; so too evidence for craft occupations and industries from metalworking and potting to the manufacture of beads. All flourished down there, in the Lower Town, but are absent from the city's Upper Citadel, where the main civic structures stood.[91] Objects made for personal display had little place, it seems, in the most elevated quarters of the city. Instead, what defines the Upper Citadel are buildings like the Great Bath – a large sunken pool measuring roughly forty feet long and over six feet deep, lined with carefully executed brickwork, sealed with plaster and bitumen and entered on either side via steps with timber treads – all constructed to the finest architectural standards, yet unmarked by monuments dedicated to particular rulers, or indeed any other signs of personal aggrandizement.

Because of its lack of royal sculpture, or indeed other forms of monumental depiction, the Indus valley has been termed a 'faceless civilization'.[92] At Mohenjo-daro, it seems, the focus of civic life was not a palace or cenotaph, but a public facility for purifying the body. Brick-made bathing floors and platforms also were a standard fixture in most dwellings of the Lower Town. Citizens seem to have been familiar with very specific notions of cleanliness, with daily ablutions apparently forming part of their domestic routine. The Great Bath was, at one level, an outsized version of these residential washing facilities. On another level, though, life on the Upper Citadel seems to negate that of the Lower Town.

So long as the Great Bath was in use – and it was for some centuries – we find no evidence of industrial activities nearby. The narrowing lanes on the acropolis effectively prevented the use of ox-drawn carts and similar commercial traffic. Here, it was the Bath itself – and the act of bathing – that became the focus of social life and labour. Barracks and storerooms adjacent to the Bath housed a staff (whether in attached or rotating service, we cannot know) and their essential supplies. The Upper Citadel was a special sort of 'city within the city', in which ordinary principles of household organization went into reverse.[93]

All this is redolent of the inequality of the caste system, with its hierarchical division of social functions, organized on an ascending scale of purity.[94] But the earliest recorded reference to caste in South Asia comes only 1,000 years later, in the *Rig Veda* – an anthology of sacrificial hymns, first committed to writing around 1200 BC. The system, as described in later Sanskrit epics, consisted of four hereditary ranks or *varnas*: priests (*brahmins*), warriors or nobles (*kshatriyas*), farmers and traders (*vaishyas*) and labourers (*shudras*); and also those so lowly as to be excluded from the *varnas* entirely. The very top ranks belong to world-renouncers, whose abstention from trappings of personal status raises them to a higher spiritual plane. Commerce, industry and status rivalries may all thrive, but the wealth, power or prosperity being fought over is always seen as of lesser value – in the great scheme of things – than the purity of priestly caste.

The *varna* system is about as 'unequal' as any social system can possibly be, yet where one ranks within it has less to do with how many material goods one can pile up or lay claim to than with one's relation to certain (polluting) substances – physical dirt and waste, but also bodily matter linked to birth, death and menstruation – and the people who handle them.

All this creates serious problems for any contemporary scholar seeking to apply Gini coefficients or any other property-based measure of 'inequality' to the society in question. On the other hand, and despite the great gaps in time between our sources, it might allow us to make sense of some of Mohenjo-daro's otherwise puzzling features, such as the fact that those residential buildings most closely resembling palaces are not located on the Upper Citadel but crammed into the streets of the Lower Town – that bit closer to the mud, sewage pipes and paddy fields, where such jostling for worldly status seems to have properly belonged.[95]

Clearly, we can't just project the social world evoked in Sanskrit literature indiscriminately on to the much earlier Indus civilization. If the first South Asian cities were indeed organized on caste-like principles, then we would immediately have to acknowledge a major difference from the system of ranks described over a millennium later in Sanskrit texts, where second-highest status (just below *brahmins*) is reserved for the warrior caste known as *kshatriyas*. In the Bronze Age Indus valley there is no evidence of anything like a *kshatriya* class of warrior-nobles, nor of the kind of aggrandizing behaviour associated with such groups in later epic tales such as the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana*. Even the largest cities, like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, yield no evidence of spectacular sacrifices or feasts, no pictorial narratives of military prowess or celebrations of famous deeds, no sign of tournaments in which anyone vied over titles and treasures, no aristocratic burials. And if such things were going on in the Indus cities at the time, there would be ways to know.

Indus civilization wasn't some kind of commercial or spiritual arcadia; nor was it an entirely peaceful society.[96] But neither does it contain any evidence for charismatic authority figures: war leaders, lawgivers and the like. A small, cloaked sculpture made of yellow limestone from Mohenjo-daro, known in the literature as the 'priest-king', is often presented as such. But, in fact, there's no particular reason to believe the figure really is a priest-king or an authority figure of any sort. It's simply a limestone image of an urbane Bronze Age man with a beard. The fact that past generations of scholars have insisted on referring to him as 'priest-king' is testimony more to their own assumptions about what they think must have been happening in early Asian cities than anything the evidence implies.

Over time, experts have largely come to agree that there's no evidence for priest-kings, warrior nobility, or anything like what we would recognize

as a 'state' in the urban civilization of the Indus valley. Can we speak, then, of 'egalitarian cities' here as well, and if so, in what sense? If the Upper Citadel at Mohenjo-daro really was dominated by some sort of ascetic order, literally 'higher' than everyone else, and the area around the citadel by wealthy merchants, then there was a clear hierarchy between groups. Yet this doesn't necessarily mean that the groups themselves were hierarchical in their internal organization, or that ascetics and merchants had a greater say than anyone else when it came to matters of day-to-day governance.

Now, you might at this point be objecting: 'well, yes, technically that may be true, but honestly, what's the chance that they weren't hierarchical, or that the pure or the wealthy did not have greater say in running the city's affairs?' In fact, it seems very difficult for most of us even to imagine how self-conscious egalitarianism on a large scale would work. But this again simply serves to demonstrate how automatically we have come to accept an evolutionary narrative in which authoritarian rule is somehow the natural outcome whenever a large enough group of people are brought together (and, by implication, that something called 'democracy' emerges only much later, as a conceptual breakthrough – and most likely just once, in ancient Greece).

Scholars tend to demand clear and irrefutable evidence for the existence of democratic institutions of any sort in the distant past. It's striking how they never demand comparably rigorous proof for top-down structures of authority. These latter are usually treated as a default mode of history: the kind of social structures you would simply expect to see in the absence of evidence for anything else.[97] We could speculate about where this habit of thought comes from, but it wouldn't help us to decide if the everyday governance of early Indus cities could have proceeded on egalitarian lines, alongside the existence of ascetic social orders. It is more useful, we suggest, to level the interpretive playing field by asking if there are cases of such things happening in later, better-documented periods of South Asian history.

In fact, such cases are not difficult to find. Consider the social milieu from which Buddhist monasteries, or *sangha*, arose. The word *sangha* was actually first used for the popular assemblies that governed many South Asian cities in the Buddha's lifetime – roughly the fifth century BC – and early Buddhist texts insist that the Buddha was himself inspired by the example of these republics, and in particular the importance they accorded

to convening full and frequent public assemblies. Early Buddhist *sanghas* were meticulous in their demands for all monks to gather together in order to reach unanimous decisions on matters of general concern, resorting to majority vote only when consensus broke down.[98] All this remains true of *sangha* to this day. Over the course of time, Buddhist monasteries have varied a great deal in governance – many have been extremely hierarchical in practice. But the important thing here is that even 2,000 years ago it was not considered in any way unusual for members of ascetic orders to make decisions in much the same way as, for example, contemporary anti-authoritarian activists do in Europe or Latin America (by consensus process, with a fallback on majority vote); that these forms of governance were based on an ideal of equality; and that there were entire cities governed in what was seen to be exactly the same way.[99]

   We might go further still and ask: are there any known examples of societies with formal caste hierarchies, in which practical governance nonetheless takes place on egalitarian lines? It may seem paradoxical but the answer, again, is yes: there is plenty of evidence for such arrangements, some of which continue to this day. Perhaps best documented is the *seka* system on the island of Bali, whose population adopted Hinduism in the Middle Ages. Balinese are not only divided by caste: their society is conceived as a total hierarchy in which not just every group but every individual knows (or at least, should know) their exact position in relation to everyone else. In principle, then, there are no equals, and most Balinese would argue that in the greater cosmic scheme of things, this must always be so.

   At the same time, however, practical affairs such as the management of communities, temples and agricultural life are organized according to the *seka* system, in which everyone is expected to participate on equal terms and come to decisions by consensus. For instance, if a neighbourhood association meets to discuss repairing the roofs of public buildings, or what to serve for food during an upcoming dance contest, those who consider themselves particularly high and mighty, offended by the prospect of having to sit in a circle on the ground with lowly neighbours, may choose not to attend; but in that case they are obliged to pay fines for non-attendance – fines which are then used to pay for the feast or the repairs.[100] We currently have no way of knowing if such a system prevailed in the Indus valley over 4,000 years ago. The example merely serves to underscore that there is no

necessary correspondence between overarching concepts of social hierarchy and the practical mechanics of local governance.

The same is, incidentally, true of kingdoms and empires. One very common theory held that these tended to first appear in river valleys, because agriculture there involved the maintenance of complex irrigation systems, which in turn required some form of administrative co-ordination and control. Bali again provides the perfect counter-example. For most of its history Bali was divided into a series of kingdoms, endlessly squabbling over this or that. It is also famous as a rather small volcanic island which manages to support one of the densest populations on earth by a complex system of irrigated wet-rice agriculture. Yet the kingdoms seem to have had no role whatsoever in the management of the irrigation system. This was governed by a series of 'water-temples', through which the distribution of water was managed by an even more complex system of consensual decision-making, according to egalitarian principles, by the farmers themselves.[101]

CONCERNING AN APPARENT CASE OF 'URBAN REVOLUTION' IN CHINESE PREHISTORY

So far in this chapter we've looked at what happened when cities first appeared in three distinct parts of Eurasia. In each case, we noted the absence of monarchs or any evidence of a warrior elite, and the corresponding likelihood that each had instead developed institutions of communal self-governance. Within those broad parameters, each regional tradition was very different. Contrasts between the expansion of Uruk and the Ukrainian mega-sites illustrate this point with particular clarity. Both appear to have developed an ethos of explicit egalitarianism – but it took strikingly different forms in each.

It is possible to express these differences at a purely formal level. A self-conscious ethos of egalitarianism, at any point in history, might take either of two diametrically opposing forms. We can insist that everyone is, or should be, precisely the same (at least in the ways that we consider important); or alternatively, we can insist that everyone is so utterly different from each other that there are simply no criteria for comparison (for example, we are all unique individuals, and so there is no basis upon

which any one of us can be considered better than another). Real-life egalitarianism will normally tend to involve a bit of both.

Yet it could be argued that Mesopotamia – with its standardized household products, allocation of uniform payments to temple employees, and public assemblies – seems to have largely embraced the first version. Ukrainian mega-sites, in which each household seems to have developed its own unique artistic style and, presumably, idiosyncratic domestic rituals, embraced the second.[102] The Indus valley appears – if our interpretation is broadly correct – to represent yet a third possibility, where rigorous equality in certain areas (even the bricks were all precisely the same size) was complemented by explicit hierarchy in others.

It's important to stress that we are not arguing that the very first cities to appear in any region of the world were invariably founded on egalitarian principles (in fact, we will shortly see a perfect counter-example). What we are saying is that archaeological evidence shows this to have been a surprisingly common pattern, which goes against conventional evolutionary assumptions about the effects of scale on human society. In each of the cases we've considered so far – Ukrainian mega-sites, Uruk Mesopotamia, the Indus valley – a dramatic increase in the scale of organized human settlement took place with no resulting concentration of wealth or power in the hands of ruling elites. In short, archaeological research has shifted the burden of proof on to those theorists who claim causal connections between the origins of cities and the rise of stratified states, and whose claims now look increasingly hollow.

So far we've been providing what are effectively a series of snapshot views of cities that, in most cases, were occupied for centuries. It seems unlikely that they did not have their own share of upheavals, transformations and constitutional crises. In some cases we can be certain they did. At Mohenjo-daro, for instance, we know that roughly 200 years before the city's demise, the Great Bath had already fallen into disrepair. Industrial facilities and ordinary residences crept beyond the Lower Town, on to the Upper Citadel, and even the site of the Bath itself. Within the Lower Town, we now find buildings of truly palatial dimensions with attached craft workshops.[103] This 'other' Mohenjo-daro existed for generations, and seems to represent a self-conscious project of transforming the city's (by then centuries-old)

hierarchy into something else – though archaeologists have yet to fathom quite what that other thing was supposed to be.

Like the Ukrainian cities, those of the Indus were eventually abandoned entirely, to be replaced by societies of much smaller scale where heroic aristocrats held sway. In Mesopotamian cities palaces eventually appear. Overall, one might be forgiven for thinking that history was progressing uniformly in an authoritarian direction. And in the very long run it was; at least, by the time we have written histories, lords and kings and would-be world emperors have popped up almost everywhere (though civic institutions and independent cities never entirely go away).[104] Still, rushing to this conclusion would be unwise. Dramatic reversals have sometimes taken place in the other direction – for instance in China.

In China, archaeology has opened a yawning chasm between the birth of cities and the appearance of the earliest named royal dynasty, the Shang. Since the early twentieth century discovery of inscribed oracle bones at Anyang in the north-central province of Henan, political history in China has started with the Shang rulers, who came to power around 1200 BC.[105] Until quite recently, Shang civilization was thought to be a fusion of earlier urban ('Erligang' and 'Erlitou') and aristocratic or 'nomadic' elements, the latter taking the form of bronze casting techniques, new types of weaponry, and horse-drawn chariots first developed on the Inner Asian steppe, home to a series of powerful and highly mobile societies who played so much havoc with later Chinese history.[106]

Before the Shang, nothing particularly interesting was supposed to have happened – just a few decades ago, textbooks on early China simply presented a long series of 'Neolithic' cultures receding into the distant past, defined by technological trends in farming and stylistic changes in regional traditions of pottery and the design of ritual jades. The underlying assumption was that these were pretty much the same as Neolithic farmers were imagined to be anywhere else: living in villages, developing embryonic forms of social inequality, preparing the way for the sudden leap that would bring the rise of cities and, with cities, the first dynastic states and empires. But we now know this is not what happened at all.

Today, archaeologists in China speak of a 'Late Neolithic' or 'Longshan' period marked by what can be described, without equivocation, as cities. Already by 2600 BC we find a spread of settlements surrounded by rammed earth walls across the entire valley of the Yellow River, from the coastal

margins of Shandong to the mountains of southern Shanxi. They range in size from centres of more than 300 hectares to tiny principalities, little more than villages but still fortified.[107] The major demographic hubs lay far away, on the lower reaches of the Yellow River to the east; also to the west of Henan, in the Fen River valley of Shanxi province; and in the Liangzhu culture of southern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang.[108]

Many of the largest Neolithic cities contain cemeteries, where individual burials hold tens or even hundreds of carved ritual jades. These may be badges of office, or perhaps a form of ritual currency: in ancestral rites, the stacking and combination of such jades, often in great number, allowed differences of rank to be measured along a common scale of value, spanning the living and the dead. Accommodating such finds in the annals of written Chinese history proved an uncomfortable task, since we are speaking of a long and apparently tumultuous epoch that just wasn't supposed to have happened.[109]

The problem is not merely one of time, but also of space. Astonishingly, some of the most striking 'Neolithic' leaps towards urban life are now known to have taken place in the far north, on the frontier with Mongolia. From the perspective of later Chinese empires (and the historians who described them), these regions were already halfway to 'nomad-barbarian' and would eventually end up beyond the Great Wall. Nobody expected archaeologists to find there, of all places, a 4,000-year-old city, extending over 400 hectares, with a great stone wall enclosing palaces and a step-pyramid, lording it over a subservient rural hinterland nearly 1,000 years pre-Shang.

The excavations at Shimao, on the Tuwei River, have revealed all this, along with abundant evidence for sophisticated crafts – including bone-working and bronze-casting – and warfare, including the mass killing and burial of captives, in around 2000 BC.[110] Here we sense a much livelier political scene than was ever imagined in the annals of later courtly tradition. Some of it had a grisly aspect, including the decapitation of captured foes, and the burial of some thousands of ancestral jade axes and sceptres in cracks between great stone blocks of the city wall, not to be found or seen again until the prying eyes of archaeologists uncovered them over four millennia later. The likely intention of all this was to disrupt, demoralize and delegitimize rival lineages ('all in all, you're just another jade in the wall').

At the site of Taosi – contemporary with Shimao, but located far to the south in the Jinnan basin – we find a rather different story. Between 2300 and 1800 BC, Taosi went through three phases of expansion. First, a fortified town of sixty hectares arose on the ruins of a village, expanding subsequently to a city of 300 hectares. In these early and middle periods, Taosi presents evidence for social stratification almost as dramatic as what we see at Shimao, or indeed what we might expect of a later imperial Chinese capital. There were massive enclosure walls, road systems and large, protected storage areas; also rigid segregation between commoner and elite quarters, with craft workshops and a calendrical monument clustered around what was most likely some sort of palace.

Burials in the early town cemetery of Taosi fell into clearly distinct social classes. Commoner tombs were modest; elite tombs were full of hundreds of lacquered vessels, ceremonial jade axes and remains of extravagant pork feasts. Then suddenly, around 2000 BC, everything seems to change. As the excavator describes it:

> The city wall was razed flat, and … the original functional divisions destroyed, resulting in a lack of spatial regulation. Commoners' residential areas now covered almost the entire site, even reaching beyond the boundaries of the middle-period large city wall. The size of the city became even larger, reaching a total area of 300 hectares. In addition, the ritual area in the south was abandoned. The former palace area now included a poor-quality rammed-earth foundation of about 2,000 square metres, surrounded by trash pits used by relatively low-status people. Stone tool workshops occupied what had been the lower-level elite residential area. The city clearly had lost its status as a capital, and was in a state of anarchy.[111]

What's more, there are clues that this was a conscious process of transformation, most likely involving a significant degree of violence. Commoner graves burst in on the elite cemetery, and in the palace district a mass burial, with signs of torture and grotesque violations of the corpses, appears to be evidence for what the excavator describes as an 'act of political retribution'.[112]

Now, it is considered bad form to question an excavator's first-hand judgement about a site, but we cannot resist a couple of observations. First,

the ostensible 'state of anarchy' (elsewhere described as 'collapse and chaos')[113] lasted for a considerable period of time, between two and three centuries. Second, the overall size of Taosi during the latter period actually grew from 280 to 300 hectares. This sounds a lot less like collapse than an age of widespread prosperity, following the abolition of a rigid class system. It suggests that after the destruction of the palace, people did not fall into a Hobbesian 'war of all against all' but simply got on with their lives – presumably under what they considered a more equitable system of local self-governance.

Here, on the banks of the Fen River, we might conceivably be in the presence of evidence for the world's first documented social revolution, or at least the first in an urban setting. Other interpretations are no doubt possible. But at the very least, the case of Taosi invites us to consider the world's earliest cities as places of self-conscious social experimentation, where very different visions of what a city could be like might clash – sometimes peacefully, sometimes erupting in bursts of extraordinary violence. Increasing the number of people living in one place may vastly increase the range of social possibilities, but in no sense does it predetermine which of those possibilities will ultimately be realized.

As we'll see in the next chapter, the history of central Mexico suggests that the kinds of revolution we've been talking about – urban revolutions of the political kind – may well be a lot more common in human history than we tend to think. Again, we may never be able fully to reconstruct the unwritten constitutions of the earliest cities to appear in various parts of the world, or the reforms undergone in their first centuries, but we can no longer doubt that these existed.

55. See also Bogaard 2005.

8. IMAGINARY CITIES

1. E.g. Dunbar 1996; 2010.
2. Dunbar 1996: 69–71. The cognitive basis of Dunbar's Number is inferred from comparative studies of non-human primates, which suggest a correlation between neocortex size and group size in various species of monkeys and apes (Dunbar 2002). The significance of those findings for primate studies is not in question here, only whether they can be extended in any simple or direct way to our own species.
3. Bird et al. 2019; see also Hill et al. 2011; Migliano et al. 2017.
4. Sikora et al. 2017.
5. Bloch 2013.
6. Anderson 1991.
7. See Bird et al. 2019; and compare Bloch 2008.
8. Fischer 1977: 454.
9. See especially Childe 1950.
10. We hope to treat the rich African material, outside ancient Egypt, more fully in future work, along with many other valuable cases that could not be included here, such as the Pueblo traditions of the American Southwest, to name but one. For important existing discussions of African material, which bear out a number of our observations about the decentralized and self-organizing nature of early cities, see e.g. S. McIntosh 2009; R. McIntosh 2005.
11. Most archaeologists are generally happy to call any densely inhabited settlement over around 150 hectares, or certainly over 200 hectares, in size a 'city' (see, for example, Fletcher 1995).
12. Fleming 2009: *passim*.

13. For direct evidence of in-migration to Teotihuacan, based on isotopic studies of human remains, see White et al. 2008; for similar evidence at Harappa see Valentine et al. 2015. For a general discussion of neighbourhoods and their role in the formation of early cities, Smith 2015.

14. Plunket and Uruñuela 2006.

15. Day et al. 2007; Pennington et al. 2016.

16. See Pournelle 2003.

17. Sherratt 1997; Styring et al. 2017.

18. See Pournelle 2003; Scott 2017.

19. For China see Underhill et al. 2008; for Peru see Shady Solis, Haas and Creamer 2001.

20. Inomata et al. 2020. They key site here is in Tabasco State, and goes by the name Aguada Fénix. Dated between 1000 and 800 BC, it's now recognized as the 'oldest monumental construction ever found in the Maya area and the largest in the entire pre-Hispanic history of the region'. Aguada Fénix is by no means an outlier. Massive architectural features, implying communal labour on the scale of ancient Egyptian pyramids, have now been found at numerous sites in the Maya lowlands, many centuries before the inception of Classic Maya kingship. Mostly these comprise not pyramids but earthen platforms of staggering proportions and horizontal extent, carefully laid out in roughly E-shaped formations; their function remains unclear, as most of these sites were revealed by remote sensing (using LiDAR technology) and are yet to be excavated on any scale.

21. Anthony 2007.

22. Much of this research (published exclusively in Russian) was cutting-edge by the standards of the time, including aerial photography, subsurface prospection and careful excavation. For summaries and descriptions in English see Videiko 1996; Menotti and Korvin-Piotrovskiy 2012.

23. Shumilovskikh, Novenko and Giesecke 2017. What distinguishes these soils, in physical terms, is their high humus content and

capacity for storing moisture.

24. Anthony 2007: 160–74.

25. To get a sense of relative scale, consider that just this vacant centre of a mega-site alone could have contained a large Neolithic town such as Çatalhöyük more than twice over.

26. Scientific dating shows that some of the largest known mega-sites were contemporaneous; Müller et al. 2016: 167–8.

27. Ohlrau et al. 2016; Shumilovskikh, Novenko and Giesecke 2017.

28. Nebbia et al. (2018) present evidence in support of this extreme seasonal model, while leaving room for other possibilities.

29. The people of the mega-sites had a tradition of deliberately burning their houses, which complicates matters for modern analysts, trying to ascertain how much of each site was in use simultaneously. It's not known why this burning was done (for ritual purposes, or hygiene, or both?). Did it take place routinely within settlements, so part of the mega-site was living and growing, with the other part lingering on as a sort of 'house-cemetery'? Ordinarily, careful modelling of high-precision radiocarbon dates would allow archaeologists to resolve such issues. Frustratingly, in this case, an anomaly in the calibration curve for the fourth millennium BC is preventing them from doing so.

30. Kirleis and Dal Corso 2016.

31. Chapman and Gaydarska 2003; Manzura 2005.

32. One should also allow for different answers, varying from one mega-site to another. For example, some of them, such as Maidenetske and Nebelivka, mobilized their populations to dig perimeter ditches, marking out a garden space between the outer circuit of houses and the edge of the settlement. Others, such as Taljanky, did not. It is worth stressing that these ditches cannot possibly have functioned as fortifications or defences of any kind – they were shallow, with frequent gaps so that people could come and go. It's worth stressing this, because earlier scholarship often viewed the mega-sites as 'refuge towns' formed for the defence of a local population, a view that has now been largely

abandoned in the absence of any clear evidence for warfare or other forms of conflict (see Chapman 2010; Chapman, Gaydarska and Hale 2016).

33. Bailey 2010; Lazarovici 2010.

34. As John Chapman and colleagues show, there is nothing in these assembly houses to suggest they housed a political or religious upper class: 'Those expecting the architectural and artefactual reflections of a hierarchical society with elites ruling over thousands of inhabitants in the Trypillia mega-site will be disappointed.' (Chapman, Gaydarska and Hale 2016: 120). Aside from their scale, and sometimes an accentuated entranceway, these buildings are similar in their furnishings to ordinary dwellings, except for the interesting absence of installations for the preparation and storage of food. They have 'none of the depositional characteristics of a ritual or administrative centre' (ibid.), and do not seem to have been permanently occupied on any scale, which supports the idea that they were used for periodic, perhaps seasonal gatherings.

35. Chapman, Gaydarska and Hale 2016.

36. The Basque system of settlement organization is described by Marcia Ascher in Chapter Five of her book *Mathematics Elsewhere* (2004). We cannot do justice to the subtleties of Ascher's account here or the mathematical insight she brings, and refer interested readers to her study and to the original ethnographic material she relies on (Ott 1981).

37. Ascher 2004: 130.

38. As one of their leading excavators, the prehistorian Johannes Müller (2016: 304) puts it: 'The new and unique character of spatial organization in Late Trypillia [or 'Tripolye'] mega-sites displays some insights into human and group behaviour which might still be relevant for us today. Both the ability of non-literate societies to agglomerate in huge population groups under rural conditions of production, distribution, and consumption and their ability to avoid unnecessary social pyramids and instead practice a more public structure of decision making, reminds us of our own possibilities and abilities.'

39. *Heartland of Cities* was the title of a landmark archaeological survey and analysis of the central Mesopotamian floodplain by Robert McCormick Adams (1981).

40. The marshes of southern Iraq are home to the Maʿdān (sometimes called Marsh Arabs), best known to Europeans through the writings of Wilfred Thesiger. The marshes were systematically drained by Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath government in an act of political retribution, leading to the mass displacement of the indigenous population, and enormous damage to this ancient habitat. Since 2003 there have been sustained and partially successful efforts to reconstitute the marshes and their ancestral communities and ways of life.

41. Oates et al. 2007. Key evidence is in Syria, where military conflict has interrupted archaeological work at sites like Tell Brak, on the Khabur River (a major tributary of the Euphrates). Archaeologists call these grasslands in northern Mesopotamia the 'dry-farming' zone, because agriculture based on rainfall was possible there. The contrast is with southern Mesopotamia, an arid zone, where irrigation from the major rivers was mandatory for cereal-farming.

42. These mounds are the great material accretions of human life and death known by the Arabic word *tell*, built up through successive foundation and collapse of mud-brick architecture over tens or often hundreds of generations.

43. For a survey of 'the Sumerian world' see Crawford (ed.) 2013.

44. This also fitted rather well with British colonial concerns in the modern region they called 'Mesopotamia' which were based on a policy of elevating (and occasionally creating) local monarchies favourable to their own interests (see Cannadine 2001).

45. See Dalley 2000.

46. Wengrow 2010: 131–6; Steinkeller 2015. Scribes sometimes used another word (*bala*) – meaning 'term' or 'cycle' – to refer to corvée labour and also the succession of royal dynasties, but this is a later development. It is interesting to compare the whole phenomenon with the Malagasy *fanompoana* or 'service', a

theoretically unlimited labour duty owed to the monarchy; in this case the monarch's own family was exempt, but there are similar accounts of the absolute equality of everyone who came together to dig earth on royal projects and the cheerful enthusiasm with which they did so (Graeber 2007a: 265–7).

47. Steinkeller 2015: 149–50.

48. Written evidence from various periods of Mesopotamian history shows that rulers quite routinely proclaimed debt amnesties on jubilees and other festive occasions, wiping the slate clean for their subjects and allowing them to resume a productive civic life. Redemption of accrued debts, either by royal proclamation or in 'years of forgiveness', made good fiscal sense. It was a mechanism for restoring balance to the economy of Mesopotamian cities, and by releasing debtors and their kin from servitude it allowed them to continue living productive civic lives (see Graeber 2011; Hudson 2018).

49. Women were citizens and owned land. Some of the earliest stone monuments from anywhere in Mesopotamia record transactions between male and female owners, who appear as legal parties on an equal footing. Women also held high rank in temples, and female royals trained as scribes. If their husbands fell into debt they could become acting heads of households. Women also formed the backbone of Mesopotamia's prolific textile industry, which financed its foreign trade ventures. They worked in temples or other large institutions, often under the supervision of other women, who received land allotments in similar proportions to men. Some women were independent financial operators, issuing credit to other women; see, in general, Zagarell 1986; van de Mieroop 1989; Wright 2007; Asher-Greve 2012. Some of the earliest documentation on these matters comes from Girsu, in the city-state of Lagash, around the middle of the third millennium BC. It comprises some 1,800 cuneiform texts derived mostly from an institution named 'the House of the Woman' and later called 'the House of the Goddess Baba', for which see Karahashi 2016.

50. Chattel slavery, the keeping of slaves as property in private households, was so deeply rooted in the economy and society of

classical Greece that many feel justified in defining Greek cities as 'slave societies'. We find no obvious equivalent to this in ancient Mesopotamia. Temples and palaces held prisoners of war and debt defaulters as slaves or semi-free workers, who performed manual tasks such as grain-grinding or porterage all year round for food rations and owned no land of their own. Even then, they formed only a minority of the workforce in the public sector. Outright chattel slavery also existed, but played no comparably central role in the Mesopotamian economy; see Gelb 1973; Powell (ed.) 1987; Steinkeller and Hudson (eds) 2015: *passim.*

51. Jacobsen 1943; see also Postgate 1992: 80–81.

52. Barjamovic 2004: 50 n.7.

53. Fleming 2004.

54. As John Wills (1970) noted long ago, something of the conduct of assemblies is likely preserved in the speeches ascribed to gods and goddesses in Mesopotamian myth. The deities too convene to sit in assemblies, where they exhibit skills of rhetoric, persuasive speech, logical argumentation and occasional sophistry.

55. Barjamovic 2004: 52.

56. One such 'urban village', as Nicholas Postgate (1992: 81–2) terms it, is documented in a tablet recovered from the city of Eshnunna in the Diyala valley, which lists Amorites 'living in the city' according to their wards, designated by the names of male family heads and their sons.

57. See e.g. Van de Mieroop 1999, especially p. 123.

58. Ibid. 160–61.

59. Stone and Zimansky 1995: 123.

60. Fleming 2009: 1–2.

61. Fleming (2009: 197–9) notes the 'tradition [at Urkesh] of a powerful collective balance to leadership by kings may be the inheritance of a long urban history', and that the council of elders cannot possibly be construed as part of the king's own circle of advisors. It was rather an 'entirely independent political force' of

some antiquity, a collective form of urban leadership, which 'cannot be regarded as a minor player in a primarily monarchic framework'.

62. To reconstruct early urban political systems in Mesopotamia, Jacobsen relied especially on the story of 'Gilgamesh and Agga', a brief epic composition about the war between Uruk and Kish, which describes a city council divided into two chambers.

63. Hence population estimates for the fourth millennium BC city are based almost entirely on topographical surveys and distributions of surface finds (see Nissen 2002).

64. Nissen, Damerow and Englund 1993.

65. Englund 1998: 32–41; Nissen 2002. A significant number of the monumental structures on the Eanna complex are spectacularly enlarged versions of a common household type (the so-called 'tripartite house' form) which is ubiquitous in villages of the preceding 'Ubaid period of the fifth millennium BC. Specialists debate whether some of these buildings might have been private palaces rather than temples, but in fact they don't resemble later palaces *or* temples very much. In essence, they are up-scaled versions of traditional house forms, where meetings of large numbers of people probably took place in the idiom of an extended family under the patronage of a deity-in-residence (Wengrow 1998; Ur 2014). The first compelling examples of palace architecture in cities of the southern Mesopotamian alluvium come only centuries later, in the Early Dynastic period (Moorey 1964).

66. See Crüsemann et al. (eds) 2019 for a magnificent survey of Uruk's architectural development over the ages; although we note that their interpretation plays down those aspects of urban planning we would see as clearly relating to civic participation (especially with regard to the early phases of the Eanna sanctuary they tend to assume, even in the absence of written evidence, that any sort of grand architectural project must necessarily have been intended to establish the exclusivity of a ruling elite).

67. Among them are early copies of the so-called 'Titles and Professions List', which was widely reproduced in later times and

includes (among other things) terms for various kinds of judges, mayors, priests, chairs of 'the assembly', ambassadors, messengers, overseers of flocks, groves, fields and farming equipment, and also of potting and metalworking. Nissen, Damerow and Englund (1993: 110–11) review the immense difficulties of extracting any kind of social history from such documents, which depends on finding corroborations between particular terms and their recurrence in functional administrative texts of the same period, and even then is somewhat tendentious.

68.   Though we should also note that, at least by Old Babylonian times (*c*.2000–1500 BC), much scribal instruction also went on in private households.

69.   Englund 1988.

70.   Bartash 2015. There is a possibility some were already slaves or war captives at this time (Englund 2009), and as we'll see, this becomes much more commonplace later; indeed, it is possible that what was originally a charitable organization gradually transformed as captives were added to the mix. For the demographic composition of the temple workforce in the Uruk period see also Liverani 1998.

71.   Another aspect of quality control in urban temples was the use of cylinder seals. These tiny, near-indestructible carved stones are our main source of knowledge for about 3,000 years of image-making in the Middle East, from the time of the first cities to the Persian Empire (*c*.3500–500 BC). They had many functions, and were not simply 'art objects'. In fact, cylinder seals were among the earliest devices for mechanically reproducing complex images, done by rolling the seal on to a strip or block of clay to make raised figures and signs appear, so they stand at the beginning of print media. They were impressed on inscribed clay tablets, but also marked clay stoppers of jars containing food and drink. In this way, tiny images of people, animals, monsters, gods and so on were made to guard and authorize the contents, which distinguished the otherwise standard products of temple and later palace workshops and guaranteed their authenticity as they passed among unknown parties (see Wengrow 2008).

72. Some Assyriologists once believed this sphere encompassed almost everything: that the first Mesopotamian cities were 'temple states' governed on the basis of 'theocratic socialism'. This thesis has been convincingly refuted; see Foster 1981. We don't really know what economic life was like outside the area administered by the temples; we just know that the temples administered a certain portion of the economy, but not all, and that they had nothing like political sovereignty.

73. On the Uruk Vase the figure of the goddess, probably Inanna, is larger than the males who march towards her. The only exception is the figure who approaches her directly, at the head of the parade, which is mostly lost due to a break in the vessel but is most likely the same standard male figure that appears on cylinder seals and other monuments of the time with his characteristic beard, hair gathered into a chignon, and long woven garments. It is impossible to tell what status this male figure refers to, or if it was occupied on a hereditary or rotating basis. The goddess wears a long robe, which almost completely disguises the contours of her body, while the smaller male figures appear nude, and arguably sexualised (Wengrow 1998: 792; Bahrani 2002).

74. See Yoffee 1995; Van de Mieroop 2013: 283–4.

75. See Algaze 1993. There is no hint of these colonies in the administrative correspondence of the mother-city (and writing was hardly used in the colonies themselves).

76. In essence, these were the sacred origins of what we now call commodity branding; see Wengrow 2008.

77. See Frangipane 2012.

78. Helwig 2012.

79. Frangipane 2006; Hassett and Sağlamtimur 2018.

80. Treherne 1995: 129.

81. Among the more remarkable finds from the Early Bronze Age cemetery at Başur Höyük in eastern Anatolia is an early set of sculpted gaming pieces.

82. Largely as predicted, in fact, by Andrew Sherratt (1996); and see also Wengrow 2011. Where urban and upland societies converged, a third element emerged which resembles neither the tribal aristocracies nor the more egalitarian cities. Archaeologists know this other element as the Kura-Araxes or Transcaucasian culture, but it has proved hard to define in terms of settlement types, which vary widely within it. For archaeologists, what identifies the Transcaucasian culture above all is its highly burnished pottery, which achieved a remarkable distribution extending south from the Caucasus as far as the Jordan valley. Over such considerable distances, methods for making pottery and other distinctive craft products stayed remarkably constant, suggesting to some the migration of artisans, and perhaps even whole communities, to settle in remote locations. Such diaspora groups seem to have been widely involved in the circulation and working of metals, especially copper. They carried with them certain other distinctive practices such as the use of portable cooking hobs, sometimes decorated with faces, which supported lidded pots used to prepare a cuisine based on stews and casseroles: a somewhat eccentric practice in regions where roasting and baking food in fixed ovens was an age-old practice going back to Neolithic times (see Wilkinson 2014, with further references).

83. Recent work attributes the eventual decline of the Indus civilization to changes in the flood regime of the major river systems, prompted by alterations in the monsoon cycle. This is most evident in the drying-up of the Ghaggar-Hakra, once a major course of the Indus, and a shift of human settlement to more easily watered areas where the Indus meets the rivers of Punjab, or to parts of the Indo-Gangetic plain which still fell within the catchment of the monsoon belt; Giosan et al. 2012.

84. For a review of the debates see Green (2020), who develops an argument that the Indus civilization was a case of egalitarian cities, but along rather different lines to our own.

85. For general overviews of the Indus civilization, and further description of the major sites, see Kenoyer 1998; Possehl 2002;

Ratnagar 2016.

86. For an overview of the Indus valley's far-flung commercial and cultural contacts in the Bronze Age see Ratnagar 2004; Wright 2010.

87. For the Indus script in general see Possehl 1996; for the Dholavira street-sign, Subramanian 2010; and for the function of Indus seals, Frenez 2018.

88. See Jansen 1993.

89. Wright 2010: 107–10.

90. See Rissman 1988.

91. Kenoyer 1992; H. M.-L. Miller 2000; Vidale 2000.

92. 'The Indus Civilization is something of a faceless sociocultural system. Individuals, even prominent ones, do not readily emerge from the archaeological record, as they do in Mesopotamia and Dynastic Egypt, for example. There are no clear signs of kingship in the form of sculpture or palaces. There is no evidence for a state bureaucracy or the other trappings of "stateness".' (Possehl 2002: 6)

93. Daniel Miller's (1985) perceptive discussion of these points remains important.

94. As discussed by, among others, Lamberg-Karlovsky 1999. It is sometimes objected that viewing the Bronze Age civilization of the Indus valley through the lens of caste means painting an artificially 'timeless' picture of South Asian societies, and thus slipping into 'orientalist' tropes, because the earliest written mention of the caste system and its basic social distinctions or *varnas* occurs only around a millennium later, in the hymns of the *Rig Veda*. In many ways, it's a puzzling – and to some extent self-defeating – objection, because it only makes sense if one assumes that a social system based on caste principles cannot itself evolve, in the same way that, say, class or feudal systems undergo important structural transformations over time. There are, certainly, those who have explicitly taken this position (most famously, Dumont 1972). Obviously, however, that is not the position we are taking here; nor do we see any continuity in this

context between caste, language and racial identity (another false equation, which has hampered these kinds of discussions in the past).

95.   On this point see Vidale's important (2010) reassessment of Mohenjo-daro and its archaeological record.

96.   The general scarcity of weapons from Harappan sites remains striking; but as Corke (2005) points out, in other Bronze Age civilizations (e.g. Egypt, China, Mesopotamia) weaponry tends to be found in burials rather than settlements; so – he reasons – the visibility of weapons and warfare in the Indus valley may be greatly reduced by an overall lack of funerary remains. As he also points out, though, there is no evidence that weapons were used as symbols of authority (by contrast with Mesopotamia, for instance) or in any way formed 'a significant part of elite identity' in the Indus civilization. What is definitely absent is the *glorification* of weapons and the kind of people who employ them.

97.   Obviously, it's partly just the desire to preserve the credit for having 'invented' democracy for something called 'the West'. Part of the explanation might also lie in the fact that academia itself is organized in an extremely hierarchical fashion, and most scholars therefore have little or no experience of making democratic decisions themselves, and find it hard to imagine anyone else doing so as a result.

98.   Gombrich 1988: 49–50, 110 ff. See also Muhlenberg and Paine 1996: 35–6.

99.   As with all such cases, just about everything on the topic of early Indian 'democracy' is contested. The earliest literary sources, the Vedas, assume a society that's entirely rural, and that monarchy is the only possible form of government – though some Indian scholars detect traces of earlier democratic institutions (Sharma 1968); however, by the time of Buddha in the fifth century BC the Ganges valley was home to a host of city-states, small republics and confederations, many of which (the *gana-sangha*) appear to have been governed by assemblies made up of all male members of the warrior caste. Greek travellers like Megasthenes were

perfectly willing to describe them as democracies, since Greek democracies were basically the same thing, but contemporary scholars debate how democratic they really were. The entire discussion seems to be premised on the assumption that 'democracy' was some sort of remarkable historical breakthrough, rather than a habit of self-governance that would have been available in any historical period (see, for example, Sharan 1983; Thapar 1984; our thanks to Matthew Milligan for guiding us to relevant source material, although he bears no responsibility for the use we've made of it).

100. On the *seka* principle see Geertz and Geertz 1978; Warren 1993.

101. Lansing 1991.

102. As argued in Wengrow 2015.

103. Possehl 2002: *passim*; Vidale 2010.

104. Independent cities were only entirely abolished in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as part of the creation of the modern nation state. European empires, and the creation of the modern interstate system in the twentieth century, succeeded in wiping out any traces of them in other parts of the world.

105. Bagley 1999.

106. Steinke and Ching 2014.

107. Interestingly, some of the smallest are in Henan itself, the heartland of the later named dynasties. The town of Wangchenggang, associated with the Xia Dynasty – the semi-legendary precursor to the Shang – has a total walled area of around thirty hectares; see Liu and Chen 2012: 222.

108. Ibid.: *passim*; Renfrew and Liu 2018.

109. Some scholars initially suggested that the Longshan period was an age of high shamanism, an appeal to the later myth of Pan Gu, who prised heaven and earth apart in such a way that only those with spiritual powers could journey between them. Others at first related it to classical legends of *wan guo*, the period of Ten Thousand States, before power was localized to the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties; see Chang 1999.

110. Jaang et al. 2018.

111. He 2013: 269.

112. Ibid.

113. He 2018.

9. HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

1. The precise location of Aztlán is unknown. Various lines of evidence suggest that populations speaking Nahuatl (the language of the Mexica/Aztec) were dispersed among both urban and rural settings before their southward migration. Most likely they were present, alongside a range of other ethnic and linguistic groups, in the Toltec capital of Tula, which lies north of the Basin of Mexico (Smith 1984).

2. So-called for the founding political union of three city-states: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan.

3. Mexica kings claimed partial descent from the Toltec rulers of a city called Culhuacan, where they sojourned in the course of their migrations, whence the ethnonym Culhua-Mexica; see Sahlins 2017.

4. Stuart 2000.

5. See Taube 1986; 1992.

6. Published estimates range as high as 200,000 and drop down to as low as 75,000 people (Millon 1976: 212), but the most thorough reconstruction to date (by Smith et al. 2019) rounds off at 100,000 and relates to the Xolalpan-Metepec phases of the city's occupation, between *c*.AD 350 and 600. At that time, much of the population – both rich and poor – lived in fine masonry apartment blocks, as we'll go on to discuss.

7. In fact, it's quite likely some form of writing system was used at Teotihuacan, but all we can see of it are isolated signs, or small groups, repeated on wall paintings and pots where they caption human figures. Perhaps one day they will yield answers to some of the burning questions about the society that built Teotihuacan, but for the moment they remain largely inscrutable. Scholars can't