The Origins and Character of the Mesopotamian City

It is now generally accepted that Mesopotamia is the one region in the Old World where we can say with certainty that an urban civilization arose spontaneously. The origins of cities there have been extensively discussed in the past four decades, not so much by Near Eastern historians, who have often limited their comments to statements of archaeologically discernible facts, but by anthropologists, sociologists, and some urban historians specializing in later periods. The topic is of importance in the study of Mesopotamian urbanism, as our ideas about their origins influence to a great extent how we view the nature of cities in subsequent history. In this chapter I do not intend to give a survey of the events connected with the rise of urbanism, nor an overview and critique of all theories seeking to explain it. I will discuss some of the most influential theories on urban development and point out what elements in them seem most useful for understanding the Mesopotamian situation. This will lead to a consideration of the character of the Mesopotamian city once it was fully developed.

First, I have to restate a few well-known facts. Mesopotamia is the region where cities originated first in world history. Hence, the rise of cities there was an independent and indigenous event. Second, the entire evolution took place in prehistory. No textual sources are available from the time cities first arose, and texts from later periods can only be used to illustrate patterns visible in the earlier archaeological record. Third, the entire process from the first permanent settlement in southern Mesopotamia to the first cities there took an enormously long time, from around 5500 BC to around 3500 BC. The emergence of the city may have occurred relatively suddenly, but cannot be understood in isolation from what preceded it, and must be seen as a culmination of that process.
Of the numerous discussions on the origins of the city, three approaches have found the most adherents, each stressing a particular function of the earliest cities: ceremonial, commercial, or redistributive. The concept that the earliest cities, in all areas of primary urban generation, functioned foremost as ceremonial centres has been most extensively argued by Paul Wheatley, reviving an idea already developed by Fustel de Coulanges in the mid-nineteenth century. Wheatley maintained that religion provided the primary focus of social life in the period immediately preceding urbanism. Wherever cities first appeared, they contained a ceremonial complex, in his opinion, and even if the latter performed secular functions as well, these were part of the religious context. The priests were the first group to escape the ‘daily round of subsistence labor’, hence setting the process of social stratification into motion. Only after ceremonial centres were firmly established did they obtain a redistributive economic role, and secular elites only developed after cities had been in existence for several centuries.

Although the observation that all the earliest cities contained a ceremonial centre is accurate, for Mesopotamia at least, the conclusion that religion drew people together in urban conglomerates is not warranted. The reasoning behind it seems to be one of *cum hoc ergo propter hoc*. The idea that temples are primarily religious institutions is a modern concept and does not apply to the early Mesopotamian temples. They fulfilled primarily a managerial role in the local economy. As I will demonstrate later, no urban settlement is possible without an agricultural base to support a dense population. Agricultural resources needed to be extracted from the countryside by an authority, and religion provided that authority. But people did not converge upon ceremonial centres for their spiritual leadership, and throughout the world many such centres exist in isolation. Moreover, the temple’s importance in early Mesopotamia is greatly overstated, due to the archaeologists’ focus on monumental architecture, and a misreading of mid-third-millennium archival records. The ideological focus provided by early cities clearly existed, but it was of insufficient strength to be the sole driving force towards urbanism.

A second theory emphasizes the role of long-distance trade in the development of cities. Its most extreme advocate is the urban theorist, Jane Jacobs, who has earned an almost legendary status in the USA for her ‘visionary’ ideas and is extensively quoted in anthropological and sociological literature. However, she is almost entirely unknown (or ignored) among ancient Near Eastern specialists. In her book *The Economy of Cities* (1969), she attacked the ‘dogma’ that agriculture preceded cities, and replaced it with a theory that the existence of cities led to agriculture, and that cities first originated because of long-distance trade in raw materials. The empirical basis for this theory is the existence of such eighth- to sixth-millennium settlements in the Levant and Anatolia as Jericho and Çatal Hüyük, interpreted by some scholars to have been cities. But, whereas the latter scholars acknowledge that an agricultural base was needed for these settlements, Jacobs hypothesized the existence of pre-agricultural cities antedating these excavated sites. She described an imaginary city, New Obsidian, which was involved in the long-distance trade in obsidian without being located near its sources. Food for the inhabitants would have been obtained partly through barter with nearby hunter-gatherers, but mainly through imports from foreign hunting territories. Because meat would have spoiled during its transport, live animals were driven to New Obsidian, where soon a selection of the tamest animals was made for breeding. Seeds and nuts were brought into town as they preserved better than fruits and vegetables, and when mixed together in bins and partly sown in wild patches, they were accidentally cross-bred and became ‘better’ than their wild progenitors. Soon the city began to grow most of its food. ‘Cities First—Rural Development Later.’

Jacobs’s theory is based entirely on false premisses. It relies heavily on an unconvincing parallel with the modern world, where the most advanced urban areas are supposed to have the most advanced agriculture. And, when dealing with prehistory, Jacobs ignores altogether what Bairoch has called ‘the tyranny of distance’.

The transport of food products is very expensive, as the transporter consumes part of his or her load. A man carrying the entire load, can daily transport 35–40 kilograms over 30–35 kilometres. Every day he has to consume about one kilogram, so he

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eats his entire load in about seventeen days when he has marched at the most 600 kilometres one way, taking into account that he has to eat on his way back. Of course, to be able to barter the food he cannot consume all of it. An example makes this problem obvious. If a man comes a distance of 100 kilometres to obtain obsidian at New Obsidian, he will start out with 40 kilograms of food. In three days he will have reached his destination with 37 kilograms, and he will be able to barter a maximum of 34 kilograms for obsidian. Those 34 kilograms will feed one inhabitant of the city for slightly more than one month. For the 5,000 inhabitants of Çatal Hüyük to be supported for one year, 60,000 trips of this type would be needed from a radius not surpassing 100 kilometres from the site. That area is only 157 square kilometres, and considering the extremely low population density in pre-agricultural times, there were not enough people in that region to provide all the food needed in New Obsidian. Moreover, all these calculations are based on the assumption that circumstances were optimal. It seems impossible to walk 33 kilometres a day in the region around Çatal Hüyük, while rest-stops on the road would have increased the consumption by the transporter. How long would it have taken to drive live undomesticated animals over this distance? The problems could not be alleviated by using draft animals, as Jacobs states that all this activity took place before the domestication of animals. Nor does river transport provide an alternative, as rivers are only navigable in one direction in the area of Çatal Hüyük. Jacobs’s theory is thus entirely unacceptable.

Mellaart, whose work inspired Jacobs, was more careful as he acknowledged the existence of agriculture around sites such as Jericho, Çatal Hüyük, and others. He also stressed the role of religion in the creation of these settlements, referring to man as ‘a religious animal’ and to the fact that ‘religious structures are among the earliest remains of the *homo sapiens*’. But still the settlements of the eighth to sixth millennia he studied are not to be regarded as cities and certainly not as the beginnings of urban civilization. They were highly anomalous settlements, relying on unique coincidences of very fertile surroundings and location on trade routes, enabling and precipitating a dense habitation. No

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usurped by a secular and military authority, whose influence was nurtured by increased competition between the various urban centres.

Adams considered the rise of the city as one aspect of the rise of the state, i.e. a society that is hierarchically organized on political and territorial lines rather than on the basis of kinship or other ascriptive relationships. The political authority of the state happens to be situated in the city where a dense and socially stratified population resides. I would agree with this viewpoint, although I do not want to broaden the discussion here to the rise of the state in Mesopotamia. In Adams’s opinion cities originated because states developed. Society was structured with classes, differentiated both through wealth or access to means of production, and through occupation which could be agricultural, pastoral, industrial, commercial, cultic, or administrative. Cities were the loci where these classes interacted or where the interactions between them were regulated. In economic terms they were redistributive centres of goods and services produced by these classes. Adams’s theory has earned widespread support among Mesopotamian scholars, who have elaborated on it, and indeed its argument is highly persuasive. In the present discussion I would like to stress why cities evolved in southern Mesopotamia of all places, and to elaborate on the various aspects of their redistributive role.

It is very difficult for us to determine why cities appeared in southern Mesopotamia, rather than in Anatolia or the Levant, for instance. By the beginning of the fourth millennium the region provided the three preconditions of city life, as determined by Gideon Sjoberg: a favourable ecological base, an advanced technology (relative to the pre-urban form) in both agricultural and non-agricultural spheres, and a complex social organization, especially with regard to the power structure. But these circumstances do not necessarily lead to an urban society. As Ester Boserup has shown there is a need for a certain level of population density, as the aggregate food surplus produced by the agriculturalists needs to satisfy the requirements of the non-agricultural urban population. The southern Mesopotamian countryside was certainly fertile enough to sustain a dense population, but there was no shortage of agricultural land that would force people to live closely together. So why did they decide to remain in a small geographical zone, so that the prerequisite population density could be attained? I think we can answer this question by looking at the ecological diversity of the region. Several scholars, such as Adams and Liverani, have pointed out that the Near East contains a number of diverse ecological zones in close contact with one another: steppe, irrigated alluvium, and mountains with forests and pastures. This is also true on a more microscopic scale, especially for the very south of Mesopotamia. All too often it is imagined that this area was uninhabited until the arrival of irrigation farmers in the mid-sixth millennium. But many wild natural resources were available to non-farmers, and were exploited by them prior to the appearance of farming: pasture for herds of sheep and goats in the river valleys and the steppe, and extensive fishing and hunting grounds for fishermen and hunters in the marshes. When the technology to tap water from the numerous natural channels of the Euphrates river was introduced, large-scale farming became possible, but it did not replace herding, fishing, and hunting. All these activities took place in a small area in the very south of Mesopotamia, and it is thus not surprising that the earliest cities, Ur, Eridu, and Uruk, are to be found there as well. Exchange between the different food-producing groups became extensive and commonplace, and an organizing institution soon developed at the same time as the introduction of irrigation farming. Of course, exchange requires surplus production, something many scholars assume to have originated virtually spontaneously. Such an assumption is false and the origin of a surplus is the subject of much debate. No family will produce more than is needed for its subsistence unless it is forced to do so by a higher authority, or because the benefits of a surplus are obvious and indispensable. In theory, each of the specialized food-producing groups could be self-sufficient, and perhaps only the desire for a less restricted diet or for products that do not fulfil elementary needs pushed them to barter part of their produce. Still, the development is not inevitable and obvious.

The focus upon a small zone in the very south of Mesopotamia explains, in my opinion, why that was the area of primary urban development. Once the city had become a fact of life in the very south, the concept spread further north along the many channels of
the Euphrates, which enabled easier exchange of bulky items along the river. By 2800 BC we find a system of city-states stretching from the Persian Gulf to the area just south of modern-day Baghdad. Inter-city trade of agricultural produce remained limited, however, and each city-state was self-sustaining in its food supplies and basic material needs until about 1800 BC when the military unification of Babylonia led to an integration of the agricultural economy as well.6

But this leads us too far in time, and we need to backtrack in order to explore further what the role of the earliest cities was. So far, I have referred only to their functions in the economy—moreover only in certain aspects of the economy—an approach that is too limited in its scope. The social stratification that characterizes urban life involves social power which relies on four sources, according to a theory developed by Michael Mann: economic, ideological, military, and political. With these sources of power, certain individuals or groups attain their goals in society. In the case of early cities, the urban élites were closer to these sources than were the other members of society. I would like to investigate here how this manifested itself. By treating these four areas separately, I do not intend to indicate that they had independent identities. They are interacting networks, whose separate consideration I hope will lead to a clearer understanding of their nature.

The economic power of urban élites has already been discussed in part. Their role was mainly managerial: the interaction between differently specialized producers of goods and services was controlled by a small segment of society. In the first cities that group had temple connections, and the anachronistic term priesthood is commonly used as its designation. An unknown number of these priests had the knowledge of writing, the ability to record transactions permanently on bulky clay tablets. The economic power was not limited to local affairs, but also extended to long-distance trade. The importance of long-distance trade in early Mesopotamian civilization is not as easy to assess as is often assumed. A majority of scholars agree that southern Mesopotamia is a region lacking all raw materials but clay and reed, and that long-distance trade is needed to obtain access to basic materials such as timber, stone, and metals, and luxury goods such as semi-precious stones. The need for such materials has been used as one, or even the most important, causal factor in the rise of cities in southern Mesopotamia on the grounds that it would have necessitated the production of a surplus for exchange purposes. This explanation is not convincing, as it fails to show why other regions of the Mesopotamian alluvium, equally lacking in resources, did not develop cities at the same time as the South; besides, the poverty of southern Mesopotamia in raw materials has been greatly overstated. Wood and stone were available and useable, even though they were not of the best quality, and clay, bitumen, and reed could substitute for other materials. There was no necessity to acquire products from abroad, although it is clear that from the fifth millennium onwards trade contacts between southern Mesopotamia and the surrounding areas existed. Pottery produced in southern Mesopotamia dating to that millennium has been found along the Persian Gulf as far south as the United Arab Emirates, and in the second half of the fourth millennium an incredible expansion of the southern Mesopotamian Uruk culture throughout the Near East may have been driven by trade. But the economic importance of that trade remains to be assessed. A find in Saudi Arabia of a pot produced in Ur shows direct or indirect contacts between these two places, but not how common these contacts were.

Be this as it may, it seems likely that long-distance trade was originally controlled by the temples, and that the merchants had temple affiliations. This was probably caused by the fact that surplus production of textiles and other tradable goods was held by the temples. It is interesting that long-distance trade was the sector of the economy that was privatized earlier than any other state- or temple-controlled enterprise. Perhaps this can be explained as the result of the merchants’ need for as much neutrality as possible, in order to avoid identification with a participant in a power struggle. Thus, we can conclude that the economic power of urban élites originally included long-distance trade, but that the importance of this trade has been exaggerated, and that it soon was delegated to private entrepreneurs.

The second source of power is ideological. At the time of urban origins, ideology was primarily religious. Although private shrines and ancestor cults survived throughout Mesopotamian history, urban temples grew increasingly large and the priesthood seems to

have taken the role as mediator between the people and the gods. A late fourth-millennium carving on a stone vase found at Uruk (Fig. 2.1) shows a row of naked men carrying vessels and jars of produce to a goddess, identified by the symbols behind her as Inanna, the goddess of procreation. In front of her stands the city ruler, represented larger than his men and fully dressed in ceremonial robe, clearly acting as an intermediary. Rituals of fertility involving the ruler and the goddess were common until the eighteenth century at least. It is reasonable to assume that religious ideology was used by the priesthood to extract produce from the rural population, but its exact methods are not revealed to us.

With the rise of kingship, a secular authority in need of an ideological basis developed alongside the religious one. This basis was provided through a combination of military and religious leadership. The latter had been provided by the priesthood, whose powers needed to be usurped before the military commander could claim religious leadership as well. The king fought battles against other city-states, but these battles allegedly were to protect the property of the city god. The conflict, lasting more than a century, over an agricultural area between the neighbouring city-states Umma and Lagash is portrayed as the defence of the rights of the god Ningirisu by successive kings of his city-state, Lagash. One king, Eanatum, even portrayed himself as having been bred as Ningirisu’s champion, and nurtured by the goddess Ninhursag.

Inanna stood by him, and named him ‘Eana-Inanna-Ibgalkaka-atum’. She placed him on the good lap of Ninhursag. Ninhursag laid him on her good breast. Ningirisu rejoiced over Eanatum, semen placed in the womb by Ningirisu. Ningirisu measured him with his span: (he was) five cubits and one span tall! With joy Ningirisu gave him the kingship of Lagash.⁷

Similarly, the ‘Sacred Marriage Rite’ came to involve the king who had intercourse with the goddess in order to assure the fertility of the land.

Traces of conflict between secular and religious leaders are noticeable in texts from the best documented city-state, Lagash. In the early twenty-fourth century the distinction between the two seems to have been eradicated when king Uru’inimgina proclaimed an edict ostensibly placing all lands in the hand of the city-gods, but in reality taking control of all temple domains himself. Later kings always held the position of high priest or even legitimized their rule by accepting divine status. The ideology of the secular power could thus not be separated from religion. Both temple and palace were located in the city, and the kings always stressed their urban background. So, here also the city acted as an ideological centre for the state.

Evidence for military engagement goes back to the pictorial representations of the late fourth millennium (Fig. 2.2), but it becomes abundant only in the mid-third millennium when royal inscriptions and monuments boast about military campaigns.

against neighbouring city-states or distant countries. All we know about the military involves such warfare, and the rise of the secular king has been convincingly related to the increased hostility between competing cities in southern Mesopotamia. Military power was always held by the palace located in the city, although the priest-ruler may have held that authority in the late fourth millennium as well. Feudal-style manor lords who delivered troops to the king when he needed them, and who raided on their own account, when free to do so, did not exist. Even when states relied on military levies from semi-nomadic tribes, as is documented in the texts from Mari, the administration and command of these troops remained an urban affair. The state’s military power was thus centrally controlled in the city.

This military power relates, however, only to the ‘international’ affairs of the early city-states. Was military power also used by the urban elites in order to control the rural hinterland? Adams, for instance, has suggested that military coercion may have forced the exchange between villages and towns in the mid-fourth millennium. In the early historical periods we do not find any direct evidence for such coercion, however. A standing army in the service of the king was perhaps only created in the twenty-fourth century by Sargon of Akkade, who claimed to have fed daily 5,400 soldiers, most likely a fictitious number. These men, and their successors in the employ of later dynasties, were involved in expeditions outside the heartland of their states. Yet the twenty-first-century kings of Ur appointed a military hierarchy, with blood ties to the royal house, next to the civil bureaucracy in the core provinces. These military men seem to have been installed to guarantee to the king the loyalty of the civilian administrators who had local ties—not to help them extract resources from the local populations. Only in the peripheral areas of the state did the military fulfil the role of tax collectors for the kings in Ur.

Although active opposition to the king by his citizens is referred to in the omen literature, the use of the army against residents of the countryside is never attested, as far as I know. No installations where such military troops could have been housed are visible in the archaeological record before the appearance of arsenals in Assyria of the first millennium. The collection of taxes seems to have been taken care of by bureaucrats without threat or violent resistance. Peasant revolts are not attested in Mesopotamian history. On the other hand, these bureaucrats may have relied on soldiers to enforce their demands. In early second-millennium texts, men with military titles are sometimes perceived as a threat, as can be seen from this passage of a letter from Ur:

Concerning the field, the allotment of Sin-abushu which you have taken unlawfully and have given to Ili-idinnam, Sin-abushu went and approached the king. The king gave him a soldier. Be quick! Before the soldier of the king arrives and they make you give compensation for the field, return the field to its owner. It is urgent!

The use of the military in internal affairs may thus have been more common than is suggested by the documentation.

The last source of power, political, is harder to define, especially since the military and ideological aspects have been stripped from it, a criticism that has been expressed against Mann’s model. Mann separated political from military powers, describing as political ‘those of centralized, institutionalized, territorial regulation’, as distinguished from decentralized, often independent, powers of military groups. If we regard politics as the actions and manoeuvres of the state, both for its internal organization and for its diplomatic

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relations with other states, we can discuss them separately from economic, ideological, and military powers. From the outset cities clearly demanded a political organization different from that found in village communities. Royal political domination was established through a bureaucracy that expanded in size throughout the third millennium, culminating perhaps in the twenty-first century during the rule of the Third Dynasty of Ur. At that time, possibly the most prolific bureaucracy of the ancient world recorded minute aspects of administration, economy, and the courts, in a standardized format using an apparently dead language, Sumerian. Again, what is important for our consideration of the origins of the city is the fact that this aspect of power too was firmly founded in the city. The state was built around the city, as we aptly stress by our use of the term city-state when referring to early Mesopotamian political organization.

Thus, when we look at the late prehistoric and early historic city in Mesopotamia, we see that all four sources of power were centred in it: economically it acted as a redistributive centre, ideologically it contained the focal institutions of temple and palace, militarily it organized the army used by the kings, and politically it incorporated the organizing forces of the state. The city played thus a central role for its surroundings in many different ways; it grew up to provide that focus. The particular ecological conditions of southern Mesopotamia gave rise to this organization after an evolution lasting two millennia. In the mid-fourth century, the city was a fact of life in that area, never to disappear for the rest of ancient Mesopotamian history.

In my opinion, there are some amazing aspects of the early urbanization of the South, that need to be discussed before moving on to the North. Around 3200 a completely urban culture existed in southern Mesopotamia. Several technological innovations became visible simultaneously: writing, monumental arts and architecture, and mass-produced goods, especially pottery. The first written documentation shows the existence of developed systems of weights and measures, time-reckoning, and numeration. These accomplishments led V. Gordon Childe to his famous ten criteria to distinguish the earliest cities from older or contemporary villages:

1. size of settlements: the concentration of relatively large numbers of people in a restricted area;
2. specialization of agriculturalists and craftsmen;
3. payment of small amounts of taxes to a deity or divine king;
4. truly monumental architecture;
5. social stratification and a ruling class supported by a surplus;
6. writing;
7. emergence of exact and predictive sciences;
8. artistic expression;
9. foreign trade to import raw materials;
10. class rather than kinship affiliation.

Although one can criticize the value of this list in identifying cities, it is true that all these elements were present in the earliest cities of southern Mesopotamia. Their simultaneous appearance is indicative of the ‘revolutionary’ changes that took place in society, changes whose importance cannot be overestimated.

What seems to me to be even more amazing is that these changes took place first and foremost in one specific place: the city of Uruk. Admittedly there is a real danger of overemphasizing Uruk’s role, as it is the only extensively and intensively investigated site of this period. But many aspects of Uruk show its special status in southern Mesopotamia. Its size greatly surpasses that of contemporary cities: around 3200 it is estimated to have been about 100 hectares in size, while in the region to its north the largest city measured only 50 hectares, and in the south the only other city, Ur, covered only 10–15 hectares. A clear migration, not only to the city of Uruk itself but also to its surrounding countryside, at the expense of the region to the north, is visible. And Uruk continued to grow: around 2800 its walls encircled an area of 494 hectares and occupation outside the walls was likely. A comparison with later cities shows the magnitude of this size: Athens after the expansion by Themistocles only covered 250 hectares, Jerusalem in AD 43 only 100 hectares, and Rome as the capital of an enormous empire under Hadrian was only twice as large as Uruk had been 3,000 years earlier.

Not only was the city itself enormous, but its temple complexes were also extremely monumental and elaborately decorated. The building history of the temples devoted to Anu, the sky god, and to

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Inanna, the goddess of love and fertility, is extremely complicated and need not delay us here. It suffices to say that they were enormous in size and both contained various buildings. In the Inanna complex several examples of naturalistic sculpture of extremely fine artistic quality were found, as well as the first evidence of writing on clay tablets. Marvin Powell has suggested that writing was invented by a Sumerian-speaking citizen of Uruk, a suggestion that is appealing if impossible to verify with the evidence available at present.

The importance of the city of Uruk was not limited to southern Mesopotamia. For about 500 years from the mid-fourth millennium on, the culture that we call the Uruk culture spread out over an enormous geographical area. Writing, mass-produced pottery, cylinder seals, and decorated monumental architecture were the hallmarks of that culture. At first it spread into western Iran where it influenced the culture at Susa, and then both cities established colonies: Susa as far east as Shahr-i-Sokhte in eastern Iran, Uruk in northern Syria at sites such as Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda, and as far west as the Egyptian Nile delta. The Uruk influence may have caused fundamental changes in Egyptian culture where individual marks of ownership were replaced by a real writing system and monumental funerary architecture appeared. The scope of the Uruk ‘expansion’ is thus overwhelming. Its stimuli are unclear; long-distance trade has been most often used as a justification, but its importance has been overstated and other factors must have played a role as well. Whatever the impetus of this expansion may have been, its driving force most likely was situated in the city of Uruk, the predominant centre of southern Mesopotamia. The leadership of Uruk, both locally and internationally, at a very early point in its urban development, is startling to say the least. It shows that much more complex factors were at work in urban development than the picture drawn here suggests.

The development of urbanism in northern Mesopotamia followed patterns quite different from those in the South, due to dissimilar ecological conditions. Rather than the great variety of natural settings in small geographical areas, the North consists of two physical regions. The western part, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, contains a vast rolling plain, the northern and eastern sectors of which receive sufficient rainfall for dry-farming. The southern sector of that area has to rely on irrigation for its agriculture, and permanent settlement is limited to the river valleys. The eastern part, from the left bank of the Tigris to the Zagros mountains, consists of a piedmont region with low hills, gradually rising to the east. The western flanks of the Zagros contain a number of intermontane valleys running parallel to the Tigris river. Although rainfall is often sufficient for dry-farming, its reliability is low, and often irrigation water supplements rain.

Whereas village settlement in this region dates back several millennia farther than in the South—as far back as the eighth millennium—internal processes did not lead to the development of cities. Cities first appeared in the late fourth millennium with the expansion of the Uruk culture described above. Extensive excavations of such cities are rare; only at Habuba Kabira is the entire extent of the city known. Although it occupied only eighteen hectares, its urban characteristics are clear: monumental architecture, dense domestic habitation, mass-produced goods, and proto-writing, all directly influenced by Uruk. Interestingly, the city was surrounded by a defensive wall, a characteristic that also distinguishes earlier northern villages from contemporary settlements in the South. The reasons for the need of a defensive structure are unknown. There is evidence of fires at several locations in Habuba Kabira at the time of its abandonment, which may have been the result of a violent conquest. The absence of textual sources prevents a clear reconstruction of what happened. In any case, with the disappearance of southern influence in the region, urban settlements declined, either being totally abandoned, or continuing as villages.

Five hundred years later, around 2500, a second period of urbanization occurred in northern Mesopotamia, which seems to have been part of a process of urban development encompassing an enormous geographical area from the Indus Valley to the Aegean, and throughout Syria and Palestine. Large fortified cities appeared, now equalling the urban centres of the South in size. Textual evidence from Mari and especially from Ebla shows a secular urban élite holding all sources of power. The culture of these cities was greatly influenced by southern Mesopotamia, and southern diffusion has usually been considered the driving force of this evolution. Although the urban development of the region may have declined

around 2100, numerous cities survived in a framework of alternating political fragmentation and centralization under various powers. At the end of the Bronze Age in the fourteenth–thirteenth centuries all the main urban centres show signs of great decline, and only in the ninth–eighth centuries did cities reappear as a common feature throughout northern Mesopotamia. In the late seventh century BC, when the neo-Assyrian empire collapsed, the region suffered a total economic decline, and our knowledge of the level of urbanization becomes very vague.

Cities were thus not as easily maintained in the North as they were in the South. The agricultural potential of the region permitted the self-sufficiency of village communities, obviating the need for redistribution by cities. Only when southern powers installed centres to organize the extraction of northern goods for their own benefit, or when a centralizing political force arose in the North itself, were cities needed. Throughout the history of the region, cities were less common than in the South, and many of them owed their existence more to commercial, military, or political concerns than to agricultural ones.

In conclusion, this survey of the origins of cities in Mesopotamia has shown, I believe, that ecological conditions played an important role in their development. In the South the variety of zones with different agricultural potentials in close proximity to each other encouraged the growth of points of exchange. These nodal points gained a central role in other aspects of the economy as well as in religious, military, and political life. In the North, on the other hand, villages sufficed for the management of agricultural resources, and the city was at first introduced through southern influences. Throughout the history of the North the non-agricultural roles of the city predominated: trade, politics, militarism, and religion. They could only appear after the state had evolved, not before the state. The origins of urbanism in both areas had important repercussions for the characteristics of their cities, which I will explore in further detail in the following chapters.

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City and Countryside: The Mesopotamian View

To an ancient Mesopotamian, city life was civilized life. The city was the seat of culture, and non-urban life was uncultured. The Mesopotamian visualized his or her city as being located at the centre of a world that could not exist without it, both in mundane and cosmic terms. The centrality of the city in the Mesopotamians' own concept of their culture was a constant theme throughout their literature. When a city and its god were in harmony, its inhabitants prospered and were happy. In the Sumerian composition, 'The Curse of Akkade', this prosperity was described as follows:

In those days, she (Inanna) filled Akkade's stores for emmer wheat with gold,
filled its stores for white emmer wheat with silver,
copper, tin, and blocks of lapis lazuli were regularly delivered in its granaries,
the outside of its grain silos she plastered over with mud.
Its old women were given counsel,
its old men were given eloquence,
its maidens were given playgrounds,
its young men were given the strength of weapons,
its little ones were given happiness.
Nursemaids holding the children of generals,
played the algasurri-lyre;
Inside the city was the tigi-drum, outside were reed pipes and tambourines.
Its harbour, where the ships moored, was full of joy.

In the last few centuries, city life was praised in these terms:

In the Akkadian literature the idea also was common. The city of Babylon, for instance, was praised in these terms:

Babylon is such that one is filled with joy looking at it.
Babylon is like a Dilmun date whose fruit is uniquely sweet.

The only surviving world map we have from Mesopotamia, dating to the first millennium, placed Babylon at the centre of the universe. Such an exalted opinion was not reserved for Babylon, indeed a cultural and political centre, but other, politically less important cities, were honoured similarly. About Arbela in Assyria the following was said:

Arbela, Arbela!
Heaven without rival, Arbela!
City of joyful music, Arbela!
City of festivals, Arbela!
City of happy households, Arbela!

Many people bore names that glorified their city, such as Mannu-ki-Babili 'Who is like Babylon', Larak-za-rna-ibni 'Larak has created the seed', and Dilbat-abi 'Dilbat is my father', a chauvinism probably unparalleled in history.

The concept of the city as the basis of civilization was, perhaps, most strongly expressed when city life was contrasted to that of the uncivilized world. The latter was not thought to be the bucolic countryside, but the steppe, the desert, and the mountains; the habitats of the nomads. In a Sumerian literary composition of the early second millennium the life of the nomad was described in these negative terms:

He is dressed in sheep skins;
He lives in tents in wind and rain;
He doesn't offer sacrifices.
Armed [vagabond] in the steppe,
he digs up truffles and is restless.
He eats raw meat,
lives his life without a home,
and, when he dies, he is not buried according to proper rituals.

3 Translation from Benjamin R. Foster, Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature 2 (Bethesda, 1993), 738, quoted by permission.
Such a description became a stereotype for the life of nomads and mountaineers throughout Mesopotamian history. In the first millennium Assyrian rulers used similar terms to refer to the inhabitants of the mountains in the east. Interestingly, they referred to them with archaic ethnic terms, such as Gutians, a people that had long disappeared from the face of the earth. Such designations promoted the image that time stood still among the nomads and that they lacked the ability to make progress.

The city represented order, the desert and the mountains embodied chaos. The progression from savagery to civilization in a human being was portrayed in the evolution of the legendary Enkidu, the creature that the gods made to challenge King Gilgamesh of Uruk. He arrived on earth as a wild creature, living as an animal in the steppe. His gradual development into a civilized human being was guided by the courtesan Shamhat, who introduced him to sexual intercourse, grooming, and the consumption of bread and beer. The completion of his education was symbolized by his introduction into the city of Uruk, his entrance into human civilization.

Erica Reiner has suggested that, parallel to the tradition of despising the life of nomads, an opposite trend existed in Mesopotamian literature that glorified the freedom of nomadism and loathed urban life as being effeminate. The suggestion is based on two almost identical passages in myths where curses were proclaimed, one by the queen of the netherworld, Ereshkigal, upon Aššūnamir, ‘His Looks are Brilliant’, who foiled her plans, the other by Enkidu upon Shamhat, who had introduced him to city life where he found an untimely death. The curses were devastating. This is what Ereshkigal said:

Come, Aššūnamir, I will curse you with a great curse,  
Let me ordain you a fate never to be forgotten.  
May bread of public ploughing be your food,  
May the public sewer pipe be your drinking place.  
The shadow of a wall be your station,  
The threshold be your dwelling.  
May drunk and the sober slap your cheek!

6 The Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld, ll. 103-9, translation by Benjamin R. Foster, From Distant Days (Bethesda, 1995), 82, quoted by permission. Reiner’s translation of this passage is, obviously, quite different: ‘Come, Aššū-namir, I will curse you with a great curse. May the bread from the city’s bakers be your food, may

Rather than condemning Aššūnamir and Shamhat to an effeminate city life, as opposed to the freedom of the steppe, it seems to me that these curses have to be considered as being more malicious. The writers were aware of the existence of social outcasts, such as transvestites and prostitutes, who were tolerated in Mesopotamian society, but pushed to its fringes. Their presence in the cities was acknowledged, and they even fulfilled an important role in urban society, but their life was thought to be a miserable one at the margins of civilization. Theirs was a homeless life in the shadows of the city walls, eating food from the gutters and drinking water from the sewers, and these curses condemn their victims to such a life.

Reiner also quotes a passage from the Erra epic where the god Erra is aroused by warmongering creatures, the ‘Seven’, with the following words:

Why have you been sitting in the city like a feeble old man,  
Why sitting at home like a helpless child?  
Shall we eat woman food, like non-combatants?  
Have we turned timorous and trembling, as if we can’t fight?  
Going to the field for the young and the vigorous is like to a very feast,  
(But) the noble who stays in the city can never eat enough.  
His people will hold him in low esteem, he will command no respect,  
How could he threaten a campaigner?  
However well developed is the strength of the city dweller,  
How could he possibly best a campaigner?  
However toothsome city bread, it holds nothing to the campfire loaf,  
However sweet fine beer, it holds nothing to water from a skin,  
The terraced palace holds nothing to the [wayside] sleeping spot!

The passage was included in a paean to military life, glorified because of its ability to frighten gods and men alike. The opposition here is not between urban life and nomadism, but between the city and the battlefield. A life on the battlefield could lead to glory, but it was also chaotic, and chaos was something to be avoided.

the jugs of the city be your drink, may the shade of the city wall be your residence, may the threshold be your sitting place, may the drunk and the thirsty slap your face.' See Erica Reiner, Your Thsowarts in Pieces. Your Mooring Rope Cut (Ann Arbor, 1985), 44.


7 Erra epic, Tablet I, ll. 47–59, translation by Benjamin R. Foster, From Distant Days (Bethesda, 1995), 135–6, quoted by permission.
Erra heeded the words of the ‘Seven’ and went on a terrifying rampage. Only when he returned to his city did he calm down, and order returned to earth; the audience of the Erra epic liked order. People copied excerpts of the text on amulets as protection against the terror described in it. To the Mesopotamian literate mind life on the fringes of civilization or on the battlefield was aberrant and repulsive. There was no admiration for the life of a ‘noble savage’.

The negative attitude towards non-urban life is quite remarkable as the rulers of many dynasties had risen to power as tribal ‘sheikhs’. Yet, once they had firmly established a foothold in a city, their nomadic past, at best, was recalled in an epithet, while attention to the cities, their temples, and their gods became a matter of pride. Hammurabi, who was still referred to as ‘king of the Amorites’ in a few of his inscriptions, ignored this connection entirely in the long list of epithets at the start of his famous law code. Instead he boasted of his accomplishments in embellishing or restoring cities and their cult places. A ruler’s work in a city was considered to be of the greatest importance. The epic of Gilgamesh in its seventh-century version showed how the king’s search for bodily immortality was futile, but predicted that he would be remembered for ever for the beauty of his city, Uruk:

Climb the wall of Uruk, Ur-shanabi, and walk around. Inspect the foundation terrace, look over the brickwork, if its bricks are not baked bricks, and if the Seven Counsellors themselves did not lay its foundations!*

Why was the city so important to the Mesopotamian? The answer lies in its role both as a religious and as a political centre, two functions considered to be of utmost importance to society, and closely interrelated. Each Mesopotamian city was the home of a god or goddess, and each prominent god or goddess was the patron deity of a city. This concept probably arose in prehistory when all important settlements had their own pantheon headed by one deity, and it was so strong that it survived throughout the history of the region. In the third millennium, for instance, every city of the South was closely associated with a Sumerian deity: e.g. Nippur with Enlil, Ur with Nanna, and Girsu with Ningirsu. The Mesopotamians thought that the gods had built the cities as their own dwellings. A hymn to Enlil describes the foundation of his city Nippur:

Enlil, on the sacred place where you marked off your settlement, you built Nippur as your very own city. The Kiu, the mountain, your pure place, whose water is sweet, in the centre of the four corners (of the universe), in Duranki, you founded.

The connection between god and city was thought to have been so close that the decline of a city was usually blamed on its abandonment by the patron deity. Thus, when the Sumerian cities were overrun by invaders from the east in the last years of the third millennium, the literary compositions described their fall in terms of the gods’ departure, not as a military disaster.

This concept did not disappear when the city-states were replaced by larger political entities of territorial states and empires. When Babylon became the political capital of the South and the cultural capital of the entirety of Mesopotamia, its patron deity, Marduk, rose in prominence in the pantheon. In the twelfth century a masterpiece of Babylonian literature, the so-called Creation Epic, was composed to explain his ascent as king of the gods. He defeated the gods’ enemy, Tiamat, was granted royal status, and then the other gods built a dwelling as his reward, the city of Babylon.

When Marduk heard this, his face lit up, like the light of the day. ‘Build Babylon, whose construction you have desired. Let its brickwork be fashioned, name it The Shrine.’ The Anunnaki wielded the hoe, in the first year they made its bricks. When the second year arrived, they raised high the top of the Esagila, equaling the Apsu, having built a ziggurat for the Apsu. For Anu, Enlil, and Ea they set up dwellings at its foot. In their presence Marduk was seated in splendour.

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9 Hymn to Enlil, ll. 65–8, Adam Falkenstein, Sumerische Götterlieder 1 (Heidelberg, 1959), 14.
10 The Epic of Creation, tablet VI, ll. 55–65.
Whenever Marduk abandoned the city, an event depicted in several literary texts, disaster ensued:

People’s corpses block the gates. Brother eats brother. Friend strikes friend with a mace. Free citizens stretch out their hands to the poor (to beg). The sceptre grows short. Evil lies across the land. Usurpers weaken the country. Lions block the road. Dogs go mad and bite people. Whoever they bite does not live, he dies.\(^{11}\)

The absence of the patron deity from his or her city caused great disruptions in the cult. The absence of the divinity was not always metaphorical, but often the result of the theft of the cult statue by raiding enemies. Divine statues were commonly carried off in wars by the victors in order to weaken the power of the defeated cities. The consequences were so dire that the loss of the statue merited recording in the historiographic texts. When Marduk’s statue was not present in Babylon, the New Year’s festival, crucial to the entire cultic life of its city, could not be celebrated. ‘For [eight] years under king Sennacherib, for twelve years under king Esarhaddon, thus for twenty years (altogether), Bel (i.e. Marduk) s[rayed] in Assur and the New Year’s festival was not celebrated.\(^{12}\)

Despite the existence of a national pantheon headed by the god Assur, whose name was used for the original capital and for the country as well, the Assyrians also maintained a strong tradition of associating gods with individual cities: Assur with Assur, Ishtar with Nineveh and with Arbela, Ninurta with Kalhu, and Sin with Harran. Deities of lesser rank probably were associated with smaller urban centres. It is thus no exaggeration to say that, throughout Mesopotamian history, cities were regarded as the dwellings of individual deities, built by these divine beings, and that the fortunes of these cities were thought to depend upon the goodwill and the presence of those tutelary divinities.

The second crucial function of the city, closely related to its religious role, was that of political centre. The Mesopotamians always saw political power as being held within a city, not within a nation or a region. Even if in reality a dynasty had firm control over a territory with many urban centres, emphasis was placed on its relationship to only one of them. The location of political power in a city was considered to be true not only in Mesopotamia itself, but also in the other areas of the Near East with which the Mesopotamians were in contact.

The origin of this concept lies in the time of the city-states, when each city truly constituted a separate political power. The Sumerian King List starts with the statement that ‘when kingship was lowered from heaven, kingship was (first) in (the city) Eridu’, and then the text goes on to list a number of cities with the names of their rulers. It expresses the ideology that kingship could only be present in one city at a time, a distortion of the actual historical situation where the existence of several contemporaneous city dynasties was the rule rather than the exception. It may thus seem that the Sumerian King List documents the existence of a concept of territorial dominion. The justification of the actual territorial control by one city may have been the reason for the King List’s composition, but it is important that the text fails to define that territory, and instead focuses solely upon individual cities, all of which have the ability to act as the centre of political power. The succession of city dynasties was recorded in it from the mythological origin of kingship to the historically attested Isin dynasty (c.1800), and continued in other chronographic texts to register the dynasties of the cities of Larsa, Babylon, and Urukug, thus persisting in locating political power primarily in one city. Later, when Babylonia had irreversibly developed into a territorial state, the rulers continued to refer to themselves as ‘king of the city of Babylon’, rather than of the entire country.

The Assyrians applied the same ideology to the city-state of Assur, as is expressed in the Assyrian King List. The original purpose of that list may have been the legitimization of Shamshi-Adad’s rule over the city of Assur (1813–1781). This foreign king was of nomadic descent, and his rule could only be explained by integrating his ancestors within a list of local city rulers. They were placed at the start of the list with the special notation that they were ‘kings who lived in tents’. Hence, it was acknowledged that non-urban rule was possible, yet highly unusual and leading to an urban rule. Through later expansion of the list the local dynasty of Assur was portrayed as being continuous from the third millennium down to the reign of Shalmaneser V in the late eighth century. In reality, several kings did not consider the city to be their political


And indeed, the total destruction of a city was used by the Mesopotamians as a military technique to instil terror in the defeated enemies, and to terminate their existence as an independent power. Although the annals talk about the levelling of cities as if it happened all the time, it is clear that this final solution was only used after repeated rebellions. But then it was done with a vengeance as is shown by the destruction of Babylon by Sennacherib:

With their corpses I filled the city squares. I carried off alive Shušubu (Mushēzib-Marduk), king of Babylon, together with his family and [officials] into my land. The wealth of that city (Babylon)—silver, gold, precious stones, goods and valuables—I counted out into the hands of my people and they took it as their own. The hands of my people took hold of the gods' dwelling(s) there and smashed them. They took their property and goods... I destroyed the city and its houses, from foundation to parapet, I devastated and burned them. I razed the brick and earthenwork of the outer and inner walls, of the temples, and of the ziggurat, as much as there was, and I dumped these into the Araḫtu canal. I dug canals through the midst of that city, I flooded it with water. I made its foundations disappear, and I destroyed it more completely than a devastating flood. So that in future days the site of that city and (its) temples would not be recognized, I totally dissolved it with water and made it like inundated land.15

The sight of the earth of Babylon carried down the Euphrates and deposited in the Persian Gulf is said to have terrified the inhabitants of Dilmun, modern-day Bahrain, to such an extent that they voluntarily submitted to Assur and presented Sennacherib with their treasures.16 The total destruction of cities was used by the Babylonians as well. Probably their most ignominious act in today's opinion is the destruction of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar, repeatedly described in the Hebrew Bible. This event turned Judah into a sparsely populated state without any political or military significance.

Iconographic material also demonstrates the importance of the city as a political centre. From the ninth century on, a crown appears in Assyria, possibly only worn by queens, which had the

13 François Thureau-Dangin, Une relation de la huitième campagne de Sargon (Paris, 1912), 16 col. i, ll. 89–90.
16 See Daniel D. Luckenbill, Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia II (Chicago, 1927), 185.
shape of a city wall (Fig. 3.1). This crown became very popular later on. It was the standard royal crown of the Persians, and in the West the Greeks after Alexander considered it an attribute of goddesses such as Kybele, clearly with Near Eastern inspiration. And it still influences the popular image of the royal crown today, as any child’s drawing of a king will show. Perhaps most indicative of the idea that relinquishing a city was a symbol of giving up political power are the depictions of people offering a model of their city to the victorious Assyrian conqueror (Fig. 3.2). Again, this image has a long history in Europe: in Byzantine and Renaissance art it became a symbol of submission to God, when rulers offer him a model of their city.

Thus in the Mesopotamian concept of a city two ideas predominated: it was both a religious and a political centre. Temple and palace were basic urban institutions, and they were the institutions that defined a city. In the Mesopotamian mind, the city was contrasted to the steppe and the desert where permanent settlement was impossible. Several rulers had nomadic ancestry, but this past was not a matter of pride—rather the opposite.

Mesopotamia is famous for its numerous cities, many of which grew out of villages over the centuries. Throughout the millennia of

Mesopotamian history, new cities were founded as well. Some of these were royal foundations, and we might expect that kings were proud of their work. Yet in the ancient Mesopotamian sources we notice an ambivalence towards the value of those endeavours and an apparent lack of pride among the founders of new cities. Mesopotamian kings are not known for their false modesty, thus the reasons for this restrained attitude deserve to be investigated. The inscriptive record on the foundation of new cities is surprisingly limited. Only a handful of Mesopotamian kings are known to have founded a city. Sargon of Akkade built the seat of his new dynasty in the twenty-fourth century. However, as its actual location remains uncertain, we have no local inscriptions describing the work. The Kassite king Kurigalzu I (early fourteenth century) built Dur-Kurigalzu, ‘fortress of Kurigalzu’, modern-day Aqar Quf, north of the traditional capital Babylon, but little is known about this city. The surviving inscriptions do not commemorate the construction of the entire city, only that of individual buildings within it. In the late thirteenth century Tukulti-Ninurta moved across the river from Assur to an enormous new settlement. The city, which he called Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta or ‘Harbour of Tukulti-Ninurta’, lost
its special status upon his death. Assurnaṣirpal II’s move to the newly established Kalhu, modern-day Nimrud, in the ninth century was more successful in that this city remained Assyria’s capital for some 150 years. After that the centre of power was moved to Sargon’s new capital Dur-Sharrukin, modern-day Khorsabad. This was perhaps the only city really intended to be founded on virgin soil in pre-Greek Mesopotamian history. However, it was left uncompleted by Sargon’s successor, Sennacherib, who rebuilt the old city of Nineveh in its entirety in order that it might function as the state capital. We know of other settlements named after rulers, but there are no inscriptions commemorating their foundation. When we compare this record to that of Alexander of Macedon and his Hellenistic successors, who covered the Near Eastern countryside with large cities named after themselves, and used these as the backbone of their administration of the region, the contrast is obvious. Alexander alone is said to have founded seventy new cities.

The work involved in the construction of the new cities must have been enormous. Those we know archaeologically were gigantic in size and contained many monumental buildings. Very little evidence concerning the organization of the labour and the procurement of building materials is preserved. In their commemorative inscriptions, the kings usually pointed out that conquered people were set to work on the projects, and they also detailed how they obtained in distant lands the wood and stone needed. It is not accidental that all the builders of new capitals were highly successful in their military conquests and captured great amounts of booty and tribute. But local resources were also needed. Sargon II’s correspondence gives some rare insights on that aspect during the building of Dur-Sharrukin. Countless bricks were produced by the local population of the region, seemingly with a quota set for each village. The amounts of straw needed were apparently too great for the area to bear. The palace herald, Gabbu-ana-Assur, complained as follows: ‘All the straw in my country is reserved for Dur-Sharrukin, and my recruitment officers are now running after me (because) there is no straw for the pack animals. Now, what are the king my lord’s instructions?’ And where did Sargon find the funds to finance his project? A somewhat enigmatic letter suggests that he needed to borrow them from his citizens.

To the king, my lord: your servant Shulmanu-[ ]. Good health to the king, my lord! The king my lord told [me]: ‘Nobody will pay back your loans until the work on Dur-Sharrukin is finished’ (Now) they have [refunded] to the merchants (loans on) the portion of Dur-Sharrukin that has been constructed, but nobody [has reminded] (the king) about me; 570 pounds of silver with [my seal] and due this year have not been repaid as yet. When the king, my lord, sold gold and precious stones on my account, I told the king, my lord, that my father was much in debt to Ha[r[ ], Huziru and [ ]]. After my father’s death I paid half of [his debts], but now their sons [are telling me]: ‘Pay us the debts that [your] father owes to our fathers!’ As soon as Dur-Sharrukin has been [completely] built, the king my lord [will ] to the house [ ] and pay the debts to [ ]. The king my lord may ask Sha[r-[ru-emuranni]: half of [his work assignment in Dur-Sharrukin [is finished].19

The need for funds to pay for the labour and supplies to be obtained locally must have been great, and it is not unlikely that the king had to turn to his wealthy citizens to obtain them. Unfortunately, we do not have much more information on these matters, but it seems safe to say that the building of new cities was a complex enterprise.

If this conclusion is correct, we would expect the kings who undertook the work to elaborate on their activities in their building inscriptions. Yet, when we study these texts, we find a lack of information on certain aspects of the undertaking. First, the kings must have had a motivation for the building of these vast cities, but when we look at their records no reason for the work is declared.

Assurnaṣirpal’s justification for the work on Kalhu is merely a statement that the city built by his predecessor Shalmaneser had become dilapidated. Divine requests are mentioned by Tukulti-Ninurta and Sargon, yet there is no elaboration of that in their inscriptions. Sargon seems to have been proud only of the idea that he was able to settle a place no one else had thought of before. His description depicts him as ‘civilizing’ an inhospitable place.

17 See Giovanni B. Lafranchi and Simo Parpola, The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part II (Helsinki, 1990), no. 296.
18 Ibid. no 119, translation quoted by permission.
19 Simo Parpola, The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part I (Helsinki, 1987), no. 159, translation quoted by permission. J. N. Postgate, ‘The Economic Structure of the Assyrian Empire’, in Mogens Trolle Larsen (ed.), Power and Propaganda, (Copenhagen, 1979), 221 n. 43 states that this letter indicates that Sargon imposed a moratorium on all debts during the work on Dur-Sharrukin. This seems unlikely as the creditors of the writer are demanding immediate repayment.
At that time, with the (labour) of the enemies I had captured, I built a city at the foot of Mount Musri above Nineveh, according to [the god’s] command [and my wish. I named it Dur-Sharrukin]. A great park like on Mount Amanus, planted with all the aromatic plants of Hatti, fruits of every mountain, I laid out by its side. None of the 350 ancient princes who before me exercised dominion over Assyria and ruled the subjects of Enil, had thought of this site, nor did they know how to settle it, nor did they think of digging its canal or setting out its orchards. [To settle that city, to build its shrines, the temples of the great gods, and the palaces, my royal seats, day and night I planned. I ordered that it be built. In a favourable month, on an auspicious day, in the month of Simânu, on an eshsheshu day, I made them carry baskets and mould bricks.]

It is only when Esarhaddon decided to restore the city of Babylon, demolished by his father Sennacherib, that an explicit reference is made to an order by the god Marduk. Esarhaddon described in detail how he was hesitant to undertake the work and consulted the oracles to see whether the gods were at peace with Babylon. But this project involved the restoration of a previously damned city, destroyed and cursed by his father, and it was important for Esarhaddon to know the god’s feelings about the rebuilding.

The lack of justification is all the more striking when compared to the lengthy explanations written when individual buildings were constructed or restored. In such cases a divine request was often cited as the incentive for the king’s work. The most detailed description of such a request by a god is found in a literary composition of the late third millennium, a hymn in honour of the Eninnu temple at Girsu, built by Gudea. The king related two dreams in which deities came to him to ask for the construction of a temple for Ningirsu. He failed to understand the first dream, and needed his mother to explain its meaning to him:

The man, who is enormous like the heavens, enormous like the earth, whose head is like that of a god, whose wing is like that of the thunderbird, whose lower parts are like a flood, at whose right and left lions lay——


Rituals to guarantee the good fortune of the city also are not attested. Only the time of the fashioning of the bricks was explicitly mentioned as having been important. Sargon indicated that this happened in the month Simanu, i.e. May-June. From the third millennium on this month was regarded the best moment for brick-making, with good reason, as at this moment of the year there was no agricultural work in southern Mesopotamia and the clay pits were moist, providing both a labour force and easily accessible clay. Moreover, there was no danger of subsequent rain which could have destroyed the bricks left in the open to dry.

There seems to have been more reliance on rituals when an individual building was constructed. Both textual and archaeological evidence for such rituals before and during construction or restoration exists. Several Babylonian rituals known from late manuscripts describe what needed to be done by a lamentation-priest ‘when the wall of the temple falls into ruin’. They involved the offering of sacrificial animals and libations to various deities, and the singing of various lamentations on an auspicious day. The use of such rituals was probably inspired by the need to avoid the curses invoked by earlier builders, as every restoration entailed the partial destruction of the existing remains. However, when an entirely new building was erected rituals were also performed to ensure the purity of the place, and to protect the building from evil. Foundation trenches were purified with fire and filled with pure sand in which semi-precious stones, metals, and herbs were mixed. The first brick was specially prepared with honey, wine and beer mixed in the clay. Commemorative deposits were placed at various points in the foundations, as well as figurines in order to ward off evil. All these actions were undertaken following rigidly established ritual procedures.

A final element that is omitted in the available written documentation about the building of a new city involves its planning. The rectangular layout of the walls of a city such as Dur-Sharrukin could not have been realized without advanced planning. From existing ground plans of houses, some dating as early as the third millennium, we know that architects knew how to develop a blue-print. Yet, no one claims credit for the layout of new cities. Sargon boasted that he made plans to overcome the technical difficulties of the construction of Dur-Sharrukin, but his description does not show any awareness of the unusual character of the city's layout. Tukulti-Ninurta proudly proclaimed that the canal dug to provide Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta with water was straight, but, although he mentioned the walls of the new city, he did not refer to the fact that they formed almost a perfect rectangle.

The silence in the building records of new cities concerning the motivations of the founders, the absence of rituals and omen readings before the work was started, and the apparent lack of pride about the layout of these cities, are all startling. Mesopotamian kings were eager to boast of their accomplishments, as they did when they constructed individual buildings, feats often described in great detail. The Mesopotamian situation is the complete opposite to what we see in ancient Rome. The choice of a site for a new Roman town was determined through extensive consultation of the oracles, the area of the town was ritually purified, and its layout was planned after oracular inquiries. Why this difference? After all, the Mesopotamians can hardly be regarded as less dependent than the Romans on omens and rituals for the running of their daily lives.

In my opinion, the reluctance of Mesopotamian kings to boast about their city building was grounded in the general attitude towards the merits of such an enterprise. Founding a new city was considered to be an act of hubris. A first-millennium tradition about Sargon of Akkade criticized the king for having built a new Babylon, whereby he incited the wrath of the god Marduk: ‘He (Sargon) dug up earth from the clay pits of Babylon and built a replica of Babylon next to Akkade. Because of the wrong he committed, the great lord Marduk became angry and wiped out his people by a famine. From east to west there was a rebellion against him, and he was afflicted with insomnia.’ And we can understand this feeling, as any new city detracts from the importance of the existing ones. Tukulti-Ninurta highlighted in his inscriptions that Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta was a religious centre to complement the old

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city of Assur, not a new city to replace it. New work was depicted as the expansion of something that already existed.

The only exception was the building of Dur-Sharrukin by Sargon of Assyria. The king was proud that he settled a previously uninhabited place. He depicted himself as expanding the cultivated area of Assyria:

The wise king, full of kind thoughts, who focused his mind on the resettlement of the abandoned countryside, the cultivation of lands left fallow, and the planting of orchards, who conceived the idea of raising a crop on slopes so steep that nothing had grown there since time immemorial, whose heart caused him to cultivate desolate areas which earlier kings had not known how to plough, in order to hear the work song, to cause the springs of the surrounding area to flow, to open ditches, and to make the water of abundance rise like the sea, above and below. The king, with open mind, sharp of eye, in everything the equal of the Master (Adapa), who became great in wisdom and intelligence, and grew in understanding—to provide the wide land of Assyria with food to repletion and well-being, as befitting a king through the filling of their canals, to save (the people) from want and hunger, so that (even) the beggar will not . . . at the bringing of the wine, and so no interruption may occur in the offerings of the sick, so that the oil of abundance, which soothes men, does not become expensive in my land, and that sesame be bought at the (same) price as barley, to provide sumptuous offerings, fitting for the tables of god and king, the price of every article had its limit fixed, day and night I planned to build that city.25

The city was the cornerstone of his programme of civilizing the area. A new beginning was made, but perhaps this was acceptable as no important city was located nearby Dur-Sharrukin. Other kings did not stress innovation. Continuity was what mattered to them. Cities had histories going back for hundreds of years, and that history made them important. Huge rebuilding programmes, such as those that took place in Babylon in the first millennium, were not depicted as new beginnings, but as the restorations of cities to their former glory. Bigger may have been better in the Mesopotamian opinion, but the extension needed to be based on an old and respectable structure with a long history behind it. Existing cities could be expanded with new buildings without shame, and such actions were glorified in inscriptions, but the foundation of a city itself was too important a task to be left to a mere human.

The Mesopotamians' idea of their cities was thus tied to a respect for the past. Cities were monuments of the age-old culture; they were not new and modern, but old and respectable. They were not human creations but divine ones. When the walls of Uruk were praised, the fact that their foundations were laid by the seven primordial sages was stressed. When Sargon of Assyria—the only king who readily admitted to having built a new city—described his work on Dur-Sharrukin, he likened himself to one of these sages, Adapa. It was as if he re-enacted a primordial accomplishment. Adapa had brought civilized life to the people of Babylonia at the beginning of time, and had introduced the building of cities. Berossos, the Hellenized Babylonian priest of Marduk writing around 300 BC, stated it in these words:

In Babylonia a great mass of foreign people was settled in the land of the Chaldeans, and they lived an uncivilized life, like that of beasts and animals. In the first year a frightening monster appeared out of the Red Sea in the region of the Babylonians, and its name was Oannes (= Adapa) . . . Of the same animal he says that it lived in the day among the people without eating anything and that it taught the people writing, science and technology of all types, the foundation of cities, the building of temples, jurisprudence, and geometry. He also showed them how to harvest grains and fruits. He gave mankind all that constitutes civilized life.26

In sum, the Mesopotamians took the idea that cities are at the root of civilization literally.

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For the negative image of nomads, see Peter Machinist, ‘On

25 D. G. Lyon, Keilschriftexte Sargon's Königs von Assyrien (Leipzig, 1883), 34, ll. 34–43.


The foundation of new cities was studied in an article by Jean-Louis Huot, 'Les Ville neues de l’orient ancien', in J.-L. Huot (ed.), *La Ville neuve: Une idee de l’Antiquité?* (Paris, 1988), 7–35. He denied that cities were ever created 'ex nihilo' in Mesopotamia, either because the settlements were abandoned immediately after the death of their founder, or because the regular town plan noticed in the archaeological record was imposed upon an existing settlement. It appears, however, that these objections cannot prevent us from stating that certain Mesopotamian rulers intended to create newly planned cities and that such an undertaking was considered to be feasible. In a later publication, Jean-Louis Huot, et al., *Naissance des cités* (Paris, 1990), 215–16, this scepticism seems to have diminished somewhat. More recently the practice of founding new cities was the subject of an entire conference published by S. Mazzoni (ed.), *Nuove fondazioni nel Vicino Oriente antico: realtà e ideologie* (Pisa, 1994).


The Urban Landscape

A modern-day traveller through the countryside of Mesopotamia does not see the remains of majestic stone temples and funerary monuments, as is the case in Egypt, but encounters nothing other than earthen mounds, distinguished from their surroundings only by their height. These mounds, usually referred to with the Arabic term *tell*, are the remnants of great and small cities, the accumulation through millennia of the debris of mud-brick houses, palaces, and temples. To recognize the layout of the ancient cities of Mesopotamia from these remains is not an easy task. Although aerial photographs can provide us with a map of their main features, this map will always be a palimpsest with details from many different eras. The collection of datable objects on the surface of the *tell*, usually pottery shards, permits to some degree the determination of when certain zones were occupied, but still in a very imprecise way. Only excavation guarantees the clear recognition of buildings and their date of occupation. It is, however, an extremely expensive and time-consuming procedure, and not a single urban site in Mesopotamia has been completely excavated. In fact, most excavations have uncovered only a very small percentage of the total area of the site under investigation.

Ancient Mesopotamian sources on urban layout are very restricted in number, but they do provide useful information. A very small number of ancient summary maps of a few Babylonian cities exists. Best preserved is a plan of the city of Nippur, probably produced around 1300 BC (Fig. 4.1). It focuses on the city wall, its gates, the course of the Euphrates river, subsidiary canals, and the temples; its accuracy has been confirmed by excavations at the site. Moreover, some texts, somewhat optimistically called 'The Description of Babylon', or 'The Description of Assur' by modern scholars, contain lists of the names of gates, streets, temples, and quarters of these cities. If much of the monumental architecture is
FIG. 4.1 Ancient map of Nippur

archaeologically known as well, the combination of the two sets of data permits the drawing of city plans with many buildings exactly identified by name. A careful examination of topographic indications in ritual and economic texts, again combined with archaeological data, may produce comparable results. Thus, we have something resembling a modern tourist map for such cities as Assur, Babylon, Borsippa, Nippur, and Uruk, useful for the principal monuments of these cities, but less so for the details of the plans.

The information on the layout of individual cities is thus always partial and fragmentary. Yet we are in a unique position to study urban layout by the mere fact that so many cities existed in ancient Mesopotamia. Many parts of the region are literally covered with tells of all sizes. Mesopotamia was, after all, the most densely urbanized region in the ancient world, and the accumulation of data from various sites allows us to develop quite an accurate picture of the Mesopotamian town. It is a common misconception that the Mesopotamian city was limited to its walled centre. A city had several built-up parts, a walled inner city, suburbs, a harbour district, as well as fields and orchards adjoining these areas. These were all integral elements of the city and an evaluation of Mesopotamian urbanism cannot ignore the role each of them played. Archaeological research has concentrated on the walled inner city, which is consequently best known to us. A variety of plans, determined by geography and by the time of foundation, are attested, and the various layouts seem to reflect different attitudes towards the function of the city. But the other sectors of town, surrounding the inner city, need to be considered as well. Due to the lack of documentation we cannot distinguish temporal or geographical variations in their layout.

When someone in antiquity approached a Mesopotamian city, along a road or by boat on a waterway, he or she would have been aware of the city’s presence long before reaching it. More cultivated fields would appear, together with the villages of farm labourers tending them. The city’s monumental buildings would have been visible from afar, especially the ziggurat towering over the rest of the town. The first urban element encountered would have been the harbour district, where inter-city trade took place. In southern Mesopotamia and along the rivers in the North this was a real harbour on a river or canal, while elsewhere it was a mercantile centre located on the overland routes passing by the city. The Akkadian language refers to both centres of trade with the same term, kārum. Texts from various sites indicate that the harbour district was distinct from the inner city and situated outside the city walls, and thus cannot be equated with the intramural harbours shown on some archaeological maps. Many toponyms of Babylonia and Assyria contain the element ‘harbour of’, but usually the settlements are not located archaeologically.

Consequently, the only extensive remains of a kārum were found outside Mesopotamia, at a settlement that was founded by merchants from Assur, and is thus likely to reflect Mesopotamian traditions. The site in question was called kārum Kanish, ‘harbour Kanish’ in antiquity, and was located at the foot of the central Anatolian city Nesha, some 150 metres north-east of the citadel (Fig. 4.2). The settlement survived for only about 150 years starting around 1950 BC, with a hiatus in occupation of thirty to sixty
The Urban Landscape

FIG. 4.2 Plan of Kultepe-Kanish. Shaded portions indicate areas excavated by early archaeologists. Contours indicate intervals in metres above the level of the plain.

years, and reflects thus a relatively short period of time. Kanish was primarily inhabited by merchants coming from Assyria, whose correspondence and contracts were found in their houses. These texts make clear that the Assyrians settled there in a community structured along Mesopotamian lines, and acting as a branch of the government of Assur. Some Anatolian merchants lived in the Assyrian colony, but their role is unclear as their records remain unpublished. The excavations have revealed a dense cluster of small houses along winding and narrow streets. These streets were paved with stones, something that would not have been found in

Mesopotamia proper, where pottery shards might have been laid on the surface of streets. Also stone-lined drains were in use at Kanish, a feature that most likely would have been absent in Mesopotamia. The major streets were seemingly wide enough to permit the use of a cart. The karum contained not only dwellings, but also workshops, primarily located in the areas settled by Anatolians. Yet no religious or secular monumental buildings have been excavated so far. The harbour district had its own defensive wall, emphasizing its detachment from the inner walled city.

At Kanish the harbour district was located relatively close to the walled city itself, perhaps because it functioned as the centre of the Assyrian trading system throughout Anatolia, and needed close interactions with the king of Nesha who provided protection and the permission to trade. But elsewhere the karum was further removed from the city. This physical separation resulted from the fact that the harbour acted as a neutral zone where citizens from various communities could interact without direct and obvious supervision of the urban political powers. One can visualize these districts filled with activity and life, with people loading and unloading boats and pack animals, and buying and selling. Traders from such distant regions as India and Egypt at times mingled with the natives. The lack of information on this sector of town is unfortunate, and an archaeological investigation of a karum in Mesopotamia proper would seem a promising project.

Coming closer to the town, a visitor would start to walk through gardens and orchards, owned by the urban residents who grew fresh produce there to complement their diet of barley, fish, and meat, brought in from further afield. In Babylonia the orchards were mainly used to cultivate date palms, still the most common tree in the area today. Other fruit trees and some vegetables were grown in between the palm trees or in special plots. As these crops required a lot of water, the orchards and gardens were usually located on the banks of the numerous canals near the cities. In Assyria the date palm was less commonplace, and orchards of different trees were laid out near the cities. Several kings boasted that they imported exotic trees from the regions in which they campaigned, and the presence of gardens near capital cities is recorded with pride in their building inscriptions. The most extensive record of such an accomplishment is provided by king
Assurnasirpal II (ruled 883–859), who collected saplings of some forty-one types of trees on his campaigns and planted them near his capital city, Kalhu:

I dug a canal from the Upper Zab, cut it through a mountain top, and called it Patti-hegalli. I irrigated the lowlands of the Tigris and planted orchards with all kinds of fruit trees in them. I pressed wine and offered first-fruit offerings to Assur, my lord, and to the temples of my land. . . . (Here he lists the names of forty-one trees and bushes, many of which cannot be identified.) The canal cascades from above into the gardens. The alleys smell sweet, brooks like the stars of heaven flow in the pleasure garden.¹

Many of these trees were, of course, not commonly found in Assyria, and the orchards around other cities were less exotic. The orchards and gardens continued into the suburbs and even inside the city walls. The trees furnished not only food, but also shadow and protection against the heat of the sun. In the summer their greenery must have provided a pleasant retreat from a parched countryside.

Soon the visitor would enter the city's suburbs. As is the case today, the distinction between satellite villages and suburbs would not always have been clear, as habitation around the city walls was far from continuous and permanent. In contrast to the inner cities, which were almost continuously occupied for millennia, suburbs were only intermittently inhabited, when the city's population outgrew its walls, and when they would not be exposed to constant attacks and looting by armies and raiding bandits. Archaeologists unfortunately have not devoted much time to the areas outside city walls, as they do not contain monumental buildings considered to produce the most spectacular finds. The periodic settlement of the suburbs has both a positive and a negative consequence for modern researchers. Advantageous is the fact that, when a suburb is found and mapped out, we are not presented with a plan that incorporates data from many different time periods, but with one of a single period of occupation. Of course, that period may have lasted for more than a century, and changes in the layout of the settlement must have taken place, but these changes were relatively minor. On the negative side is the fact that the areas of the suburbs are often indistinguishable from the surrounding countryside due to the lack of accumulation of remains; they are thus often ploughed over by farmers or, if outside the agricultural zone, a small amount of sand deposit can hide all traces of them.

As a result, very little information is available on suburbs, and their existence has been recorded only at a few sites. In just one case these remains have been mapped extensively, at a site called Tell Taya, its ancient name unknown, located in the Assyrian plain near Tell Afar in north-western Iraq. The most conspicuous element of the site is a high round citadel, 50 metres in diameter, situated on the left bank of the Wadi Taya. Around this citadel was a small walled city of only 5 hectares. Tell Taya is unique so far because its extensive ruined suburbs can still be seen on the plain: stone foundations were used for the houses, and these are still visible on the surface due to wind erosion of other debris. Only one-third of the suburbs have been surveyed in detail, but their total extent has been determined. Around the walled city were 65 hectares of dense occupation, themselves surrounded by 90 hectares of scattered development (Fig. 4.3). Considering the small walled city and the extensive suburbs, Tell Taya may have been a very unusual settlement. Yet the features of its suburbs must reflect those of other cities to some extent, and can thus be used as a guide to visualize those.

Although Tell Taya's citadel was occupied intermittently from 2400 to the first centuries AD, the suburbs were only in use during its first period of occupation in the twenty-fourth century. The remains provide ample documentation on their layout. The suburbs were located primarily to the north and the east of the walled city. They were intersected by two small rivers, the Wadi Taya and the East Wadi, which in antiquity must have contained more water than they do today. The walled inner city could be approached by two major roads, one to the west of the Wadi Taya, the other to the east of it. Yet these road systems were, it seems, concerned with communication to the districts outside the city, rather than with providing access to the town centre. They did not converge on the citadel, but only led the traveller to its general area. Within the framework of larger roads was a system of small and narrow side streets, without any obvious pattern. A number of them led to the Wadi Taya and it is clear that they were intended to give access to

its water. There are some open spaces in the plan, but it is impossible to determine whether these existed in antiquity or are the result of stone quarrying by more recent occupants of the region. In general, the occupation between the streets is very dense. Not only houses are visible, but also a number of buildings that are too large to have served for domestic purposes, and may have had an official function. Industrial workshops existed also, and can perhaps be recognized by the large amounts of pottery debris found near them.

It is clear that the suburbs of Taya grew over time, although all within the twenty-fourth century. Three concentric bands of aligned houses are visible in the plan, each representing the limit of the dense occupation at one time. In its final phase the entrance to the major streets was guarded by semi-circular walls, in one case with an adjoining tower. Thus, although the suburbs were not surrounded by a defensive wall, the outer row of houses was laid out so that it formed a clear limit, and the entrances to major streets were protected. The erosion that uncovered the foundations of the houses unfortunately also removed most of their contents. Here and there remnants of kilns, slag, and pottery wasters can be seen, but it is impossible to determine the functions of the various neighbourhoods of the suburbs in any detail. They contained primarily residential and industrial areas, while the religious and official buildings were seemingly restricted to the citadel and the walled city.

Another Assyrian site where some evidence of suburbs was supposedly uncovered is Nuzi in north-eastern Iraq. The mid-second-millennium levels show, outside the small main mound, only 4 hectares in size, the remains of large houses belonging to prominent families according to the tablets found in them. The excavator believed these houses to be located in the suburbs, but it is more likely that they were part of the lower town occupation of the city of Nuzi.2

Early Babylonian cities also had suburbs, but their remains have only been uncovered by accident. The most intensive research on them was done at Ur, where the excavator, Leonard Woolley, noticed that his workmen picked up many objects on their way to the excavations. He dug for a few days in the area to the north of the walled city, but the excavation was considered to be too expensive for the meagre architectural results, and was soon abandoned for a system where workmen were paid for objects picked up and brought in. These collected finds indicate that part of the site was used for the production of pottery, clay figurines, stone amulets, and cylinder seals. Other craft activities probably took place there as well, or in other suburbs located at various sites outside the inner city. The location of craft areas outside city walls was, of course, a sensible practice: access to raw materials and water was easier, bad

odours were less likely to irritate citizens, and space was less restricted.

Freedom of space was a major reason why people settled outside the city walls, which would have been laid out many centuries earlier, when the population had been much smaller. This option was only available when the countryside was not exposed to warfare or raids. In case of an occasional raid the suburban population could withdraw within the city walls, but such an arrangement could not last for prolonged periods of time. Consequently, some cities seem to have established subsidiary walled settlements instead of a corona of suburbs. This led to the existence of agglomerations of two or more cities in close proximity to one another. A peculiar example of such an arrangement was found on the northern border of Babylonia, an area exposed to attacks from Assyria and the Syrian desert, where in the early second millennium twin Sippars were located a mere 5 kilometres apart. Thus, the suburb was not the only way to deal with a population outgrowing the city walls. But suburbs were a common feature throughout Mesopotamia, and future archaeological research should devote more attention to them.

After traversing the suburbs the Mesopotamian visitor would finally reach the inner city, the centre of the urban settlement. This sector has almost always been the sole focus of attention, both of the archaeologist and of the illicit digger, as it is most visible on the surface and promises to produce the most sensational finds. It is thus best known to us, and because of our detailed knowledge we are able to distinguish different plans of the inner cities, determined by geographical circumstances and by the history of their foundation. Yet all inner cities of Mesopotamia had certain common characteristics; before discussing the different layouts we are able to discern, I will describe their standard features.

An inner city was always, at least partly, located on a higher elevation than the other sectors of the city. This elevation was due to artificial terracing in the few cases of new foundations, but usually it was a result of the natural growth of the city. The inner city customarily remained occupied for several millennia in antiquity, and even more recent settlements, typically only villages, tend to be located on the remains of these ancient towns. There were several advantages to keeping a settlement in the same location. The accumulated collapse of the buildings of earlier occupants provided a height that clearly delineated the settlement and had a defensive value. Xenophon reports that the villagers of the area around the former city of Kalhu took refuge on top of the ziggurat’s ruins when his troops passed by. Once a city wall was built, it required less energy to keep it in good order than to build a new one around a new settlement. Moreover, once the ground level of the city had risen above that of the countryside, it became impossible to irrigate its surface, and rather than settling on badly needed agricultural land, it made more sense to remain on top of the old site. Finally, religious sentiments dictated that temples must remain in the same location. Thus many settlements were occupied continuously for several millennia starting in prehistory, and the collapse of earlier buildings provided a natural height demarcating them from their surroundings.

The inner cities were also clearly distinguished by their defensive walls. Perhaps the presence of walls was the main characteristic of a city in the eyes of an ancient Mesopotamian: all representations of cities prominently display walls, many kings boast of their building or repairing city walls, and even literary works sing their praise. A city without a wall might thus not have been conceivable. Of the relatively few Mesopotamian depictions of cities, Assyrian palace reliefs provide the best record. The typical image of a city consisted of one or more rings of fortification walls with numerous towers at regular intervals, which seem to indicate a walled citadel and one or more town walls (Fig. 4.4). The same idea, with only a single wall, is shown in the city-models offered to Assyrian kings as a gesture of submission, and, interestingly, also in representations of Assyrian army camps (Fig. 4.5). The ubiquitous emphasis on the walls in iconographic material reveals the Mesopotamian concept that they were a crucial characteristic of the city.

That concept is also reflected in the numerous royal building inscriptions commemorating the construction or repair of city walls. For instance, Tukulti-Ninurta I described his work on the wall of Assur in these terms:

At that time the ancient wall of my city, Assur, which had been built by previous kings, had become dilapidated and old. I removed its broken down parts, renewed and restored that wall. Around that wall I dug a large
moat—a large moat which no previous king had ever built. Its bottom I cut into the bedrock with copper picks. Twenty musaru down I reached the water level. I placed my foundation inscriptions in that wall.\(^3\)

Even the literature of Mesopotamia celebrates city walls. Most famous is the praise of the walls of Uruk at the beginning and the end of the Epic of Gilgamesh in its first-millennium version.\(^4\) And indeed, the excavated remains of this city's walls are impressive. In antiquity they were 9.5 kilometres long and had nearly a thousand semi-circular bastions. Much later Herodotus started his description of Babylon with an account praising the size of its walls:

It is surrounded by a broad deep moat full of water, and within the moat there is a wall fifty cubits wide and two hundred high . . . On the top of the


\(^4\) See Ch. 3, p. 46.
wall they constructed, along each edge, a row of one-roomed buildings facing inwards with enough space between for a four-horse chariot to pass. There are a hundred gates in the circuit of the wall, all of bronze with bronze uprights and lintels.  

From this quote it is clear that a city’s defences were not limited to walls, but also included monumental gates and a moat. For the latter, advantage was often taken of the presence of a river adjoining the city, while other sides were protected by excavated channels. An Assyrian account describes the moat dug around Dur-Jakin, an archaeologically unidentified Babylonian city conquered by Sargon. The moat was almost 100 metres wide, 9 metres deep, and located some 60 metres in front of the city wall. Bridges were built across it, which were cut under attack, while the army was positioned in between the moat and the walls. Clearly this description does not refer to a hastily constructed defence: the digging of the moat had been a massive undertaking. It has been calculated that to excavate a moat of these dimensions for a medium-sized city of 50 hectares, ten thousand men would have had to work three and a half months.  

Massive gates gave access to the inner cities. Some gates, like the famous Ishtar gate at Babylon, were extensively decorated. The location of the northern and southern palaces between that gate and the point where the Euphrates river entered the inner city shows the need to guard these access points to the city. Although many town plans show numerous gates, it is not certain that all of them were in use. For instance, at Dur-Sharrukin several of them were blocked off. Access was restricted as much as possible for security reasons, and city gates were closed at night to protect the inhabitants, as is revealed in an Akkadian literary topos, describing a city sleeping under a starry sky:

> The countryside is quiet, the land is totally still, the cattle lie down, the people are asleep, the doors are fastened, the city gates closed.  


All inner cities were characterized by the presence of monumental buildings. Palaces were always located there, as were the main city temples. Some shrines may have been located in the suburbs, but all important temples were within the walled inner city. In Babylonian cities the temple of the patron deity was usually the oldest monumental building, hence situated in or near the centre of town, and on a height in order to be visible from the surroundings. This elevation was not necessarily due to artificial terracing, but often resulted from the tradition of locating temples exactly on the same spot, a habit that originated early in prehistory. At the site of Eridu, for instance, a succession of sixteen shrines was excavated in exactly the same location, spanning a period from the sixth to the late third millennium. The ruins of each earlier shrine were contained within the foundations of its successor. The sequence started with a small one-room shrine, and the temple expanded continuously, culminating in a ziggurat of the twenty-first century. The exact location of the earlier temple remains was a matter of concern to later builders. In the sixth century, king Nabonidus related how the temple of Shamash at Sippar had fallen into ruin, although it had been restored just forty-five years earlier. Specialists examined the situation, and concluded that the last restoration had been flawed because the original foundations had not been followed. In order to determine exactly where the earlier temple had been, kings of this period were careful to excavate the underlying infrastructure, as failure to adhere to the original plan was thought to lead to a weak construction.

The accumulation of the debris of earlier monumental buildings naturally led to a greater rise of the temple’s ground level than for the rest of the town. But it became also a special aim of the builders. In the late third millennium the ziggurat was developed by creating a succession of massive platforms on top of which a small shrine was located. This ziggurat was situated either adjacent to the main temple, or at a distance, but then connected to the temple by a succession of courtyards. It towered over the rest of the city, and must have presented an impressive sight, considering that the authors of the Biblical book of Genesis saw in Babylon’s ziggurat a prime example of man’s hubris.

8 See Stephen Langdon, Die neubabylonischen Königsinschriften (Vorderasiatische Bibliothek 4; Leipzig, 1912), Nabonid Nr. 6.
The palace was the second monumental building in town, distinguished from the temple by its fortified character. In Assyrian cities several palaces were located on artificially constructed citadels, clearly visible from the surrounding countryside. The buildings were often enormous in size, and considerable energy was expended on their construction and decoration. They were a powerful symbol of royal might.

Most inner cities also had non-monumental areas, except perhaps for the early cities of Assyria, which I will discuss later. The cities were after all the main residential centres of Mesopotamia, and often largely occupied by domestic quarters. They were divided into monumental and residential sectors by a system of streets and canals, the latter primarily found in Babylonia. It is clear, however, that these urban divisions were quite flexible, and that domestic dwellings could infringe upon the monumental sectors, if space was needed. Certain scholars have doubted that inner city canals existed, as they wonder how water could have run through them, considering that the level of the tell is usually several metres above that of the countryside. The Nippur map confirms their reality, however, and we have to imagine that the banks of these canals sloped steeply upward in antiquity. Silt deposit probably caused the canals to dry up over time, and then they were most likely converted into streets.

The streets of Mesopotamian cities were rarely monumental. Notable exceptions existed, such as the Processional Way in Babylon, leading from the New Year's temple outside the walls to the Marduk temple complex in the centre of the city. It formed a kilometre-long straight avenue from the Ishtar gate to the Marduk temple, and was named 'May the arrogant not flourish'. Sennecherib described in detail how he enlarged the streets of Nineveh when he turned it into his capital city:

At that time I enlarged the site of Nineveh, my royal city. I widened its streets enough for a royal procession, and made them shine like daylight... In order that in the future there would not be a narrowing of the royal road, I had steles made which stand opposite one another. Sixty-two great cubits I measured as the width of the royal road, up to the Gate of the Orchard. If ever any of the inhabitants of that city tears down his old house and builds a new one, and the foundation of his house encroaches upon the royal road, he shall be hung on a stake in front of his (own) house.²

Roads only rarely transected the entirety of the town as a thoroughfare from one gate to another. In cities that resulted from organic growth no straight streets can be observed. In planned cities we find some straight streets behind the gates, but these usually led to the cult centre in the middle of the town, or even only to the nearest monumental building, as far as we can see. They did not provide a grid, or even a means to get quickly from one end of town to another. As was observed in the suburbs of Tell Taya, the primary function of the streets leading into the inner cities seems to have been to provide access from the outside. But once inside one was caught up in a maze of narrow, winding streets, totally lacking a plan. Such a street pattern was probably determined by the natural conditions in Mesopotamia. Narrow winding streets provided protection against the sun and against dust blown in by desert winds. Moreover, due to the lack of wheeled transportation, wide streets were unnecessary. Yet the entire city became subdivided into sectors delineated by these irregular streets. The circulation pattern within these sectors often consisted of small squares from which a number of streets radiated (Fig. 4.6). In this way conglomerations were created of neighbourhoods with internal circulation but with restricted access from the outside. Many of the streets were dead ends, and could perhaps be closed off with gates, creating an isolated community inside them.

Street names were not rare. Many of the streets in Babylon of the sixth century had exalted names, such as 'Pray and he will hear you'. Legal documents throughout Mesopotamian history locate a piece of property by street, often named after a god or after the ethnicity of the inhabitants. A humorous tale of the first millennium describes the confusion of a visitor to Nippur who wants to find a doctor's house and is given these directions: 'When you come to Nippur my city, you should enter by the Grand Gate and leave a street, a boulevard, a square, [Til]Izida Street and the ways

² D. D. Luckenbill, The Annals of Sennacherib (Chicago, 1924), 152–3, xvii ll. 13-16, 19–27. The exact length of a great cubit is unknown, but it is about 50 cm. The road would thus have been about 31 m wide. The Gate of the Orchard is not one of the known city gates of Nineveh.
Thus, there must have been some order in the clutter of streets we perceive in the archaeological plans.

Along the streets houses were packed closely together in agglomerations resembling Roman domestic insulae. This building pattern was, and is, very common in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world, and obviously has the advantage that it protects the inhabitants against the heat by reducing the number of walls exposed to the sun. Protection against the heat dictated many other aspects of the layout of Mesopotamian houses. Although there existed innumerable variations in the house plans, two basic variants existed in Mesopotamia. One consisted of a set of rooms merged together in an agglutinative pattern. The other was formed by a courtyard, surrounded by rooms that were accessed only from that courtyard. The courtyard house was ideally suited to protect its inhabitants from excessive heat in the daytime and cold at night. At night the courtyard and the rooms filled up with cool air, which during the daytime became heated by the sun. The rising hot air provided cooling currents in the rooms. In the afternoon, when the house was at its hottest, increasing shadow produced similar currents to offset the heat. It is thus no surprise that the courtyard house remains the preferred style of dwelling in the Middle East to this day.

Outside windows were rare in the Mesopotamian house, and the streets were lined by blank façades. Both the inside and outside walls of unbaked bricks were very thick, and occupied almost half of the house's surface. Due to the lack of long roof beams, the rooms were small, and many domestic activities may have taken place in the courtyard. Second storeys probably did not exist in the south of Babylonia, but further north they may have been common. It is likely that people slept on the roofs, if not under the open sky, under reed structures or the like that would never survive in the archaeological record.

The plans of houses changed constantly as individual rooms were often bought and sold, or houses were divided among brothers at the father's death. As space limitations were great in inner cities, open spaces between the houses would have been soon

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10 Translation by Benjamin R. Foster, From Distant Days (Bethesda, 1995), 363, quoted by permission.
allowed us to locate these zones with certainty. It is important, however, to keep their existence in mind when population estimates are made based on the size of settlements.

A word needs to be said about the location of burials in ancient Mesopotamian cities. Two types of interment existed seemingly throughout the history of Mesopotamia: burial underneath the floors of houses, streets, and squares, and burial in special cemeteries. Due to the focus of the archaeologists’ attention on built-up areas in towns, the first type seems to have predominated, but it seems unlikely that all inhabitants could have been buried in that manner. The tradition of burying a dead family member underneath one’s house was inspired by the cult of the dead. Deceased ancestors were greatly respected, and at times meals were held within the house which involved offerings to those family members. Pipes in the floor enabled the pouring of food and drink into the tombs. Interestingly, burial-chambers were often reopened, and, the bones present were swept aside, in order to layout a new corpse. It is unclear to us how it was decided who was to be buried underneath the family home, and who was taken to a cemetery. The location of cemeteries in or outside inner cities is rarely known. We have some notable exceptions at Ur, for instance, where in the centre of town a large cemetery was in use for several centuries in the middle of the third millennium. Again more archaeological research on this aspect of urban occupation would be useful.

Despite the fact that all Mesopotamian inner cities had the above-mentioned characteristics in common, we can distinguish four major variants in their layouts. The differences derive from the geographical surroundings of the cities, and from their building histories. The geographical conditions were quite distinct between Upper and Lower Mesopotamia, and both regions had two types of urban settlements. The majority of cities developed naturally over time from villages to urban centres, and showed no advanced planning in their layout. They were the result of organic growth over the centuries. Throughout the history of Mesopotamia, however, cities were founded according to preconceived artificial plans as well. These planned cities need not have been built on virgin soil, but were also created on top of existing towns or villages. What is important, however, is that at a particular moment a decision was taken to build a city according to some regular and
The four variants in the layout of Mesopotamian inner cities can thus be summed up as Upper and Lower Mesopotamian cities resulting from organic growth, and as planned cities in both regions. In the following I will discuss each variant with special emphasis on those aspects that distinguish them from one another.

Lower Mesopotamian cities that had grown organically were characterized by a dense occupation of the inner towns with buildings of varied nature. Religious complexes, palaces, administrative buildings, residential, and industrial areas were all part of the inner cities. The cities were intersected with canals and major streets, but no effort was made to make these straight, and consequently the divisions of the town they created were irregular. Although it may be possible to assign predominant functions to quarters, such as religious or administrative, the separation between them was not strict. Temple complexes, for instance, were only surrounded with monumental walls in the first millennium: previously, houses often abutted the temples themselves. Even if the inhabitants of such houses were often temple personnel, they were not exclusively so.

The main religious complex of a town dominated its plan and its skyline, as it was large and built on a height. The second important monumental building was the palace, but seemingly not all Lower Mesopotamian cities contained one, including some cities that were politically prominent. Palaces were often located at the edge of the inner cities that had been founded in prehistory or the early historical period. When the cities developed after secular elites had become firmly established in the region, by the mid-third millennium, the palace and temple complexes were located in each other’s vicinity in or near the centre of town. The city walls were often constructed after a settlement had already attained a substantial size, and by necessity they followed the contours of the settlement, usually more or less oval shaped. The natural height of the tell formed by earlier building deposits facilitated the erection of a defensive wall on its edges. No prior planning of the wall’s outlines is thus noticeable. There were a great many cities that developed organically in Lower Mesopotamia, and local circumstances influenced their particular layouts.

Upper Mesopotamian cities usually developed differently from those in the South. Instead of a gradual growth from village to city over the centuries, many villages suddenly expanded in the mid-third millennium when the region was urbanized, possibly under Lower Mesopotamian influence. The cities developed two clearly distinct sections, an upper and a lower town. The local Akkadian dialect used two terms to refer to these divisions: kerhum for the acropolis and adašum for the lower town. Access to the former was restricted as is illustrated by this quote from a letter found at Mari:

The day after tomorrow Simahlânê will arrive with his troops in Mari... 150 Babylonians and 50 Numhaian, 200 men in total, will accompany him... To the men that accompany him I will assign lodgings in the adašum. Not a single soldier will be given a tablet for access to the kerhum. But I will make Simahlânê enter the kerhum, and according to circumstances I will give his attendants [comfortable] lodgings, so that he will not get upset.\(^\text{12}\)

The upper town was located on top of the debris of the earlier village, several metres above the level of the plain, not in the centre of the lower town, but at one of the edges. The monumental buildings were situated on it, clearly visible from the surroundings. It is clear from the excavations at Shubat-Enlil and Qattara that in the early second millennium those buildings were all of a religious character, while the palace and administrative buildings were located in the lower town. If the location of the so-called palace of Naram-Sin in the lower town at Tell Brak is not unusual, this may also have been the case in the mid-third millennium.

The upper town was separated from the lower one only by its height and by the monumental walls of its buildings. This is different from the situation in the South where canals or streets separated the religious sector from the rest of town. In the only site where this has been examined, Shubat-Enlil, the lower town contained some domestic architecture besides monumental palace buildings. But there seems to have been an evolution in that practice. A carefully planned residential area with a straight paved street leading to the acropolis was found in the mid-third-millennium town. In the second millennium that residential area was not occupied, and just a few domestic remains have been found on the edges of the town, near the city walls. It seems, therefore, that there was almost no domestic occupation of the

walled city in the early second millennium, when Shubat-Enlil was the capital city of the state created by King Shamshi-Adad (ruled 1813–1781). People must have lived in the suburbs and villages surrounding the city, which was reserved for religious and administrative purposes. Such a situation was never encountered in Lower Mesopotamia. Plenty of open spaces were thus available within the Upper Mesopotamian lower city, which could be used for agricultural activity, and provided a safe haven for the inhabitants of the suburbs and their flocks in times of crisis.

The differences between those cities of the South and the North that resulted from organic growth are thus the following: southern cities contained a dense occupation of varied nature within their walls, while northern ones reserved the walled cities for official purposes and the residential areas were mainly located in the suburbs. The citadels of Upper Mesopotamia have no counterpart in the South where a less clearly delineated sector of town contained the city's temples. The remains of southern cities contain several mounds separated by gullies, where canals and streets used to be. In the North the remains are limited to one high mound, the acropolis or upper town, while the lower city shows little relief.

Although cities that had evolved over the centuries were by far the most common in the entirety of Mesopotamia, throughout the history of the region new settlements were founded with advanced planning, or at times older ones were entirely rebuilt with a radically new and planned layout. Usually these settlements were either new capital cities or trading and military foundations in Mesopotamia's periphery. Although the tradition of founding new capital cities is attested in Babylonia as early as the twenty-fourth century, when King Sargon built Akkade, only one example of it is known archaeologically—Dur-Kurigalzu, built in the second half of the second millennium, just south of modern Baghdad. It is an unusual site in that it stretches for some 5 kilometres along a branch of the Euphrates, joining together three earlier settlements, and no evidence of planning can be seen. Information on planned cities only becomes available in the seventh and sixth centuries, when Babylonia gained political and military supremacy over Western Asia, and its kings undertook massive building projects in many of the ancient Babylonian cities, completely redesigning several of them. These refurbished cities were planned on the same pattern, as is exemplified by Babylon (Fig. 4.7) and Borsippa (Fig. 4.8).
The planning was most likely the work of the architects of kings Nabopolassar (ruled 625–605) and Nebuchadnezzar (ruled 604–562), who may have been guided by earlier works, undertaken by the late Assyrian kings.  

The inner cities were laid out as a large rectangle surrounded by massive walls and a moat filled with water. Within the walls were several monumental gates, giving access to straight streets, leading to the centre of town. The inner cities were thus partitioned into rectangular sectors, which were named after the city gates. But within these sectors the street pattern became much less regular, although the rectangular pattern was not entirely abandoned. The town centre was occupied by the religious quarter, dominated by a ziggurat. This quarter was not located on a height, but separated from its surroundings by a massive wall. The centrality of the temple complex was emphasized by the fact that the roads from the city gates led to it. Moreover, the ziggurats were particularly elaborate and must have been visible from a great distance. Indeed, the temple was intended to be the city’s focal point.  

The palace, on the other hand, was located on the edge of the cities, at the point where the rivers entered them. This was a weak point in the defences, and the military installations adjoining the palace were probably located there for a good reason. Herodotus (1. 191) recounts, however, that Cyrus of Persia was still able to penetrate Babylon through the bed of the Euphrates after he had diverted the water upstream. The palace was not entirely enclosed by the city wall, but, as was the case in Assyria, it extended into the countryside, probably indicating that its function surpassed the city limits.  

Babylon and Borsippa were bisected by rivers. In Babylon the Euphrates cut the inner city into two almost equal parts. The monumental buildings were concentrated in the eastern part, while the western part may have been reserved for residences. In Borsippa a branch of the Euphrates turned into a lake just north of the city. A run-off channel from that lake separated the northern fifth of the city from the rest. In both places water from these rivers was diverted to fill the moat around the walls.  

Babylon had the unusual feature that a second wall was built to form an enormous triangle around the eastern part of the city, along the Euphrates. It may have been intended to integrate within the city the so-called summer palace, situated 2 kilometres to the north of the inner town wall. This outer wall was 7.5 kilometres long, and together with the Euphrates on its western edge, created a triangle measuring 12.5 kilometres in circumference. The eastern inner city was situated at its corner as a highly defended fortress containing temples, palaces, and elite residences.  

Advance planning was not only used for Babylonian cities of the late period, but also for earlier settlements built by southern Mesopotamians on the fringes of the region, for trading and military purposes. Excavated examples of such planned towns are Habuba Kabira in northern Syria, founded in the mid-fourth millennium, Shaduppum, now in a suburb of Baghdad, and Haradum in western Iraq near the Syrian border, both early second...
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millennium foundations. The last site shows all the characteristics of these settlements (Fig. 4.9). It was founded by Babylonians on top of an older settlement in the eighteenth century and survived for little more than one hundred years. Its plan was almost a perfect square, covering only 1.3 hectares. The town was intersected by a number of straight thoroughfares, leading to a religious complex in the centre of town. To the north of the temple was located a large residence that belonged to the so-called mayor. The thickness of the walls, and the defensive character of the city gate suggest that the settlement had a military character. But the location of the site close to the river and the texts found in it indicate that it had an important role to play in the trade between Babylonia and the areas to its north and west. City planning was thus in existence from the very beginning of Babylonian history, and new foundations were ideally laid out as rectangles, allowing for special circumstances that were easily accommodated. The main roads of these cities led to the religious centre in their centre, which stresses again the fact that the temple was considered to be the Babylonian city’s most important monumental building.

Planned cities are best known in Assyria where several new capital cities were constructed in the late second to the mid-first millennia: Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (thirteenth century), Kalhu (ninth century), Dur-Sharrukin (eighth century; Fig. 4.10), and Nineveh (seventh century). Kalhu and Nineveh were built over much smaller earlier cities, and at that time their layout was entirely refashioned. Both survived under several kings, all of whom worked on them and slightly refurbished them. The other two sites reflect the original plan of their builders accurately, and are thus ideal illustrations of a planned Assyrian city.

The architects designed these cities as a large rectangle, surrounded by a massive wall. In Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and Dur-Sharrukin this rectangle is almost perfect, in Kalhu and Nineveh much less so, probably because earlier features had to be included (Kalhu), or because of the topography of the surroundings (Nineveh). On every side of the rectangle, the wall was pierced by several monumental gates, some of which were seemingly not used. The gates were never located exactly opposite one another, although this could have been very easily accomplished. Major streets were laid out behind some of them, yet they did not transect the entire city, and just led to the nearest monumental building, as far as we can see. In a sense we have here a total reversal of the Hippodamian scheme of ancient Greece and Rome, where the grid pattern of thoroughfares was strictly maintained even when the circumference of the city was highly irregular. In Assyria the city walls were regular and linear, while internally the street pattern was irregular.

Each city, except perhaps Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, had two citadels substantially raised above ground level and surrounded by their own walls. They were always located on the city wall, not in the centre of town. Often they extended slightly beyond the limits of the city wall, as if to show their association with the surrounding

![Fig. 4.9 Plan of Haradum]
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The largest citadel was used for one or more palaces and for temples; the second one contained military installations. All these buildings were of massive proportions, and extensively decorated. Their construction was glorified in numerous inscriptions as the king's major accomplishment.

Because of the imposing character of the monumental buildings on the citadels, archaeologists have had little or no time to investigate the lower towns. Only a small section of Nineveh has been surveyed, and the research has shown the existence of élite residences just north of the Kuyundjik citadel, with an industrial quarter somewhat further north. Large areas of these immense Assyrian cities were probably not occupied, but used for pleasure gardens, areas to provide refuge to villagers in times of danger, and for pasture, if we can believe the biblical book of Jonah's mention of many cattle inside Nineveh. It is clear that extensive gardens were considered to have added to the city's pleasures, and several kings boast of having laid them out. According to the building inscriptions all kings who established a new capital started out by digging canals to provide their cities with additional water and to irrigate the fields near and possibly inside them. Sennacherib, for instance, built an extensive aqueduct system, bringing water in from distant mountains. The economic importance of these canals is debated. They may have been needed to support the dense populations of these artificial foundations; yet Sennacherib's own statement that he used a large part of the water to create an artificial swamp suggests that an image of grandeur may have been striven for by these works.

The planned cities of Babylonia and Assyria thus show similarities in that their general layouts were highly regular, and preferably rectangular. They differed, however, in the location of their cult centres. In Babylonia, these were in the centre of the city, separated from the palace, while in Assyria they were located with the palace on a citadel on the city wall. The cities of Assyria seem to have had much more open space than those of Babylonia, perhaps because they were more artificial creations than their southern counterparts, which were usually refurbished ancient and prominent cities.

The four different layouts reflect varied attitudes towards the cities. The differences are greater between Lower and Upper Mesopotamia than between unplanned and planned cities. In Lower Mesopotamia numerous cities were located near the rivers and canals that provided the water indispensable for agriculture. Often several of these waterways entered the city walls. Settlement outside the agricultural zone was impossible, so space was restricted. In Upper Mesopotamia the well-watered plains allowed settlement almost everywhere, and the need for artificial canals was less immediate. The cities were not clustered along the major rivers; instead they could rely for their water supply on smaller streams. Consequently the attitudes towards cities as residential centres were different between the two regions. Throughout Lower
Mesopotamian history inner cities were densely occupied by domestic dwellings, and they were the logical form of settlement in a limited area. In Upper Mesopotamia houses in inner cities were less numerous, and at times perhaps barely present, because settlement in villages throughout the countryside was possible.

In the South, the primacy of the temple as the main public building in town never disappeared, while in the North the palace became the dominant structure, especially in the planned cities of the first millennium. Military installations were also much more prominent in Assyria than they were in Babylonia. The first millennium cities of Assyria had massive arsenals, while in Babylonia no military buildings separate from the palace are known. These differences suggest the greater importance of military and secular matters in Assyria than in Babylonia, where the cultic importance of the city remained a constant through its history.

The differences between unplanned and planned cities in both regions were really not so great. Planned cities show a concern with an outward regularity, but inside the cities this order soon disappeared. The emphasis on the linearity of the wall may have resulted from the city wall’s pre-eminence in the Mesopotamian concept of a city. When a wall was built around an existing settlement it was easier to follow its established contours, which were usually oval. Throughout the planning of inner cities in Mesopotamia we see an ability to adapt to existing circumstances. No dogged adherence to architectural principles is visible, but flexibility in the design is a major characteristic.

Finally, a word about the sizes of these Mesopotamian cities is in order. When talking about urban dimensions we can only take into account the inner cities, clearly delineated by walls, as measurements of suburbs are absent at the moment. There is an enormous variation in the areas of excavated cities. A settlement such as Abu Salabikh in the early third millennium only covered 20 hectares, while at the same time Uruk’s wall surrounded an area of 494 hectares, about 400 of which were settled. The latter city was very unusual in its size and remained the largest walled city in Mesopotamia for two millennia. More common were Babylonian cities such as Ur, with 61 hectares, and Mashkan-shapir, with about 72 hectares in size, or in the North Shubat-Enlil, which covered 75 hectares in the early second millennium.

The new foundations of the late second and early first millennia greatly surpassed these dimensions: Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta covered at least 240 hectares, Kalhu 360, Dur-Sharrukin 300, and Nineveh 750 hectares. The largest city in antiquity until imperial Rome was Babylon, where the outer wall encircled an area of 890 hectares. Its size startled the Greeks: Aristotle describes Babylon in his Politics (3. 1. 12) as a ‘city that has the circuit of a nation rather than of a city, for it is said that when Babylon was captured a considerable part of the city was not aware of it three days later’. Of course, not all the area within the city walls was occupied, and the kings who commissioned the building of these new capital cities clearly wanted their size to reflect grandeur.

The issue of settlement size relates closely to that of population size, but estimating the latter is virtually impossible. The textual record is disappointing: there are no census lists, and references such as Assurnasirpal II’s claim that he fed 69,574 men and women after the founding of Kalhu are probably not very reliable indicators of the size of the population. We are thus forced to look at the archaeological record for estimating populations. Three techniques are currently popular among prehistorians, based on the total size of settlement, the sustaining area available to a settlement, and the domestic architecture. All three techniques have an enormous margin of error, which cannot be reduced by their combined use.

It is not easy to determine the area of settlement in a city at any moment in time, because no city has been completely excavated. Occupation within the city walls was usually only partial, and we cannot establish the extent of the open areas. Habitation outside city walls certainly existed at times, but figures about the spread of suburbs are totally lacking. The number of inhabitants per hectare

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14 The numbers given in different publications for the sizes of cities vary enormously. I use here mainly those provided by Wolfram Nagel and Eva Strommenger, ‘Altorientalische Städte—von der Dorfkultur zur Hochkultur seit Habubah bis Babyloni’, Köln: Jährbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte 16 (1978–79), 61–75, with some additions and corrections.


16 The information provided by Tertius Chandler in ‘Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth’, 2nd edn. (Lewiston and Queenston, 1987), is based on an entirely uncritical use of data from widely varying sources, and is therefore unreliable.
of settlement is essentially impossible to establish. Comparison with contemporary, or early twentieth-century AD Middle Eastern cities provides a guideline, but the variation there is enormous, and the applicability of the figures is doubtful. Most scholars have adopted a figure of 100–400 persons per hectare, but this is inappropriate as the range is too wide and as ‘the use of later statistics begins from an assumption we should be setting out to prove’. Moreover, the supposition that population density remains the same whatever the size of the settlement is most likely false. A study of numerous modern Middle Eastern villages indicates that density actually decreases when the settlements grow larger, which might have been true in antiquity as well. If so, there is no linear correlation between area and population of a settlement, making estimates of the latter even less secure.

It is equally difficult to calculate the sustaining area of a site, i.e. the amount of agricultural land available for the feeding of its population. Even when one city dominates an isolated and well-delineated area, we cannot determine how much land was developed for agriculture in antiquity. It is usually stated that one person can be fed by the income of 1.5 hectares of irrigated agricultural land or 3 hectares of rain-fed land. This figure may help us to set the upper limit of the number of people in a certain territory, although it is always possible that food was imported over long distances. A useful lower limit can never be established on this basis.

Population estimates based on the size of houses are also unreliable. The method involves two uncertain figures: the number of dwellings in a settlement and the number of inhabitants per house. Since we cannot determine the area of occupation of a city at any particular moment in time with certainty, we cannot calculate how many houses were located in it. Even if we knew from excavation how many residences existed in one area, we cannot assume that the density of buildings was the same all over town. Moreover, the number of inhabitants per house cannot be established. The size of a house in a densely inhabited city does not vary with the size of the family residing in it, as expansion of the dwelling to accommodate for family growth is restricted by the presence of neighbours and the lack of open spaces adjacent to the house.

In order to demonstrate existing uncertainties about population sizes, it may be useful to quote some examples of the numbers published for a specific city: Nineveh after its rebuilding by Sennacherib in the early seventh century. The enormously large city of some 750 hectares drew attention even in antiquity. The biblical book of Jonah states that it had 120,000 inhabitants, which has been regarded as at best based on a contemporary guess, or as most likely too high. The most recent estimates consider the number too low, suggesting 300,000 as a round population figure, or too high with 75,000 inhabitants as more reasonable. These last opinions both presume that the entire walled city was inhabited, but that the population density was either 400 or 100 persons per hectare. Obviously the divergence of the published numbers is so great that none can be used for acceptable demographic analyses.

Paul Bairoch, a specialist in demographic studies for Western Europe in the historical periods, calculated a factor of error of one to twelve when discussing ancient Near Eastern population sizes. According to him, urban density is determined by three factors, each with a great margin of inaccuracy: (1) area of occupation within the city walls; (2) number of storeys per house; (3) number of inhabitants per room. None of these elements can be properly ascertained at the moment. We are thus confronted with a high degree of uncertainty when discussing population size. Even the assumption that variation in settlement size is reflective of variation in population size is not proven. Some very general statements can be made with a high degree of conjecture. We can presume that Babylon in the sixth century had an extremely large population, or that Dur-Sharrukin in the late eighth century was probably not fully settled. But more detail is at present unavailable, and demographic studies remain a remote goal.

19 The estimates mentioned here can be found in David Oates, Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq (London, 1968), 49 (perhaps 120,000); Mario Liverani, Antico Oriente. Storia, società, economia (Rome, 1988), 815 (less than 120,000); S. Parpola in Jack M. Sasson, Jonah (New York, 1990), 312 (300,000); and David Stronach in S. Mazzoni (ed.), Nuove fondazioni nel vicino oriente antico (Pisa, 1994), 103. (75,000).


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Social Organization

The social structure of the Mesopotamian city cannot be easily studied even in its most basic outlines. The absence of census lists, or even a relatively complete set of family names from any city, prevents us from recognizing even the familial ties of the inhabitants beyond their closest relatives. For most of Mesopotamian history, and with few exceptions, individuals were identified by their name, and, when further specification was needed, this was done by profession or by the name of the father: for instance, Nûr-Shamash, the shepherd, or the son of Ahi-shâgish. Rarely, an ethnic designation, such as the Amorite, Turukkean, or the like, was included. It was only in first millennium Babylonia that a more complete genealogy was consistently used. Before that date we are thus usually unable to establish family ties between individuals further removed than siblings.

We can determine with certainty that the most basic social unit in the city was the nuclear family: a married couple with a number of unmarried daughters and sons, and perhaps a widowed parent. Such a family could own domestic slaves residing in the same household. Widows and waifs not taken care of by a family were pitied, and their protection was a sign of royal beneficence. On the other side of the scale, the largest social unit was the entire city community, ‘the city’, which sometimes appears in the documents acting as one entity, especially in its interactions with authorities such as the king. People sometimes expressed their attachment to the home town by giving their children names such as ‘Uruk preserves’.

Membership to the city community was probably based on residence, but we have no idea whether or not other requirements existed. Moreover, we do not know where the

1 See Johann Jakob Stamm, Die akkadische Namengebung (Darmstadt, 1968), 84–85.