



Guillermo Algaze. *Ancient Mesopotamia at the Dawn of Civilization: The Evolution of an Urban Landscape.* Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008. 246 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-01377-0.



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On the Early Cities of Mesopotamia

The origins, organization, and operation of early cities remain subjects of great interest across many disciplines. In the book under review, archaeologist Guillermo Algaze uses market-based economics to explain not the origins of cities in Mesopotamia, but the subsequent trajectory of their development. His provocative arguments reveal a great deal about the earliest cities in southern Mesopotamia of the fourth millennium BC, while posing some challenges about the nature of historical causality and explanation.

It may be useful to begin with a brief review of the state of our knowledge of these developments. Thirty years ago, archaeologists knew that the world's first cities had been built in Mesopotamia by 3200 BC. Archaeological excavations of monumental public buildings and finds of proto-cuneiform writing in what is now southern Iraq, particularly at the site of Uruk, suggested that Mesopotamian cities were centered on public institutions that both physically dominated the urban landscape and organized much of the production, storage, and distribution of agricultural products and manufactured goods.

Little was known about settlement and occupation in neighborhoods outside the monumental centers.

One explanation for the rise of these cities, that of Robert McC. Adams, emphasized their location at the intersection of different ecological zones and their ability to function as points of exchange for distinctive resources of each zone. Another perspective, taken by Paul Wheatley, focused on the possibility that temples in newly built cities served as focal points of ritual practice that would bring people into cities and increase the influence of priests to the point that they would become kings.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, Algaze recognized that the material culture of southern Mesopotamia was in fact found across a large area of the Middle East during the Late Uruk period (ca. 3350-3100 BC), more than five hundred miles up the Tigris and Euphrates rivers into what is now Syria and Turkey as well as into the Zagros Mountains of Iran. In recognizing this "Uruk Expansion," Algaze also proposed a model to explain it: the

growing cities of southern Mesopotamia required natural resources that were found in these peripheral areas, and they sent merchants and even entire colonies into an undeveloped periphery to assure themselves of an adequate supply of raw materials.

Algaze's synthesis of this phenomenon, with its clear hypothesis to explain the Uruk expansion, provided an orientation for much of the research on the Uruk phenomenon in intervening years. Some of that work suggested that Algaze's emphasis on long-distance trade was overstated, as there was little direct evidence for traded goods in the Mesopotamian heartland itself, while other work investigated the organization of local societies in the areas affected by the expansion and showed that these societies were larger, more complex, and built earlier than his original model suggested.

In the current volume, Algaze acknowledges that societies in both northern and southern Mesopotamia were urban during the first half of the fourth millennium BC, and shifts his attention to a related question: why did cities in southern Mesopotamia grow to be larger and more powerful than settlements in neighboring regions beginning in the second half of the fourth millennium BC? Algaze proposes a fundamentally economic explanation that begins with trade, and he has drawn in provocative ways on the work of economists ranging from Adam Smith to Paul Krugman, with a particularly important role for the views of Jane Jacobs.

The argument begins with natural resources, and there is no doubt that resources in and around Mesopotamia are distributed unevenly. The Mesopotamian plain possesses abundant water and agricultural and herding land as well as marshes with rich aquatic resources along its southern margins, whereas the mountains to the north and east contain timber and stone for building, copper and silver, and a range of semi-precious stones, but less capacity to produce a surplus to support large concentrations of population. As noted by many scholars, these regional disparities have provided a natural basis for exchange of raw materials for manufactured products across the millennia.

Algaze then suggests ways that such trade could generate and amplify concentrations of population and wealth among these regions. Trade leads to import substitution, diversification of production, and subsequent specialization. Specialized manufacturing processes are adopted in other industries, leading to further diversification. Greater production leads to economies of scale that increase the trade advantage of producers of goods over

suppliers of raw materials. Algaze proposes that these processes occurred during the Uruk period in manufacture of stone blades, copper metallurgy, and (most importantly) textiles (pp. 73ff.).

The clearest of these examples is the explosive growth of textile industries in southern Mesopotamian cities beginning in the Late Uruk period. Initial importation of wool-bearing sheep onto the Mesopotamian plain by 4500 BC led to import substitution, in which wool replaced linen (from flax plants) as the primary fiber in textile production. Because wool can be more easily dyed than linen, this import substitution led to diversification of production (more varieties of woven cloth), and specialization of large numbers of workers in textile production organized by (and providing wealth for) the major urban institutions of palace and temple.

As a general rule, trade is complementary but not inherently asymmetrical. Algaze argues, however, that the irrigation canals necessary for agriculture and thus settled life on the Mesopotamian plain significantly reduced transportation costs, allowed trade in bulky commodities like grain, and enhanced concentration of people into cities, which intensified the diversification and specialization of their economies. He assembles Mesopotamian textual data suggesting that water-borne transportation could be 170 times as efficient as transportation by donkey caravan (pp. 54ff.).

To summarize the major argument of the book, then: Algaze proposes that southern Mesopotamian cities grew significantly larger and stayed significantly larger than settlements on its peripheries by 3200 BC because of features of its natural landscape, the distribution of resources, and an ongoing process of diversification and specialization of production.

He also proposes a research agenda for the time when archaeologists might be able to return to work in Iraq. His suggestions—which include more detailed studies of climate, geomorphology, and settlement, excavation of earlier levels of southern cities and areas outside their monumental centers as well as attention to smaller settlements—will not be controversial among specialists. There is much else of value in this volume. Algaze gathers a range of research on climate change, including important recent work by Jennifer Pournelle, to suggest that the Mesopotamian climate became significantly drier from about 3500-3000 BC (pp. 43ff.).

Given the wealth of stimulating proposals in this book, there is much to discuss. Algaze's model is based

on what some scholars would find to be an excessive economic and geographic determinism (recalling in some ways Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* [1997]). He acknowledges briefly (pp. 147-148) the role of individuals and groups as decision makers or agents as well as the potential impact of events in historical explanation, but clearly does not consider them to be significant in this case. Others may find his assumption that earliest urban economies were based on market principles like fluctuating prices and profit motives to be misplaced—they certainly developed in later periods of Mesopotamian history, but arguably as a result of centuries of urban life rather than being present from the start.

Evaluating the explanatory factors in a particular case is difficult, and as much as I admire the skill with which Algaze has outlined the importance of geography and economy in the growth of southern Mesopotamian cities, the Mesopotamian archaeological record increasingly suggests that we must consider a greater role for political leadership and conflict in explaining developments in areas outside the Mesopotamian plain. This is particularly marked in recent excavations in northeastern Syria, where it has become increasingly clear that the Uruk expansion was marked by significant conflict at some major sites (Tell Brak and perhaps Hamoukar). Tell Brak, the largest city currently known in the pe-

riphery with a population of perhaps twenty thousand people, was extensively burned, the major known temple rebuilt in honor of the southern Mesopotamian goddess Inanna, and its settled area (and likely population) significantly reduced during the Uruk expansion. The divergent histories in which southern cities grew increasingly large while northern cities disappeared from the historical record for centuries (only to re-emerge about five centuries after the Uruk expansion) must take this conquest into account.

The extent to which this model is applicable to other archaeologically and historically known cases of urban development is perhaps a subject best addressed by specialists in other areas, but its applicability within greater Mesopotamia is limited. It cannot, for example, account for the development of political and economic urban centers away from the advantages of resources and canal transportation in southern Mesopotamia, as certainly happened in northern Mesopotamia during the fourth millennium BC and later in Assyria beginning in the mid-second millennium BC.

Algaze's work is important and thought-provoking, and like his earlier work identifying the Uruk expansion, will undoubtedly be discussed and debated by archaeologists and historians working to understand urbanism in Mesopotamia for years to come.

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