

URBANIZATION IN IBERIA AND MEDITERRANEAN GAUL IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM BC

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II • ON THE NOTION OF THE CITY AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE STUDY OF WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN PROTOHISTORY

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Abstract

For historians, the urban phenomenon is a given and, in spite of its many versions and particularities across time and space, it is conceived as fundamentally invariable and is intuitively recognised. Therefore, unlike other social scientists, including sociologists and geographers, they have not paid particular attention to the definition of the city. For pre- and proto-historians, however, the profound, essential nature of the city is a basic question, as the early formation of towns is one of the central issues of their research. This has generated a large amount of scientific literature on the subject in the last decades. With this paper, we intend to contribute to the reflection on the nature of the city, and to define it in a way that may help identify and understand the protohistoric cities of Iberia and Mediterranean Gaul, if they did really exist.

Key words: city, urbanism, protohistory, western Mediterranean

Resum

Per als historiadors, el fet urbà és una realitat que, malgrat les seves moltes versions i particularitats al llarg del temps i de l'espai, és fonamentalment invariable i reconeguda de forma intuïtiva. Per aquest motiu, i a diferència d'altres científics socials, com ara sociòlegs o geògrafs, no han prestat especial atenció a la definició de la ciutat. Per als pre- i els protohistoriadors, però, la naturalesa profunda i essencial de la ciutat és una qüestió bàsica, ja que la formació inicial de les ciutats és un dels temes centrals de la seva recerca. Això ha donat peu a una literatura científica important sobre aquest tema en els darrers decennis. Amb aquest treball pretenem contribuir a la reflexió sobre la naturalesa de la ciutat i donar-ne una definició que pugui ajudar a identificar i comprendre les ciutats protohistòriques d'Ibèria i de la Gàl·lia mediterrània, si realment van existir.

Paraules clau: ciutat, urbanisme, protohistòria, Mediterrània occidental

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For most of us, including social science researchers, the notion of a city is a matter of common sense and has therefore not been problematic for many scholars who devote themselves to the study of the past, particularly historians. They may have debated the specific characteristics and functions of the cities in particular regions and periods without feeling the need, at least as a rule, to question the essential nature of such habitation sites; in other words, what sets them apart from other kinds of human nucleated settlements. This stance is not very different to that of certain geographers, such as P. Wheatley, who considers that “it is not particularly profitable for a social scientist to discuss the nature, the essential quality of urbanism. That is a metaphysical question more amenable to philosophical inquiry than to the empirical methods of social sciences” (Wheatley 1972, 601). In a more nuanced way, and with a touch of irony, H. M. Miner states that “everyone knows what a city is, except the experts” (Miner 1967, 3). In short, in today’s world, as well as in the “historical” past (in the classical sense of the word, i.e. the periods for which important written sources of information exist), the city is a given, a connatural element of any society, although it can adopt many forms, achieve very different sizes and perform functions of a considerably diverse nature. Defining the minimum common denominator of cities can therefore be a task that is as attractive as it is difficult and, ultimately, perhaps useless.

Indeed, it is wise, as Wheatley proposed, not to enter into debates that will not lead to real progress in our knowledge. After all, if the definition of the city has not been the subject of a profound discussion among historians, one must conclude that it was not a particularly relevant issue for this field. However, the question is posed in a very different way for prehistorians and, above all, protohistorians, since one of their central subjects is precisely the emergence of the first cities and frequently, in close connection with this, the appearance of institutionalised inequality and the constitution of the early states. It is therefore an important matter to decide whether or not the first settlements that are distinguished by their relatively large size in seemingly hierarchised settlement systems can be considered cities or not. Indeed, it is not by chance that urbanization in such cultural and chronological contexts has been the object of important publications and conferences held in the last twenty-five years (Andersen *et al.* 1997;

Yoffee 2004, Chapter 3; Osborne 2005, 5-8; Smith 2007, 4; Marcus and Sabloff 2008, 12-20; Garcia 2013; Fernández-Götz, Wendling and Winger 2014; Fernández-Götz and Krausse 2016; *Making Cities: Economies of production and urbanisation in Mediterranean Europe, 1000-500 BCE* International symposium 18-19 May 2017, organised by Joanne Cutler, Beatriz Marin Aguilera and Margarita Gleba, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge; *Urbanisation et contacts de cultures en Méditerranée Occidentale, Journées d’Étude Internationale, Montpellier 12-13 novembre 2018*, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, organised by Rosa Plana-Mallart and Sandra Zanella).

As Osborne clearly stated in one of the aforementioned contributions,⁵ studying urbanization presupposes the existence of, or rather the need for, a clear notion and an equally precise definition of what a city is in abstract and general terms, beyond the implicit consensus on this issue. In other words, when it comes to the formation of the first cities, the definition, rather than the mere description, of what is urban cannot be avoided. Therefore, in this introduction we face up to the challenge of defining as precisely and inclusively as possible what a city is. Needless to say, we do not expect this discussion to be definitive, but rather a discursive basis with which to nourish future debates on this issue.

It goes without saying that this concern has been raised in multiple reflections and debates, mainly from the fields of geography, sociology and archaeology, beginning with the pioneering work of Weber (1969 [1921] = 1922). A review of the most relevant positions regarding the subject at hand is obviously necessary. However, a comprehensive and detailed analysis of all this literature would be far beyond our capabilities and would definitely surpass the limits of this necessarily short paper. We will therefore focus our discussion mainly on the contributions from or connected to the field of archaeology, although without ignoring the most prominent sociological and geographical theoretical sources that frequently inspired them.

Considering what has been said in the previous paragraphs, it is no surprise that among students of the past –with the notable exception of M. Weber (1921) who must always be taken as a separate case– the definition of the town has provoked, above all, researchers involved in the formation of complex societies. We can begin with V. G. Childe,

5. “If we are going to worry ourselves about the coming of the town, then the category of town needs to mean something to us in public language” (Osborne 2005, 6).

who reflected on this issue in his famous 1950 article, at a time when archaeological information was still scant in comparative terms. In spite of his intellectual power and his great breadth of knowledge, Childe did not feel able to give a definition of the city, although he implicitly recognized the need for it in the first sentence of this article: “The concept of ‘city’ is notoriously hard to define” (Childe, 1950, 3). Based on the available data, and combining features of material culture and social organization, Childe proposed a list of ten points that, in his view, characterize urban societies and the cities themselves; this constitutes a very accurate description of the available knowledge on the habitation sites that characterized his “urban revolution”. More specifically, he mentioned: 1) The concentration of a relatively large population in a restricted area, although perhaps less than that of many present-day villages; 2) The coexistence in this space of a diverse population with regard to its status and its role in the production system, which can, at least potentially, be recognized in the remains of houses and facilities related to production); 3) Appropriation of the economic surplus by a central authority and the consequent accumulation of capital, which should have led to the existence of warehouses controlled by the power); 4) A monumental public architecture, itself an expression of power; 5) In relation to point 3, social stratification; 6) The use of registration and accounting systems, including writing; 7) Development of mathematical and astronomical knowledge; 8) In relation to point 3, development of the visual arts; 9) Long distance commerce; 10) Community affiliation based on residence, rather than lineage (Childe 1950, 9-16).

In the subsequent decades, and up to the present, the urbanization process in general and the notion of a city in particular have continued to be studied and discussed by archaeologists (among others, Andersen *et al.* 1997; Osborne 2005, 5-8; Smith 2007, 4; Marcus and Sabloff 2008, 12-20; Fernández-Götz, Wendling and Winger 2014, 6-9; very recently, and in a particularly explicit way respecting archaeological research, Smith 2016). They often draw on theoretical sources from the fields of geography and sociology, in particular, as regards the latter, Weber (1969 [1921] = 1922) and Wirth (1938).⁶ However, the analysis of these texts shows that, at least from our point of view, a sufficiently precise and suitably inclusive definition of the city is still lacking. In other words, many authors agree to identify the definition of the city

as a relevant concern, but none proposes one that is truly comprehensive and operational, thus confirming many decades later Childe’s assertion about the difficulties involved in this purpose.

For example, in a section significantly titled “What a city is and is not”, Marcus and Sabloff also conclude that, despite the diversity of regions and chronological periods, “a single, widely agreed-upon definition for the city may one day be possible”. This also implies that such a definition does not currently exist and that they are not proposing one, in spite of the need. However, based on an abundant previous literature, they provide a list of seven characteristics “often invoked in definitions of the city”, which is different, but of a similar nature, to that proposed by Childe. It can be summarized in the existence of social and political diversity in a limited area, which results in the presence of different functional zones –including a central religious and/or administrative centre– and organized use of the space, integrating different neighbourhoods (Marcus and Sabloff 2008, 13). We can add other “checklists” drawn up, for example, by C. Renfrew (2008, 47-4) and particularly that of M. Smith, which is extremely elaborate (Smith 2016, 158-164). Smith presents it as an alternative to any clear-cut definition of city, which he understands is practically impossible to achieve (“There is no single best definition of urbanism nor any single best approach for analyzing early cities and urban societies”) (*ibid.*, 166). In short, these lists of attributes correspond to the difficulties experienced in finding an adequate definition of the city. They constitute a fairly accurate and relatively abstract description of the well-known cities and they are useful for those reasons, but they do not provide a clear solution to the problem experienced by protohistorians when they come to deciding whether their “proto-urban”, “almost urban”, “possibly urban” or “supposedly urban” settlements are true cities.

Other scholars, however, have insisted on the need for a definition of the city. A clear and unequivocal relationship between signified and signifier is necessary to avoid polysemy and ambiguity (what Osborne has rightly called “private language”) (Osborne 2005, 6), which are incompatible with undertaking a scientific activity. Osborne, for example, explicitly indicates that “... for any discussion of urbanization, definition of the term remains basic” (Osborne 2005, 5) and suggests an “expedient” one “in terms of relative population size and density” (Osborne 2005, 8).

6. For a wider discussion of the sociological and geographical stances concerning the city and urbanization, see Marcus and Sabloff 2008.

Following Grove (1972, 560) and in fact other geographers such as Mabogunje (1962, 3-4) and ultimately Christaller and the theory of the central place, he points out that the definition of the city must be based on its functions within an implicitly complex sociocultural system (Osborne 2005, 8). This viewpoint is shared by other Anglo-Saxon scholars such as B. Trigger (2003, 120; 2008, 55) and M. Smith. In his 2007 article, the latter proposes “a functional definition of *urbanism*: urban settlements are centers whose activities and institutions –whether economic, administrative, or religious– affect a larger hinterland. Cities are large urban centers with numerous urban functions, whereas towns are smaller urban centers with fewer urban functions” (Smith 2007, 4-5). It is a definition very close to that of some geographers (“we can define towns as settlements offering a given variety or level of certain characteristic services” Grove 1972, 560), which has been subsequently adopted by Fernández-Götz and Krausse (2013, 480), with an important and appropriate nuance regarding size, “a numerically significant aggregation of people permanently living together”, and by Fernández-Götz, Wendling and Winger in an extensive section devoted, once again, to discussing the definition of a city (2014, 9). About ten years later, Smith insisted on the functional definition of the city, arguing that urban functions, which he understood as “an activity or institution that directly affects life and society in a hinterland”, are the only truly universal feature of cities. In this way, he denies that the city must also be universally defined through sociological traits (Smith 2016, 154).

From our point of view, the problem of the strictly functional definition of the city is that it conflates two notions that are not exactly equivalent: the city itself and the so-called “urban functions”. As Smith himself (2016, 155) and other scholars point out, such functions may be performed by settlements of very diverse natures and sizes. It is pertinent, for example, to recall here Hansen’s critique of a purely functional definition: “The result is often too broad in definition of what a city is. Many villages fulfil the requirement of performing many functions in relation to a broader hinterland..., by this [functional] definition it is impossible to distinguish cities from towns and towns from villages.” (Hansen 2008, 71). It follows from this that the definition of the city cannot rest exclusively on functional traits, but also on demography, as aptly indicated by Fernández-Götz and Krausse: a minimum population is needed to consider a settlement as a city. On the other hand, the existence of both a relatively large population and specialized functions entails some social di-

versity, i.e. the presence of both a significant number of commoners and at least some members of the elite; consequently, social diversity is connatural to the city. Put another way, we understand that cities are loci not only of certain functions affecting a wider territory, but also of distinct ways of life that can only exist within a particular material milieu defined by certain specific traits in terms of size (a minimum area above that of villages), the physical proximity of the inhabitants (high population density) and the social distances between them. Urban functions may be exerted by and from other kinds of settlements, but we do not think these can be called “cities”, if this term is to maintain a fully specific meaning.

This leads us to the definitions of cities based on sociological traits, especially Wirth’s (1938) and, to some extent, Weber’s (1969 [1921] = 1922). The latter clearly indicates that “size alone can hardly be sufficient to define the city” (1969 [1921], 23) and gives in fact a fundamentally functional definition of urbanism that is close to a list of traits: “To constitute a full urban community [*Stadtgemeinde*] a settlement must display a relative predominance of trade-commercial relations with the settlement as a whole displaying the following features: (1) a fortification; (2) a market; (3) a court of its own and at least partially autonomous law; (4) a related form of association; and (5) at least partial autonomy and autocephaly, thus also an administration by authorities in the election of whom the burghers participated” (*Ibidem*, 38). Despite this, he also suggests that the city is “a locality and a dense settlement of dwellings forming a colony so extensive that personal reciprocal acquaintance of the inhabitants is lacking” (*Ibidem*, 23 = Weber 1922, 513). Weber did not claim that this was a necessarily defining feature of the city, but we still believe it is a particularly relevant trait in two ways. Firstly, because it stresses the diverse nature of the personal relationships between significant parts of the city’s population, including “impersonality” (see also Wirth 1938, 11-12); and, secondly, for its implications in defining the minimum size of the city, since impersonality requires a substantial population and physical size, an important trait that, as already stated, helps separate the notion of what the city is from the concept of village or other sites with urban functions. From a functional point of view, absolute size might seem irrelevant in hierarchised settlement systems in which larger sites are supposed to be cities and towns that organize and control the territory through political, administrative and religious institutions. Even so, size is an important aspect that should not be disregarded when it comes to

defining what the city is, given its implications for the social life of the inhabitants, “whose activities, roles, practices, experiences, identities, and attitudes differ significantly from those of other members of the society who identify most closely with ‘rural’ lands outside such settlements” (Cowgill 2004, 526). As Wirth put it, “the fact that the urban community is distinguished by a large aggregation and relatively dense concentration of population can scarcely be left out of account in a definition of the city” (Wirth 1938, 6). It is true that this scholar also held that “these criteria [population size and density] must be seen as relative to the general cultural context”, but, regardless of the many different contexts in which cities are attested, there has to be a lower limit for the urban population below which it is not possible to speak of a city. Otherwise, settlements of the physical and human size of a village, not to mention small fortified centres, could be designated as cities, provided that functions related to the control and exploitation of a territory were carried out. It is more appropriate to designate this kind of place as “palatial”, “ceremonial” or “control” centres. We also understand, still drawing on Weber’s view, that the city is necessarily large enough to entail the existence of different “neighbourhoods”, within which the traditional close and direct relations between people typical of the pre-urban communities –hamlets and villages– are preserved, whereas they are lost between the inhabitants of different districts.

In a very influential paper published in 1938, Wirth insisted, from a different perspective, on the social diversity that characterizes the population of cities as the most relevant trait of this kind of site, the one that separates it from other nucleated settlements; to his mind, a city is “a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals” (Wirth 1938, 8). Such a definition, though not very popular among archaeologists, as we have seen, is the basis of the well-known characterization of the city by a prominent architecture historian, Spiro Kostof, for whom “Cities are places where there is a specialized differentiation of work —whether people are priests or craftsmen or soldiers— and where wealth is not equally distributed among the citizens. These distinctions create social hierarchies: the rich are more powerful than the poor; the priest is more important than the artisan. Social heterogeneity is also axiomatic” (Kostof 1991, 37–38). Social heterogeneity is thus linked, at least to some extent, to the specialized functions that are typical of the city.

Another relevant issue has to do with the notion of “low-density urbanism” developed by

Fletcher (2009; 2012), initially for the analysis of situations typical of the modern world (for example the large conurbations on the east coast of the United States), but which has also been applied to various areas in pre-industrial periods, including central Europe in the late Iron Age (Moore 2012; Fernández-Götz 2018, 120-122). The concept applies to large and frequently very large sites, whose boundaries are often ambiguously defined and that are not densely occupied (though some parts of them can be); frequently, farming and livestock are practiced in open areas within this kind of site, so that the distinction between the rural and the urban is blurred. We believe that this spatial structure must involve, on the one hand (and to quote Cowgill again), “activities, roles, practices, experiences, identities, and attitudes” that differ significantly from those that are typical of settlements where most people live in close proximity; and on the other, non-centralized forms of sociopolitical organization that are rather heterarchical in kind (Moore). We understand that high population density is an essential quality of cities, since it has particular sociological consequences that are not possible in low-density settlements, however large and complex they may be. Human relationships are necessarily different in nature if a large population is densely concentrated in a limited space or scattered over areas of several hundred or more than a thousand hectares. Consequently, these two kinds of settlement (high- and low-density) are different in nature and should not be confused, even if both accomplish urban functions as defined above.

What has been said up to this point emphasizes the need for a clear and precise definition of the city. Therefore, we will venture to give one, while remaining aware of the difficulties involved and the possibility of not obtaining a satisfactory result. Such a definition needs to be formulated with an adequate level of abstraction to comprise the actual enormous diversity of cities over time and space. Moreover, if it is to be useful for archaeological research, it must be formulated in terms that allow material correlates. Population size and proximity, as well as social diversity, do matter in the definition of urbanism, because they are crucial for the particular social life that sets cities apart from other settlements with urban functions. Consequently, they must be part of the definition and include an estimate of the minimum population level below which, in any cultural context, it is not possible to consider a site as a city, but rather as a village or another kind of settlement that displays urban functions, for example, some hillforts. Drawing on Weber and Wirth (followed by Kostof) for a sociological viewpoint, and

on Grove's (and many others') functional standpoint, we suggest the following definition of the city: "A densely occupied settlement whose size is too large for all its inhabitants (who number not less than one thousand) to maintain a neighbourhood-type relationship (Weber), that controls and exploits a neighbouring territory (Grove), and that, as a consequence of the latter, is inhabited by people of diverse social levels who undertake specialized activities of different types (agriculture, crafts, administration, priesthood, military) (Wirth, Kostof)."

It is important to note that all the features mentioned in this definition are archaeologically observable and measurable. It may seem difficult, and it surely is, to venture a minimum population figure, but, as we have stated above, this is a key aspect in the definition of the city. Therefore, we can assume this risk as necessary; a specific figure, provided that it derives from minimally sound reasoning, is better than ambiguous expressions such as "substantial", "remarkable", "dense", "numerically significant" or "important." The minimum number of one thousand inhabitants that we suggest to define the city is derived from two complementary hypotheses. The first, drawn from Weber's ideas, is that any city must comprise at least two different districts or neighbourhoods; there must be close daily interaction between the inhabitants of each neighbourhood, although ties are looser with the residents of the other. If we admit that each of these neighbourhoods is made up of a maximum of around fifty families⁷ and have a total population of 200 to 250 people each, we would obtain a total population figure of some 450 to 500 people. However, we feel (rather than know) that the social diversity (following Wirth) and maybe even the impersonality (following Weber) implied in the notion of city is not possible with such a small population. This is why we think that number must be doubled at least. Perhaps, with all the necessary precautions, a minimum could be estimated at some 250 families, i.e. about 1,000 people. This figure has also been endorsed by several scholars from different fields of the social sciences (Hansen 2008, 70 and Note 3), although others consider that larger populations, of at least a few thousand, are necessary (Cowgill 2004, 528).

This brings us to another essential issue for the subject of this book: the calculation of popula-

tion at archaeological sites. This matter has been widely debated in the archaeological literature since the nineteen-sixties, beginning with the pioneering contributions of Naroll (1962) and Cook and Heizer (1968).⁸ This calculation is particularly difficult when, as is common, settlements have been only partially excavated or not excavated at all. Even when they are known over a broad area, there may still be additional difficulties, such as the existence of houses of very different sizes, as is usual among stratified societies. This, of course, makes it impossible to blindly use the most common average family size indexes (4 to 5 people) (unless they are applied to the average size of the domestic units of each settlement). To all this, it is necessary to add the existence of zones for community use, such as streets, public buildings, warehouses, etc., that can occupy a large but potentially very variable area in the settlement. This is obviously difficult to evaluate without extensive excavation work or geophysical surveys, although the latter frequently do not provide fine-grained functional information. On the other hand, the area occupied by a population of a given size (for example, the one thousand inhabitants that, in our view, constitute the threshold size of the urban centre), can vary considerably due to environmental, cultural, social and economic factors. It follows from this that it must be analysed and evaluated on a local or regional level.

Within the area and period considered in this volume, population density at nucleated sites has been analysed in particular detail by Moreno and Valor (2010) for the site of Kelin. This is a large settlement in the interior of Valencia that has been sufficiently excavated to allow a calculation of population density, which has been estimated at 26 m² per inhabitant, i.e. 385 inhabitants per hectare. It is an approximate and hypothetical calculation that should be refined with information from studies of other sites, as further excavations provide more data for them to be carried out. However, it is well founded on a rigorous methodology and allows a preliminary approach to the demography of the nucleated settlements of Iberia and Mediterranean Gaul. If this figure of urban population density is accepted, the settlements with a concentrated population would meet the demographic requirement to be considered as cities (i.e. 1,000 inhabitants) if they have an area of 2.6 hectares or more. Given that, as shown in the

7. This figure is based on the number of dwellings attested in the Early Iron Age nucleated sites on the Mediterranean coast of the Iberian Peninsula, where a non-hierarchised settlement system, typical of a local group level society, is attested. We assume that the first towns were constituted by the aggregation of such social units, which formed the urban neighbourhoods.

8. For an overview of this issue, see Moreno and Valor 2010, and Gracia *et al.* 1996.

different chapters of this book, such sites are frequent in Iberia and Mediterranean Gaul, we can reach the provisional conclusion that autochthonous cities probably existed in the protohistory of the western Mediterranean, although further research on their internal structure is still needed for us to fully understand their social and functional nature.

When dealing with subjects such as the one we have tried to develop in this brief contribution, it is easy to fall into nominalist debates that are not in themselves of great interest and certainly do not contribute to our knowledge of the past. Therefore, we believe it is perfectly reasonable to use an intuitive concept of the city, without a precise definition, in most geographical or historical studies. This, however, cannot be the case in the literature dealing with protohistory, when cities, if they really did exist, were in their initial formation period. In this precise context, we do not believe that the definition of the city is irrelevant, since the potential urban nature of the large protohistoric settlements constitutes an important element in the global interpretation of the socio-cultural systems in which they developed. If the conclusion were to be that they were not cities in the precise sense of the word, our ideas about the nature of such social systems would have to vary substantially and other terms would have to be coined to designate this kind of site. Consequently, a clear-cut and explicit definition is necessary as an analytical tool and a heuristic device that may lead field research and enhance further reflection on the nature of large protohistoric sites. Our goal here has simply been to provide some conceptual material for the discussion and for the development of an analytical tool of this kind.⁹

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