

Finally, Elizabeth Williams critiques the colonial legacies of museums and proposes strategies for decolonising their narratives. The extensive bibliography encourages further exploration within a more self-reflective field of Byzantine studies.

In conclusion, this volume is a significant contribution to the ongoing transformation of Byzantine studies. By moving beyond simplistic pronouncements and engaging with contemporary discussions on decolonisation, it dismantles lingering Eurocentrism and fosters a more nuanced understanding of the medieval past. The contributors offer a rich tapestry of perspectives, critically examining the power dynamics that shaped both the historical reality of Byzantium and the subsequent development of the field itself.

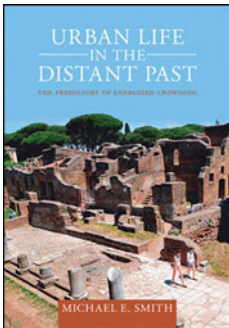
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MICHAEL E. SMITH. 2023. *Urban life in the distant past: the prehistory of energized crowding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-009-24904-1 hardback £100.



Cities are at the heart of all the biggest global sustainability challenges. We must understand what urbanism is and how it is reshaping our planet to help resolve those challenges. In recognition of this, I commend Cambridge University Press and the editors, Rubina Raja, Søren Sindbæk and Michael E. Smith, for their new book series: Urban Archaeological Pasts. The series is both timely and important. The inaugural publication is Smith's *Urban life in the distant past: the prehistory of energized crowding*, which is the product of a lecture series delivered by Smith at the Centre for Urban Network Evolutions (UrbNet) in 2017 in Aarhus, Denmark.

*Urban life in the distant past* is a good introduction to urbanism in archaeology. The content will be helpful for graduate students seeking to identify critical issues and ways to develop the discipline—which I return to at the end of this review—and researchers within and adjacent to urban archaeology will find Smith's global approach, propositions and polemics, thought provoking. One of my favourite aspects of the book is the inclusion of 29 case studies that, crucially, include critical discussion of both empirical evidence and broader comparative insights. These include examples from around the world spanning the past six thousand years, such as the Maya site of Tikal, Armana in Egypt, Angkor in Cambodia, and the Burning Man Festival campsite in contemporary North America. The discussion of social science theory was enjoyable to read, with a good mix of familiar preceding scholars (Hobbes, Durkheim, Weber, Jacobs, Geertz & Chang etc.) and contemporary ones such as Margaret Levi

and David Wengrow. Already, the book has had an impact on researchers doing important work at the interface of archaeology, urbanism and sustainability (e.g. Roberts *et al.* 2024).

If there is a canon of urban archaeology, Smith ranks high in that list. Smith has been pivotal in growing capacity and networks of expertise in urban archaeology and has been an unwavering voice for the need for global comparative approaches in archaeology. This is common now, but just a decade ago it was more controversial.

The eight chapters cover a range of topics. The first chapter, ‘Premodern cities and the wide urban world’, defines the book’s scope and connects ancient and modern cities with examples from Roman Ostia and Angkor in Cambodia, Tikal in Guatemala, Teotihuacan in Mexico, Çatalhöyük in Turkey, Ascolia in Italy, and internment camps of Japanese Americans in the Second World War. The second chapter, ‘The prehistory of energized crowding’, outlines perhaps Smith’s biggest contribution ‘energized crowding’, which is adapted from the architectural historian Spiro Kostof (Kostof 1991). For Smith, ‘energized crowding’ is the mechanism through which smaller-scale settlements grow into cities, and population size and density are crucial aspects of this. Chapter 3 discusses the ‘Size of cities and settlements’, with a compelling discussion of social-science approaches from planning and economics, and sites such as Monenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley, and the Pueblos of the Southwest United States and temporary cities of the North American Plains Indians. Chapter 4 deals with ‘States, cities and power’, with an analysis of different forms of governance. Chapter 5, ‘Markets, crafts and urban life’, discusses the centrality of economic activity to cities. Chapter 6 explains the importance of ‘Top-down institutions and the urban scale’, including a discussion of inequality, which is an important topic for urban sustainability research. Chapter 7 has a fascinating exploration of ‘Generative forces and urban life’, which is especially timely given the recent focus in archaeology and the social sciences on bottom-up processes and egalitarian societies. I especially appreciated Smith’s explanation of how his thinking on this has developed and changed. Chapter 8 points the way to the future, bringing together both heritage and scientific perspectives to provide a conclusion on the ‘Value of premodern cities today’. These include insights into why some cities ‘succeed’ and others ‘fail’, the relationship of population size to city density and, human-built environment interactions, which lead to three areas for further investigation to address contemporary issues: providing longer-term understandings of urban trajectory and sustainability; increasing the sample size of urban cases to better understand the diversity of urbanism; and the potential of using archaeological sites as historical urban ‘laboratories’.

The volume also brings together and further develops many of Smith’s ideas from previous publications. Smith has a persistent controversial and provocative polemic running throughout the text, in which he situates himself in opposition to post-processual approaches—his approach is inspired by social science first, then as part of the sciences, with an epistemology resting on previous researchers such as Jared Diamond and others (p.241). This is articulated in the introductory and concluding chapters, in which he claims that “research on built environments and drivers of change are close to worthless if pursued using a non-scientific epistemology” and concludes that his approach will “avoid the non-scientific and antiscientific strains of scholarship that infect much of archaeology today” (p.232). This will no doubt initiate animated discussion within archaeology; however, large quantitative dataset analysis in archaeology is now typical, and increasingly combined with innovative ways of making

archaeology more inclusive, thus this ongoing debate from the 1980s feels a bit dated. Smith's goal here is that by "using a scientific approach—data can be extracted from these [urban] ruins to recreate many aspects of ancient urban life and to place premodern cities within a rich comparative framework that includes cities today and into the future" (p.250).

Smith's concluding vision is for archaeology to provide policymaking social scientists with quantitative data. Smith is being deliberately provocative here and aims for urban archaeology to play a crucial role guiding our future development.

To address our biggest global challenges, I think urban archaeology could be pushed further than Smith's propositions. I suggest that one of our greatest assets is that archaeology is a 'queer' sort of discipline, it resists simplistic categorisation, able to encompass and connect with many different methods, diverse partnerships and innovative approaches. In working towards the grand challenges of our time, we can engage urban archaeology as an expansive and generous partner 'with the world', collaborating with many knowledge systems, especially local and indigenous approaches (e.g. Chirikure *et al.* 2018). I think our priorities must include community-focused and community-led research projects that find innovative ways of engaging with policymaking, diversifying the urban canon, using archaeology to generate new understandings of foundational sustainability concepts and the environmental interactions of cities, including how they are supported by a complex array of many interacting species (e.g. Green *et al.* 2020; Leadbetter 2021; Kim & McAnany 2023; Chen 2024). These become even more crucial if, as Smith argues throughout the text, we need to understand urbanism globally and comparatively. If our goal is to save the world, let us ensure it is a world worth saving; an archaeology of the cosmopolis should itself be cosmopolitan.

Cities can be fun and necessary places to live, sites of joy, refuge and resilience (Leadbetter & Sastrawan 2023). But cities are often framed as sites of problems; in the future, we may have much to learn and contribute archaeologically by exploring cities as places with solutions. The growing area of urban vitalism may be a helpful partner (Nederhand *et al.* 2023) and it links to Smith's discussion of New Urbanism. Cities are wonderfully diverse, experimental, surprising and bubbling with transformation. I hope that as this series develops, it will further expand our understanding of urbanism and archaeology—our planet's future depends on it.

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*Book Reviews*

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