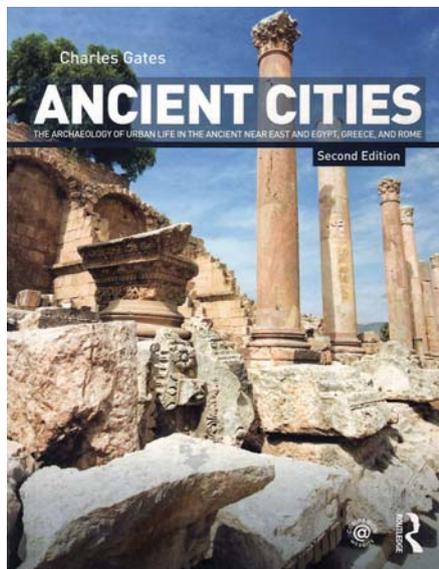




BOOK REVIEWS

Gates, Ch. 2011. *Ancient Cities: The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece, and Rome.* – London, Routledge

Nicholas Warner



The vast scope of this book almost inevitably makes any review of it partial and partisan. Who could possibly know everything about all of the cities that fall within its remit, much less the varied cultures that created them? How can the fragments of urban experience, represented here by the fragments of ancient cities that survive, ever be fully understood? Is it even worth bothering to condense the material into a single volume? The answer, for didactic purposes, must be in the affirmative. I wish that I, when an undergraduate student of architecture, had been given the opportunity to benefit from a course such as that which inspired this book – one that its author has clearly taught on countless occasions. But back in the 1980s all that we architecture students had to sustain us

was a sliver of the Classical World rather than the whole pie with its diverse flavours.

'Ancient cities: The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece, and Rome' is a well-organised descriptive survey of significant sites (and key objects deriving from them) ranging geographically from London to Mohenjo Daro. It introduces students to a theoretical framework for addressing those sites and provides a concise guide to the archaeological techniques that have been used to develop our comprehension of the material. The text is almost always clear and succinct, with every effort made to explain the many unfamiliar terms that are bound to occur in any such endeavour. The second edition also contains a very useful timeline and glossary, as well as a

handsome bibliography related to recommendations for further reading that are tailored to each chapter. The illustrations possess the enormous merit of having been drawn by the same hand (and a masterful hand it is, too). As an accessible visual compendium there is little to complain about. And then there is also the lure of a companion website to ease the lot of student and teacher alike, if so inclined.

So what can be improved on, as 'Ancient Cities' clearly fulfils a real pedagogic need? Critics of the first edition have pointed to a lack of connection/comparison between the cultures, here presented in chronological order. This remains a major concern at both macro and micro levels, and could be addressed by the provision of a fuller synthetic and theoretical chapter (probably at the end of the book) dealing with the problems of implicit evolutionary or comparative approaches.

The remainder of my remarks relate to architecture, which the author describes as 'key' in his introduction, and which falls within this reviewer's area of competency. Some of the architectural descriptions would benefit from reworking. For example, the description of the White Temple of Uruk could include some reference to the extraordinary ribbed plinth that dominates the illustrated reconstruction. Some chapter titles such as: 'Archaic Greek Cities I: The Doric and Ionic orders of Greek Architecture and East Greek Cities to the Ionian Revolt' can definitely be shorter.

The classical language of architecture itself surely deserves a fuller treatment, given that most of the buildings discussed in the Greek and Roman world employ it in pure or bastard form. And what of the most popular order of all: Corinthian? This is given barely a mention as a 'variant of Ionic', which some might dispute. Instead, there is perhaps an undue concentration on statuary: important, yes, but subsidiary to the architecture that framed it. The inclusion of so many monumental buildings is understandable given that they are what usually survives best in the archaeological record, and what so often defines a city. However, given the title of the book, the balance between the monumental and the 'ordinary' is a delicate issue. Djoser's Step Pyramid Complex, for example, may be said to have a limited relevance for a history of cities as opposed to a history

of architecture. Should the discussion of the Parthenon and its associated monuments merit eleven pages versus the three pages given to the Agora and the houses around it? Maybe a few of those eleven pages should instead be devoted to Petra or Marib, which are strangely absent from the line-up, as are their parent Nabatean and Sabaeen cultures. Or turned over to a fuller treatment of that most basic but most varied building block of the city: the house.

As far as the technology of building is concerned, some inconsistencies need to be ironed out and connections forged. Brick stamps are mentioned in the context of Imperial Rome – but what about Egypt? Reference to ashlar masonry occurs in the context of Late Bronze Age construction in Cyprus – but what about Egypt, again? Vaulting is addressed at the end of the chapter on 'Early Sumerian Cities' but the brief discussion here does not extend to true elliptical/parabolic vaults (maybe not a feature of Sumer, but a common enough roofing technique elsewhere). The remarkable translation of building forms from wooden or earthen architecture into carved stone, seen in many cultures, is another area that might be further explored. Perhaps all the information related to construction methods (that do, after all, govern the physical appearance of the city) should be gathered from the dispersed locations it occupies within the text and consolidated into a single, rich, chapter.

Cities, as the author concludes, are mutable. It is to be hoped that this useful book, in like manner, will evolve over time and develop its stratigraphy without compromising its commendable clarity.

Gates, Ch. 2011. *Ancient Cities: The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece, and Rome*. – London, Routledge. Pp. 474. ISBN-10: 0415498643/ISBN-13: 978-0415498647. Price: \$46.95 (paperback), \$130.00 (hardback).

Copyright © 2003-2012 PalArch Foundation

The author retains the copyright, but agrees that the PalArch Foundation has the exclusive right to publish the work in electronic or other formats. The author also agrees that the Foundation has the right to distribute copies (electronic and/or hard copies), to include the work in

archives and compile volumes. The Foundation will use the original work as first published at www.PalArch.nl.

The author is responsible for obtaining the permission of the use of illustrations (drawings, photographs or other visual images) made by others than the author. The author can be requested to submit proof of this permission to the PalArch Foundation. Pdf texts (papers and proceedings) are free to download on the conditions that each copy is complete and contains the PalArch copyright statement;

no changes are made to the contents and no charge is made. The downloaded (and/or printed) versions of PalArch publications may not be duplicated in hard copy or machine readable form or reproduced photographically, nor may they be redistributed, transmitted, translated or stored on microfilm or in electronic databases other than for single use by the person that obtained the file. Commercial use or redistribution may only be realised after consultation with and with written permission of the PalArch Foundation.