



Compact urban development around a carefully laid out grid of streets in Mohenjo-Daro, the largest settlement of the Indus Valley Civilization



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IN PURSUIT OF PROGRESS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

The emergence and development of large cities in antiquity was not necessarily associated with the concentration of wealth and resources in privileged social groups. Often, urban centers turn out to have been created by egalitarian societies.

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As archaeology was coming into its own as an independent scholarly discipline, the notion of “progress” was regarded as one of the most important concepts defining human develop-

ment. Even before the discipline was fully formed, the foundations for this way of thinking were laid by Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, a Danish antiquarian and museum curator. When he took on the task of organizing archaeological findings gathered in the Copenhagen church of the Holy Trinity and presenting them at an exhibition in the National Museum in Copenhagen in 1836, he decided to distinguish three epochs: the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age. Each successive period was marked by the ability to utilize a new raw material in the production of

tools and everyday objects. Each period was believed to be associated with the development of increasingly sophisticated technologies, thereby demonstrating the ongoing march of human progress, as measured by humanity's continuously growing abilities and skills.

Evolutionist foundations

Academic archaeology took shape in the latter half of the 19th century. From its inception, it was an “evolutionist” project – a response and reaction to Charles Darwin's biological evolutionism. Drawing on the social anthropology of Lewis H. Morgan and Edward B. Tylor, an assumption was made about the homogeneity and uniformity of human nature and the linearity of the development of human communities. It was believed that during their development, societies always passed through successive stages, starting from the simplest forms to the most complex, from “primitive” to “civilized.” Each of these stages could be precisely identified by the presence of a number of distinctive features. This unilinear evolution was endless, and the successive stages at which human groups found themselves were characterized by increasing sophistication. They were marked by more advanced technologies, harnessable due to the increasingly refined state of humanity. Development understood in this way thus signified the maturation of humankind itself, invoked as a metaphor for cultural change. This concept implied a gradual transition through successive stages of development. These stages were typological in nature and allowed for progress to be defined as the transitions between these stages.

After several decades, however, it came to be noticed that depicting human development in such a unilinear way failed to capture the cultural diversity

of man. The idea of multidirectional cultural development was instead posited as a much more appropriate approach, which in time led archeology to be redefined as the history of culture. Consequently, the cultural-historical school emerged, adopting the *archaeological culture* as the basic analytical category. Such a culture was identified through the formal categorization of various object types, such as ceramics, flint implements, bronze items, settlement or burial features, bundled together into a coherent whole with clearly defined spatial and temporal boundaries. The archeological cultures so delineated were granted the status of real existing entities. Each successive culture was seen as more and more advanced, showing progress in producing artifacts, skills in building increasingly sophisticated structures, and practicing more and more complex burial rituals. The history of an archaeological culture thus defined was presented in the form of complete classical narratives, as stories with a beginning, middle, and end – also referred to as the archaic, classical, and post-classical phases, respectively.

Over time, these archaeologically distinct cultures began to be associated with ethnically homogeneous people or tribes. It was believed that these cultures reflected certain social entities. The spread of archaeological cultures was thus considered synonymous with the dispersal of peoples and ethnic groups, sometimes equated with the conquest of neighboring territories. Differences in the pace of development of archaeological cultures in different areas were considered equivalent to differences in the pace of development of the peoples or tribes that they represented. Given the inescapable political context of archaeology, differences between archaeological cultures began to be used to emphasize differences in the level of civiliza-



Agglutinative settlement cluster in the northern part of the Neolithic settlement at Çatalhöyük (today in Türkiye)

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plest to the increasingly complex, in the belief that this sequence adequately gauges the progress of human development and degree of sophistication. Moreover, indigenous and primitive communities were perceived as small and isolated groups, separated not only from one another, but also from the rest of the world. They were considered vestiges, exemplifying the earliest states of human development.

Overcoming limitations

Interpreting human history in terms of a series of consecutive blocks, normatively distinguished social groups or cultures, imposes a certain conceptual framework upon the past, hindering our capacity to perceive developmental nuances and blurring over differences instead of facilitating their understanding. It also makes it impossible to capture distinctions between scales of development and progress. Recent years have brought a growing awareness of the inherent limitations on thinking imposed by the evolutionist legacy in archaeology and the conviction that the well-established frameworks of knowledge hinder adequate recognition of the nature of human development and progress. This I will illustrate based on the example of the concept of egalitarianism as a form of social development and the question of the nature of the first urban-like centers.

It was once thought that simple societies, characteristic of the Paleolithic or Neolithic, came to be replaced by societies of growing social complexity, as seen in the Bronze or Iron Age. Many previous accounts depicted the Neolithic as a time when the first forms of social inequality emerged. Recent research nevertheless indicates that such an interpretation lacks sufficient grounding in evidence – that the governing principle of these communities was not a desire to dominate, to create and reinforce divisions, but rather a desire to unite group members and nurture equality among them in order to maintain balance and ensure the group's survival. The constant tension between egalitarian and hierarchical impulses was continually offset through practices and actions preventing phenomena that might lead to the emergence and perpetuation of social inequalities. These included consciously-implemented practices such as hiding away, destroying, or removing objects from settlements. This meant fostering an ethos of egalitarianism, implemented differently for different groups of people. Here, “progress” can be understood as the establishment of increasingly efficient mechanisms for preserving egalitarian principles within the group, rather than the accumulation of material goods or the efficiency of their transmission between generations. The development of a sedentary way of life, the domestication of plants and animals, and the emergence of Neolithic urban settlements can no longer be



considered necessary and indispensable conditions for the emergence of rudimentary forms of social inequality, subsequently leading to the formation of communities based on such inequality.

Studies of a number of large prehistoric and ancient settlements inhabited by thousands of residents, such as Uruk in present-day Iraq, Çatalhöyük in Türkiye, Mohenjo-Daro in Pakistan, or Teotihuacán in Mexico, have shown that they were created and inhabited by egalitarian communities. Previous claims that a highly differentiated social community is a necessary and indispensable condition for the emergence of large urban centers have therefore been debunked. The egalitarian form of organization proved sufficiently efficient for the creation and structuring of organizations for the more than 2,000 residents of Çatalhöyük, as well as for the more than 100,000 residents of Teotihuacán. The dramatic increase in the scale of these centers was not associated with the prior concentration of wealth in privileged social groups, nor did it lead to such concentration. This stands in complete contrast to evolutionist accounts, where it was difficult to imagine that such enormous cities could have been inhabited without classes of rulers and officials.

These examples demonstrate that the histories of prehistoric and ancient communities cannot be explained in terms of a putative homogeneous and unidirectional path leading to the establishment of authoritarian societies. The cities built by those communities were not always formed around opulent palaces inhabited by rulers enjoying great privilege and wealth, surrounded in turn by districts inhabited by officials and priests. Rather, we now know that social complexity and progress in the development of urban centers cannot be equated with the presence of stratified social groups or social organization created and controlled by an administrative apparatus sanctioned by a belief system. ■

The prehistory of Denmark as presented by Christian Jürgensen Thomsen

Further reading:

Graeber D., Wengrow D., *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, 2021.

Hodder I., *Staying egalitarian and the origins of agriculture in the Middle East*, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 2022, doi: 10.1017/S0959774322000063