

the years 1951–64 by Arthur Ralegh Radford, were influenced by his Christian beliefs (pp. 182–84). Even more interesting is the case of George Fielden MacLeod and his Iona Abbey project (pp. 191–94). This Church of Scotland minister, who was a former soldier and a social and ecumenical activist, not only initiated a reconstruction of the medieval Scottish monastic quarters on the island of Iona (conducted between 1938 and 1965) but also created a religious community destined to live there. His concept of “reconstruction” focussed on “spiritual authenticity”, hence he “manipulated historical and archaeological evidence to support his version of Iona’s past” (p. 194).

Reading the multi-layered story of Iona Abbey, I realized that this is the building—and its surroundings—which fascinated me when I had a first glimpse of the book’s cover. Indeed, the past and present of the Iona project bring together numerous threads discussed in various parts of the book. Gilchrist successfully, and with impressive erudition, brings together archaeological perspective with critical heritage approach and studies on the material and sensual aspects of sacred heritage. This is an important voice that calls for further research in different geographical and historical settings.

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- Michael E. Smith. *Urban Life in the Distant Past. The Prehistory of Energized Crowding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 318pp., 93 b/w illustr., hbk, ISBN 978-1-109-24904-1 (e-book DOI: 10.1017/9781109249027)

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Relations, whether perceived of as the links between nodes in a formal network or the comings-together of humans and non-humans into assemblages or Actor-

Networks, are a central focus in much contemporary archaeological thought. They are also fundamental to the central concept of Smith’s book, energized

crowding, in short, the idea that the gathering of people into a specific locale is a generative process from which urban life emerges. Smith's emphasis is on what he terms 'face to face interactions' (a phrase perhaps more loaded in our remote-working, post-Covid World than it was a few years ago!). A critical contribution of the book is to explore the empirical basis of energized crowding, achieved through the application of settlement scaling (the modelling of the relationship between settlement area and population). The book is distinctive in the way it draws on a broad range of case studies, from the familiar ancient cities of Angkor and Pompeii to pre-modern and contemporary sites which exhibit energized crowding without being recognisably urban; early medieval 'Thing' sites and Burning Man festival.

Energized crowding places a focus on interactions and relations. Whilst Smith focusses on the power of face-to-face interactions, the book, perhaps inadvertently, opens up potential for the drawing together of two parallel trajectories in contemporary archaeological theory in which the term process takes two different meanings; the first being a return to the mindset of the New Archaeology (encapsulated in empirical network approaches, the development of new scientific approaches and the use of big data) and the second an interest in process as the generative relations between human and non-human (inspired by, among other things, assemblage theory, Actor-Network Theory, process archaeology and posthuman thought). Here, Smith's empirical focus is on the relationship between population size and density and how these intersect with urban institutions, form and social composition, but in drawing the generative nature of relations into focus, this has the potential to stimulate new thinking; does an intensity of face-to-face relations need to also equate to an intensity of human-material relations, and

what does this mean for our understanding of urbanization as a socio-spatial process which extends beyond human action and intention? Smith points out, although does not fully explore, the negative implications of energized crowding (in relation, for example to crime and environmental degradation) and the way different social structures relate to it materialising as particular built forms. This line of thought could be extended to understand how both difference and shared experience emerge out of urban experience (e.g. Leadbetter, 2021).

Conceptually, Smith develops an approach at the beginning of the book, which sets out to put aside the persistent challenge of urban archaeology (and urban studies in general), those of definition and, by extension, the ability to compare and generalize between experiences of urban life in the past and present. Smith's work is a stimulating, challenging (and at times frustrating) contribution to facing these questions. As the diverse case studies demonstrate, Smith's principle scale of analysis is not the 'city' but the 'settlement', which shifts our field of enquiry from asking what made or makes a city, to how and why energized crowding is characteristic of settlements of varying size and density, some of which are unambiguously urban and others which can be perceived of exhibiting some characteristics of urban places, especially when situated within a wider hierarchy or network of settlements. Therefore, rather than treading the familiar ground of asking what is a city, Smith sets out to address two core questions; 'what was life like in premodern cities' and 'what factors shaped urban life in the deep past?'

As someone increasingly frustrated with the focus on urban definition, it was the opening chapter that I found the most stimulating and interesting. Here (p. 4–5), Smith calls for a contextual awareness in defining the urban, an openness to shaping definitions in relation to the questions being asked and, perhaps most critically, an initial

concern with the settlement itself, as a means to sidestep the pitfalls of 'urban' being placed in marked contrast to the 'rural' and the implications of the associated judgements and assumptions which go with this. Importantly, this allows for the scope of the processes which we understand as urban, which for Smith effectively equates to the outcomes of energized crowding, to be broadened. It is for this reason that the subsequent chapters do not begin with detailed analyses of cities, but of how energized crowding might exist outside of 'urban' societies, as a periodic feature of hunter-gatherer and agrarian societies.

The middle part of the book seeks to systemize and generalize contexts of urbanization. Smith makes a compelling case that cities can pre-exist states, that structures of power have implications for urban form and society and that cities are shaped by their economic context. Here Smith seeks to create an empirical basis for comparative study, drawing on a wide body of social science and archaeological literature to create categories and measures upon which comparison can be based. Smith's rationale here is clear and the choices generally justified, but this section felt to me to be one-sided; of course cities are shaped by their contexts and we should develop approaches to understanding how this occurs, but this is a two-way process, cities and urban societies are also generative; lubricating and facilitating particular social structures and processes, with the generative nature of urbanity having the potential to pick apart, re-shape or even overthrow the status quo. Indeed, this is an area of increasing concern in contemporary urban theory, where the concept of 'extended urbanization' has sought to explore the ways that cities shape wider regions and networks (e.g. Brenner and Schmid, 2015). As such, I found this section of the book jarring, sitting uncomfortably with the earlier

emphasis on the generative nature of energized crowding and the later discussion of bottom-up, grassroots processes.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore the top-down and bottom-up factors which shape urban life. Here the discussion of urban institutions is particularly compelling, but I found the considerations of social class and wealth inequality more problematic. Smith generalizes that 'in most premodern state societies [the population] was divided into two social classes: a small and wealthy elite class... and a mass of commoners'. Smith rails against evidence for an urban middle class as not founded on empirical evidence and also against the shaping influence of social identity. Whilst his critiques are valid, I found this binary distinction between elite and common extremely limiting, and masking the intersectional nature of inequality, particularly in the intense social context of the city (see e.g. Marin-Aguilera, 2021). The empirical basis of Smith's analysis here is also open to question. Whilst open to the evidential issues, Smith creates a somewhat simplistic relation between house size, the composition of artefact assemblages and wealth. The basis of an argument that the artefact assemblages of the wealthy are larger and potentially more diverse than those of those lower down the social order is open to question, for example. My own analysis (Jervis et al., 2023, 321) of the possessions of medieval households shows that the household goods of the poorest were not dissimilar to those of the wealthiest non-elite households because the poorest lacked the ability to acquire and keep livestock, which Smith goes on to emphasize as an important and overlooked element of urban life. Therefore, whilst Smith's call to empirically assess wealth inequality is welcome, the methodology and its underlying assumptions remain under-developed (although it should be noted that Smith is not

proposing that this work is complete, rather than this is an avenue that archaeologists should explore more thoroughly).

Smith closes with a reflection on the potential of comparative approaches for understanding what he terms 'the wide urban world'; to understand how we can ask questions of relevance to past, present and future cities, and why we should. At the heart of his proposals is settlement scaling and the use of empirical measures which can be broadly compared between diverse contexts. Whilst a logical conclusion to the book, personally I would have liked to see a bolder statement here, which embraces both the empirical but also more theoretical lines of enquiry which can enrich our understanding of the urban phenomena.

Smith's over-arching aim appears to be to place urban archaeology onto a more rigorous and objective scientific footing. The book is littered with sustained and passing critique of what might be broadly termed 'post-processual' approaches to the urban past, perhaps best exemplified by a dismissal of the importance of identity (admittedly a slippery and often poorly theorized concept) to urban life (p. 198). It is the dismissive tone of this critique which I find the most frustrating element of the book. Smith's statement (p. 196) that 'until the past decade or so, archaeologists gave little attention to the role of generative forces in the past' with the 'state' being 'the only actor worth considering' for understanding cities and urban life appeared, at first to erase the contribution of work which, either explicitly or implicitly, explores issues of agency which have dominated some areas of archaeological thought since the late 1980s. I was set to critique this point, aware that this scholarship has made important contributions to our understanding of past urbanity, for example in the role of merchants and traders in urban growth (e.g.

LaViolette and Fleisher, 2005; Sindbæk, 2007) and the social dynamics of urban communities (e.g. O'Keefe, 2005; Smith, 2008), but in thinking through earlier examples I struggled, and this perhaps poses an interesting question about why this scholarship has bypassed much research on urban archaeology. Smith's focus on generalization and scientific method is of course markedly 'processual' in character, but the nuance with which Smith deals with issues of concept and method within his own thinking offers a notable contrast to the abrupt dismissal of other theoretical approaches. The closing chapter nicely summarizes what Smith intends the reader to take from the study; that we should not reify the concept of the city, that the 'settlement', rather than the 'city' is the most useful frame for analysis, that population size and density are key determinants of urban life and that these intersect with top-down and bottom-up processes.

In sum, this is a provocative book. Whilst some might consider it a little old-fashioned in its systemization, modelling and generalization, for me it is on the pulse of areas of contemporary archaeological thinking; a suspicion of approaches lacking clear empirical basis, a concern with contemporary relevance and interdisciplinarity and an awareness that the processual models of the mid-20th century lack the nuance required to move between the general and the specific. This is a line which I feel Smith has walked particularly carefully. The book is rich in 'pen portrait' case studies which introduce the reader to a wide range of examples, whilst succinctly highlighting their relevance to the more conceptual elements of the argument. All urban archaeologists would do well to learn its lessons of treating the very concept of the urban with caution, questioning our assumptions and understanding what it is that unites cities, and what

makes individual places and communities distinctive.

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