Cities and the emergence of Civilizations

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Why are cities key to the emergence of civilizations?

The vast majority of the population in all pre-modern societies have been farmings, living in rural villages and hamlets. However, the fact that a small minority within a society lived in towns and cities, and had the freedom from basic food production activities to engage in trade, administration, art, philosophy, scientific speculation and experiment, and technological invention, allowed complex societies to appear – and for human progress to take place at an ever-increasing pace. Without cities, people would not have progressed beyond the Neolithic.

Living in cities broadened people's horizons, allowed ideas to spread much more quickly, enabled inter-city trade to expand and ideas, techniques and diseases to travel over long distances much more easily than before.

New ways of doing things

Individual people tend to be conservative. This is an important trait in human survival – why mend something that isn't broken? Until modern times, relying on the traditions and techniques passed on by one's forebears was the best way to survive in a world stalked by famine and disease. When people lived in small villages, with few visitors from outside, they tend to adhere to ideas handed down from generation to generation. If one imaginative individual comes up with a new way of doing things, he or she can be stamped on by the other villagers, the majority of whom will view change with suspicion.

Progress does take place, but slowly, in very small steps, so that few actually notice.

In urban settlements, on the other hand, large numbers of people are crammed together in a small space. When someone comes up with a new idea, there are enough people with whom he or she can communicate so that at least some may give a sympathetic hearing. New ideas have a much better chance of catching on than in the more confined setting of a village.

Centres of trade

Another result of the large and dense populations living in cities is that trade becomes much easier.

Where there are no towns traders have to travel from village to village peddling their wares. This is time consuming and costly; in many villages they might make no sales at all. Where there are towns and cities (we will use the terms "city" and "town" interchangeably from now on, as meaning comparatively large urban settlements), costs of trade are greatly reduced. Traders do not need to travel so far or so long between sales, they have a much larger market to sell to and it is much easier for them to find buyers.

These factors are multiplied because towns and cities have rich people living within them (or at least, buying goods in them). Being centres not only of trade but of administration, towns and cities house government officials, senior clergy, and wealthy business types, groups which in pre-modern times have always made up the wealthiest elements in society.

Trade routes thus link towns and cities to each other, and trade routes bring new ideas, techniques, beliefs, foods, fashions and so on to towns. Towns people become part of the wider world in a way that most villagers could not.

Incidentally, trade routes often also make the hinterlands of towns and cities more productive by stimulating specialisation amongst farmers. Freed from the necessity of producing for all their needs, farmers can use their land to best effect for growing crops and animals best suited to the soil and climate. This reinforces the other factors discussed above.

Living in most pre-modern towns was not necessarily a healthy option. In the days before the importance of public hygiene was properly understood the concentration of thousands of people within a very small area posed major hazards to life. Inadequate waste disposal systems caused vermin to flourish and diseases to spread. Houses collapsed at an alarming rate, and fire could sweep through crowded streets with devastating speed. Nevertheless, in all pre-modern societies townsfolk were on average wealthier, better educated and more open to new ideas than were their rural cousins.

Cities and the emergence of states

In a region where there are no towns and cities, states are hard to develop. How does one village conquer several others? Where a town has developed, on the other hand, it is easy for its larger population to bring neighbouring villages under its control and so form a rudimentary state. Also, a town acts as a focus for the surrounding villages – as a centre of local exchange, for example, or of religious practice, or of political authority. This encourages the villages in an area, which would previously have been independent (and very often mutually hostile) communities, to cohere into a single community.

Cities as centres of culture

The large populations of cities give an audience to poets, dramatists, and musicians. Their religious life calls for artisans, artists and architects. Their wealth gives employment to skilled textile workers, furniture makers and jewellers. The existence of town and cities has allowed temples, churches, mosques, palaces, schools, universities, research centres, theatres, concert halls, museums, art galleries and all manner if cultural institutions to flourish. The emergence of urban societies opened up vast new horizons for humankind; even redefined what it is to be human.