Southeast Asia: ancient centre of urbanization?

The study of early Southeast Asian urbanization can reveal the variety of human responses to the environment that gave rise to the entity known as the ‘city’ today. Archaeologists have long been intrigued by cities, yet the specialized field of urban archaeology has only emerged within the past 25 years; the study of early Southeast Asian cities remains in its infancy.

The city

Defining the city continues to be problematic. Until recently, archaeologists assumed the city was a cultureless, universal phenomenon, with standard features regardless of time and place. It is now acknowledged, however, that the agglomeration of buildings and people was not an evolutionary inevitability. Physical and spatial expressions of social structure, population, political power, economic activity and religion are determined by local factors that vary across space and time. So describing the evolution of cities must begin by comparing local sequences of development with sequences found in other parts of the world. Differences in causal variables such as trade, warfare, religion and control of water supply then become apparent, revealing the effects of local environmental and historical conditions on urban development. Different cultures produced cities similar in form but bearing the stamp of their unique origins.

Cities in Southeast Asia are often distinguished from those in the Middle East due to the lack of monumental structures. Paul Wheatley, in his study of Southeast Asian urbanization, argues that monuments are not a valid yardstick. For instance, a city and assigned suburbs can be constructed around a single monument, yet no evidence of dense habitation has been confirmed within its central precinct. Future research might discover such evidence, especially as our knowledge of Angkor Thom remains abysmal. Archaeologists such as Jacques Gauer have only recently begun to search for signs left by people who lived in perishable structures.

Archaeologists still divide the development of human society into stages of increasing complexity, starting with the clan and proceeding to the tribe, the chieftaindom and the state. The city was thought of as a stage at all, but rather as proof that a society had attained state-level organization, a correlation now known to be erroneous. To take one example, the largest Egyptian pyramids were constructed around 3000 BCE, whereas the first urban centres did not appear until 1500 years later. Early Egypt is now recognized as a ‘civilization without cities’. It was, however, a civilization with monuments. Paul Wheatley, in his study of Southeast Asian urbanization, argues that monuments are not a valid yardstick. For instance, a city and assigned suburbs can be constructed around a single monument, yet no evidence of dense habitation has been confirmed within its central precinct. Future research might discover such evidence, especially as our knowledge of Angkor Thom remains abysmal. Archaeologists such as Jacques Gauer have only recently begun to search for signs left by people who lived in perishable structures.

If not monuments, then what archaeological criteria can define the city? Population, even if it can be reconstructed, is not a valid yardstick. For instance, a city in ancient Mesopotamia may have contained no more than 5,000 inhabitants, but that figure is met by many large villages in Southeast Asia. In fact, the sites of Angkor Borei and Oc-éo in the lower Mekong River valley were never occupied by city populations, apparently restricted within small areas and possibly protected by walls. Indeed, at Oc-éo, Mallaret, Pierre-Yves Manguin, and his Vietnamese collaborators have shown that numerous brick structures and a variety of manufacturing existed in the early first millennium CE. Despite signs of significant population and economic activity, neither site shows evidence of state-level organization. Such possible examples of states without cities and cities without states reinforce the conclusion that political structure cannot necessarily be divided by artifacts or settlement patterns.

Political structure is just one aspect of determining social complexity, and since some archaeologists believe it is no longer viable to determine political evolution through archaeological remains, they avoid using the term ‘city’ altogether and have turned to a more profound study of settlement patterns as the best hope of developing an accurate, objective ‘yardstick’ to understand the processes that lead to increasing social complexity. Instead of looking for ‘cities’, they look for ‘hierarchies of settlement’.

Methods

To establish a hierarchy of settlement, one must chart the settlement patterns of many sites in a large area. Identifying early Southeast Asian settlement pat- terns requires large-scale archaeological surveys and excavations, interpretation of primary documents, analysis of trop-