

Coming Together:
**Comparative Approaches to Population Aggregation and Early
Urbanization**

9th Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology Visiting Scholar Conference

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The current, fast-growing tendency of people moving from small settlements to cities has resulted in increased scholarly interest into the origins and different aspects of population nucleation. Coalescence has been a global phenomenon for human societies during the past several millennia, and the long-term perspective of archaeological research has a great potential to provide insights into how urban environments formed and their implications for humanity.

The search for a universal definitions of terms such as ‘urban’ and ‘city,’ has frequently distracted scholars from investigating the processes of how ancient aggregated settlements evolved. Through the reorganization of smaller scale social units into more complex configurations, early centers of economic and political organizations occurred throughout the world at various times and places, and in fundamentally different socio-political contexts. Their architectural and functional characteristics varied extensively, and their evolutionary trajectories took dramatically diverse courses. Nevertheless, one common feature of these nucleated settlements was that they offered a variety of opportunities to their residents that overrode the multitude of challenges of living in close quarters.

To understand the formation, development, and organization of aggregated settlements in their wider spatial and temporal contexts, a multi-scalar perspective in a diachronic framework must be employed. By combining this approach with state-of-the-art field and analytical methods, we now are in a position to identify those various factors and processes that resulted in the movement of people to large centers, and contributed to the sustainability, or unsustainability, of these sites.

This symposium will focus on prehistoric population nucleation and ancient urbanization in a cross-cultural framework. An international group of anthropologists, prehistorians, and classicists will explore the integrative mechanisms that brought large populations together, the social practices and institutions that fostered the maintenance of aggregated settlements, as well as the impacts of aggregation on socio-cultural developments. In order to interpret variations in early population nucleation, the geographical focus will include Europe, the Near East, and the New World, and participants will consider the following topics: 1) socio-economic conditions of early population nucleation and urbanization; 2) benefits and disadvantages of coalescence; 3) decision-making and cooperation at aggregated settlements; 4) changes in social organization, economy, and identity stimulated by aggregation; 5) socio-cultural types, political configurations, and layout and functions of settlements; and, 6) long-term mechanisms of integration and disintegration in settlement trajectories.