



URBAN WARFARE

IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

ANTHONY KING

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Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century

Anthony King

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First published in 2021 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4367-0

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: King, Anthony, 1967- author.

Title: Urban warfare in the twenty-first century / Anthony King.

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA : Polity Press, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "An outstanding interdisciplinary introduction to urban warfare in the contemporary world"--Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020053371 (print) | LCCN 2020053372 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509543656 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509543663 (paperback) | ISBN 9781509543670 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Urban warfare--History--21st century. | Metropolitan areas--Strategic aspects. | Siege warfare--History.

Classification: LCC U167.5.S7 K56 2021 (print) | LCC U167.5.S7 (ebook) | DDC 355.4/26--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020053371>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020053372>

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Preface

I cannot remember precisely when it was. It may have been in 2001 or 2002, or it might have been in 2004 or 2005, after I had already started to work on the armed forces. However, the memory itself remains quite distinct. In my first years at Exeter University my office was directly opposite that of Barry Barnes, who held the professorial chair of the department. I was very lucky. Our proximity in the department was congenial and instructive for me. As an eminent sociologist, Barry was a very fine mentor and friend. I met Barry frequently, as a result, and we talked about many things, including sociology and social theory. In one of those conversations, as was common, he invited me into his room and, as we chatted, he showed me a small, yellow booklet, the reading list from an old course on 'Social Order' which he had taught at Edinburgh. On the cover of this booklet was the photocopy of an engraving of a late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century siege, in which cannon had breached a wall, while soldiers attacked a gate as defenders poured burning oil upon them. Barry motioned excitedly at the image and cried: 'Look at all the social stuff going on there.' His point was, of course, that once humans were able to form social groups and cooperate with each other, there was almost no limit to their powers – for good or ill.

I would like to say that, from the moment I saw that image, I decided to take Barry up on his challenge and to write a sociology of urban warfare. Yet, that would not be true. I remembered the image and Barry's exhortation as a general lesson about sociological analysis, not as an injunction to write a particular book. The idea of a book on urban warfare only came much later as I was finishing my

book on command in 2018. At this point, British and American and, indeed, Western armed forces generally were beginning to think seriously about urban operations. Their concerns about the increasing likelihood of urban operations, as well as their intense experience of them over the previous decade or more, attracted my interest. I had, in fact, written about urban tactics in *The Combat Soldier*, published in 2013. However, Barry's image of that early modern siege became increasingly significant to me as I researched urban warfare. So in the end, this book might be read as a circuitous answer to Barry's challenge. It is a sociology of urban warfare; it is an attempt to show how the changing size and density of military forces and cities, as social groups, have reconfigured the urban battle in the twenty-first century. I do not mention the work of Émile Durkheim in this book anywhere. Yet, for anyone who knows his work, its influence on my thinking about urban warfare past, present and future should be obvious.

As always, many friends and colleagues helped me with this book. I am grateful to them all. I offer special thanks to the following. I could not have conducted the military research I have without the support of the British Army and the Royal Marines, and especially 40 and 45 Commando Royal Marines. I am personally grateful to: Ben Baker, James Bashall, Jules Buczacki, Matt Cansdale, Alec Case, Innes Caton, James Cook, Kevin Copsey, Mike Cornwell, Gerry Ewart-Brookes, Adam Fraser-Hitchen, Paddy Ginn, Stephen Greenberg (USMC), Paul Hammett, Sigolene Hobson, Rupert Jones, James Martin, Nick McGinley, Charles 'Jack' Nicholson, Nick Perry, Jamie Powell, Dan Reeve, Clo O'Neill, Dom Rogers, Simon Rogers, Dickie Sernberg, Jolyon Simpson, Al Speedie, Zac Stenning, Andrew Stuart and Matt Taylor. Stephen Bowns, Peter Dixon, Robert Goodin and the Royal Anglian Regiment were extremely generous in their support for my research on Belfast in

1972 and the permission to use some images. I would also like to thank Ben Barry, Virginia Comolli and Antonio Sampaio at the International Institute for Strategic Studies; Marcus Geisser at the International Committee of the Red Cross; and James Denselow at Save the Children. At Warwick, Jon Coaffee and Stuart Elden provided very useful guidance, as did Randall Collins and Jeremy Black.

The US Army was no less helpful. At West Point, the Modern Warfare Institute has provided invaluable support, especially John Spencer (who has been particularly kind), John Amble, Liam Collins and Noel Siosson. I am indebted to Doug Winton not only for some fascinating conversations but also for allowing me pre-emptively to read his excellent doctoral dissertation on urban warfare, which I look forward to seeing in print and which I would recommend to everyone interested in the topic. I am very grateful also to Sean MacFarland, Joseph Martin, Joe O'Callaghan and Danilo Pamonag (Filipino Army) for their time and insights. At NATO, Jeff Biddiscombe, Frode Rieger, Simon Thomsett and Jan van der Werf were very helpful.

At Polity, I am very grateful to John Thompson, who initially saw potential in the project; Louise Knight, who has been a brilliant editor; Inès Boxman for her assistance; and Sarah Dancy. Will Crosby helped check the references. As always, I am indebted to those who read and commented on the manuscript. Charles Heath-Saunders and Patrick Jackson at the MOD confirmed that the book did not breach operational or personal security and provided useful comments. The feedback from Christopher Dandeker, Chris Torchia and two anonymous reviewers at Polity was very helpful indeed. I am particularly grateful here to Patrick Owen, an excellent student from my first cohort at Warwick. Finally, as always, Patrick Bury provided perceptive and very pertinent guidance about how to improve the manuscript.

1 Gomorrah

Mosul

On 16 July 2018, the last bombs fell on Mosul. A battle, which some American generals described as ‘the most significant urban combat since World War Two’, was over.^{[1](#)} After nine months of bitter fighting, ISIS was defeated, but the city was also destroyed. Homes, government and commercial buildings, factories, shops, mosques and hospitals had been ruined; the streets were choked with rubble and the detritus of war. The civil infrastructure – water, electricity, sewage – had collapsed. The fighting had been truly terrible. One of the American commanders of the operation, General Stephen Townsend, recalled: ‘The battle of Mosul was the most disorganized, chaotic, debris-littered place I’ve ever seen. Large swathes of the city were damaged. Some parts, especially the west side, were completely levelled – entire neighbourhoods destroyed.’^{[2](#)} Other US officers, closer to the combat, were shocked: ‘You can’t replicate how stressful it was: how bad the slaughter was in Mosul.’^{[3](#)}

It was a scene worthy of the Old Testament. Indeed, the battle of Mosul had a strange historical parallel. More than 2,500 years before, in 612 BCE, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, Nineveh, located on the east bank of the Tigris in modern Mosul, had been sacked by Babylonian forces. Excavations at the Halzi Gate discovered the remains of men, children and even a baby, killed by arrows as they tried to escape the burning city. Then, the last king of

Assyria, Sin-shar-ishkun, had perished in the flames with his possessions, his eunuchs and his concubines.⁴ Like their Assyrian predecessors, ISIS too had chosen to die in the ruins of Mosul.

In June 2014, ISIS advanced on Mosul. The city of over 1.5 million, the second biggest in Iraq, was a major strategic prize. Although Mosul was defended by an American-equipped Iraqi division of some 20,000 soldiers, the entire force fled in the face of a bold advance by only 1,500 ISIS fighters. The ISIS force, mounted in Toyota trucks, entered the city all but unopposed. With the capture of Mosul, the ISIS leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, declared the creation of the caliphate. For more than two years, ISIS imposed a reign of terror on their territory in eastern Syria and northern Iraq. Remarkably, they were able to unite the entire international community against them. The war against ISIS converged inexorably on Mosul.

On 16 October 2016, the Iraqi Security Forces, under the supervision of a US Combined Joint Task Force based in Baghdad, began its campaign to retake Mosul with a force of 94,000 Iraqi soldiers.⁵ Initially, the Iraqi 1st Infantry and 9th Infantry Divisions attacked the eastern part of the city from the east and south-east, though the Iraqi Counter-Terrorist Service, an elite special forces formation of about 10,000 soldiers, led most of the attacks. The Iraqi Security Forces were accompanied by about 1,000 American advisers with a further 2,000 supporting them.⁶ They were opposed by an ISIS force of some 5,000–8,000 active fighters, supported by locally recruited young militants; ISIS probably fielded a force of about 12,000 in the city.

From October 2016, Iraqi Security Forces began to advance on and into eastern Mosul (see [Map 1.1](#)). Iraqi forces faced intense resistance. Mosul consisted of some 200,000 buildings and 3,000 kilometres of road; millions of

rooms and thousands of square metres of terrain had to be cleared. Organized into small squads of perhaps five fighters, ISIS defended the city fanatically from their prepared strongpoints, engaging in frequent counterattack, often using subterranean passages to infiltrate Iraqi lines.

Of course, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) – mines and booby-traps – played a central role in the ISIS defence plan. ISIS laid belts of IEDs across roads and avenues of advance, hiding them in the rubble and ruined buildings. However, their most feared and effective weapon was the suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED). ISIS had prepared hundreds of armoured vehicles before the Iraqi attack; many were camouflaged to look like civilian vehicles.⁷ Whenever the Iraqi Army mounted an assault, ISIS launched suicide fleets against Iraqi lines. Having observed the Iraqi dispositions from remotely controlled drones, ISIS commanders directed the vehicles along routes to inflict maximum damage and casualties. In all, ISIS mounted 482 suicide vehicle attacks in Mosul.⁸ Eventually, the Iraqi Army developed effective countermeasures, blocking side roads with tanks, barricades or craters created by bombs dropped by US aircraft. Thwarted by these obstacles, ISIS loaded their armoured vehicles with squads of suicide bombers. Once the vehicles reached Iraqi lines, the individual bombers burst out of the trucks and charged towards the Iraqis detonating themselves in hellish scenes.

gunships and jet and propellered aircraft monitored the city and struck targets with cannon fire, Hellfire missiles and precision bombs.

The final acts of the battle were worthy of Stalingrad itself. The last ISIS fighters were trapped in fighting positions in a shrinking pocket near the west bank of the Tigris. As they refused to surrender, the Iraqi forces eventually bulldozed over their positions, eliminating any final resistance with grenades. 'It reminded me of something you would watch on a World War II video of Iwo Jima; marines burying Japanese die-hard defenders on Iwo Jima. I never thought I'd see that.'⁹ Although some escaped, most of the ISIS fighters were killed. Officially, 1,400 Iraqi soldiers were killed and 7,000 wounded, but casualties were probably much higher.¹⁰ Although thousands left Mosul before the battle, estimates of civilian deaths vary wildly. The lowest suggest that 3,000 died, the highest 25,000. Any figure within this range seems possible.

The Urban Revolution

Mosul may, indeed, have been one of the greatest urban battles of the twenty-first century, but it was far from unique. On the contrary, urban warfare has become normal, even the norm, today: 'Warfare, like everything else, is being urbanized.'¹¹ Of course, since the early 2000s, there has been extensive fighting in rural and mountainous areas in conflicts in Sudan, Afghanistan, Mali, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and in Kashmir and Ladakh. By contrast, in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Georgia, Yemen, Israel, Libya and the Ukraine, populations have been overwhelmingly caught up in the fighting; in these theatres, wars have taken place inside urban areas.

The rise of urban warfare in the early twenty-first century now has a well-recognized chronology. In October 1993, US Special Operations Forces and Rangers were trapped inside Mogadishu for twelve hours after an attempt to seize a Somali warlord had failed. In stark contrast to the Gulf War, when US Abrams tanks were able to engage Iraqi T-72s in the open desert from several kilometres before the Iraqis had even detected them, the canyons of Mogadishu became a killing zone; two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down and in running gun battles with local militia that lasted for more than twelve hours, eighteen US soldiers were killed and seventy-three wounded.

The battle of Grozny a year later was an even more sobering portent of the urban future. In December 1994, in response to the declaration of Chechen independence by President Dudayev, Russian Army forces advanced into the capital Grozny in order to reassert Moscow's authority. The Chechen rebels allowed Russian armoured columns to penetrate deep into the city. The 131st Mechanized Rifle Brigade, under Major-General Politovsky, reached the central station, where some conscripts, thinking the conflict was over, even bought rail tickets home.¹² Yet, the war had only just begun. A brigade commander, Colonel Stavin, later claimed that he heard the words, 'Welcome to hell', over his radio. At that moment, with complete surprise, Chechen hunter-killer teams ambushed the Russian columns from high-rise buildings, destroying numerous armoured vehicles and tanks, and killing many soldiers, before moving through cellars and sewers to new positions. In the end, the Russians had to mount a systematic clearance of the city, destroying much of it, before the uprising was suppressed in February 1995. Even so, a second bitter battle occurred over the city in 1999–2000, as Russian forces seized Grozny from the rebels once again.

In 1984, Sarajevo was the site of a very successful Winter Olympic Games. However, only a decade later, Sarajevo came to haunt public imagination as symbol of ethnic war. From May 1992 to December 1995, Serbian forces besieged and bombarded the city as part of its war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The blockade, watched across Europe on nightly news programmes, inflicted terrible suffering on the citizens of Sarajevo, who had to endure constant sniper and artillery fire. There were some notorious incidents, including the Serbian mortaring of Markale marketplace on 28 August 1995, which killed forty-three civilians and injured seventy-five more.

By the late 1990s, Sarajevo, Mogadishu and Grozny were being interpreted not just as significant incidents in themselves, but as the start of a trend. They denoted an epochal turn to urban warfare. The past couple of decades have only affirmed this trajectory. Since 2000, urban warfare has been almost continuous. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, for instance, a few engagements took place outside urban areas, but the battles inside Iraqi cities were far more significant. The battle of Nasiriyah on 23-24 March 2003 was notorious. There were other major battles: in Baghdad, Samawah and Najaf.

The Iraqi invasion was rapid, but it established the tone for the rest of the campaign. From 2003 to 2008, US-led forces were engaged in an urban counterinsurgency campaign against Al Qaeda terrorists, and Sunni and Shia militias. The most intense urban battles occurred in November 2004 with the second battle of Fallujah and, in March to May 2008, when Shia militias were finally suppressed in Sadr City and in Basra. Yet, the US also conducted major operations in Tal Afar in 2005 and Ramadi in 2006. Most of the campaign took place in the towns and cities of Iraq, with US coalition forces fighting to control the streets. Sometimes the situation was relatively benign. In Basra,

British troops wore berets on patrol until 2004, but, for the most part, coalition forces wore helmets and body armour and moved in protected vehicles because of the threat from IEDs, rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire. It was a high-intensity urban guerrilla war, with Ramadi, Fallujah, Mosul and Baghdad the sites of extreme violence and, sometimes, grotesque atrocity.

Other recent conflicts in the Middle East only reaffirm the point. The Syrian civil war is the most important case here. It began as a series of urban protests in the towns and cities of eastern Syria, beginning in Dar'a in February 2011. However, in the face of extreme repression, antiregime elements formed increasingly effective local militias and began to fight Assad's troops. Between 2011 and 2016, fighting took place in most Syrian cities and towns. Major battles took place in Homs, Damascus, Aleppo, Ghouta, Idlib, Latakia, Hama and many other towns and cities. In addition to indiscriminate artillery and air bombardment, the regime periodically employed gas to kill civilian opponents. Local and international reportage has captured the horror of these sieges.

ISIS's rise and fall is a case study in urban warfare. In early 2014, ISIS began to ally itself with tribal groups in eastern and southern Syria, in Deir Ezzor, Hasaka, Raqqa and Dar'a. As a result, ISIS took control of Deir Ezzor in July 2014 and from there began to expand its caliphate. ISIS inserted Sunni sleeper cells into towns and cities across the region. These cells mobilized the local Sunni population in support of ISIS's imminent assaults, and provided intelligence and mounted attacks on the opposition forces holding the towns. As a result, ISIS took Raqqa, al-Bab, Fallujah and Mosul in a 'lightning push' in 2014, the towns falling in quick succession, often without significant fighting. Once established in an urban hub, ISIS was then able to dominate the surrounding area.

Almost all ISIS's offensive operations were urban, then. The eventual defeat of the group took precisely the same form; most of the fighting took place in cities. The caliphate was destroyed as the US-led coalition reversed ISIS's own urban gains, retaking Iraqi and Syrian cities in turn. As a British officer noted:

The campaign for the liberation from IS was a series of urban battles. There was no front line. It was just the cities and then the manoeuvre to them. If you looked at the campaign map, it consisted of spots: the fights were in cities and towns. In the Soviet era, there were large fronts, you don't have those forces now. You are going to go from point to point.^{[13](#)}

Both the Libyan and the Yemen civil wars have also been heavily urbanized. Following Gaddafi's fall in 2011, Libya quickly descended into a struggle between General Haftar's Libyan National Army and the Government of National Accord based in Tripoli. They fought major battles for control of Benghazi in 2012 and Sirte in 2016 – and continue to do so. Similarly, the Yemen civil war has been highly urbanized with a major battle over control of Sana'a between Houthi rebels and government forces.

The West has been involved in the wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. Elsewhere, war has also migrated into cities. The experiences of Israel reflect this process. During the Six Day War in 1967, Israeli paratroopers retook Jerusalem, but in that conflict and the subsequent Yom Kippur War of 1973, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) was primarily engaged in open manoeuvre war in the Sinai desert or on the Golan Heights. The first phase of the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was also predominantly characterized by manoeuvre warfare. However, since then, IDF operations have become increasingly urban. Ironically, even during the Second Lebanon War of 2006, many of the most intense

engagements occurred in the towns of south Lebanon. Despite the fact that this region consists of rural, rocky hills and scrubland, 'most of the fighting took place in built-up areas'.¹⁴ Circumstances have forced the IDF to urbanize.¹⁵

Russia had also experienced an urban revolution by the mid-1990s; the battles of Grozny in 1994-5 and 1999-2000 suggested that something profound had changed. Russian conflicts since the Chechen wars have only affirmed the point. Since 2000, Russia has fought wars in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine from 2014. After years of tension, in August 2008, Georgia deployed a force to suppress Russian-supporting Ossetian separatists who had been shelling Georgia. On this pretext, President Putin initiated a large operation to regain control of South Ossetia and drive out the Georgian troops. The fighting in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War concentrated on Gori and Tskhinvali. Similarly, in the Donbas, most of the fighting took place in urban areas. Donetsk Airport, for instance, was the site of a major six-month battle in 2014 and 2015. The airport was eventually taken by the Donetsk People's Republic Army in January 2015, when Russian special forces blew up the terminal building and its Ukrainian defenders. In early 2016, there was a renewed bout of fighting, which again focused on three urbanized areas: Avdiivka, a Ukrainian controlled industrial town with large coke and chemical plants, the major railway junction of Yasinovata, and Horlivka.¹⁶ In each case, the Ukrainian and Donetsk Peoples' Republic forces have tried to seize - or hold - key industrial or transport nodes in cities and towns.

Across Eurasia and the Middle East, then, warfare has urbanized. However, the urbanization of warfare is a truly global phenomenon. In India, on 26 November 2008, twenty-four terrorists from the Lashkar-e-Taiba group

arrived secretly by boat into Mumbai. Armed with automatic rifles, grenades and suicide vests, they rampaged through some of the most prominent landmarks of the city, including the Taj Hotel, for four days, killing 174 civilians and security personnel. The 2008 Mumbai attack has highlighted the vulnerability of Indian cities to attacks. The Indian Army is currently concerned about improving its capacity to mount urban operations. In the Philippines in recent years, the armed forces have been engaged in two major urban battles against Islamicist jihadists: in Zamboanga in 2013 and in Marawi in 2017. The battle of Marawi was a brutal and intense engagement, when local militants from the Maute group reinforced ISIS jihadists led by Isnilon Hapilon to seize control of the main buildings in the centre of the town. The jihadists were eliminated only after bitter fighting against the Filipino Army, led by the special forces.

Mosul may, then, stand alone as the Stalingrad of the early twenty-first century. For Western forces, it was certainly the largest and most intense urban campaign of the past two decades. Yet, despite its scale, Mosul was not an aberration. Urban combat has become a central, maybe even the defining, form of warfare in the twenty-first century. In the twentieth century, armies prepared to fight in the field. Today, it seems all but inevitable that they will fight in cities.

Urban Origins

The rise of urban warfare is deeply troubling. The scale of human suffering and the destruction it has inflicted have often been terrible. Nevertheless, it would be quite wrong to suggest that urban warfare itself is new. Urban warfare was a regular occurrence in antiquity. Indeed, the siege and the sacking of cities were central themes in classical

literature, as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* demonstrate. Roman literature is also replete with depictions of urban warfare. Unlike the *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid* was not a primarily a poem about battle. Yet, some of its most powerful passages describe the sacking of Troy, the most famous siege of all:

There we found the fighting so heavy that it seemed there were no battles anywhere else, that this was the only place in the city where men were dying. We saw Mars, the irresistible God of War, Greeks rushing to the palace, men with shields locked over their backs packing the threshold, ladders hooked to the walls and men struggling to climb them right against the doorposts, thrusting up their shields on their left arms to protect themselves while their right hands gripped the top of the walls.¹⁷

Virgil took his imagery from Roman siege techniques; his observation of the details of the escalade are striking. His moving depiction of the destruction of Troy seems to be a subtle interrogation of the hypocrisies of Roman imperialism.

Yet, written between 29 and 19 BCE during Augustus's Principate, Virgil's account of urban warfare was anything but new, even then. On the contrary, by the first century BCE, siege warfare was a prominent, even primary, form of warfare. The Old Testament, composed between about 1200 and 165 BCE, records the sacking of many cities, including Nineveh, and, of course, Jericho: 'And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.'¹⁸ Archaeology affirms the literary evidence. According to the archaeological research, humans first started to inhabit urban settlements at the beginning of the Neolithic period, about 10,000 years ago; Jericho has been

dated to 9000 BCE. Similarly, in Anatolia, Çatalhöyük seems to have been inhabited from 7500 to 5700 BCE.¹⁹ Both display signs of militarization. Jericho was surrounded by rock-cut ditch and three-foot-thick walls (see [Figure 1.1](#)).²⁰ The original Jericho was destroyed in *c.* 5000 BCE. Although Çatalhöyük is not so obviously fortified, it was plainly a stronghold. The settlement consists of a series of tightly packed, baked mud houses, accessible only through the roof by means of a ladder, and with blank exterior walls (see [Figure 1.2](#)). Moreover, wall paintings of what may have been a warrior have been discovered inside the settlement.²¹



[Figure 1.1](#): The ancient walls of Jericho

Source: Daniel Case / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>).

Fortified settlements may have predated agriculture and the state. However, the first true cities emerged in Mesopotamia around 3000 BCE. The first city-states appeared in Sumer, an area that is now southern Iraq but was then a coastal, estuarine area bordering the Gulf. Ur, for instance, was founded about 2100 BCE; at its peak, it had 35,000 inhabitants.²² There were approximately twenty other rival city-states in existence at this time. The subsequent history of Bronze Age Mesopotamia consisted of the cyclical rise and fall of agrarian empires, centred on the cities of Akkad, Sumer, Babylon, Assyria and Elam. Warfare – and above all siege warfare – was a central element of the almost constant conflict between these empires.

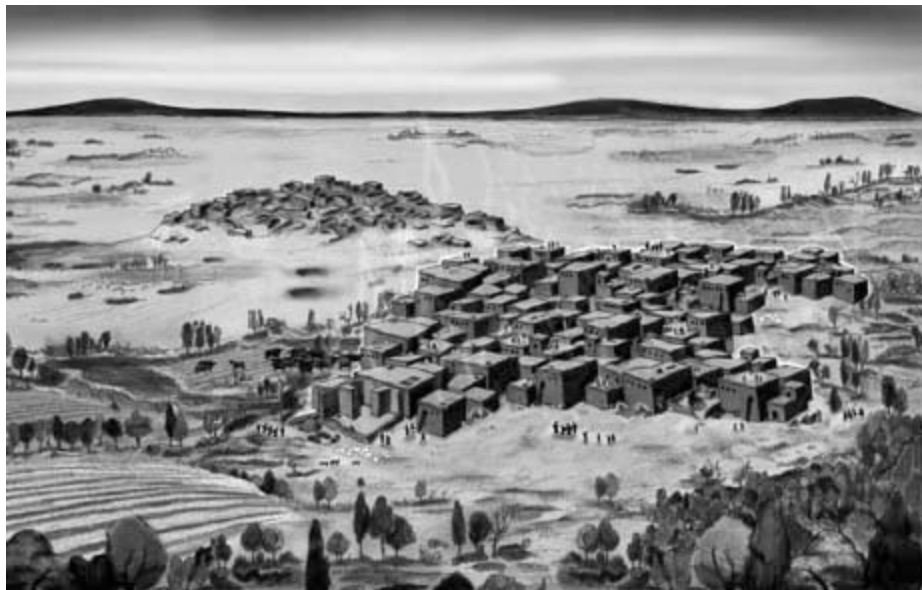


Figure 1.2: Çatalhöyük

Source: Çatalhöyük Research Project (<http://www.catalhoyuk.com/>).

The Assyrian Empire of the seventh century BCE illustrates this process. Between 711 and 627 BCE, Assyria attained dominance in the region under a succession of powerful kings: Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. The recent battle of Mosul raged around their palaces in

Nineveh. From the late eighth century, Assyrian kings engaged in a series of successful campaigns against their Elamite and Babylonian rivals, defeating them in battle and sacking their cities. The extraordinary murals in Ashurbanipal's palace include detailed depictions of successful sieges. Having taken Babylon, Ashurbanipal attacked Elam and eventually besieged and took the royal city of Hamanu. One of the friezes shows Assyrian soldiers climbing ladders, while others, protecting themselves with shields, undermine the walls. The corpses of Elamite soldiers sink in the river.²³

Siege warfare and urban fortification reached a very high level of development in the Mesopotamian Bronze and Iron Ages, then. Similar developments are observable in other major pristine civilizations of the Americas, China and India. All agrarian city-states were able to generate hitherto unachievable concentrations of military power. They built and fortified very large cities, but were also able to besiege, assault and sack their enemies' cities. Later, around the fourth century BCE, states developed sophisticated siege engines and catapults. The power of the Roman Empire, for instance, rested not primarily in the superiority of the Roman legions in open battle but in their unique ability to build fortifications in the field and to take apparently impregnable fortresses like Alesia, Maiden Castle and Masada. Urban warfare certainly reached a higher level of sophistication and intensity in the era of great ancient agrarian empires in the Middle East and Mediterranean from 3000 BCE to the fall of Rome in 476 CE. However, urban warfare was already established, when the Greeks and Romans perfected the art of siege warfare.

Urban warfare is, then, as old as cities themselves. The sad conclusion must be that from the moment humans, as aggressive, intelligent and highly social primates, began to live in urban settlements, they also began to fight each

other for them and to kill each other in them. Indeed, while it might be comforting to preserve a pacific vision of early human urban evolution, evidence suggests that warfare was in fact always an integral part of city life. From the outset, urban settlements were primarily defined by the wall that surrounded them and protected their inhabitants. The city may well have been the cradle of civilization; but it was also the crucible of war.

Understanding Contemporary Urban Warfare

Urban warfare is ancient. Its long provenance is widely recognized by commentators today. Yet it has, once again, come to prominence in the early twenty-first century. Clearly, the reappearance of the urban battle has engendered deep concern, not only among the armed forces who have to fight in this dangerous and difficult terrain, but also among politicians, political leaders, humanitarian agencies and, of course, citizens themselves. Many towns and cities have been destroyed – often irrevocably – in recent decades; huge numbers of civilians have been killed, wounded or displaced. The suffering has been truly terrible. There seems little doubt that urban conflict and warfare will continue to proliferate in the coming decades. It will remain a global issue, affecting the lives of millions, threatening major political, economic and cultural centres. If the political and social implications of the rise of urban warfare are so profound, it cannot be dismissed as a technical military issue. On the contrary, precisely because urban warfare always involves large civilian populations, it is imperative that policymakers, scholars, humanitarians, commentators and the general public all understand the realities of such conflicts.

How is it possible to understand urban warfare today, though? This is very difficult. Urban warfare is a complex and diverse phenomenon. No two battles are exactly alike; each one is bewildering in itself. As a general phenomenon, it is even harder to capture the character of urban warfare today with any fidelity. It is a prodigious political, social, military and intellectual challenge. Nevertheless, whatever the obstacles, it is necessary to try at least to comprehend the anatomy of the urban battle.

Contemporary scholarship on urban warfare is the best place to start. Two broad schools of thought are observable in the literature today and it is useful to look at each of them in turn. On the one hand, some scholars and military professionals emphasize the novelty of urban conflict today. They believe that a profound military transformation – even an urban revolution – has occurred, altering the very character of contemporary military operations in cities. Disturbed by the vast metropolises in which forces now operate, they declare that urban military challenge is without precedent. Richard Norton's 2003 article, 'Feral Cities', might be taken as a seminal moment in this catastrophic vision of the urban future:

Imagine a great metropolis covering hundreds of square miles. Once a vital component in a national economy, this sprawling urban environment is now a vast collection of blighted buildings, an immense Petri dish of both ancient and new diseases, a territory where the rule of law has long been replaced by near anarchy in which the only security available is that which is attained through brute power. Such cities have been routinely imagined in apocalyptic movies and in certain sciencefiction genres.^{[24](#)}

For Norton, the feral city of the future presents the armed forces with a totally new predicament. Since military forces