

The Devniad, Book 30

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Urrr, What Was the Question?

The Pizza Guy knew things no American could guess.

He leaned against our doorframe while Maureen went to get his money. His black eyes — he was dark complected, slight, sturdy, at a guess had once lived somewhere between Bengal and Bosnia — scanned the books piled around the room, and smiled.

There was something superior about that smile. He had brought our pepperoni special, and now a challenge.

“So, you like to read books?”

I knew I was in trouble. “Sure do.”

“An educated man?”

O boy. “I pass for one sometimes.”

The Pizza Guy smiled again, and launched his killer question. The one no Americans of his acquaintance could ever answer, because they had no real culture.

“Can you tell me, what is oldest city in the world?”

A beat, while the brain worked. Snap crackle POP. “Ur of the Chaldees?”

He waved it away. Not sure he’d ever heard of my answer, but he knew the right one all right. “Damascus!”

“Oh, OK. I didn’t know that. Damascus, huh. Interesting.”

“Yes. Not many people know it. Damascus. The oldest city.”

“I’ll remember that. Thanks. By the way, where are you from originally?”

“I am from Damascus.”

“Uh-huh.”

The point here is not to make fun of the Pizza Guy's little lapse into parochialism. After all, he was the one who'd done all the

foreign travel, plus his English for instance was a lot better than my Arabic. And for all I knew, back home in Syria he had been the Doctor Guy or the Nuclear Physicist Guy.

In fact, I thought his question was a juicy, important one. Was his answer right? I dived headfirst into the reference books.

Well, it turns out The Pizza Guy is not wrong, if you add one important proviso.

Dimashq, which is what he would have called his city among friends, “has been inhabited since prehistoric times and is reputedly the oldest *continuously occupied* city in the world.” That’s per my trusty *Columbia Encyclopedia*, one-volume (I call it The Wristbuster). Abraham, the early Biblical bigshot, lived around 2,000 BC; there was a city at Damascus by then.

By the way, its history since shows that with cities, old doesn’t mean unwanted. The city has attracted successive rulers including the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Assyrians (who from their name I assume to be Syrians before ThighMaster), the Persians, the Greeks, the Seleucids, the Armenians (!), legions of Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Egyptians (them again), the Karmathians (weren’t they on *Star Trek?*), the Seljuks, simply hordes of Mongols, some uncomfy Ottomans, the British, and the French. Apparently Mongols or even Armenians were OK but having the French in charge was too much for the long-suffering Damascenes. So the locals finally took over during World War II while folks were distracted.

Anyway, back to the distant past. What’s interesting is that “continuously occupied” escape clause. OK, you can go to Damascus right now and look around and

realize there have been markets like this ... and pedestrians with these faces ... and streets clogged with these traffic jams right here for at least 4,000 years. Yow.

But what's the answer to the original question in the way I took it?

Regardless of whether it's around today ... after living in the trees and the caves and then the first two families sleeping under adjacent fallen logs and then the first villages and then after even more millennia the first towns: what was the first city? The Big Town so awesome its size alone transformed the nature of lives lived there?

Unfortunately, the tomes on archaeology and ancient history I have lying around the house don't seem to think in quite these terms.

For one thing, the authors know that any day now some Iranian shepherds could find a brick on top of some dusty mound outside town that turns out to have been The Big One. Also, back then, no one was keeping score. Because the first city certainly came before the first writing. And besides, what exactly is a city?

I don't think Jarmo, in what's now Kurdistan in northern Iraq, qualifies, though archaeologists are awfully interested in it and its dates are incredibly early. How early? Try 7000 BC. But Hugh Thomas, in his modestly titled *A History of the World*, calls sites like Jarmo "overgrown villages," and quotes Lewis Mumford on the level of building technology used in such places: "Baked mud and baked reeds, comparable to a beaver's nest." That's harsh, dude. But Jarmo's population in 7000 BC wasn't exactly megalopolitan either: 150-200 people. Forget it.

Archaeologists also like Catal Huyuk, in what's now Turkey, and Jericho on what is today the Palestinian West Bank in Israel. By as early as 8000 BC, believe it or not, "when Europe was still only just recovering from the last ice age ... [Jericho] was defended by

a rock-cut ditch and stone wall with a solid circular tower," says *The Times Atlas of World History*. By 6800 BC, both sites had populations of 2,000 each, spread over 20 or 20 acres, living in mud-brick houses with beaten mud floors and branch-and-plaster roofs. This is REALLY early days yet, remember: *cattle* wouldn't even be domesticated for about another 300 years!

But Catal Huyuk (no relation) had no streets, just houses and courtyards all jigsawed together. And no doors; you entered the house though a hole in the roof. Reminds me of Maureen's Uncle Harold ...

It's hard to escape the feeling that these were still villages, inhabited almost entirely by farmers. Awesomely cool as they must have appeared by contemporary standards, I can't imagine there was much nightlife.

In fact, leave off the dancing shoes for another few millennium until you come to Sumerian civilization. It flourished between 3300 and 2000 BC in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that's now Saddam Country. No one is exactly sure where the Sumerians came from. Central Asia is one good guess. Of course, if you're into Ancient Astronaut theories (you know who you are, Tom), you may prefer Mars or the Lesser Magellanic Cloud.

These shaven-headed, curly-bearded movers and shakers from Sumer sure stirred things up. They introduced a few little improvements like writing, animal-drawn wheeled vehicles, oars, advanced metalworking, extensive irrigation works — and, as the *Times Atlas* puts it, the "large compact social organisations which may properly be called cities."

The People's Chronology by James Trager admirably explains how this process gains critical mass: "By reducing slightly the number of people required to raise food, they permit a few people to become priests, artisans, scholars, and merchants." Thus introducing to the world such useful

concepts as sin, dinnerware, homework, and marketing.

And speaking of useful, one book mention that you know a few Sumerian words yourself: certain sounds attached to particular meanings so crucial they've survived 5,000 years and ended up still recognizable within American English.

The most familiar? "Alcohol."

Most of the main city candidate sites seem to have developed around temples. Hey — let's think about that.

Civilization is basically writing and cities. But scholars seem to agree that cities got their real start via religion. And early writing seems to have been basically tallies of goods. Where would you first have enough goods in one place to need a count? Why, in big, rich temple/farm/factory complexes, perhaps. Where you'd also have an administrative class (priests) with a need to tally goodies and the leisure from stoop labor to develop a system for doing so.

So I've just proved that civilization comes from organized religion. By Styphon, *there's* a disturbing thought.

Back to those cities growing up around temples in ancient Mesopotamia. There are several attractive prospects for who got biggest firstest.

There's Uruk (Biblical Erech, modern Warka in southern Iraq), which might be a popular choice among booklovers. For one thing, it's where writing was invented about 3500 BC. First hieroglyphs with numerals, pictographs, and ideographs, then by 3000 BC the famous cuneiform. For another, probably not coincidentally, it's the site of the oldest story in the world, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The man in the title was the world's first literary character (he saved mankind from a great flood by building an ark) — but also a real guy, the King of Uruk around 3000 BC. There was a big white temple at Uruk to the sky god Anu. By 2500

BC, the great wall of the city boasted 900 towers, and there were certainly scores of thousands of people in residence.

Other candidates? Well, perhaps even earlier there was a great temple town/city at Eridu south of the site of Uruk. In fact, you can dig down at Eridu and find almost 3,500 years of temples — beginning with the lowest level, built sometime not long after 6000 BC.

And archaeological evidence indicates that Nippur, site of the shrine to the Sumerians' top god Enli, was an even more important early religious center. While Kish wielded even more political clout.

But Uruk, Nippur, Kish — tish, tish. Remember my guess to The Pizza Guy? My candidate for the first place to really wear the urban turban is still ... Ur.

Ur (the "Ur of the Chaldees" tag is from the Bible) was on the scene fairly early, back about 4000 BC. Remember, that's before the Sumerians really got going as a culture (about 3300 BC). And if you want firsts, how about this: *pottery* was invented here. Certainly by 2500 BC, Ur was a huge religious and commercial center. (Beating out Damascus by 500 years, nyah nyah.)

In fact — and here's the kicker for me — by 2200 BC Ur probably had twice the population of any other urb around. Say, 100,000 people. Now *that's* a city.

And remember, as with the other great Mesopotamian cities, they built this thing out of mud.

Sun-baked mud for most of it; harder oven-baked mud bricks when they really had to. Sumer sat on one of the world's great alluvial plains: mud on top of more mud. There wasn't much stone around, you'd have had to dig too deep. Hell, there weren't even many *trees*.

Yet, built without stone or wood or power tools, this Big Muddy stayed the world's greatest city for quite a few

hundred years, through various dynasties, wars, and other changes of administration.

In Ur's heyday, tourists would have been bused (make that chaired or cameled or maybe just piggybacked) past various magnificent royal cemeteries and temples. The primo stop would certainly have been Big Ziggy — the great 100-foot-high ziggurat of King Ur-Nammu. A ziggurat is a stepped pyramid, and you know how much tourists like steps.

Ur was the source of so much we now take for granted. I can't prove that this first Really Big City invented, say, nightclubs or con men or pollution.

But how about infantry? The first guys shown marching in phalanx with shields and spears appear on a monument in Ur. And the Urfolk were enthusiastic early adopters of the idea of empire, probably invented in Egypt. The last great rulers of the city styled themselves Kings of Akkad and Sumer, and their writ reached from Elam (in Iran) to Byblos (on the coast of Lebanon).

Speaking of writs, on a more positive note the rule of law was created at Ur. Ur-Nammu himself promulgated the first laws, 300 years before the more famous Code of Hammurabi. Thus starting inexorably the great chain of events leading to the OJ Trial.

Ur looms large in Judeo-Christian histories especially. After all, Abraham was an Ur homeboy who moved to Canaan (the Mesopotamian equivalent of California) and founded a new religion, Judaism.

Ur's last empire went down before the Elamites (in perhaps the first but not the last Iran-Iraq War) around 2000 BC.

The city stayed a minor center for centuries more, but was abandoned by the 4th century BC. Business didn't really pick up again until Sir Leonard Woolley started digging around in 1922.

Was Ur the first city? As all the above shows, that's a complicated question. But it's certainly a contender.

And after all: when we want to say something is the first, the forerunner, the original, don't we say it's the ur? The urtext, the Ur-Hamlet? OK, I know that's from an old unrelated German form, but isn't the coincidence interesting?

One thing certain: I owe The Pizza Guy many thanks for bringing all this up. As I always tell Maureen, pizza is brain food ...

FlimFan

Here are my totally subjective takes on movies seen since last time.

Excellent:

Carrington (Starz cable) — Lytton Strachey was a wit and a homosexual, as we know from his famous reply to the draft board officer who in 1916 asked what the writer would do if a brute of a German soldier were raping his sister: "I should endeavor to come between them." With lines like that plus a big showy weirdo beard and floppy white hat, Jonathan Pryce as Strachey easily steals this fine 1995 British historical. For a while. Then Emma Thompson's subtle performance as the painter Dora Carrington gradually overwhelms us with its restraint: she does most of the work with her eyes and sudden, blessedly normal smiles. Like her life, the film is organized around the men in it. (Of whom easily the strangest and definitely the one she loves most is Strachey.) But, members of that nonconformist bunch the Bloomsbury Group, the guys are all mad in ways that sometimes repel us. The movie keeps Carrington's viewpoint, and her own kind of madness instead draws us in. Why does she love Strachey? Because, as she tells

him, he's "so cold and wise." Uh-huh. Well, we're not sure we get it, but tell us more. Written and directed by Christopher Hampton, *Carrington* has really lush visuals of wonderful English country houses and the beautifully messy lives these artists lived within them.

Good:

Mrs. Brown — Almost fell off my wee sheep when I heard the daft news that Billy Connolly, the Scottish George Carlin, was taking a serious role in a period piece. But he's quite convincing — by turns direct, kind, charismatic, arrogant, alcoholic, paranoid — in this British history flick. It's based on the unconventional friendship Queen Victoria forged with brawny Highland horsegroom John Brown after her beloved Prince Albert died. Dame Judi Dench, my Aunt Ann's favorite actress, gives you a beautifully modulated portrait of Victoria. Her round face and slitted eyes may show us despair, anger, and high-handedness, especially at first, but she never loses our sympathy. Dench reminds us it's hard enough to be a human being, much less a queen. Also enjoyable is the arch performance by Anthony Sher as Prime Minister Disraeli, who could have given Oscar Wilde lessons in ironic repartee. This movie is darker than I expected, with more class injustice and upstairs-downstairs dichotomy. Those recent great Jane Austen historicals, while more entertaining, have made me forget that real life doesn't always have such happy endings. Nice job here, though, of handling the main historical question: Did they or didn't they? As when Brown and the Queen have been out nightriding, returning flushed and a little drunk. One official looks at another and says, "Don't even think it." But we can't *help* it ...

Mimic — Everyone knows New York City has enough damp, dirty places to hide a thousand mutant species growing in the

slimy secret darkness. (And that's just the restaurants.) This is the story of one of them. Actually, stylish visuals and settings, tight writing, and unexpected changes on old themes help make this SF/horror flick by new director Guillermo Del Toro a cut above the usual. But if you're entomophobic, bug out. Mira Sorvino is fine as the young scientist who whips up a new species of super insect for a good cause, only to have her creation evolve into *Something Else* down in the subways. Where, naturally, everybody ends up going, armed only with ... well, you think you hate to rub on those bottled bug repellents? Wait until you see the guck Sorvino recommends. The payoff for the title — what the bugs mimic and exactly how they do it — is a nastily fascinating delight. Ditto F. Murray Abraham, having a great time underplaying his told-you-so scenes as Mira's wise old mentor. "But they all died in the lab," she whines when things begin to Go Horribly Wrong. Whispers Murray silkily: "They aren't IN the lab anymore, Susan. You let them out ... The world's a much bigger lab." And you can't always pick your lab partners.

Decent:

GI Jane — First I'll get my bad-pun alternative title thing done. They shoulda called this movie *Top Gyn*. OK, now that's out of the way. SEAL stands for SEa Air Land. U.S. Navy SEAL team commandos are supposed to be in their element on or in all three. Demi Moore is surprisingly in hers here, as a sharp Navy intell lieutenant picked by a politician to be the first female to undergo SEAL training. Moore effectively portrays a woman ambitious enough to run the sexist gauntlet that ensues. The question: is she tough enough? She's certainly buff enough. Moore pulls off one-handed pushups in close-ups where I would have whined for a body double and a talented SFX crew. Viggo Mortensen also

commands attention as Master Chief Urganyle, a nasty drill instructor so tough he can quote poetry and wear shorts without diminishing our fear and respect. But the political stuff gets so overdramatized it's laughable, like the ending — where training is interrupted with, surprise surprise, a real mission. What works are the sections where the movie functions as a documentary (with direction by *Blade Runner's* Ridley Scott, make that a high-gloss documentary) on SEAL training methods. The rest is standard-issue Hollywood.

Money Talks — It's not cash that talks in this flick, it's Chris Tucker in his first but not last starring role — a hilarious, runaway performance in a fairly stupid movie. His character, a ticket scalper/carwash attendant, gets mixed up with a TV newsman on the make and mistakenly pegged as a cop-killing terrorist. Stuff happens. Rapidly. Through it all, Tucker (similarly unforgettable as Ruby Rhod the manic DJ in *The Fifth Element*) talks faster than a 1930s screwball comedy, and screams harder — and higher — than Fay Wray. At one point, Tucker identifies himself to the newsman's future Italian father-in-law, Paul Sorvino, as the son of Vic Damone and Diahann Carroll. And tells daughter Heather Locklear that she's fat. "You know, phat. Pretty Hot And Tempting?" Charlie Sheen as the newsman — a thankless straight man role — looks distinctly ungrateful. This movie avoids the usual Arab, Russian, or German villains, realizing it's equally fun to demean the national character of the French. As when Tucker threatens one darkly suave *terroriste* that he'll "kick his Jerry-Lewis-loving ass." Prediction: producers will instantly typecast Tucker's supertalented ass into a string of hugely popular comedies that make him an international star with millions of dollars and a string of agents he keeps canning because they won't let him play Othello.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #327, August 1997

To all

Let me beat Mike Resnick to the punch by suggesting a new anthology that should be a big seller: *Alternate Dianas*.

Interesting and literate if of course necessarily exploitative coverage of Diana Spencer's death in the Sept. 15 *New Yorker*. I especially liked British barrister Geoffrey Robertson's article on press freedoms and (versus?) ethics. "Today there seems to be a new awareness of two limits: dimly, one imposed by conscience, and, more keenly, a fear that readers content to be treated as voyeurs will revolt if regarded as ghouls." He suggests areas that might be considered as off limits for reportorial scrutiny: "the cradle, the school, and the bedroom ... the hospital and the grave." But what about exposing, say, corrupt nurses, or teachers, or morticians?

To Tom Endrey

To answer some of your computer questions and hope I don't overlap too much with other APA answers:

Access 2.0 isn't networking software, it's a big, powerful database — part of your Office package. Not too hard to figure out, especially if it has Wizards in the help menu, that step you through tasks. Do you know about databases? Just a few thousand hours' work and you can create, say, catalogs of your books or art, or recipes, or a big address list, etc. And it can link to Word or Excel, too, if you want to pull some of your data out into an article or a spreadsheet sometime. Put the info in with some forethought and you can later pull out, say, all the art you purchased in 1994 costing over \$50, or all your SF friends in Massachusetts and Oregon, or any of your paperbacks with "Mars" in the title.

About those mystery games. Don't know the others, but SimCity is my brother Michael's favorite game, also beloved of millions of others. A great game wherein you play God and build a city from scratch. If you haven't already, in your Games menu, go to that SimCity subdirectory, double-click it, and look for a file with the extension .EXE or something called SimCity and labeled an "application." Double-click that and it should execute (run or open up) the game. Then play away!

Don't share your faith in Velikovsky or the Mars Face, Tom, but it's interesting to hear about it. John Ford said last Boskone that his Velikovsky jokes weren't getting those laughs of recognition anymore. Do you think V is ripe for a comeback?

To Nomi Burstein

Your starting an e-list of language abuses sounds like a great idea. Sign me on. Did I ever mention the cafeteria lunch menu I saw once? Along with the usual Zesty Cole Slaw, it offered "Macaroni and Cheese Au Gratin." Now, I'm as fromagephilic as the next guy, but there's a limit ...

Oh the embarrassment! During the housemoving, I don't recall actually seeing into anyone's lingerie drawer, yours or Michael's. Made up that comment about the French-cut purple number because it sounded so unlikely. Oops. Should I be glad I didn't also make up love chains, riding crops, and a Chinese raping chair?

To Tim Szczesuil

Boy, are you turning into Heavy Equipment Guy! First the shovel loader, now a 17-foot truck. Say, NESFA could use a bathing beach ... are you handy with a harbor dredge?

To Paul Giguere

Enjoyed your Necronomicon report. You make Lovecraft sound pretty appealing,

especially *To the Mountains of Madness*. I love stories about Arctic and Antarctic exploration; had no idea *TTMOM* was one. Sounds like *The Annotated Lovecraft* by Joshi is the edition to buy, too, since I also like glosses and explanatory matter.

Against your American definition of "pornography" as having pictures, my dictionary has it from two Late Greek words: "porne," a prostitute; and "graphein," to write. Thus defining pornography as writing about prostitutes. Guess modern marketing methods have considerably expanded the category since the days of the Late Greeks.

To Elisabeth Carey

Thanks for the details on your job experience. Don't worry, you'll find something. If there's any justice in the universe, God loves a librarian.

To Ray Bowie

Your cousin's husband died of a heart attack standing at the bus stop, age 48? Thank goodness this can't happen to me. I so rarely take the bus.

To Mark Olson

I'm one of the people who recommended James White's *The Escape Orbit* to you last year; sorry you didn't end up liking it better. Can't refute any of your specific points, though. Maybe because I first read it when I was young, I still have a soft spot in my head for it.

They should look into cloning your brain into an expert system for those new net intelligent agents, Mark. You've got meaty, short, interesting reportage in this issue on astrophysics, hotel party layout, zoos, botanical gardens, that Pittsburgh con, etc. Another delightful reading experience from The Awesome Olson.

To George Flynn

In reviewing *Face/Off*, did I say "But let's face it" on purpose? It would appear so, *prima facie*.

I'm also following your rationing plan for Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin novels. Several at a time, then take a few months off. Fourteen down, and to date I guess four to go. Would it were scores.

To Joe Ross

Good to talk to you at Michael Burstein's Campbell Wishin' and Hopin' Party. I did like your Superman parody; look forward to the conclusion next ish. (Well, I guess that makes it this ish.)

Great quote collection again. Especially the one about new Massachusetts Gov.

Celluci's being vanilla, while Bill Weld was "Cherry Garcia and Tropical Rain Crunch and sherbert all together, and you never knew what you were going to get."

To Tony Lewis

To go the interfaith route here, the work of NESFA Press is not only a mitzvah, it's a crusade! Plus a time-traveling haj that will bring all involved mucho karma.

To Michael Burstein

So your alien abduction featured a large room, sticky floors, strange foods, flickering lights, etc. I know you meant it for a movie house, but sounds equally like a 1971 lava-lit pot party. Sure it wasn't an infantile-memory flashback to some bash to which your parents dragged you?

By the way, thanks for your own party on The Night You Won the Campbell. Can say now I wasn't sure you had a chance, up against four novelists — and you at this point with only short stories published. Your on-line presence must have really paid off. Plus your winning personality and clever use of subliminal messages ("KICK SHIN" and "VOTE SEX VOTE BURSTEIN SEX SEX BURSTEIN BURSTEIN BURSTEIN SEX VOTE") embedded as centisecond-burst animations in all your net postings.

Glad to hear I'll be featured as a religious prophet in an upcoming Burstein masterpiece. Though the teaching-order sisters of my youth — Sister Mary Machine Gun, the Beak, and all the old gang at Our Lady of the Evening — must be doing Immelmans in their ossuaries.