The City-State in Five Cultures


A nice, concise set of essays on city-states. The latter occupy a particularly important place in Western history because of the impact of Classical Greek poleis and Italian Renaissance city-states. The authors of this multi-volume book are interested in common features of city-states, what factors promote their emergence, and what factors result in their disappearance. There is a short introduction setting out a reasonable definition of city-states, chapters on Sumerian, Greek, Italian Renaissance, Medieval-Early Modern German-Swiss, and Hausa city-states. The book concludes with a nice comparative chapter. The topical chapters are all good with a particularly nice survey of Greek poleis and a really informative chapter on Hausa city-states. The final, comparative chapter tends to stress the importance of lack of political competition from larger states in the emergence and persistence of city-states. This is similar to the conclusion reached by the economic historian David Stasavage in his analysis of European city-states. There may be another important aspect that the authors of this book downplay in the persistence of city-states; the importance of a number of these states as entrepots for inter-regional trade.