

James Lloyd - Childe's Definitions Essay

HPAR4006 - What Makes Civilisation?

'Understanding Early Civilisations' is a book written by Bruce G. Trigger, and touches upon the many aspects that could be used in order to define what makes a civilisation, and compares the "seven best documented early civilisations" in detail (Trigger, 2003). Chapter 3 of this book references 10 distinct definitions made by V. Gordon Childe in 1950 that characterises the difference between a uniform society and a complex one. It is quite clear that many of these definitions could be linked to Ancient Egyptian civilisation.

The most prominent of these characteristics that could easily be linked to Ancient Egyptian culture is "Monumental Architecture" (Trigger, 2003. p. 43). It is quite clear that this could easily be linked to Ancient Egypt, as there are various examples of monumental architecture throughout the various Egyptian dynasties, including the 'Great Pyramid' at Giza, built for Khufu, the 2nd king in Egypt's 4th Dynasty (History.com, 2018) and the Karnak Temple at Luxor, which was built between Egypt's 12th and 20th Dynasties (wmf.org, 2017). Another significant feature of Ancient Egypt that focuses around monumental architecture is the Valley of the Kings, where hundreds of tombs were built, dedicated to various pharaohs and their families (Mark, 2017). This characteristic can clearly go hand-in-hand with another of Childe's attributes, that being "Monumental Art" (Trigger, 2003.) It is clear that various tombs and temples in Egypt feature this type of art, ranging from paintings found in various tombs- such as the Tomb of Nebamun occupying various paintings of fishing in Egypt- and engravings found on most of Egyptian Temples- such as the smiting scenes found on the Pylon walls of the Temple of Horus at Edfu. This clearly shows further just how complex of a society Ancient Egypt was, as it not only features monumental architecture, but this was accompanied by a whole host of monumental art techniques.

Another of Childe's attributes that could be applied to Ancient Egyptian culture is "resident specialist craft workers under control of religious officials" (Trigger, 2003). This could be seen at the workman's village of Deir el-Medina, where the residents were the workers who built the tombs found in both the Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens, and were forced to "remain discreet" about the locations of these tombs (Mark, 2017). This clearly shows how the residents of this village were under control from the pharaoh and his priests in order to ensure that the resting places of Egyptian kings remained hidden and untouched, which again shows how complex of a society Ancient Egypt was.

Another characteristic that was thought of by Childe is how the society features "large urban centres" (Trigger, 2003). Again, this clearly is apparent throughout Ancient Egypt, as there

are a whole host of urban cities across the country, including those of Thebes, Luxor and Memphis. It is clear that not only were these 'urban centres' strictly residential, as there are various Temples and other key buildings that can be found in each of these cities. Another point that shows the importance of these cities is how they were key features of various annual Egyptian festivals, such as Luxor being the centre for the 'Opet' Festival. This clearly shows how these cities played a key role in Ancient Egyptian life, and weren't merely just used for residential purposes.

Another one of Childe's attributes that is mentioned in this book is "ruling class exempt from manual labour" (Trigger, 2003). Although there is little evidence for this being completely true, there is some evidence that references how the elite Egyptians had slaves to carry out their work for them. Although there were some restrictions to what the slave masters were able to do, including not being able to force harsh labour onto slave children (Redford, 2001), it is still apparent that many high officials in Ancient Egypt had slaves. However, this still doesn't show how the ruling classes of Egypt were exempt from labour, just how they had people to do some of their labour for them.

It is quite clear that, going off of Childe's given characteristics alone, that Ancient Egypt could quite easily be described as a complex ancient society, as many of these specific attributes are apparent in Ancient Egypt clearly. However, it could be argued as to whether calling Egypt a complex society off of these factors alone may not be reliable, as there could be other un-mentioned factors that could contribute to the complexity of an ancient civilisation.

Bibliography

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