

An early civilisation, as defined by anthropologists, is “the earliest form of class-based society that developed in the course of history” (Trigger 1993:1); there are multiple ancient civilisations of which there is a limited amount of information on; those who study these ancient cultures often look for similarities and patterns between the different cultures as a means of understanding and explaining aspects of a separate civilisation. Ancient Egyptian civilisation is considered to be among the oldest civilisations that there is, something which Egyptian culture was considered to be as far back as during the time of Herodotus (an Ancient Greek historian born in the 480. BC), who stated “concerning Egypt I will now speak at length” (Herodotus, History II.35)¹ when talking about the civilisation and products which came as a result of Egypt.

The chapter of Trigger’s book, “Early Civilisations: Ancient Egypt in Context” (1993), makes multiple mentions of the fact that there seems to be a clear difference of opinion between historians when it comes to studying the similarities and differences between Ancient Egypt and other early civilisations. He states that the “belief that Egyptian civilisation was different from that of any other society has discouraged Egyptologists from treating information about any other early civilisations as a means to understand ancient Egypt better” (Trigger, 1993:2); this statement by Trigger implies that while information found out about other early civilisations can be used as means of understanding another, such as using the Ancient Greeks to understand the Romans, there are some who believe that the ancient Egyptian civilisation was too different from that of anywhere else in the ancient world and therefore Egypt cannot be used to help gain information about other places, and other civilisations will not share similarities with the Egyptian civilisation.

There is the idea mentioned in the chapter about how when studying an ancient civilisation, it is important to study cross-culturally, to identify patterns of the time and find similarities between how the civilisations were built up in the ancient world. The idea is something which Steward stressed the importance of (though during the same period many of the publications covering ancient civilisations did not follow this idea, including one of Steward’s own works).

The parallels which can be found between different ancient civilisations is something which is very important to consider when studying a certain civilisation or the ancient world as a whole. In regards to Egypt, it could be argued that early Egyptian civilisation was a city-state; Trigger’s definition of a city-state system is a “network of adjacent city states whose elite tended to compete with one another, often militarily, to control territory, trade-routes, and other resources” (Trigger, 1993:10) while they still shared alliances and intertwined themselves with one another, most commonly through marriage. The ancient Egyptian civilisation can be called a city-state system, as could other ancient civilisations, such as the Aztec civilisation of Mexico. Egypt, however, had a larger territory than others, something which it formed early on in its development, during the predynastic years (5000 – 3100. BC); during this time Egypt was made up of Upper and Lower Egypt, before it was unified at the beginning of the first pharaonic dynasty. Egypt was also quite politically stable during the

¹ Trigger, 1993, pg1

predynastic period, and then more so when it became centred under one capital (though this did change during the development of the civilisation, such as when Akhenaton moved the capital city from Thebes to Amarna). Egypt is mostly considered to be a territorial state because of the way in which it treated any conquered states, in comparison to how a city-state would. Trigger states that a territorial state would dismantle local governments and replace them with a new version more in line with its own.

The ancient Egyptian civilisation can be compared with and show similarities to other ancient civilisations, as Trigger's book suggests, though there is some merit in the idea that Egypt is overly unique compared to other civilisations of the period. Franz Boas believed that "every culture was a unique product of its own largely fortuitous historical development" (Trigger, 1993:2) and this can be argued in favour of all civilisations, but when looking exclusively at the ancient Egyptian civilisation it is more clear that the uniqueness of Egypt may make it harder to find patterns between civilisations.