

Childe's Characteristics of Complex Societies, and Their Relation to Ancient Mesopotamia

Childe's Characteristics are a way of defining a civilisation, by giving a list of factors that should be required for a society to be considered a 'civilisation'. These can be applied to ancient Mesopotamia. In addition, Wenke and Olszewski argue that by the Uruk period, there had been the "appearance of the complete checklist of civilisation¹". However, they do not specify in detail what criteria have been used to reach this conclusion, beyond the listing of a few basic factors, which can therefore create difficulties when trying to compare their findings and arguments to other criteria, such as Childe's Characteristics. The focus here is on the 10th of Childe's characteristics; that a civilisation requires "resident specialist craft workers politically as well as economically under the control of secular or religious officials²".

However, Maisels has argued that this characteristic can be divided into three further aspects³; 1) "peasants, craftsmen, and rulers form a community⁴", 2) "the social solidarity of the community is represented (or misrepresented) by the pre-eminence of temples and funerary cults⁵", and 3) "a state organisation is dominant and permanent⁶". Whilst this helps to clarify Childe's characteristic, it also helps to illustrate the relationships between different characteristics. The others characteristics listed by Childe that are connected to Maisels' factors are; "2) craft workers, merchants, officials, and priests supported by the surpluses produced by the farmers⁷", which would be necessary to allow craftworkers to provide wares for officials, and "4) monumental architecture⁸", such as temples or palaces. In addition, there are further characteristics that relate, although not as directly. The first is "1) large urban centres⁹". Whilst not always necessary, the presence of an urban area can make control of craft workers easier, due to the presence of officials, and administrative and religious centres. The second factor is "9) the regular importation of raw materials both as luxuries and as industrial materials¹⁰". This can aid with goods production, if necessary.

In Ancient Mesopotamia, there is evidence for "resident specialist craft workers politically as well economically under the control of secular or religious officials¹¹". One example of craft workers who were entirely under the control of officials are weavers during the Old Babylon period¹². However, there were other craft specialists over which officials exerted religious or secular control. Since Temples and Palaces required metal goods, both employed Smiths full time to provide such goods¹³. The employment encouraged religious control where they worked for temples, and secular where they worked for palaces, as they were reliant on such institutions so as to provide for their families. However, as previously stated, it can be more beneficial to apply Maisels¹⁴ breakdown of Childe's category, because it provides more examples. The first aspect, the formation of a community,

¹ Wenke and Olszewski, 2007, pp.341

² Trigger, 2003, pp.43

³ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

⁴ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

⁵ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

⁶ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

⁷ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

⁸ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

⁹ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

¹⁰ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

¹¹ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

¹² Trigger, 2003, pp.363

¹³ Trigger, 2003, pp.363

¹⁴ Trigger, 2003, pp.43

can be seen in the city states, such as Ubaid, Uruk, or Babylon. These states suggest community simply through existing, as they are made up of peasants, craftsmen and ruling classes living and working within the city and the surrounding area. City states are also an indicator of the third aspect, state organisation. This relationship exists because a city state cannot exist without a dominant ruler or administration, and are guaranteed to have at least some degree of permanency. Therefore, the development of a city state is indicative of state organisation¹⁵. The second aspect of Maisels' breakdown, the social solidarity of a community, can be seen in Mesopotamian temples and funerary rights. Temples such as the White Temple at Uruk¹⁶ can be somewhere where everyone worships in the same way at the same place, therefore suggesting a form of solidarity within the community (furthermore, the presence of such monumental architecture indicates the fulfilment of the 4th aspect of Childe's Characterisation).

Overall, Childe's characteristics can be easily applied to ancient Mesopotamia, however, they do at times require expansion on, due to oversimplification. In addition, it is difficult to separate one factor from the others as clearly as it is implied that they can be. By these characteristics, ancient Mesopotamia civilisations can be considered complex, and each characteristic can be clearly defined within these civilisations.

¹⁵ Wenke and Olszewski, 2007, pp.341

¹⁶ Wenke and Olszewski, 2007, pp.344

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