

Steadman. S, Ross. J (2017), *Ancient Complex Societies*, Routledge. Ch. 2 *Critical Elements in Complex Society*

Within this chapter Steadman and Ross outline and explain four “cultural institutions” that is believed by cultural anthropology to create human culture: social relationships, religious systems, economic systems, and political structures, and it is divided into those subjects accordingly. In the section on Social relationships, for example, they explain how, while social relationships may change in importance or type, such as by becoming a tool for the gaining of social power or for choosing appropriate marriage candidates, it continues to retain its importance despite no longer being necessary for the primary goal of survival.

This chapter takes a clinical, analytical tone to its investigation of four “cultural institutions”, as it only serves to summarise other findings for other sections in the book and serves mainly, it seems, to deliver information instead of apply it in a way that might seem or be subjective, while listing various case studies in order to clarify or illustrate the points being made, such as the mention of the Kula Ring being an example of long-distance trade in symbolic and valuable goods.

While it serves as an excellent overview for the topic, being easier to understand than other writings on the topic, the main issue is that each criteria deemed necessary for complex societies and cultures seems to be overly simplified for the purpose of ease of imparting the information and lacks the nuance it might otherwise have, because it doesn't seem to recognise that different cultures may have placed differing importance on those criteria. The Vikings, for example, do sometimes differ to the criteria established by Steadman and Ross.

Kinship, Social Networks, and Social Differentiation

This section, while applicable to the Vikings, tends to focus more on general application in terms of a kind of high culture the Vikings did not tend to have. Viking culture placed a great deal of importance on small family units, being members of small communities; especially when taken into consideration that many villages were small and very often isolated, which is suggestive of both being small communities and the elite in those communities likely having had close, social bonds with their subjects. This is also in direct opposition to Steadman and Ross' declaration that such kinship - which conferred, like Viking chieftdom, status - was only important in early-state societies, whereas these bonds seem to be maintained throughout the Viking Age.

Religion and Ritual

This is one area in which what is known about Viking religious practices and Steadman and Ross' information are in direct agreement. Vikings seemed to have practiced community based rituals and religion and had no centralised organisation until the implementation of Christianity, and by Steadman and Ross' reasoning are, thus, less complex societies than others.

Economic institutions and Resources

Other than raiding vikings seemed to have had no real economic institutions. While they had significant trading networks their main means of export and production of goods was the raiding of other settlements. Resources, like food and human labour, also often had to be imported, having had a system of slaves or serfdom - known as thralls - and some estimates show that there were up to two slaves per household¹. However, in accordance to Steadman and Ross' criteria for complex

¹ P.H. Sawyer (2002), p. 39

All other information taken from Steadman. S, Ross. J, (2017) and Knut, (2003)

societies, the Vikings did have access to significant resources and human labour, and did have widespread and complex trading networks.

Dimensions of Political Complexity

Steadman and Ross narrow this field into three axes: centralisation, differentiation, and integration. Despite being a complex society the Vikings are very limited in all three axes; they had very little centralisation for the majority of the Viking Age - King Harald Fairhair who ruled from 872 to 930 was, for example, the first king of a unified Norway, nearly a century after the generally agreed beginning of the Viking Age that started at the turn of the 8th century, while Cnut the Great in 1016 to 1035 is generally regarded as the first true Viking king as he ruled both Norway and Denmark in addition to England² - and even then there are a handful of accounts where chieftains disobeyed orders - such as Norwegians who founded colonies on Iceland, who later Icelanders claimed were escaping the tyranny of Harald Fairhair. Additionally, Vikings have limited differentiation, often structured with minimal levels of politics - landholders or Jarls answered to the king, and typically they were the only other political level of any note. Integration, however, is difficult to judge, so a judgment will not be made due to the limited amount of information available.

Conclusion

Ultimately, while Steadman and Ross' criteria for the analysis and the determining of a society's complexity do have merit and are, generally, applicable in most situations, it lacks the nuance necessary to truly reflect the differences in cultural values in societies that, while by any other measures are 'complex', do not wholly fulfil the criteria they use to define a culture as such.

² Lund. N, (1994)

All other information taken from Steadman. S, Ross. J, (2017) and Knut, (2003)

Bibliography

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