

Introduction

The concept of “civilisation” has long occupied a central place in archaeological and historical scholarship. While the term is widely used in popular discourse, its academic definition remains contested. Early scholars often equated civilisation with moral or cultural superiority, a view now largely rejected for its ethnocentrism. Modern approaches instead seek analytical criteria that distinguish complex societies from simpler social formations without implying inherent value judgements. One of the most influential attempts to define civilisation in this way was made by the archaeologist V. Gordon Childe. In his formulation of the characteristics of complex societies, Childe sought to identify observable social, economic, and cultural features that tended to emerge together in what he termed “early civilisations”.

This essay discusses what makes a civilisation by engaging with Childe’s characteristics of complex societies, as outlined in *Defining Early Civilisations* (Trigger, p. 43). It begins by briefly outlining Childe’s approach and the broader significance of his model. It then introduces his key characteristics of civilisation before focusing in depth on one of these: the development of writing. Using examples from both ancient Egypt and early China, the essay demonstrates how writing functioned as a foundational element of complex societies, supporting administration, ideology, and cultural continuity. By comparing these two civilisations, the essay highlights both shared patterns and regional variations, illustrating the usefulness and limitations of Childe’s framework in defining civilisation.

Childe and the Problem of Defining Civilisation

V. Gordon Childe developed his model of civilisation in the mid-twentieth century, a period when archaeology was becoming increasingly systematic and comparative. Childe was particularly concerned with identifying large-scale social transformations, most famously the “Neolithic Revolution” and the “Urban Revolution”. For Childe, civilisation was not a sudden achievement but the outcome of long-term processes that transformed small-scale agrarian communities into complex, urbanised societies.

According to Childe, early civilisations could be identified by a cluster of characteristics rather than a single defining trait. These characteristics included:

1. The presence of large, dense populations in urban centres
2. The existence of occupational specialisation
3. The ability to produce and accumulate surplus.
4. Monumental public architecture
5. A ruling elite and social stratification
6. Long-distance trade
7. Standardised systems of measurement
8. Advanced artistic expression
9. The development of writing or record-keeping
10. The emergence of exact and predictive sciences

Not all societies displayed these traits in identical ways, nor did they always appear simultaneously. Nevertheless, Childe argued that the co-occurrence of these features marked a fundamental shift in social organisation. His model has since been refined and critiqued, particularly for its emphasis on urbanism and its roots in Old World examples. Despite these criticisms, Childe's characteristics remain a valuable heuristic tool for comparative analysis.

Overview of Childe's Characteristics of Complex Societies

At the heart of Childe's definition is the idea that civilisation involves increasing social differentiation and institutional complexity. Urban centres, for example, reflect not merely population growth but new forms of social interaction, governance, and economic exchange. Occupational specialisation indicates that not all members of society were engaged in food production, suggesting the presence of surplus agriculture capable of supporting artisans, priests, administrators, and rulers.

Monumental architecture, such as temples, palaces, and tombs, reveals the ability to mobilise labour and resources on a large scale, often under elite direction. Social stratification and the presence of a ruling class point to the institutionalisation of inequality, frequently justified through ideology or religion. Long-distance trade networks connect civilisations to broader economic systems, while standardised weights and measures facilitate taxation and exchange.

Among these characteristics, writing occupies a particularly significant place. Unlike architecture or craft production, writing provides direct insight into how civilisations understood themselves. It is both a practical administrative tool and a cultural technology that enables the preservation of knowledge, ideology, and collective memory. For this reason, writing is especially useful for examining how complex societies functioned and how they differ from pre-literate communities.

Writing as a Characteristic of Civilisation

Childe regarded writing as one of the clearest markers of civilisation because it fundamentally transformed the ways in which societies organised information and exercised power. Writing allowed for the recording of economic transactions, the codification of laws, the transmission of religious beliefs, and the communication of political authority across space and time. Importantly, writing systems tend to emerge in societies with increasing administrative demands, such as taxation, labour organisation, and resource distribution.

The development of writing does not occur in isolation. It is closely linked to other characteristics of civilisation, including social stratification, specialised labour, and centralised authority. Scribes themselves constitute a specialised professional class, often closely associated with elite institutions such as temples or royal courts. By examining writing in ancient Egypt and early China, it becomes clear how this characteristic both reflected and reinforced broader patterns of complexity.

Writing in Ancient Egypt

The earliest evidence for writing in Egypt dates to around 3200 BCE, during the late Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods. Egyptian writing, known as hieroglyphs, was a complex system combining logographic, phonetic, and determinative elements. From its earliest stages, writing in Egypt was closely tied to elite power and religious ideology.

One of the primary functions of writing in Egypt was administrative. Inscriptions and papyrus records document the collection of taxes, the distribution of grain, and the organisation of labour. The centralised nature of the Egyptian state, particularly during the Old Kingdom, required detailed record-keeping to manage resources along the Nile Valley. Writing thus enabled the state to exert control over agricultural surplus, a key feature of Childe's complex societies.

Writing also played a crucial role in legitimising political authority. Royal inscriptions emphasised the divine status of the pharaoh, presenting kingship as part of the cosmic order, or *maat*. Monumental inscriptions on temples and tombs reinforced this ideology, making writing a public expression of power. The fact that literacy was largely restricted to a small class of trained scribes further underscores its role in social stratification.

Religious and funerary texts provide another important example. The Pyramid Texts, among the earliest large corpora of religious writing, were inscribed in royal tombs to ensure the pharaoh's successful journey to the afterlife. These texts illustrate how writing extended religious practice beyond oral tradition, standardising beliefs and rituals across generations. In this way, writing contributed to cultural continuity, a hallmark of enduring civilisations.

Writing in Early China

In China, the earliest widely accepted evidence for writing comes from the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE), particularly in the form of oracle bone inscriptions. These inscriptions were carved onto turtle plastrons and ox scapulae and were used in divination rituals conducted by the royal court. Like Egyptian writing, early Chinese writing emerged within an elite context and served both practical and ideological purposes.

Oracle bone inscriptions record questions posed to ancestors and deities, often concerning warfare, agriculture, weather, and royal affairs. The very act of recording these divinations reflects an advanced level of bureaucratic organisation and a belief in the authority of written records. Writing in Shang China thus reinforced the political and religious authority of the king, who functioned as an intermediary between the human and ancestral realms.

Beyond divination, writing in early China also had administrative functions. Bronze inscriptions from the later Shang and Zhou periods document land grants, military achievements, and ritual obligations. These records suggest an increasingly complex system of governance and social hierarchy, consistent with Childe's model of civilisation. As in Egypt, literacy was restricted to a small elite, further embedding writing within structures of power.

One notable feature of Chinese writing is its remarkable continuity. The logographic nature of the script allowed it to evolve while remaining recognisably connected to its earliest forms. This continuity contributed to long-term cultural cohesion across different dynasties and regions, strengthening the civilisational identity of China. Writing thus served not only immediate administrative needs but also the transmission of cultural values and historical memory.

Comparative Analysis: Egypt and China

A comparison of writing in Egypt and China reveals both similarities and differences that illuminate the nature of civilisation. In both societies, writing emerged in response to increasing social complexity and was closely associated with elite institutions. In neither case was writing initially used for everyday communication; instead, it served specialised functions related to administration, religion, and political authority.

Both civilisations restricted literacy to a trained scribal class, reinforcing social stratification. Scribes in Egypt and China occupied prestigious positions and underwent lengthy training, reflecting the value placed on written knowledge. Writing thus became a means by which elites maintained control over resources, ideology, and historical narratives.

At the same time, differences in form and usage highlight regional variation. Egyptian writing was highly visual and frequently monumental, integrated into architecture and art. Chinese writing, while also appearing on durable media such as bone and bronze, placed greater emphasis on divination and ancestral communication in its earliest stages. These differences suggest that while writing is a shared characteristic of civilisation, its specific functions are shaped by cultural and religious contexts.

A closer comparison of writing in ancient Egypt and early China reveals not only shared structural functions but also important differences in how writing was embedded within each civilisation's political ideology and worldview. In both cases, writing emerged in contexts of increasing social complexity and was closely tied to elite authority. However, the symbolic meanings attached to writing, as well as its relationship to power and cosmology, differed in ways that reflect broader civilisational patterns.

In Egypt, writing was deeply integrated into the concept of divine kingship. Hieroglyphs were not merely a neutral recording system but were themselves imbued with sacred power. The visual and pictorial nature of Egyptian writing meant that inscriptions were often monumental, public, and performative. Writing on temple walls, obelisks, and tombs projected royal authority into both the physical and spiritual landscape. The permanence of stone inscriptions reinforced the idea of an unchanging cosmic order (*maat*), with the pharaoh positioned as the guarantor of stability. In this sense, writing in Egypt functioned as a tool of ideological reinforcement, presenting civilisation as timeless and divinely ordained.

In contrast, early Chinese writing, particularly during the Shang dynasty, was more explicitly concerned with communication between the human and ancestral realms. Oracle bone inscriptions were not designed for public display but for ritual use within the royal court. This reflects a different ideological foundation: while Egyptian kingship emphasised divine embodiment, Shang kingship emphasised ancestral mediation. Writing in China therefore played a crucial role in legitimising political authority through successful divination and ancestral approval rather than through monumental display.

Despite these differences, both systems demonstrate Childe's argument that writing arises from administrative and ideological needs rather than purely cultural expression. In both Egypt and China, writing supported the management of agricultural surplus, whether through tax records in Egypt or through divinatory decisions about agriculture and warfare in China. This connection between writing and surplus production highlights its role in sustaining complex economies, a core feature of civilisation in Childe's model.

Evaluating Childe's Framework

Childe's inclusion of writing as a defining characteristic of civilisation is strongly supported by the evidence from Egypt and China. Writing clearly played a central role in enabling complex administration, reinforcing elite authority, and preserving cultural traditions. However, modern scholars caution against viewing writing as an absolute requirement for civilisation, noting that some complex societies relied heavily on oral systems.

Nevertheless, Childe's framework remains valuable as a comparative tool. By focusing on clusters of characteristics rather than rigid definitions, it allows for meaningful analysis across different regions. The examples of Egypt and China demonstrate how writing interacts with other features of civilisation, such as social stratification, surplus production, and ideological systems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, civilisation can be understood as a form of social organisation characterised by increasing complexity, institutionalisation, and cultural continuity. V. Gordon Childe's characteristics of complex societies provide a useful framework for identifying and comparing early civilisations without resorting to value-laden definitions. Among these characteristics, writing stands out as a particularly powerful indicator of civilisation due to its role in administration, ideology, and the preservation of knowledge.

The cases of ancient Egypt and early China illustrate how writing emerged in response to similar structural needs while taking culturally distinct forms. In both societies, writing reinforced elite power, facilitated governance, and contributed to long-term cultural stability. These examples confirm Childe's insight that civilisation is not defined by a single achievement but by the interconnection of multiple social developments. By examining writing within this broader context, we gain a deeper understanding of what makes a civilisation and why such societies have had a lasting impact on human history.