

Within his book *Understanding Early Civilisations*, Trigger examines the different characteristics of complex societies according to unilinear evolutionists in the nineteenth century and the more recent neoevolutionists who, he says, “believed that all societies at the same stage of development were very similar”¹ and explains that it doesn’t reflect what is known about early societies based on material culture, using the example of Egypt and Mesopotamia having developed writing long before cultures in Peru, but both showing very similar levels of social, economic, and political complexity. However, he also describes more complex listings of traits, such as Childe’s², for the differentiation of complex civilisation from more simple neolithic settlements as being an equally untenable method of judging the complexity of a society due to the vague nature of his definitions and the difficulties caused by disagreements over those definitions.

One trait that Childe claims to be a marker for a complex society distinct from neolithic villages is, for example, the presence of monumental art. While this criteria is matched by other civilisations, such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, etc., it does not reflect the archaeological evidence of, for example, the Vikings, who had no such art fixtures as seems to be implied by Childe. While the Vikings did have monumental cairns for burials of high-placed individuals³, they rarely had purely ornamental monuments or fixtures - the Picture Stones, mostly prevalent in Gotland, seeming to be one of the few exceptions. Even then, the Picture Stones were dated to the eighth and ninth centuries⁴ - very early in and in some cases predating the Viking Age. In this case, if Childe’s criteria refers to large ornamentation such as statues, the Vikings do not share this complexity with, say, Egypt, despite being an obviously highly complex society by any other measure.

However, due to the vagueness of Childe’s list, monumental art might refer to the practice of ornamentation in general, to which the Vikings do definitely comply; recovered artifacts, from cups and bowls to weaponry to ships, all show that the Vikings were especially fond of decoration despite having few purely ornamental pieces, having highly stylised art on functional objects of nearly every kind⁵.

Another criteria in contention between Childe’s traits for complex societies and their application on real cultures, rather than in the abstract, is his second one: “Craft workers, merchants, officials, and priests supported by the surpluses produced by farmers”¹. In particular, when this criteria is applied to the Vikings, the priests. Unlike Christianity, the Vikings’ polytheistic beliefs and religion was applied in daily life rather than being administered by a central authority, such as by priests, in specially constructed buildings⁶. While, especially during the pagan era, the vikings had a *goði* - a chieftain who carried the responsibility of holding sacrificial feasts⁷ - and who did remain prevalent in Icelandic settlements for quite a while, the term gradually came to be associated only with the powers and authority of a chieftain and lost any religious connotations. Instead, secular powers like kings and queens or chieftains later became associated with religion as religious leaders⁸, though not necessarily as a priest as they are commonly defined.

¹ Trigger (2003), P. 43

² The criteria listed in Trigger (2003), P.43

³ Helle (2003), P. 57

⁴ Helle (2003), P. 141

⁵ Helle (2003), P. 140

⁶ Helle (2003), P. 129

⁷ Pulsiano (1993), P. 230 - 231

⁸ Helle (2003), P. 129

As such, for much of the Viking Age the Vikings had no central religious authority as was common to other civilisations, such as the Greeks, and again by Childe's listed traits is not as complex a civilisation as another, despite the evidence to the contrary. If, however, Childe's inclusion of 'priest' is simply to refer to a cohesive unification of beliefs as a religion common across the civilisation in general, or as common religious practices overseen by individuals - such as the sacrifices farmers performed for, say the largely mysterious *d'Isir* gods⁹ - then the Vikings do fulfil that criteria. Again, the difficulties in using Childe's list to examine the complexity of a culture is made unnecessarily difficult by differentiations in definitions of those traits, the concepts of those traits, or where those criteria are applicable in any given culture.

While Childe's criteria for the identification of complex societies does have some practical use in certain instances, and does provide a base for the evaluation of those societies, it has many more issues in how it is defined; in some cases - such as the trait of the support of craft workers, officials, etc by surplus produce - due to being poorly defined, and in others - as is the case with monumental art - too vaguely defined to be of practical use, due to the difficulties those issues with definitions causes.

⁹ Helle (2003), P. 130

Bibliography

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- Knut Helle (2003), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume 1*, Cambridge University Press
- Pulsiano Phillip (1993), *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, Reprint, Routledge