

Consider how useful Childe's criteria for the emergence of towns and/or states are for interpreting the emergence of social complexity in the East Mediterranean in the Bronze Age. Answer with reference to a case study of your choice from the Aegean, or Near East/Cyprus, or Egypt.

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Within the East Mediterranean Bronze Age, there is clear evidence for the emergence of social complexity, and Gordan Childe's criteria is quite useful for interpreting such a concept¹. With keeping his framework in mind, a basis is formed in which can be used with what to look for when interpreting the emergence of state- and with the emergence of state comes the emergence of social complexity². Using his criteria specifically to interpret social complexity within the East Mediterranean during the Bronze Age however, does not always fit perfectly into the framework he created³. This can be seen when looking at the Old Kingdom burials at Saqqara- an area of Egypt which does not always align perfectly with the criteria Childe set out⁴.

Every society is complex, and as such, the East Mediterranean is no different⁵. Social complexity is just a way in which to examine society within a certain framework⁶. In the Eastern Mediterranean during the Bronze Age, social complexity derives from an economical perspective and as such, urbanisation and social hierarchy become important when analysing such a concept⁷. This is due to the fact that with the emergence of social hierarchy and urbanisation, often comes the increased presence of specialised jobs and trade, which then often leads to a more complex economy⁸. It therefore stands to reason that the criteria which Childe created to help interpret where a state or town is emerging would also help when identifying and interpreting social complexity within the East Mediterranean as an economic perspective often aligns with the framework he created.

Gordan Childe was a Marxist who attempted to understand and portray archaeological discoveries in a manner which made sense and was clear to interpret⁹. In the process of doing so, he created a criteria list containing ten separate elements to help determine whether a location or time held an emerging town or state¹⁰. Some of these criteria are easy to recognise, such as 'large settlements' or 'monumental public architecture', whilst others can be trickier to pin-point¹¹. Such an example would be 'exact and predictive sciences' as if no writing existed or survived, there would be little way of knowing if an understanding of science existed¹². Others of Childe's criteria include 'writing', 'long-distance trade' and 'sophisticated art styles'¹³. These conceptions of what qualified a state were formed from a basis of social science and Childe interpreted the data in a manner which exemplified these ideas¹⁴.

¹ Smith, 2009, p.10

² Leppard, 2019, p.283

³ MacSweeney, 2004, p.53

⁴ Rymer, 2019

⁵ Leppard, 2019, p.284

⁶ Leppard, 2019, p.284

⁷ Smith, 2009, p.4

⁸ Smith, 2009, p.4

⁹ Smith, 2009, p.3

¹⁰ Smith, 2009, p.10

¹¹ Childe, 1950, p.12

¹² Childe, 1950, p.14

¹³ Smith, 2009, p.10

¹⁴ Childe, 1950, p.3

The criteria were intended to be used to examine a wide range of places, though for now the focus now will be on Egypt¹⁵. More specifically, the Old Kingdom burials at Saqqara. This location and period of time was chosen due to the clear evidence of urbanisation and emergence of state¹⁶. This allows ease of comparison between the criteria and the state, which means that it will be clear to see where the criteria align and where it doesn't. Therefore, it will be used to see just how useful Childe's criteria is for an overarching interpretation of a certain location and where it signifies social complexity. The Old Kingdom burials at Saqqara are clear evidence of urbanisation within the Bronze Age East Mediterranean due to the nature of them being royal burial grounds¹⁷. The existence of a specific location to bury a ruling class demonstrates a thought-out design plan which accommodates the social hierarchy of the location¹⁸. It is clearly urbanised and controlled by a ruling class, which makes it an ideal candidate to examine just how far Childe's criteria is useful for interpreting social complexity.

Keeping the case study in mind, Childe's criteria can be useful to help examine social complexity within the Bronze Age East Mediterranean. For example, one of Childe's criteria was the existence of writing¹⁹. Writing in this instance is evidenced by the pyramid texts found within the tomb of Unas²⁰. He was the last Pharaoh of the fifth dynasty and his tomb was the first to be discovered containing such a style²¹. The texts are clear evidence of both education and political hierarchy due to Saqqara being used as a royal burial ground and also of an organised belief system with the road to the afterlife mapped out²². Childe's inclusion of writing within his framework is useful because writing tends to go hand in hand with emerging political structures and urbanisation- when considering the Bronze Age Mediterranean, this is especially true in regards to economic growth and account keeping²³. Due to the ties to the economy, and how social complexity is seen through an economic perspective within this period, in this regard Childe's criteria would help someone start to interpret whether social complexity was emerging. In this instance, the writing demonstrates a certain social hierarchy which is also evidence of social complexity due to the existing political structure indicative of an emerging state²⁴. However, it must also be kept in mind that this is not a defining quality of a state, as evidenced by the absence of writing in Inka states, meaning that writing does not always equate to social complexity which limits how far his criteria can be useful²⁵.

It is further useful when considering the fact that one of Childe's criteria were "truly monumental public buildings"²⁶. This is useful for interpreting social complexity because of the existence of such architecture, such as the pyramids of Saqqara, are clear examples of urbanisation²⁷. They demonstrate a social hierarchy which exemplifies both economic power and the existence of a ruling class due to their use as royal burial grounds- both factors of an emerging state²⁸. In particular, it helps identify social complexity because with the creation of the Djoser's Step Pyramid a

¹⁵ Childe, 1950, p.3

¹⁶ Rymer, 2019

¹⁷ Roth, 1988, p.202

¹⁸ Roth, 1988, p.202

¹⁹ Childe, 1950, p.14

²⁰ Allen, 2005, p.4

²¹ Allen, 2005, p.4

²² Roth, 1988, p.202

²³ Smith, 2009, p.13

²⁴ Odler and Dulíková, 2015, p.95

²⁵ Smith, 2009, p.13

²⁶ Childe, 1950, p.12

²⁷ Shaw, 2004, p.60

²⁸ Roth, 1988, p.202; Smith, 2009, p.13

development was being made which signifies the complex nature of the society in question²⁹. The creation of such a monumental piece of architecture is significant because the vast majority of ancient complex societies were responsible for such an act at least once³⁰. Furthermore, not only were there 'monumental structures' created, there is further evidence of social hierarchy with the existence of the Mastaba tombs³¹. These indicate the burial of someone who held a significant amount of power and were built in accordance to just how much power and resources that particular person held³². A ruling class is thereby demonstrated with these tombs and fall in line with Childe's criteria. This therefore indicates that his framework is useful for interpreting the emergence of social complexity within the East Mediterranean, as it once more shows that there are significant similarities between the factors of urbanisation and the emergence of social complexity.

Also, Childe's criteria is useful when interpreting social complexity because of the section in which he mentions commoners paying over surplus to a higher power and a hierarchical control over material³³. This is very indicative of social complexity because it represents a much more intricate economic system which is starting to be put in place. Such a system can be found within Egypt as during the Old Kingdom, most people worked in agriculture with stone or bone tools³⁴. Copper tools did exist, but were found in funerary contexts within tombs³⁵. This therefore implies that a higher class controlled who had access to copper, thereby signifying a more complex economic system which is indicative of social complexity and in line with Childe's criteria³⁶.

However, due to the criteria having an absolute nature, the list is not flexible enough to thoroughly encompass every society and the uniqueness of each one, or recognise that not all of the criteria were solely reserved for what is considered 'complex'. This is because the aforementioned 'monumental' structure criteria are not solely an indicator for social complexity as exemplified by Stonehenge which was not created by such a society- rather a Neolithic group³⁷. Therefore, the idea that Childe's criteria can be used as a 'checklist' for interpreting whether something is a complex society or not is something which is problematic, due to the fact that a list cannot encompass every society neatly. To follow it without question assumes social complexity can only be found within a state-like society which is an oversimplification as hunter-gatherer societies are complex in their own unique way³⁸. It then, therefore, is limited when translating Childe's framework into a guide and would as a result only be useful when aware of such a fact, and if done so can be very useful as a starting point for an interpretation of the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean. Human evolution is not something which can be put in a check list, and as a result, factors seen in emerging social complexity are not always visible in ones which are emerging states³⁹.

Furthermore, some of the elements themselves of the criteria don't allow for easy interpretation. For example, the idea of 'sophisticated art' is something which is vague due to the subject nature of art itself⁴⁰. This means that although in Saqqara art is clearly demonstrated to a high skill level and

²⁹ Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2020

³⁰ Smith, 2009, p.13

³¹ Snape, 2011, p. 56

³² Snape, 2011, p. 56

³³ Childe, 1950, p.12

³⁴ Odler and Dulíková, 2015, p.95

³⁵ Odler and Dulíková, 2015, p.95

³⁶ Smith, 2009, p.12

³⁷ Smith, 2009, p.13

³⁸ Leppard, 2019, p.284

³⁹ MacSweeney, 2004, p.53

⁴⁰ Childe, 1950, p.15

would likely fit Childe's idea of sophistication. An example which would be demonstrated to a high degree with the paintings found within the Tomb of Metjetji, with the art indicating clear intent, skill and purpose⁴¹. The art is also arguably no more sophisticated than cave paintings which undoubtedly were not originated from emerging states or towns due to the hunter/gather nature of that period of society⁴². This signifies that Childe's criteria have some flaws. Not all of them are always applicable, and they are certainly not all an indication of urbanisation and the economic complexity which derives from it. However, if someone was to interpret "sophisticated" in a manner in which clear professional skill is demonstrated within the art, the criteria become a lot more applicable when considering the extent to which a place shows social complexity. This is because art being made in a more professional manner indicate both specialised skills and an economic or propagandic gain which could have been made- both of which coincide with other Childe criteria and signify social complexity⁴³.

Another factor which limits how far Childe's criteria can be useful, is the fact that he states that "the elaboration of exact and predictive sciences" are an indicator of an emerging state⁴⁴. This is a limiting factor because the only sure way of knowing if an understanding of science existed would likely be in the written form. Childe specifically highlights "arithmetic, geometry and astronomy" as the indicators to look out for, and there is clear evidence that Egypt did have an understanding of both numerical and astronomical processes⁴⁵. This can be seen with both the agricultural calendars and the methods of measurement like the decimal system put in place⁴⁶. However, if the writing did not exist or survive detailing such an understanding, it would likely be assumed that an understanding did not exist and the likelihood of interpreting the social complexity correctly if reliant on this point is then hindered⁴⁷. Especially since scientific understanding existed prior to the emergence of states⁴⁸.

In conclusion, whilst Childe's criteria is useful for a basic understanding of social complexity within the Eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age, it will always be limited in how far it can be useful due to the nature of the elements and what they stand for. Thinking of Childe's criteria as absolute disallows a more thorough understanding of how society and the nature of social complexity operates⁴⁹. However, it is also true that although his framework is limited, his criteria is still useful to help know what to look for when interpreting a certain location. Overall, Childe's criteria holds up quite well and despite new understanding of the Bronze Age Mediterranean increasingly occurring, the basic framework he created remains a useful tool for identifying social complexity in a broad sense⁵⁰. Therefore, despite the limitations which will always be found within his system, his criteria have much more of a positive influence upon understanding and interpreting the East Mediterranean in the Bronze Age than it does a hindrance. It provides a useful starting point for a person to then, in more detail, fully interpret the location they are observing.

⁴¹ Bridgeman Images, nd.

⁴² Smith, 2009, p.14

⁴³ Smith, 2009, p.14

⁴⁴ Childe, 1950, p.14

⁴⁵ Childe, 1950, p.14

⁴⁶ Maisels, 1999, p.74

⁴⁷ Maisels, 1999, p.25

⁴⁸ Smith, 2009, p.13

⁴⁹ Smith, 2009, p.8

⁵⁰ Smith, 2009, p.8

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