

Childe's characteristics applied to ancient Egypt

Childe outlines ten characteristics that he claims can be used to identify early civilisation as separate from Neolithic villages¹. This essay will attempt to evaluate two of these characteristics and establish their relevance within ancient Egypt civilisation.

Childe's first characteristic is 'large urban centres'². There are two issues immediately identified with this characteristic: what is meant by 'large' and what is meant by 'urban centres'? For the first, it must be further asked if 'large' refers to the population size or how much land the 'urban centre' covers. There are no exact figures for population size in ancient Egypt, only estimates for regions and time periods³.

As well, 'urban centres' has a nebulous definition. Does it refer to only cities, or also towns and villages? There are many definitions and debates over the definition of each term⁴. As well the definitions for one civilisation should not be applied to another, for example applying the Mesopotamian definition of a city to Egyptian settlements led to the characterisation of Egypt as a civilisation without cities⁵.

It is likely that Egypt never had as intensely urbanised settlements as was common in city-states such as Mesopotamia⁶. Egypt was a territorial state that had settlements of varying sizes⁷. Teeter and Brewer attribute this structure, clearly seen in maps that show the dispersal of settlements along the Nile Valley⁸, to the lack of conflict over water, which was easily accessed, unlike in Mesopotamia⁹. There was no clear distinction between rural and urban settlements in ancient Egypt¹⁰ however some population centres, such as Memphis and Thebes, can be classified as cities due to their size and functional diversity¹¹.

Despite being what might be considered 'urban', these cities were small, for example the Old Kingdom capital, Memphis, covered only 30 kilometres from north to south¹². In comparison, modern Luxor covers approximately 417 kilometres squared¹³.

Childe's sixth characteristic is 'systems for recording information'¹⁴. This characteristic is problematic as it does not account for civilisations where information was passed on verbally, such as in stories or songs¹⁵, and it assumes that the information recorded can be deciphered by later civilisations. There are many examples contrary to this. Until the discovery of the Rosetta stone in 1799 and its

¹ Trigger 2003:43

² Trigger 2003:43

³ Manning 2013:67

⁴ Brewer and Teeter 2007:61

⁵ Brewer and Teeter 2007:60

⁶ Brewer and Teeter 2007:74

⁷ Brewer and Teeter 2007:75

⁸ Manning 2013:66-67

⁹ Brewer and Teeter 2007:74

¹⁰ Manning 2013:86

¹¹ Brewer and Teeter 2007:61

¹² Brewer and Teeter 2007:62

¹³ Wikipedia 2019

¹⁴ Trigger 2003:43

¹⁵ Brewer and Teeter 2007: 124

translation, Egyptian hieroglyphic script was a mystery, even as far back as Roman times when it fell out of use¹⁶.

There are several forms of written Egyptian, the earliest being hieroglyphs which evolved from pictograms¹⁷. The term 'hieroglyph' comes from the Greek words for 'sacred' and 'carvings'¹⁸. Their origin is obscured in myth, it supposedly having been the god Thoth who noticed speech could be conveyed through writing¹⁹. Formal hieroglyphs were primarily used in religious contexts²⁰, but drawing them was time-consuming, so hieratic script, used by priests, was an alternative used when writing in ink²¹. The demotic script, invented later in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, was used in private legal and contract matters²². Demotic was replaced by Coptic, the Egyptian language as written in the Greek alphabet, which has helped work out the vocalisation of earlier language²³.

While Egypt clearly has a 'system for recording information'²⁴, writing in ancient Egyptian culture was much more important on a religious level²⁵. Writing was able to transcend the boundaries between life and death and the name of a person was a representation of their eternal existence²⁶.

Overall, it can be argued that Egypt only partially meets the characteristics analysed in this essay. While Egypt had urban centres whether they were large can be debated. Also, the purpose of writing, while fitting the description of 'system for recording information'²⁷ had other, wider, more complex purposes that should not be dismissed. As such, I argue that Childe's characteristics should be used as helpful guidelines rather than strict rules of identification so the unique nuances of each civilisation should not be overlooked.

¹⁶ Brewer and Teeter 2007:128-129

¹⁷ Brewer and Teeter 2007:127

¹⁸ Brewer and Teeter 2007:133

¹⁹ Brewer and Teeter 2007:127

²⁰ Brewer and Teeter 2007:134

²¹ Brewer and Teeter 2007:133

²² Manning 2013:88

²³ Brewer and Teeter 2007:134

²⁴ Trigger 2003:43

²⁵ Brewer and Teeter 2007:139

²⁶ Brewer and Teeter 2007:139

²⁷ Trigger 2003:43

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