

Essay: Discuss, what makes a civilisation.

Use Childe's characteristics of complex societies (Trigger. Defining Early Civilisations, 43), discuss at least one of them by giving examples from BOTH Egypt and China.

→ 2000 words; (equivalent to 50% of overall module mark)

The idea of a complex civilisation or society's not one easily defined nor categorised, this is due to the inability of the wide range of societies found throughout history to fit into one specific rigid structure causing arising grey areas and it is clear that there is not just one straightforward answer to this, firstly the definition of civilisation is blurry, the Oxford dictionary defines it as "the stage of human social and cultural development and organization that is considered most advanced." but this definition lacks detail unable to elaborate on what counts and "most advanced". It is difficult to determine a cut-off point of what is a complex society and what remains as just a society.

However, although the category is highly debated it is often undisputed that both Ancient Egyptian and Ancient Chinese societies fit into this undefinable category and are a complex society. One of the ways they do this is by aligning to Gordon Childe's Characteristics of a complex society.

In 1950, Gordon Childe, who was Australian archaeologist who spent his career focus on European prehistory, decided to attempt to try and define a complex society within a research paper titled "The Urban revolution". Where he created 11 characteristics that these 'complex societies' show which helps to define them into this category.

It can also be seen that within Childe's characteristics they can seemingly lead into each other, creating a fuller picture when it comes to the complexities of these societies.

One of Childe's characteristics of a complex society was for the idea of specialised careers such as Craft workers, merchants and priests. [Childe, G] This is significant in defining a complex society as it shows that the society is able to support these sorts of work, therefore not every person is needed to work towards survival with jobs such as farming.

This reflects heavily on both ancient Egyptian and ancient Chinese's society and highlights them as complex societies.

Firstly, with the Craft works, appearance of specialised craft workers within a society shows that the society as a whole does not need to solely focus on survival allowing the population to build skills regarding craft workmanship.

This can be seen with ancient Egyptian society and although there are countless examples of craftwork one of the most notable examples is within the early craft work of

dyeing fabrics, seen as early as the predynastic era around 2500 BCE being seen in a “red-edged mat” [Vogler, H.] however alternative dye colours were found including a yellow derived from saffron used for mummy bindings, dyeing fabrics was an early form of craft working within ancient Egyptian society however it continued throughout the era, furthermore the acquisitions of these dyes suggests a possible of merchants existing and functioning within the society which is another aspect of this characterisation of a civilisation.

Furthermore, the extent of craft works in ancient Egypt can be seen within the archaeological findings, with the appearances of highly decorative items and jewellery, often involving Lapis, bleeding into the concepts of art, [Cifarelli, M.] often being a fine line between what is seen as a craft and what is art, which later leads into another one of Childe’s categories of producing monumental art.

Alternatively, this is also seen on ancient China with their craft worker such as working commonly with bronze to create craft works [Shih, H. (1972).] Similarly ancient Chinese society also produced complex jewellery, often out of gold, [Bunker, Emma C] but also using Jade such as the Chinese “Pig-Dragon Hair ornament” from around 3,500 BCE [British Museum] similar to ancient Egypt combining the worlds of craft work and artistry.

“The city was a community to which a craftsman could belong politically as well as economically.” [Childe, G] furthermore Childe mentions the importance of these craftworkers fitting into a said city or civilisation which can be seen in both ancient China and Egypt, but the prevalence of craft work found within the cities.

Craftworkers neatly lead into the ideas of merchants suggests that the society has begun to organise a complex economic system, possible with the introduction of a type of currency, although ancient Egyptian society did not function with a currency rather using bartering, [Serge Svizzero] unlike ancient China [Thierry, F.] who was minting coins from around the Qin Dynasty in 210 BCE. How a merchant can survive purely of trading goods suggests a desire for those goods within societies, furthermore this being to introduce the idea of a class system where furthermore suggesting ideas of the ruling class, this within itself if another one of Childe’s characterises a Ruling class [Childe, G]

Furthermore, merchants themselves can lead to trade outside of the society, such as within ancient Egypt with the trade of lapis [OHSHIRO, M.], and very blue stone used often in jewellery which is not found in the Nile Region and its acquisitions focused on gaining it from outside areas where it was traded which suggests international relations suggesting a more complex society.

Future the ability of merchants to introduce Lapis into ancient Egypt begins to place ideas such as luxury items into the society, giving items very high value and important

item, used in jewellery and sculptures, this itself further adds to the idea of class and a ruling class which occurred within ancient Egypt [Carlos, J.] which further aligns it with Childe's characteristics

Similarly Ancient Chinese society also had a ruling class, [Pendergrass, A.] both of which were exempt from manual labour further aligning them with Childe's characteristics.

Ancient China also engaged with international trading, one example of this is though the export of silk [Peters, M. A.] with the Silk road beginning in around 120 BCE in the Han dynasty, similarly to Egypt the merchants international trade suggests international relationships within the society suggesting a more complex civilisation, furthermore the importation of luxury goods into China was also common with these merchants, with the importing of Ivory, tortoiseshell and cotton, similarly to Ancient Egypt these items were used in creating jewellery.

Furthermore, the society can be seen as further complex with how these imported goods and craft work become intertwined with the world of art, adding to the idea of luxury items which can be sold at a higher price. This category linking into Childe's ideas of a society producing monumental art as an example of its complexity. The placement of art in complex society suggesting a desire and goal for something further than just practicality, suggesting a cultural expression and ideas, almost every culture across time have in some way created art, but a main difference is within the scale of this art, with smaller nomadic societies often having a focus on body art rather than creating structural art [Anthropology 4U]

Both ancient China and ancient Egypt produced art that could easily be considered "monumental" and within both societies this idea of large structural art is seen within the tombs and temple, with the art also holding a religious significance within the society. Often this funerary art can further depict wealth and status. Furthermore, monumental art can be seen within royal houses such as Western Zhou Dynasty palace foundations from 770 BCE in ancient China and further art being found within the archaeological remains around the buildings, [Hung W] often on pottery shards.

Uses of art in specific personal buildings such as royal houses further supports Childe's Ruling class category suggesting more power and influence given to them and further implicates a more complex societal structure.

Monumental art is also found frequently in ancient Egyptian tombs, temples and royal houses holding similarly religious significance, the earliest known example of a decorative tomb from ancient Egypt was Hierakonpolis tomb 100 dating to roughly 3500 BCE, where white, black and red paint was applied to the mudbrick walls. And this

idea of tomb art continued over the entirety of the era. Aligning Ancient Egypt with another one of Childe's categories.

The idea of this monumental art holding religious significance links back into Childe's ideas of a funerary culture and finally the idea of priests within society or an alternative religious role as a form of career, linking back to the ideas of merchants or craftworkers.

Furthermore, this leads into yet another one of Childe's characteristics that of "Social solidarity under pre-eminence of temples and funerary cults" suggesting idea of religious expression within society as a sign of its complexity which both ancient China and ancient Egypt express,

Priests in ancient Egypt originally had roles with medicine however in the later period were opted by the ruler due to their ability to contact the god furthermore they maintain important in the role of helping maintain the ruler's health, furthermore the importance of religious aspects in the funerary cults was prevalent with the society.

Ancient China more reflects idea of Shamanism or "wuism" as it was referred to in the era rather than priesthood [Enzeng, T.] although alternative religious roles were a function part of the ancient Chinese society further alleging it Childe's characteristics of a complex society.

Although there is no true one definition for a complex society, but Ancient China and ancient Egypt place as a complex society is less subjective, whether its due to both societies use of crafts works and how this can clearly show other factors of a complex society such as class, and economic systems. Both societies neatly fit into Gordon Childe's characteristics of a complex society though their uses of careers outside of farming with craftworkers, merchants and priests leading into monumental art and funerary cults. However, these categories do not stand on their own, each leading into one another further showing the complexities of the societies. Reflect the complexities of the ancient Chinese and ancient Egyptian societies.

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