

What makes a civilisation?

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Civilisation and its defining characteristics

Civilisation is a term often defined in many different ways by a variety of differing organisations or peoples. However, it can most simply be described as: "The stage of human social development and organisation which is most advanced" or similarly, "The process by which a society or place reaches an advanced stage of social development and organisation" both are definitions for civilisation under the Oxford Dictionary (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). Both alternative definitions crucially interpret and identify civilisation as being advanced in both social development and organisation, but how exactly can we pinpoint these changes that must occur to a society or a place to reach this ideal of civilisation? This is where Childe's characteristics of complex societies come into play to help understand how a society moves into being a true civilisation. These include but are not limited to: monumental art/architecture, dominant and permanent state organisation and large urban areas being created. Though Vere Gordon Childe in his 1950 work named *The Urban Revolution* which created the notion of a uniform set of characteristics for identifying civilizations is a most useful piece of work to do as said, it also has been criticised in the modern era for lacking in conceptualization. This is the criticism that Childe's work focuses on his 10 points of characterisation as describing a sort of transition rather than clearly defining the urbanisation that takes place in societies to make them identifiable as civilisations. It must also be taken into account that his idea of a universal revolution of sorts that must take place in order to form a civilization has been seen in a modern critical view as ignoring context-dependent adaptation within individual civilisations of people across history. This is important to outline before utilising some of his characteristics and applying them to the individual civilisations of Ancient Egypt and China to show how these characteristics can be seen in societies that have been viewed as being civilisations in the past to understand partially, what makes up a civilization.

The Development of Exact Practical and Predictive Sciences

Childe's characteristics of civilisation include the addition of societies developing the use of exact practical and predictive sciences. This can be seen in the development of astronomical observation techniques which are included in the better regulation of agricultural cycles; it is also seen in development within fields such as medicine or mathematics. To begin applying this characteristic of a civilisation to one in a historical context we must first look to Ancient Egypt. Ancient Egypt, despite relying on more mystical elements and ritual practices in some cases, developed a keen knowledge of the medicines and anatomy through their development as a civilisation. This can be seen in their collection of scriptures surrounding their knowledge of pharmacology such as in the case of the Ebers papyrus which lists a number of remedies they developed or saw as effective such as honey for infections and opium for pain. Although not medical practice now it must not be understated that the steps into developing a uniform pharmacology that the Ancient Egyptians undertook certainly makes them applicable to fitting into Childe's characteristic of a civilisation being able to develop exact practical science, which scriptures like the Eber Papyrus clearly prove have been undertaken by the Ancient Egyptians. However, if that was not enough evidence for the practical sciences element being developed in Ancient Egyptian civilisation then it can also be seen first in how the Egyptians pioneered an early form of indefinite counting/decimal system by using powers of ten. To add to this notion the Ancient Egyptians also developed a solar calendar for use in predicting the floods of the Nile, it was a 365 day calendar

separated into 12 months of 30 days with 5 extra days. This suggests an advanced understanding of practical/predictive science and the application of this knowledge in the calendar or early mathematics to their real life surroundings clearly fits into the notion Childe perpetuates with this characteristic being a marker for a civilisation. Especially when this knowledge is used to benefit more than just individual communities, like with the solar calendar creation, as the knowledge of how to predict floods in the Nile would have benefited more than just a singular community, it would have benefited multiple settlements along the Nile and is an indicator of civilisation additionally because they are thinking and applying the sciences that they develop on a large scale or to be used by more than just individuals. It suggests that socially these communities have developed enough to recognise multiple settlements and other communities under a uniform collective, into a civilisation.

Apart from Ancient Egypt, the idea of practical and predictive sciences being used as a characteristic of a civilisation can also be seen in Ancient China. In particular there are many similarities with Ancient Egypt as to how these practical sciences were used, in particular, the ancient Chinese made their own astronomical observations and created a lunisolar calendar as a result, which is a calendar that is created on lunar patterns like moon phases and the sun's movement across the sky in a year. Not only did they conclude that a year made up 365 days, they as a result upon making their calendar realised that 12 months, based on one full cycle of the moon's phases creating a month of around 29 and a half days, only made up 354 days, not in line with the 365 days that make up a year. The Chinese scholars then concluded that the cycles that ran the earth must overlap sometimes and once every 2 to 3 years they ended up coming up with an additional month to preserve the seasons they had outlined as a product of the calendar. These subsequent seasons allowed them to divide the year into 24 types of seasons to aid farmers on the exact precise time on when to harvest crops, when to plant crops and when to irrigate their fields. It is such a useful and precise calendar that it is still used today in some aspects within China for festivals and the like. Additionally, Ancient China created some of the world's most renowned and extensive medical scriptures, similar to the Egyptians who collected them in writings, the ancient Chinese collected them in books such as the Huangdi Neijing or the Shennong Bencaojing. The latter book lists a collection of medical herbs, plants and minerals, showing a similar stride in early pharmacology like Egypt undertook. Without doubt this shows that Ancient China had a clear grasp on and application for the practical and predictive sciences, aligning them with Childe's characteristic of development in this area of expertise among a collective people. They also share with Egypt a distinct need to develop things such as a calendar based on astronomical knowledge that clearly is made to be used by a collective rather than an individual group. Either way it clearly shows that within these two cultures thought of as civilisations, there is a common shared advancement in these early times. The advancements themselves though both predictive and practical sciences in nature are similar also, suggesting that perhaps civilisations prioritise developments in the same specific fields regardless of distance from each other, isolationist or not in philosophy. They both may prioritise developments in these fields as evidence of another one of Childe's markers for civilisation, expanding urban areas. Things such as a calendar, though they may differ in accuracy or uses, are the result of developments in the predictive sciences and are obviously for use for a larger growing population base that requires a network of farmers; farmers that need the aid of a calendar like the lunisolar one made by the Chinese or the one made by the Egyptians to predict floods and regulate their crops based on seasonal change to feed this growing urban population that would take place in a civilisation by

Childe's own characteristics. This alone possibly suggests an interconnectivity between Childe's characteristics, as one characteristic may show that another exists as a result of the presence of a singular characteristic that shows the makings of a civilisation.

Dominant and Permanent State Organisation

Within Vere Gordon Childe's Characteristics of a civilisation, another key marker to apply to both Ancient Egypt and China is the appointment of a Dominant and Permanent State organisation within a people. This also includes all of the framework that must be in place for this characteristic to truly be met by Childe's own definition of the Characteristic, this includes things such as the idea of residence over kinship being that things are based on residence and land rather than having ancestral ties to a position, it is fundamentally the position that regardless of their clan individuals can belong to a state because they reside within its borders. Applying this to Ancient Egypt and the idea of residence over kinship, it can actually be seen really clearly as within ancient Egypt there was the creation of administrative districts called Nomes. Nomes were districts, 42 in number across the Egyptian state, that were governed by individual Nomarchs. This gave the state and central government power to govern all of its land when the kingdom was in a unified state regardless of independent lineages across the Nile. However, even with upper and lower Egypt being separate kingdoms at times, the territories of Egypt were formed very early rather than being independent city states which in turn is a signifier of an advanced stage of society and thus a marker for civilisation as per Childe's own definitions. The Egyptian state was complex for its time and to achieve its dominance over the people that lived in the Egyptian borders, it rigorously utilised the strengths of its own class stratification via a hierarchy pyramid of sorts to keep its power and regulate others. A key part of the pyramid was the Egyptian scribes who would be used by the state to create tax censuses and led to an increasing development of bureaucracy in the middle kingdom periods from when the tax censuses evolved to the individual, an evolved method for the state to regulate its people and sustain their own power over the Egyptian state. Fundamentally, the ancient Egyptian state, to achieve its level of dominance and lasting power utilised many other markers of a civilisation, from the social hierarchy to taxation of surplus to the state.

On the other hand, In Ancient China the same idea of a permanent and dominant organisation of state can be found too. Notably seen with the emergence of the Qin Dynasty and the transition from feudalism to central administrative control through the creation of the 40-42 commanderies known as jun and smaller countries known as xian. This was a key change that establishes the idea of residential power based on land over hereditary succession to ancient China. Following that change during the times of Qin dynasty, a form of permanent territory rule was created to enforce this move away from feudalism. Crucially, the rule involved governors and magistrates of the land districts previously mentioned to be appointed by the emperor on pure merit and not of bloodline that would have occurred during the time of feudal lords. However, even despite being appointed magistrate or governor a person would never be more powerful than the state as the emperor could depose them from their position and move them around if they wanted or saw fit to. This ensured in the way the state was run that the power of the state would be permanent and safe from any single noble line's influence. This is clear evidence that ancient China utilised a similar form of state power and control to Egypt with the commanderies resembling Egypt's districts and the magistrates of China also resembling the nomarchs of Egypt. With or

without the comparison, ancient China is clearly applicable to the idea of a dominant and permanent state organisation as outlined in Childe's characteristics of a civilisation.

To conclude, what makes a civilisation?

Civilisation is identified by the stage of human social development and organisation that can be categorised as advanced. As shown by the use of Childe's characteristics, the key markers of a civilisation can be identified and used to compare civilisations to each other in the similar aspects that are shown between them and roughly establish a framework as to how they truly form into a civilisation using these characteristics. What is most interesting when looking at Childe's characteristics across two very different civilisations on the cover, Egypt and China in their ancient forms, is that they both not only show the same ability to align with his characteristics; it is the similarities in actual application of these key social developments and the similarities that rise from them that is very interesting. It not only makes Childe's characteristics appear as more reliable in application it also illuminates the varied factors of what makes a civilisation, which is from using his characteristics, can be determined to be a mixture of them. A civilisation is certainly a development on a society and can definitely be determined to be the making of key social developments occurring as small societies switch to unify and unite under a banner that aligns multiple tribes or communities together, in general, the bigger and more complex a society of people gets without fully crumbling under its own weight, the more civilised they become. Childe's characteristics determine the origins of this complexity as described and can be therefore taken to show what really makes up the fundamental structure of a civilisation. Irrespective of the lack of conceptualisation shown in his approach, Childe's ideas are a good foundation to understand the complex nature of what makes a civilisation.

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