

Jennifer C. Ross and Sharon R. Steadman, *Ancient Complex Societies*, New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. xi, 427. ISBN 9781315305639 (ebk)

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In Chapter 2, “Human Cultural Institutions: Critical Elements in Complex Society” (pp. 6 – 15) Ross and Steadman cover Human Cultural Institutions, and how these building blocks of society can form a fully developed, complex society. Ross and Steadman break these building blocks down into individual components, and clearly explain how each one can develop, and in particular, how each one relates to the other building blocks. This chapter takes into account the relationships between such foundations of civilisation, and how they combine, especially as a civilisation develops. This is aided by the provision of examples throughout of civilisations that exhibit elements of each block, and what this shows about such a culture. Furthermore, Ross and Steadman apply archaeological evidence from various societies to support their arguments for the impact of developing institutions.

The “Human Cultural Institutions” are broken down into four different elements; Kinship, Social Networks, and Social Differentiation, Religion and Ritual, Economic Organisation, and Political Organisation and Complexity. These elements are then broken down further, so as to demonstrate what societal building blocks make up each institution. As a result, this chapter becomes a clear and detailed introduction to human cultural institutions, and how they interact with one another, as well as explaining how they can be built on to develop from a simple civilisation, into a complex one.

I believe that this chapter sets out a very good groundwork for looking at the factors influencing a cultures development, and I also believe that the division of institutions are sensible. This is because the breakdown is clear, and where the particular element is broken down further, it is explained why this is. As a result, it is easy to make a list of factors that can have an impact on a society. In addition, I appreciate that Ross and Steadman have broken down the traditional Social, Economic and Political elements down further. By dividing Social elements into Kinship and Religion, they have made the important distinction between personal and cultural, as well as respecting that each aspect is influenced in separate ways by political and economic factors. Furthermore, despite the separation made between kinship and religion, Ross and Steadman still acknowledge the association between the two, and the ways in which aspects of each reflect the other.

This simple division of elements means that it is easy to apply Ross and Steadman’s theories of critical elements to any other societies. Throughout the development of Mesopotamian civilisation, it is simple to apply the elements of a complex society to developing civilisations, and use this to judge how complex this particular civilisation is, as well as using the same elements to suggest where it would be likely to develop further.

Kinships within society varies with complexity. In smaller, less complex Neolithic societies kinships holds more value, due to the limited size of the group. As the complexity of the society develops, the importance of kinship can decrease, or hold value in different ways. As Ross and Steadman demonstrate, other influences, such as religious or political, gain increasing importance. However, in certain circumstances kinship is still highly valued, shown in laws to protect inheritance, and clan structures¹. Religion and Ritual follow the development of the civilisation. Smaller societies, have simpler rituals, often seen in their burial rights. This can be seen in the majority of burials at

¹ Wenke and Olszewski, 2007, pp.354

Çatalhöyük, which are simple². It is far more likely to find variations in a complex society. Ross and Steadman show that due to the reflection of society by religion, a hierarchical society is likely to have a hierarchical pantheon. This can be seen in the reflection of Sumerian society by its Pantheon³. It also demonstrates how politics and kinship can relate to religion. Economic Organisation also varies with complexity. The simplest society has the simplest economy. In an early society the production of a food surplus will form the basis for a developing economy. In comparison, economics in a complex society are far more intricate. In Uruk, trade expansion and colonies worked together, resulting in a massive trade network, and the spread of Uruk culture across Mesopotamia⁴. Political Organisation and Complexity is implicitly tied to the complexity of a civilisation. A simple society, such as small Neolithic farming community, is very simple politically, with only a single level of organisation. In comparison, a highly complex society may have level of administration, with many different ranks. Uruk, and their classification of goods for trade is an example of political organisation⁵, as it requires an administration to define the grades of goods, and people who decide how to classify goods. This would produce levels of administration among only those connected to trade, and this would influence levels of government outside of trade.

² Wenke and Olszewski, 2007, pp.333

³ Wenke and Olszewski, 2007, pp.353

⁴ Ross and Steadman, 2017, pp.63

⁵ Wengrow, 2010, pp.85

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