

Defining Early Civilizations

Terms, Theories, and History

Approaches to Civilization

- As evolutionary stage
- As societies with cities
- As societies possessing part or all of a list of traits
- As a set of social relationships
- As an ecosystem

Cultural Evolutionary Theory

- “Savagery, barbarism, civilization” (Tylor, Morgan, and Spencer)
- Sociopolitical contexts: emerging European and American nationalism, class struggle
- Lingering effects: there is “only one way to think about this”

Urbanization and Cities

- Definitions by population
- Definitions by settlement hierarchy
- As a continuum of processes:
demographic,
technological, social,
ecological

Childe and Redman's Lists

- V. Gordon Childe's original list, as part of Urban Revolution model
- Redman's updated organization for the lists, to sort observable from inferred traits, was created in the 1960s, when the idea of 'multilineal' evolutionary trajectories had gained popularity

Primary vs. Secondary traits

- Presence of cities
- Full-time specialization of labor
- Concentration of surplus
- Class-structured society
- State-based organization
- Monumental public works
- Long-distance trade
- Standardized monumental artwork
- Formal systems of information recording and storage
- Formal systems of abstract knowledge

“Western Civilization”

What linkages, cultural, political, and ethnic, form the basis for the concept? (Or, good politics but bad anthropology)

- Romans invade northern Europe and Britain, bringing state-based societies to an area dominated by chiefdoms, ca. 100- 50 BC
- Rome falls to “the barbarians”, Roman empire moves to Constantinople, 331 AD
- Frankish chieftain Charlemagne crowned Holy Roman Emperor, 800 AD
- 1700s-1800s: European political and economic expansion sponsors archaeological research in Mediterranean, Middle East
- 1890s: First use of term “Western Civilization” in academic courses at US universities

Bruce Trigger's Definition: one example

“Anthropologists apply the term ‘early civilization’ to the earliest and simplest forms of societies in which the basic principle governing social relations was not kinship but a hierarchy of social divisions that cut horizontally across societies and were unequal in power, wealth, and social prestige. In these societies, a tiny ruling group that used coercive powers to augment its authority was sustained by agricultural surpluses and labour systematically appropriated from a much larger number of agricultural producers. Full-time specialists (artisans, bureaucrats, soldiers, retainers) also supported and served the ruling group and the government apparatus it controlled. Rulers cultivated a luxurious style of life that distinguished them from the ruled,” (*Understanding Early Civilizations*, pp. 44-45).

One way to re-theorize: Go with processual, (new-style) evolutionary or developmental models

- The development of civilizations around the world does exhibit patterning
- There does seem to be some kind of “progressive”, directional trend in the transition from non-state to state-based societies
- These trends can be compared to identify patterns
- Search for causal triggers, or multiple interacting factors, that explain evolutionary trends (and expect WAY more than ONE!)
- Biggest emphasis on relationship between states, pre-state antecedents, post-state collapse phases: a ‘gradualist’ approach
- Looking for themes, modes of comparison

Technological Emphases

- Eg., Childe's "urban rev.", Wittfogel's "hydraulic society", technology and trade, but also warfare as technology
- Tend to focus on enabling effects of tek: what tek makes possible
- Special focus on tech as solution to problems of civilizations
- Weakness: many of the technological innovations occur AFTER first phases of civilization development begun: not good for "sole cause", or "prime mover" models

Ecological Emphases

- Early approaches: environment as “problem” overcome by civilization (like with Wittfogel)
- More recently: ecology as system that responds (in feedback loops, for example) that can direct development of civilizations AFTER initial appearance
- Special emphasis on environmental consequences of civilization, and effect on long-term sustainability
- Radically changed by advent of new climatological, paleoenvironmental data, technologies

Social and Ideological Emphases

- Power: economic, social, and political: power negotiation, competition as critical dynamic in process of change within, between states
- Factionalism, competition, and ideology
(*Ideology: a set of beliefs, values, and institutions that explain, rationalize, and therefore reinforce the status quo)
- Individuals, Gender, Kinship and the State: extracting surplus from the kin group, and the transition to class-based societies
- Archaeological challenges: beliefs, ideologies, social units difficult (but NOT impossible) to dig up