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978-0-521-82245-9 - Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study

Bruce G. Trigger

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## Understanding Early Civilizations

This book offers the first detailed comparative study of the seven best-documented early civilizations: ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Shang China, the Aztecs and adjacent peoples in the Valley of Mexico, the Classic Maya, the Inka, and the Yoruba. Unlike previous studies, equal attention is paid to similarities and differences in their sociopolitical organization, economic systems, religion, and culture. Many of this study's findings are surprising and provocative. Agricultural systems, technologies, and economic behaviour turn out to have been far more diverse than was expected. Yet only two basic types of political organization are found – city-states and territorial states – and they influenced economic behaviour at least as much as did environmental differences. Underlying various religious beliefs was a single, distinctive pattern that is unique to early civilization and must have developed independently in different regions of the world. Many other shared religious beliefs appear to have been transformations of a shared heritage from earlier times. Esteemed lifestyles that differed idiosyncratically from one early civilization to another influenced human behaviour in ways that often persisted despite changing material and political circumstances. These findings and many others challenge not only current understandings of early civilizations but also the theoretical foundations of modern archaeology and anthropology. The key to understanding early civilizations lies not in their historical connections but in what they can tell us about similarities and differences in human behaviour.

Bruce G. Trigger was James McGill Professor in the Department of Anthropology at McGill University. He received his PhD from Yale University and has carried out archaeological research in Egypt and the Sudan. His interests included the comparative study of early civilizations, the history of archaeology, and archaeological and anthropological theory. He received various scholarly awards, including the prestigious Prix Léon-Gérin from the Quebec government, for his sustained contributions to the social sciences. He was an honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and an honorary member of the Prehistoric Society (U.K.). His numerous books include *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (1976), *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge 1989), *Early Civilizations: Ancient Egypt in Context* (1993), *Sociocultural Evolution* (1998), and *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, Volume 1* (Cambridge 1996), co-edited with Wilcomb E. Washburn.

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**BRUCE G. TRIGGER**

*McGill University*



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## Preface

In 1959, my final year as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, I produced a paper entitled 'A Definition of Urbanism' for a course in which Ronald Cohen, then a young assistant professor, sought to introduce his students to the most recent trends in ecological and neoevolutionary analysis. I compared the ecological, demographic, economic, social, political, and cultural characteristics of five urban centres: Tenochtitlan, Akhetaton, Rome, and an ancient Mesopotamian and a medieval Western European city. I concluded that the eclectic range of features exhibited by these urban centres did not support Gideon Sjoberg's (1955, 1960) general construct of the 'preindustrial city' and that the early development of cities must have been multilineal rather than unilinear. My recent rediscovery of this early work in a dusty filing cabinet reminded me of how long I have been interested in comparative studies of early civilizations.

In the autumn of 1959, as a graduate student at Yale University, I had the opportunity to study the theory and methods of cross-cultural comparison under the expert guidance of George Peter Murdock and Clellan Ford. In 1963–64, I learned still more about this subject from Raoul Naroll, a senior colleague at Northwestern University. To these anthropologists, none still living, the present work owes a great debt.

After that time, my interest in comparative studies was in abeyance while I worked on settlement archaeology, historical archaeology, and the history of archaeology. Since 1970, however, I have taught approximately every second year a course at McGill University entitled 'The Social Institutions of Early Civilizations' and more recently 'Comparative Studies of Early Civilizations'. This course encouraged my interest in how early civilizations functioned and resulted in the publication of a few papers based on the comparative study of such societies (Trigger 1972, 1976b, 1979, 1985a, 1985b, 1990a, 1990b).

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When I finished writing *A History of Archaeological Thought* (1989), I began to search for a way to evaluate the rival claims of cultural ecologists, who viewed societies as shaped by adaptive factors, and postmodernist cultural relativists, who regarded all human behaviour as culturally determined. It seemed to me that research was being guided to an unhealthy extent by theoretical dogmatism. I sought therefore to determine empirically what aspects of human behaviour and beliefs were shaped by factors that were common to all human beings and what aspects were shaped by idiosyncratic features of cultural systems by examining seven early civilizations distributed around the world, all but two of which had displayed predominantly independent trajectories of development. In this way, I hoped to provide an ontological basis for a more informed understanding of human behaviour. The results of my research are presented in this book.

The cross-cultural comparison of decontextualized traits concerning large numbers of societies around the world is, as Murdock often pointed out to his students, merely a quick way to discover robust patterning in sociocultural behaviour that requires closer study. When dealing with a small sample such as is available for early civilizations, data must be considered within a more contextualized framework if researchers are to understand their significance. The need to present data in their functional context (a kind of comparative equivalent of 'thick description') explains the great length of this book. As a result, it has also become a summary of my understanding of what is currently known about the seven best-documented early civilizations. It therefore fulfils my earlier promise to publish a synoptic description of these civilizations as well as a detailed analysis of how and why they resembled and differed from each other (1993: viii).

Since 1989, I have spent most of my otherwise unallocated time working on this book. I began writing it in November 1997, and the final draft was completed in June 2001. The most recent references are to works published early that year. The structure of the book was greatly influenced by various summaries of my research that I was invited to present when this research was still in its early stages. The first of these presentations was in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Bergen, Norway, when I was visiting that university as a guest of the Centre for the Study of the Sciences and the Humanities in February 1991. A second lecture, 'Constraint and Freedom in the Shaping of Early Civilizations', was delivered a year later to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto during a visit sponsored by the Snider Lectureship Fund. The following December, similar talks were presented at University College London, at Cambridge University, and as a Munro lecture at the University of Edinburgh. The stimulating discussions

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that followed each of these presentations greatly assisted my work. Of still greater value for guiding my research were four lectures that I gave on ancient Egypt as an early civilization while I was visiting the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology at the American University in Cairo. A year later these lectures were published as *Early Civilizations: Ancient Egypt in Context* (1993). The reactions to that volume were of great help to my later work.

Much of Chapter 2 is based on an unpublished lecture entitled 'Cross-Cultural Comparison and Postmodernism' that I gave at the University of Bradford while I was a guest speaker at the Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference held there in December 1994. The comparative discussion of writing systems in Chapter 25 is largely based on a more comprehensive study of the development of writing systems published in the *Norwegian Archaeological Review* (1998b).

Among colleagues and graduate students who have augmented or altered my perception of early civilizations in crucial ways or drawn my attention to vital literature I especially wish to thank John Baines, Mario Bunge, Stephen Chrisomalis, Jeremy Cunningham, Csilla Dallos, Bernardo Dubrovsky, Harvey Feit, Katja Goebis, Hilary Gopnik, Peter Gose, John Hall, Alice B. Kehoe, Andrea McDowell, Joyce Marcus, Lynn Meskell, Steven Mithen, Laura Nader, Joan Oates, Thomas C. Patterson, Anne Pyburn, Jérôme Rousseau, Philip Salzman, Frank Smith, Michael E. Smith, W. J. Stemp, Elisabeth Stone, Darko Suvin, Alexander von Gernet, Barbara Welch, Robin Yates, and Norman Yoffee. I also thank the many undergraduates who have taken my early-civilizations course over the years for the contributions that their discussions, questions, and essays have made to my understanding of these societies. The students of the classes of 1999 and 2001, which were taught while I was writing this book, were especially helpful. I have almost certainly inadvertently failed to acknowledge others who substantially assisted me over the past twelve years. To them I apologize.

Throughout the book I have referred to early civilizations in the past tense. This includes the Yoruba, despite the many continuities in their civilization through the colonial era to the present. I also have sought as far as possible to free descriptions of early civilizations from the use of terms, such as *demesne*, *feudal*, *peasant*, *prebend*, and *oikos*, that relate primarily to medieval European or Classical Greek and Roman civilizations. The resulting circumlocutions may seem strange at first, but I believe that this procedure helps to reduce bias in the understanding of early civilizations.

The only language of an early civilization that I have studied is Egyptian. Standardizing the spellings of words in the various other languages spoken

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in the early civilizations has proved vexatious, since each language has been transliterated in different ways into the Roman alphabet. While trying, whenever possible, to follow current conventions, I was forced to accept as given the spellings of some words that occur only in single secondary sources. I have presented ancient Egyptian words without suppositious vowels and generally have preferred transliterations that use as few diacritics as possible.

While I have read much of the primary documentation that is available in English by authors such as Sahagún (1950–82) on the Valley of Mexico, Cobo (1979, 1990) on the Inka, and Samuel Johnson (1921) on the Yoruba, I have more often cited secondary sources on the ancient civilizations on the grounds that their authors' evaluations of the primary documentation are more informed than my own. My referencing of factual material aims mainly to identify variant or contested interpretations of data, guide interested readers to further sources of information, and provide an idea of the interpretive literature on which my descriptions of early civilizations are based. I have listed at the end of the book only those works that have actually been cited.

I cannot claim to possess the expert knowledge about each early civilization that specialists on those civilizations do and am sure that such readers will find factual errors and egregious deficiencies in my understanding of particular early civilizations. Yet attempts to create multiauthored studies of early civilizations have their own pitfalls. I hope that a single interpretive viewpoint more than compensates for my heavy reliance on secondary sources.

My research for this book was greatly assisted by the award of two successive Killam Fellowships administered by the Canada Council. These relieved me of most teaching and all administrative duties at McGill University during calendar years 1990 and 1991. During calendar years 1992 and 1997 I benefited from McGill University's enlightened policy of sabbatical leave. Without such generous support it would have taken much longer to complete this book.

The final editing of the manuscript and seeing it through press have been substantially assisted by the annual stipend attached to the James McGill Professorship that I received in January 2001. I thank Zarin Machanda for her word processing of the manuscript that was submitted to the Press, Barbara Metzger for her expert copyediting, which produced a more readable book, and Kittisac Chanthaboune for preparing the illustrations. I also thank Jessica Kuper for her most helpful editorial advice, Frank Smith, Camilla T. Knapp, and Catherine Felgar for seeing the work through press, Barbara Chin for securing permissions, Robert Swanson for preparing the index, and Elizabeth Lewis for her important contributions to correcting proofs.

Readers who are interested in theoretical discussions and conclusions rather than the evidence on which they are based can read Chapters 1 to 4, the

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summaries and analysis of my findings in Chapters 13, 18, and 27, and the concluding discussion in Chapters 28 and 29. It is, however, impossible to evaluate the discussion independently of the evidence.

This book is lovingly dedicated to my wife, Barbara Welch. Her enthusiastic encouragement and critical input into its creation have vastly exceeded the call of duty. The two of us share, along with much else, a predilection for comparative studies, which in her case is directed towards Caribbean islands and banana production.

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