

Published in Lambda Alpha Journal of Man, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 25-30 (1969). Currently it is generally accepted that "civilization" can be determined indirectly from interpretation of archaeological evidence. I still think there is merit for a material culture definition.

CIVILIZATION VS. URBANISM

By B. K. Swartz, Jr. from [selected writings](#)

Curiously enough orthodox definitions of the time-honored term civilization are inadequate when carefully scrutinized. This article¹ reexamines the civilization question from a culture history, qualitative viewpoint. The current fad is an empirical quantitative approach couched in the idea of urbanism (Adams 1966). This outlook is valid, but as an historically oriented anthropological archaeologist, I find the concept of civilization as used in the humanities appealing.

Civilization was used early in anthropology by Lubbock (1870) as a synonym for culture. This meaning was maintained by American Historical anthropologists until recent times. However, Morgan, a contemporary of Lubbock, proposed an alternative meaning, related to evolutionary anthropological thinking. He considered civilization as a stage of cultural development. His criteria for civilization were (1), use of the phonetic alphabet (hieroglyphic writing on stone being admitted as an equivalent); and (2), the production of literary records (1877:11-2). Morgan's thinking was based on the use of various cognates of the word civilization by scholars since classical antiquity to refer to peoples with learning, implying writing. Of course the authors always assumed that their own society was civilized, in contrast to the unlearned out-group barbarians.

Despite the strong reaction to evolutionary thinking in anthropology early in this century, Childe refined Morgan's concept still further, and lists the following criteria for civilization: (1), extensive and densely populated cities; (2), full-time specialist craftsmen, transport workers, merchants, officials, and priests; (3), taxation; (4), truly monumental public buildings; (5) a ruling class; (6), systems of recording and exact, but practically useful, sciences; (7), writing and scripts; (8), naturalistic art expression in conceptualized and sophisticated styles (with regional variation in expression); (9), regular foreign trade; and (10), state organization based on residence. Despite the numerous criteria, basically Childe relates civilization to his Urban Revolution (1950). To him the key is cities, brought about by rapid population increase. Willey expands Childe's fourth and eighth criteria, and views civilization as a "great" art style. His criteria are (1), "excellence" in the "great" arts; (2), "climax" of religious architecture; and (3), a general "florescence" in material culture (Willey and Phillips 1958:132-3).

Present thinking on the problem is an extension of Childe's ideas with urbanism, rather than civilization, being the term used. There is danger in this confusion, i.e., civilization equals urbanism, and it is insisted that the value of the concept as originally proposed by Morgan is valid, but must be redefined. Willey's approach to the idea of civilization can be best documented from evidence achieved by archaeological observation and excavation. What must be done is to define Willey's criteria more objectively.

Despite Childe and much current thinking, many developments which are generally considered civilization are without cities in the conventional meaning of the term. By cities, large metropolitan centers with resident population are being referred to. Examples of non-city civilizations are pre-Theban Egypt and pre-Post-Classic New World centers. Here activities appear to be focused around ceremonial centers with variable visiting population patterns. It is interesting to speculate that non-city civilizations are theocratically controlled, while city civilizations have stronger secular authority. However, secularism appears late in these developments and may not be related to civilization origins. In contrast to non-city civilizations, in West Africa there are cities, but no civilization in the orthodox meaning of the term. Here the "cities" are expansive, over-grown, settled villages. No qualitative transformation has taken place. Also, cities as large trading centers, e.g., Mecca, may develop without accompanying political states. [More recent research, especially of diverse settlement patterns in pre-Post-Classic Mesoamerica, makes these observations more questionable for the New World - BKS, 1998.]

The argument for writing as an index for civilization, first proposed by Morgan, is even more tenuous. At time of European contact the Inca were not literate and the Aztecs had only the rudiments of writing. There is no evidence of writing systems in the Andean area at any time in the past, although there may have been attempts in Moche² times (Larco Hoyle 1942-3). It appears that the development of a true writing system, i.e., a system that transcribes a linguistic structure that can be read, is unique to what is conventionally called civilization. Writing systems that have been developed may then spread to non-civilized areas, often by stimulus diffusion.

Though civilization need not produce cities nor writing, certain universals of civilization are identifiable. Plant cultivation appears to be required; the stock-breeding of pastoralists appears insufficient and necessitates nomadism. The most that food collectors have been able to do is settled village living, e.g., the Northwest Coast Indians. Collecting is used here as the intensive exploitation of a particular natural food resource, so that a surplus of this resource is established (Braidwood and Reed 1957). A near universal of civilization is metallurgy. The only absence among conventionally regarded civilizations is in pre-Post-Classic Mesoamerica. The development of lapidary skill in this center may be a reaction to this lack. The functional significance of metal, however, is not for utilitarian use, but is a reflection of class structure as luxury items. Of course metallurgy is widespread in non-civilized areas, often for more utilitarian uses. The discovery of iron in the Old World is later in time. Its uses were utilitarian, primarily military, and was important in the later spread of civilization.

Neither universals nor unique features are satisfactory for the definition of civilization. For the concept to be useful to archaeologists a key must be found that one, occurs in societies that are generally regarded to be civilized; two, never occurs in non-civilized societies; and three, must leave evidence that can be detected from the physical setting by field observation and excavation. Monumental non-ceremonial construction appears to be a distinctive feature of civilization. Monumental works range from utilitarian to "non-utilitarian" or ceremonial in basic function. Those tending toward the former appear to have three types of use: (1) repositories for records and as residences of functionaries (buildings, palaces, etc.); (2) aids for movement of

merchandise, produce, water, and people (aqueducts, paved roads, bridges, etc., and the extensive development of canals and terraces); and (3), protection (walls, watch-towers, forts, etc.). Of course the occurrence of non-monumental structures of these types can occur in non-civilizations, e.g., palisades for walls or paths for roads. It is interesting to note that paved roads appear to be of greater importance in the New World non-river valley civilizations. Ceremonial "architectural" construction may be restricted to conventionally regarded civilized societies (temples, tombs, pyramids, etc.), but ceremonial structures such as European megaliths and Easter Island stone sculpture do appear in non-civilizations.

It is difficult to explain the functional correlation of what I am arbitrarily defining as monumental architecture, in contrast to monumental non-architecture, and civilization. There may be a connection here with the presence of a privileged ruling class and architecture. A reasonable explanation for the correlation of monumental public construction and civilization can be posited. The key is that civilization is inextricably bound to exploitation. With intensive food collection and cultivation a food surplus is established, allowing for a sudden increase in population density of an area--Childe's Neolithic Revolution (1925). With population increase an extensive available potential manpower source is created. Some way must be devised to control and coerce this energy. This is done by an established elite who keeps records. Such records need not be written, but be merely systems of notation and computation. By keeping track of people they can be controlled if kept occupied. This is accomplished by labor, the large-scale construction of massive public works. It has been suggested that control of water was the way the elite established themselves in Mesopotamia--Wittfogel's Hydraulic Society (1956). Other mechanisms might be economic control of food or theocratic control by prediction of natural phenomena. Once the elite is established they can initiate tribute and tax collection, exchange and trade, and military logistics by manipulating people by records. Political authority is now in effect and civilization has bloomed. Three ingredients are necessary: one, a surplus (of food); two, an elite (social classes); and three, records (of notation and computation).

The mechanism for producing civilization, however, need not maintain it. Civilization, as here defined by the presence of monumental public structures, can survive on a small unit socio-political base, such as the feudal system of medieval Europe. Also, all three factors listed above, i.e., surplus, elite, and records, need not inevitably and immediately produce civilization. Examples of this are the Natchez and Kwakiutl. The latter were probably handicapped in that they established their surplus by intensive collection of salmon, rather than by cultivation. The former received civilization from a hearth area, and had not yet fully established it in their marginal setting. It does appear, though, that monumental non-ceremonial construction is a good indicator of what is conventionally regarded as civilization in anthropological parlance.

Civilization, as defined above, apparently developed independently only twice, once in the Old World and once in the New World. The Old World hearth began at the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys of Mesopotamia, about 3500 B.C. Developments in Egypt soon followed, and somewhat later in the Indus Valley of Pakistan. At still a later time there are the Shang developments along the Hwang Ho River in northern China, which may have been essentially independent. Here there is evidence, however, of influence from the western centers of civilization.

The New World hearth developed in Nuclear America upon a pan-Formative base--Spinden's Archaic Hypothesis (1917), about 1200 B.C., the earliest Mesoamerican expression being La Venta³ and the earliest Andean expression being Chavín. [This date is now known to be too late. Monumental temples and intensive maize farming are present by 4000 B.C. at Valdivia, Ecuador, presaging earlier development of New World civilization. - BKS, 1998.]

To conclude, the terms civilization and urbanism are not synonymous. Urbanism, in the sense of city living and writing systems, is not required for the appearance of civilization. Civilization is based on political coercion of mass labor. The evidence presented for this is recording systems and monumental non-ceremonial construction, the latter being archaeologically discoverable.

NOTES

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² Moche is used, rather than Mochica, to avoid the implications of using a contemporary language unit as an archaeological term.

³ La Venta is used, rather than Olmec, to avoid the implications of using a contemporary language unit as an archaeological term. [It is clear since this was written that Olmec has become more firmly embedded in the literature and now cannot be denied.]

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