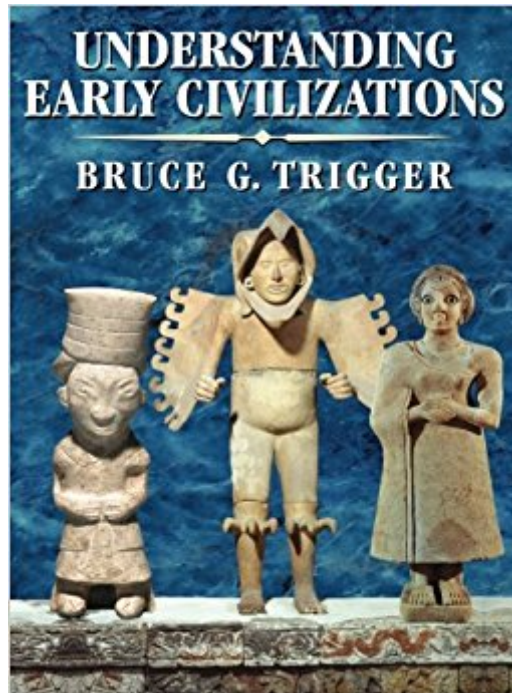




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Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study



Synopsis

Arising independently in various parts of the world, early civilizations-the first class-based societies in human history-are of importance to social scientists interested in the development of complexity, while their cultural productions fascinate both humanists and the general public. This book offers the first detailed comparative study of the seven most fully documented early civilizations: ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Shang China, the Aztecs and their neighbors, the Classic Maya, the Inca, and the Yoruba. Unlike previous studies, equal attention is paid to similarities and differences in their sociopolitical organization, their economic systems, and their religious beliefs, knowledge, art, and values. Many of this study's findings are surprising and provocative. They challenge not only current understandings of early civilizations but also the theoretical foundations of modern archaeology and anthropology. Rival cultural and ecological approaches are demonstrated to be complimentary to one another, while a comprehensive understanding of human behavior is shown to require that more attention be paid to psychology and the neurosciences. Bruce G. Trigger is 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 current interests include the comparative study of early civilizations, the history of archaeology, and archaeological and anthropological theory. He has received various scholarly awards, including the Prix Leon-Gerin from the Quebec government, for his sustained contributions to the social sciences. He is an honorary fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and an honorary member of the Prehistoric Society (U.K.). His numerous books include *Sociological Evolution* (Blackwell, 1998), *Early Civilizations: Ancient Egypt in Context* (Amer. Univ in Cairo, 1993), A

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"This is a major work of anthropological archaeology. Its comprehensiveness of theme, readiness to pursue profound if difficult and sometimes not readily answerable questions, and impressive control of a wide range of sources, reflect distinguished thought and dedicated effort. It stands out among comparative approaches to early human societies for its breadth and systematicity...This is as good a place as there is for the next generation of scholars to obtain a solid introduction to the intellectual substance of a field of great breadth and promise. The book should act as a powerful stimulant to the revitalization of comparative studies." Robert McC. Adams, University of California at San Diego, *The International History Review*"Its comprehensiveness of theme, readiness to pursue profound if difficult and sometimes not readily answerable questions, and impressive control of a wide range of sources, reflect distinguished thought and dedicated effort. ...a major achievement." *The International History Review*"Understanding Early Civilizations is the capstone of Trigger's remarkable archaeological career. No archaeologist is better qualified to undertake the challenging task of comparing seven ancient civilizations in such exhaustive detail. He has succeeded brilliantly. Trigger's effortless command of the literature and dispassionate approach to the complex theoretical issues ensure that Understanding Early Civilizations will become a classic. This is, quite simply, a definitive work." Brian Fagan, University of California, Santa Barbara"Long acknowledged as the premier historian of the discipline of archaeology in the Anglophone world, Bruce Trigger now must be recognized as its most knowledgeable authority of early civilizations. Understanding Early Civilizations presents a highly specific and richly detailed comparative analysis of seven 'early civilizations' or early class-stratified states that are viewed as essentially independent examples of the development of complex society. His study is written in the grand evolutionist tradition that emphasizes similarities in the social, economic, and cultural structures of these early civilizations despite their idiosyncratic or specific manifestations. Trigger's study is monumental and magisterial. It is a work to treasure and digest for years to come." Philip L. Kohl, Wellesley College

Arising independently in various parts of the world, early civilizations the first class-based societies in human history are of importance to social scientists interested in the development of complexity. This book offers the first detailed comparative study of the seven most fully documented early civilizations: ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Shang China, the Aztecs and their neighbors, the Classic Maya, the Inka, and the Yoruba. Unlike previous studies, equal attention is paid to

similarities and differences in their sociopolitical organization, their economic systems, and their religious beliefs, knowledge, art, and values.

Easy reading if the subject interests you. I know of no better source on this topic. Many books on early civilization focus on Mesopotamia and Egypt. This book pays plenty of attention to early civilizations in the Americas and Sub-Saharan Africa.

A highly academic read. The author isn't one to make a treatise easy going, but the ideas expressed and the information communicated is well worth the effort for those wishing to understand early cultures and ultimate issues arising from our studies of early civilizations. The book reviews seven civilizations in what I will term a Neolithic-early bronze age setting. Egypt and Mesopotamia will be familiar ground for most readers, as will the Classic Mayans and Inka (Inca); however, the African area of the Yoruba and the Shang civilization of China may not be so well known. In reviewing these cultures Mr. Trigger is answering this question: "...given the biological similarities and the cultural diversity of human beings, how much the same or how differently are they likely to behave under analogous circumstances?" The entire book is an exercise in answering this inquiry. The best part of the book may be the Introduction where the author discusses rationalism and relativism at length. He also includes romanticism and a few words on the Marxist impact before going into the confrontation between these ideologies. The author shows how being in one camp or the other has unduly influenced the outcome of various famous historical studies. He wishes to avoid these pitfalls in his review and he at least recognizes his problems. In my opinion he has avoided the worst of the intellectual traps through consistent application of his rigorous methods and therefore has produced an excellent study of these seven cultures. This book isn't one that describes how one kingdom followed another or inherited a set of traditions, rather it steps across the boundaries of time and space to look at how these various peoples acted like one another - or not - and what we might collectively discern from these actions. Are we alike because of the hard wiring in our brains? Are we different because of the environmental conditions we live under? How much are we alike or different in the fundamentals? What evidence do we really possess to show that we are alike or unlike? Lots of ideas about civilization and human living arrangements are approached and thoroughly examined. Whether the answers are satisfactory will be up to the reader, but, no matter what one's opinion might be about the ultimate questions, the reader will have been exposed to a wonderful set of thoughts and facts for consideration.

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Edition.

History can be written in many different ways. Many books on ancient history put an excessive focus on political events, with endless sequences of "Prince A inherited the kingship from his father B, but was soon assassinated by usurper C". Other books focus on very narrow topics without general interest. You will not understand much of ancient societies by collecting bare facts from books like that. Bruce Trigger's book is the antithesis of narrowly focused history. It's a superb comparison of seven early civilizations on many different levels (as you can see from the table of contents). The primary historical sources from these civilizations are not directly comparable, but Trigger's critical analysis of secondary literature is to my knowledge the most complete comparative synthesis ever written on this topic. Needless to say, nobody can be an expert on seven different civilizations. But on the other hand the benefit of having just one author is that the analysis remains consistent across civilizations, which is a prerequisite for meaningful comparisons. As a result, this book is much more informative than multi-author collections where each author has chosen his own approach to his "own" civilization. But I think the biggest positive in this book is that Trigger is well acquainted with modern anthropological thought. Especially in the introduction and the concluding chapters, the combination of comparative history and cultural anthropology produces a wealth of insights. It is particularly interesting to learn how a small elite exercised extensive control over the common people in all of these early civilizations, and how this relationship formed the basic structure of society. The one problem I encountered when reading this book was that seven civilizations is a large number. When you compare this many units to each other, the comparison inevitably takes the form of a list (listing the characteristics of civ1, then civ2, civ3 and so on). There's nothing wrong with that, but reading information in list form can be a bit tedious and requires a lot of concentration. I recommend this book to people who have a serious interest in ancient history and are determined to learn as much as possible on this subject. The title of this book is highly appropriate. After reading this book you will definitely be on your way toward understanding early civilizations.

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