

FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Selected Writings of V. Gordon Childe



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Introduction:

V. Gordon Childe and the Foundations of Social Archaeology

CHARLES E. ORSER JR. AND THOMAS C. PATTERSON



VERE GORDON CHILDE (1892–1957) WAS ONE of the most eminent archaeologists in the twentieth century. Many believe that prehistoric archaeology "is still a dialogue with the ghost of Childe" (Sherratt 1989:185), even though he died before archaeology was transformed into today's diverse discipline. Archaeologists who survey the discipline's theoretical history are inexorably drawn to evaluate Childe's influence. He was a prolific writer, a well-traveled scholar-activist, and a thoughtful and insightful student of the philosophy of history; he also had an encyclopedic knowledge of museum collections as well as the archaeological literature. His impact on archaeology continues to be felt in myriad ways. Many of his most frequently cited ideas retain their currency simply because he was uncommonly sagacious about human history. Simply put, Childe was "the most renowned and widely read archaeologist of the 20th century" (Trigger 1994:9), and we believe that the same comment will be applicable for many years to come.

Our goal in this book is to present a selection of Childe's writings that pertain directly to social archaeology. Archaeologists who use the term "social archaeology" are concerned with the relationship between how we theorize society and history, on the one hand, and what they write about particular societies that are known from archaeological, historical, and ethnographic evidence, on the other. They are concerned with the social relations and organization of the people who made the artifacts recovered in excavations and surveys. They look at those relations and their manifestations in economics, politics, and religion. They pay special attention to the social linkages between past and present. From the mid 1930s onward, Childe was instrumental in fostering an early interest in both social and societal archaeology. This collection of his essays is intended to illustrate,

among Childe's many accomplishments and contributions, the strong influence he exerted on the initial development of social archaeology. Social archaeology gained a steadily increasing number of advocates in the 1980s and 1990s, when many archaeologists encountered Childe's works for the first time.

V. Gordon Childe

Childe's prominence as a scholar-activist and an intellectual has understandably occasioned considerable debate as well as a number of biographical accounts. Biographies written between 1980 and 1992 examine Childe's life and work through different lenses (Tringham 1983). Barbara McNairn (1980) surveys Childe's method and theory and how it built on and contributed to the development of archaeological knowledge at the time he was writing. Bruce Trigger's (1980) monumental intellectual biography explores much of the same ground but from the perspective of an archaeologist who had long studied Childe's work and made use of his insights in his own work. Sally Green's (1981) is a more traditional biography of Childe's life and times. William Peace (1992) focuses on his career as an activist-scholar and explores the sociopolitical and intellectual milieu in which Childe worked. Other works—such as Trigger (1987), Peter Gathercole (1989), and Thomas Patterson (2003:33–62, 152–54)—examine how Marxist social theory and praxis informed Childe's intellectual project and development, and how he juxtaposed the findings of archaeologists and sociologists, like Émile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer, with the sociohistorical perspectives forged by Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and their successors. Each of the works provides unique insights and interpretations of Childe, the person, and Childe, the intellectual and scholar-activist. As a result of their texture, we provide here only the briefest sketch of his life and work.

Childe was born in Sydney, Australia, on April 14, 1892. He entered the University of Sydney in 1911 and graduated three years later with first class honors in Classics. During these years he developed his lifelong interest in prehistoric archaeology and the philosophy of history and his participation in trade-union and left-wing political movements, such as the Australian Workers' Education Association; he also began reading Marx, Engels, and other progressive writers during this period. In 1914, he sailed for England and enrolled in Oxford University with the intention of studying classical archaeology. His reading soon convinced him that he could use pottery to unravel the cultural complexities of prehistoric central Europe in the same manner that classical archaeologists used it to reveal aspects of daily life in ancient Greece and Rome (see "Retrospect"). Childe's self-appointed task was formidable because no one had yet satisfactorily accomplished it. In keeping with this interest, then, he combined his interest in ancient

Europe with his commitment to studying classics; his B.Litt. thesis at Oxford, completed in 1916, was entitled "The Influence of Indo-Europeans in Prehistoric Greece" (Green 1981:18).

At Oxford, Childe continued to participate in progressive political groups; he quickly joined the socialist Fabian Society and the No-Conscription Fellowship, some of whose members were jailed for opposing British intervention in World War I. He returned to Australia in 1917 and worked for the Labour Premier of New South Wales. The Labour government, which had sent him back to England in December 1921 as a research and publicity officer, was toppled in 1922. Childe found himself unemployed, with no employment possibilities in Australia because of his political activism, and with little money. For the next three years, he eked out a living as a translator for Kegan Paul, a publishing house in London, and working for the Labour Research Department, which had close ties with the Communist Party (Gathercole 1989; Green 1981:1–57; Peace 1992:51–87). He published his first book, *How Labour Governs: A Study of Workers' Representation in Australia*, during the hard times of his marginal employment in the early 1920s (Childe 1923).

In 1925, Childe was appointed Librarian to the Royal Anthropological Institute, the world's oldest scholarly association devoted to the pursuit of anthropological knowledge. He used the appointment as a means to visit museums and other repositories throughout central and eastern Europe and, in the process, to deepen significantly his knowledge of the prehistoric archaeology of Europe. The results of these wide-ranging travels were codified in his massive synthetic work, *The Danube in Prehistory*, which was published in 1929. It followed his first books on archaeology: *The Dawn of European Civilization*, which had appeared in 1925; *The Aryans: A Study of Indo-European Origins*, which was published the next year; and *The Most Ancient East: The Oriental Prelude to European Prehistory*, which appeared two years later in 1928. *The Dawn*, read by every practicing archaeologist of the time, has been described as a book that "changed archaeology forever" (Fagan 2001:12; also see Daniel 1975:247). Childe's insights and his commanding knowledge of the field proved to his colleagues the value of a pan-European understanding of history.

Childe's first two books on prehistory quickly established his archaeological credentials, and in 1927 he accepted the first Abercromby Chair of Archaeology at Edinburgh University. He resigned nineteen years later to assume the post of Director of the University of London's Institute of Archaeology, a position he held until his retirement in 1956. He returned to Australia a year later to deliver a series of university lectures and seminars. On October 19, 1957, Childe trekked into the Blue Mountains outside Sydney and fell from a cliff to his death. Rumors over whether his death was accidental or deliberate soon swept

through the archaeological community. The truth was finally revealed publicly in 1980. In a letter Childe had written to W. F. Grimes, his successor at the Institute of Archaeology, he said, "An accident may easily and naturally befall me on a mountain cliff" (Childe 1980:3). Childe claimed to have lost faith with all his early ideals, and he insisted that, at age 65, it was time for him to step aside for younger scholars with more innovative ideas and approaches. The development of radiocarbon dating contributed to his sense of impotence because it had done much to demolish many of his carefully devised cultural chronologies. On a more personal level, Childe was also terrified of becoming ill and thus being a burden on society. As a lifelong socialist, he could never see himself in this situation.

Childe's life spanned the period that witnessed the formal institution and subsequent development of archaeology as a professional, scholarly pursuit. By 1892, pioneering archaeologists had investigated many of the ruins associated with the world's great civilizations, including those in Egypt, the Near East, around the Aegean Sea, and in Mesoamerica. The period from 1860 to 1930, described as archaeology's "coming of age" (Stiebing 1993), circumscribed Childe's formative years in archaeology. Schliemann's over twenty years of excavation at Hisarlik, which had captured worldwide attention before Childe's birth, helped to transform archaeology into a public exploit that projected an image of thoughtful male excavators unearthing the hidden secrets of ancient civilizations (Hinsley 1989:91–92). Reporters and other popularizers created awe among an eager public by presenting the adventures of archaeologists who traveled to far-off, exotic lands as daring and exciting, and in the process helped to stereotype the archaeological profession up to the present. Closer to the reporters' homes, English archaeologists such as William M. Flinders Petrie and Augustus Pitt Rivers toiled to establish archaeology as a serious scientific endeavor (Daniel 1968:69–70). Archaeology was thus growing increasingly newsworthy at the time of Childe's birth in 1892. Only six months later, the *Illustrated London News* breathlessly reported Flinders Petrie's discovery of Tell el Amarna in Egypt, and in 1906, before Childe entered the university, the same paper recounted Arthur Evans's discoveries in Crete (Bacon 1976:112–13, 124–26). Evans, one of the world's most renowned archaeologists at the time, would later sit as a reader for Childe's undergraduate thesis (Green 1981:15).

Childe's scholarly interests were rooted in his attempt to understand Old World prehistory; as a result, he had little sustained interest in American archaeology. This is not to say, however, that he was entirely unaware of the cultural history of the Americas or that he thought its history insignificant. Childe was deeply committed to encouraging and fostering international exchanges between scholars, and he maintained a wide correspondence with many American archaeologists (Green 1981:75). His painstakingly compiled cultural sequences and his

theoretically oriented perspectives—particularly on cultural evolution—though inspired by European prehistory, had an impact on many archaeologists trained in North America (Flannery 1994; Patterson 1995:88). But, even though all practicing North American archaeologists would know something of Childe's work, it is nonetheless true that few American archaeologists may have bothered to read his works carefully unless they were interested in western Asia (McGuire 1992:72; Trigger 1994:20). The prehistory of Europe and that of the New World were often viewed as disparate pieces of the human story.

Childe visited the United States in 1936 and met many of the scholars with whom he had corresponded. His trip across America by train and his visits to several significant archaeological sites increased his interest in American cultural history and caused him to rethink some of his earlier interpretations, both prehistoric and political. He was particularly vexed by the way the Maya appeared to flaunt his general evolutionary outline by effectively being Neolithic in form, but yet establishing a distinguishing mark of civilization: a complex system of writing (Trigger 1980:127). Thus, while Childe's visit to the United States was personally rewarding and intellectually stimulating, he never considered North American prehistory to any serious degree in his professional or public writings. On the political front, Childe, a committed Marxist, stated that he "only felt sympathetic to capitalism" while he was in the United States (Flannery 1994:114). This was probably because of the New Deal works programs that had been put in place by the Roosevelt administration to ameliorate the devastating effects of high unemployment and grinding poverty during the Depression of the 1930s. During the Cold War, which was launched by the U.S. government in the months following World War II, Childe's leftist political affiliations and sympathies as well as his increasingly more explicit expressions of Marxist social thought made it difficult for some anthropologists in the United States to engage seriously with his work and to acknowledge fully its significance in the postwar years.

Childe was a complex individual whose voluminous writings reflect his deep intellect and a wide-ranging mind. He possessed a rare talent that enabled him "to combine a professional mastery of the subject with a wider vision of its significance" (Sherratt 1989:151). At the time of his death, Childe was memorialized as the greatest synthesizer of his generation, a renowned scholar who made a global contribution to knowledge, and an archaeological visionary (Braidwood 1958; Grimes 1959). In 1927, when Childe accepted the post at Edinburgh University, professional archaeology was just becoming a recognized and respected field of inquiry. When he died thirty years later, the discipline was widely known, albeit often misunderstood, by the general public, even though Childe made a sustained effort to increase public knowledge and understanding of its importance. His research and vision, combined with his ability to explain the past to lay audiences,

helped to transform archaeology into today's respected, scholarly pursuit and to increase the public's general awareness of the discipline.

Two of Childe's Contributions to Archaeology

Childe's intellectual milieu was shaped by the intersection of liberal empiricism, neo-Kantianism, and Marxism. His writings demonstrate an ongoing engagement with and interrogation of these three social theoretical traditions. As a result, his views matured and changed over time. Ideas that were barely developed in the 1920s appear honed and refined ten or twenty years later. Not only did he rethink and reformulate earlier interpretations and ideas, he also rejected them when they no longer made sense. He openly acknowledged that some of his earlier views may have been erroneous, ill-founded, or inadequate, and that archaeologists following in his footsteps might reject much of what he had proposed (see "Retrospect"). In spite of his own reservations about the lasting impact of his work, his contributions to archaeology remain profound. In this section, let us explore two of his achievements—his conscious application and elaboration of the concept of culture, and the perspective he developed for understanding large-scale processes of sociohistorical change or social evolutionism.

Archaeologists regularly used the word "culture" when Childe entered the discipline; however, the concept was not a dynamic one. Many relied on E. B. Tylor's (1958:1) definition of 1871: "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Most archaeologists working at the beginning of the twentieth century employed an overtly enumerative definition of culture that rested on the compilation of trait lists. The individual traits, considered as a whole, were perceived to function as a tangible identifier of a past living culture. Archaeologists worked to recover the material components of past culture, literally identified as "material culture" (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952:43–46). Their main task centered upon locating, identifying, and describing the material culture of extinct or radically changed cultures. From Europe to Peru and the American Southwest, they quickly recognized that the spatiality of culture was inextricably linked with the distribution of artifact types or material culture. U.S. archaeologist William H. Holmes (1903:21) described this method in a paper on prehistoric North American pottery published at the beginning of the twentieth century: "We soon observe that the pottery of one section differs from that of another in material, form, color, and decoration, and that groups may be defined each probably representing a limited group of peoples, but more conveniently treated as the product of a more or less well-marked specialization area." Once archaeologists understood

the spatial dimensions of culture, they could devise ways—stratigraphic excavations or seriation arguments—to arrange the cultural units into temporal sequences; they could begin to write the history of cultures that lacked writing systems—that is, they could write what happened in prehistory, the era before writing appeared. This kind of archaeological research was becoming standard practice at the time of Childe's birth; it has remained so in many areas since then.

Culture, as literary critic Raymond Williams (1983:87) noted, is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." Childe's use and elaboration of the concept of culture reflects the complexity of the idea itself as it was developed differently in various national intellectual traditions of the times; it also reflects his lifelong engagement with the claims of neo-Kantian and empiricist thought. Childe accepted the neo-Kantian claim that the subject matter, methods, and aims of the human and natural sciences were different. In his view, archaeology was a human science to which "the concepts of the natural sciences could not be applied without modification" (Childe 1935:2). As a result, he was not concerned, as were Herbert Spencer and later the logical empiricists (positivists) of the Vienna Circle, with elaborating natural laws that applied equally to both the natural and human realms or with developing a unified science and scientific methodology. He also engaged the neo-Kantian claim that the human sciences were concerned with culture—that is, the genius of a people. For many anthropologists, like Franz Boas, who engaged in a dialogue with neo-Kantian thought, the culture of a group—the subjective and objective elements that gave meaning to their lives, that incorporated foreign materials, that were modified by geography and history, and that were transmitted from one generation to the next—were most clearly embodied in the language, folklore, and sentiments of a people.

In *The Dawn*, Childe, using the convention of the time, does not actually define what he means by the term "culture." He simply delineates archaeological cultures by the presence of a few key, diagnostic artifact types (Trigger 1989:170–71, 1994:11). Writing about Greece, for example, he notes that the beginning of the Middle Helladic period is indicated by the appearance of gray pottery (Minyan ware) and a mortuary practice in which the deceased were interred in small cists or jars among their houses (Childe 1939:68–69). In his next book, *The Aryans*, Childe (1926) strives to identify the Aryans as a discrete cultural entity and, once identified, to chart their presence in various parts of ancient Europe. The first indication of their presence rested in philological evidence, an interest that harkened back to Childe's earliest university days. Using Indo-European lexicon, Childe attempts to reconstruct the Aryans' way of life and to discern the location of their elusive homeland. Childe's (1926:209–12) conclusion that the Aryans were Nordic founders of Western Civilization was later to

cause him a significant degree of mental torment when his ideas were used by Nazi scientists to promote their racist agenda (Green 1981:55). He had resisted the racist assignments attributed to the Aryans by German nationalist Gustaf Kossinna (Trigger 1989:170, 1994:11), but the modern reader may still be surprised by Childe's easy linkage between language and intellectual progress. Childe (1926:212) denies that the Aryans' success was the result of a "higher material culture" or a "superior physique," but states that their success derived from "a more excellent language and the mentality it generated."

Three years later, in the preface to *The Danube in Prehistory*, Childe (1929:v-vi) explicitly defines culture as consisting of "pots, implements, ornaments, burial rites, house forms." He states that when these objects occur together they constitute a "cultural group," or simply a "culture." He further extends the meaning of culture to equate it with a "people," and proposes that the adjective derived from a "people" is "ethnic." In keeping with the thoughts of the time, Childe also proposes that a people constitute a "race" when they are represented by skeletal remains that can be associated with a specific physical type. The conflation of race with culture was common in anthropology and archaeology during the period that Childe was writing (Orser 2003:39-74). Specific peoples of prehistory—identified as cultures and races—were identifiable because of the spatial distribution of their material culture. The prehistorian's main objects, when interested in large regions—like the entire Danube River valley—is to discern migrations, cultural interactions, and the presence of material survivals, those telltale, diachronic cultural holdovers. Cultural change was thus largely viewed as exogenous.

But even in his early work, Childe makes it clear that culture as he perceives it is not necessarily a chronological concept. A particular culture can exist for many generations, but internal changes will be suggested by the discovery of "accidental traits" that indicate the temporal differences between the two assemblages (Childe 1929:vii). In other words, archaeologists should not expect cultures to remain static over time; changes in material culture can indicate modifications of subsistence, behavior, and thought. His goal in *The Danube in Prehistory*, then, is similar to his plan in *The Aryans*: He strives to present archaeological information about discrete cultural entities in chronological order, to explore cultural origins and migrations, and to chart some of the relations between the various prehistoric cultures in the region.

Childe does more than to identify discrete ancient cultures based on artifacts. He argues that discrete peoples are more than mere collections of artifacts and notes that, as was true for the Aryans, some elements of material culture were developed purely as ethnic markers. Childe believes also that rather than merely being indicated by a single key artifact—the discrete ethnic marker of much early

research in American historical archaeology, for instance—ethnicity is only discernable on the level of a "whole culture complex." This complex can survive for many generations and be archaeologically signaled by a common set of cultural attributes (Childe 1926:204n). In tracing the ethnic unity of the Aryans, Childe uses a complex combination of pottery, battle axes, and megalithic tombs as co-occurring ethnic attributes that indicate their cultural cohesiveness over time.

In *The Danube*, Childe conceptualizes culture as a complex of certain types of remains that constantly occurred together. From the mid 1930s onward, he reconceptualized culture and regularly portrayed it as "observable facts," a "social tradition," or "the whole life of a community." In his words, "The traits of a culture are thus presented together to the archaeologists because they are the creations of a single people, adjustments to its environment approved by its collective experience; they thus express the individuality of a human group united by common social traditions" (Childe 1935:3). A decade later, Childe (1946c) implies that material culture, the means of production in Marxist terms, belongs to the economic foundations of a society, while the symbolic, signifying aspects of culture reside in the superstructure. Put somewhat differently, the members of a society are constrained by tradition; they work out their destinies using the material and symbolic forms available to them. In a phrase, culture is the arena in which they live and experience everyday life.

From the mid 1930s onward, Childe also turned his attention increasingly toward the dynamic forces of society—those that promoted historical development or social evolution and those contradictory ones that impeded socio-cultural change. He had been interested in these problems since his first encounters with the works of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Herbert Spencer, or Lewis Henry Morgan. Evolutionism had been a major thread of nineteenth-century anthropological thought, and many practitioners of embryonic anthropology and archaeology sought to use its principles to explain the progress of humanity. The broadest scheme proposed that humans had steadily progressed from savagery to civilization. Childe is credited with reinvigorating the serious consideration of sociocultural evolution in the early twentieth century (Voget 1975:552). Childe presented his perspective on the subject in both popular and scholarly books; for example, his *Man Makes Himself* (1951a), first published in 1936, was originally a series of lectures delivered to trade unions; it was also one of the most important syntheses of archaeology written at the time. Though Childe developed, refined, and modified his ideas on cultural evolution over time, the germ of evolution appears in his earliest works. For example, in *The Danube in Prehistory*, he notes that when archaeologists attempt to use typologies for chronological interpretation, they must recognize that types "evolved (or degenerated) regularly" (Childe 1929:viii).

In *Man Makes Himself*, Childe addresses the difficult question of “what is progress?” His notion of progress is peppered with Marxian terminology and concepts. He unabashedly writes about changes in the means of production and the role of technology—whose implements are archaeologically observable—in generating cultural change. His stated goal in the book is to present an objective, impersonal, and scientific investigation of human progress and to equate the historians’ concept of “progress” with the zoologist’s idea of evolution (Childe 1951a:15). Using the modern Industrial Revolution as a starting point, Childe seeks to demonstrate that human history witnessed earlier and equally dramatic revolutions as well. He perceives these sweeping cultural changes—events that rapidly pushed humanity forward—as profound moments in human history. The first revolution, the “Neolithic,” allowed humans to assert some measure of control over their subsistence base, and hence their survival, by developing horticulturalism and pastoralism. The transition from hunting and collecting wild flora and fauna to producing domesticated species represented a key moment in cultural progress. This revolution, and the subsequent changes it occasioned, established the conditions for the second revolution, the “Urban” revolution. This momentous change witnessed the development of cities and the rise of states through the transformation of small village communities composed of farmers and herders (see “The Urban Revolution”). The development of industry, foreign trade, and other amenities of urbanity allowed ancient peoples to create states and empires. The economic revolution experienced by the world’s earliest states would not have been possible without a concomitant revolution in human knowledge, which included the development of writing and mathematics, as well as the standardization of weights and measures.

In a book that was much less widely read, *Scotland Before the Scots*, published in 1946, Childe carefully works out the six stages of Scottish cultural development from their earliest history until the arrival of the Romans. Rather than working through the entire sweep of human history, he strives to illustrate his overall theoretical framework of cultural evolution in one small, European region. Using ideas he had formulated earlier through his reading of Marx and other materialists, Childe promotes the idea that archaeological assemblages in Scotland connote ordered stages of “technical and economic progress” (Childe 1946a:2). The objects within the differential assemblages—graves, houses, tools, weapons, ornaments—are “systadial,” meaning that they occupied “the same relative position in the [evolutionary] sequences as defined by the common criterion of technology” (see “Archaeology and Anthropology”; also Childe 1956a:74). By this time, however, Childe’s use of anthropological concepts had grown considerably more sophisticated and his view of culture more nuanced. In other words, his conception of the past had evolved from a largely trait-list conceptualization

of culture to an understanding of the profound importance of social relations in transforming human history. He had essentially transformed his understanding of history from a static notion into a dynamic conception that openly embraced social interaction and all that it entailed. This transformation marks Childe’s full entry into the earliest strains of social archaeology.

Childe and the Roots of Social Archaeology

Childe was a significant, early proponent of social archaeology as many archaeologists currently conceive it, even though the term “social archaeology” has diverse meanings (Ashmore 2002:1173, 1175; Hodder 2002; Meskell et al. 2001:7–8). We wish here to draw a distinction between *societal archaeology* and *social archaeology*. The former is concerned with the archaeology of society or social organizations; the latter is concerned with “understanding past societies in terms of their social contexts and lived experiences, while, at the same time, . . . remain[ing] cognizant of how the knowledge of the past that we produce is used in the present” (Meskell et al. 2001:9). Childe contributed to both kinds of archaeology; his contributions have persisted and had an important impact on today’s archaeology. It was his commitment to social archaeology, however, that drew us to Childe’s writings.

Archaeologists have been interested in the archaeology of social groups for a long time (Chippindale 1989), and they have long recognized and appreciated the complexities inherent in interpreting social differentiation in past sociohistorical formations (Hawkes 1954:161–62). It was precisely the use of archaeological materials for identifying social group distinctions that puzzled Childe during the course of his earliest research.

The material distinctions expressed by social groups intrigued many professional archaeologists. For example, British prehistorian Graham Clark, an associate of Childe’s from the late 1920s onward, was an early and pioneering advocate of societal archaeology. Clark’s *Archaeology and Society*, first published in 1939, was largely written as a textbook designed to outline a way to reconstruct ancient history from a societal perspective (Fagan 2001:98). Chapters concentrate on the reconstruction of economic, social, intellectual, and spiritual life. Clark’s avowed intent is to interpret archaeological data “in terms of social history,” a reconstruction that can only be accomplished if the functioning of communities is adequately grasped (Clark 1964:169–70). For Clark, the ecological setting constitutes the “economic base” of a society—a foundation composed of subsistence, shelter and clothing, technology, transport, and trade. The reconstruction of social life rests on conceptualizing the people’s past social organization. Clark’s overall approach was unquestionably forward-looking and innovative for the time, but his interpretation of past social organization was overwhelmingly functionalist: an archaeologist

could use the number of hearths at a site to infer whether the community was organized in nuclear or extended families; excavators could discern social differentiation or egalitarianism by the community-wide distributions of grave goods, dwellings, weapons, ornaments, and dress.

Early proponents of processual archeology further attempted to raise the profile of societal analysis in archaeology. In a famous example, Lewis Binford (1962:219) argued that an extinct social "subsystem," one identifiable through the presence of "sociotechnic" artifacts, provided a "means of articulating individuals one with another into cohesive groups capable of efficiently maintaining themselves." Under this framework, archaeologists could expect to discover sociotechnic artifacts within a past cultural system that vary in quantity, form, and structure in conjunction with the character of the social system. The difference between a hierarchical and an egalitarian social subsystem should be identifiable through an examination of the archaeologically recovered sociotechnic artifacts. David Clarke (1968:105–10), another prominent processual archaeologist, also argued that a "social subsystem" existed within a larger cultural system. In his model, the social subsystem was composed of individuals linked together through diverse and constantly changing ascribed and achieved social positions. The social subsystem was structurally analogous to four other identifiable subsystems: economic, religious, psychological, and material. Clarke used the language of systems theory to outline his understanding that social networks would oscillate and seek equilibrium.

Subsequent processual archaeologists also endeavored to model and interpret past social organizations. For instance, archaeologists who worked in the overtly behavioral strain of processualism perceived society in strict behaviorist terms, as a "social unit of activity performance"—a group of individuals voluntarily joined together during the course of a specific activity (Schiffer 1976:51). Most recently, social elements have practically been excised from behavioral archaeology with the proposition that humans do not actually interact with one another, but rather with one another "compounded with artifacts" (Schiffer 1999:3; also see Schiffer 2000).

Several archaeologists expressed a desire to develop a reinvigorated societal archaeology, along the lines proposed by processualists, in the late 1970s (Redman et al. 1978). These authors of *Social Archaeology* had as their overt goal to advance archaeology "beyond subsistence and dating." They wished to transform archaeology into an explicitly social science, whose analyses would rest on, but not cease with, the economic base. In other words, their goal was to encourage those archaeologists committed to a processualist framework to move away from environmental and technological analysis toward a more open analysis of society and social organization. In accordance with this goal, the authors of the various chap-

ters explore issues that inherently require sociability. Ideology, the social impact of art, the nature of belief systems, and measures of social differentiation mean nothing outside the sphere of human interaction. The strong nomothetic content of the articles strikes many readers today as somewhat naïve, but the overt and unapologetic focus on social organization provides a strong and consistent current for the collection.

The cause for an archaeology of society was significantly advanced by Colin Renfrew with the publication of his inaugural lecture at the University of Southampton (1973) and a collection of his essays a decade later. His inaugural lecture touched upon the archaeologists' need to understand past social variables; his collected essays significantly expanded upon this theme with a series of case studies. Renfrew (1984:4) noted that social archaeology—when composed of an explicit body of theory—was actually a new subject in archaeology, even though societal archaeology had ostensibly been pursued for many years. But one practical goal of societal archaeology as he envisioned it was to link it inextricably to social anthropology, but only after archaeologists clearly understood and appreciated its underlying philosophical assumptions. Social archaeology developed along the lines advocated by Renfrew would resemble social anthropology but it would remain distinct in important ways. Whereas archaeological research could contribute nothing to knowledge about ancient kinship terms or oral communication, its practitioners could provide abundant, important new information about the relationships between social situation and tangible material culture.

Renfrew proposed five avenues of inquiry that he believed societal archaeology could develop. One avenue would examine societies as spatial entities, where the landscape is perceived as an inseparable part of the social equation and is assessed as such (see Ashmore 2002). Another topic for research involves the creation and maintenance of exchange networks, with the underlying idea being that men and women who engaged in face-to-face economic interaction were also intimately involved in social exchange. The study of a society's framework of authority constitutes a third topic for archaeological investigation. In this kind of analysis, societal archaeologists investigate the associations between the structures of social control and the construction and placement of monuments and other immovable symbols of leadership. A broader topic for examination revolves around the dynamics of systemic growth. Inquiries of this nature would involve the conscious application of Clarke's (1968) ideas on the use of systems theory in archaeology. Renfrew believes that the adoption of a systems model in conjunction with the language of systems theory would permit archaeologists to examine large-scale social change in a manner conducive to understanding its multivariate complexity. The study of discontinuous social change, as distinguished from continuous, steady-state change, is also a topic for serious attention by social archaeologists. Here, archaeologists are

concerned with changes that appear sudden and discontinuous—changes that are analogous to Childe's revolutions.

Renfrew (1984, 2001) fully understood that the topics, and the approaches he advocated to address them, were far from perfect. At the same time, however, his willingness to tackle such overtly societal aspects of prehistory demonstrated his commitment to the notion of societal archaeology. Renfrew (1984:7–8) notes his intellectual debt to Childe, even though he remains critical of Childe's shortcomings, including his enduring belief that archaeology was inadequate for providing significant information about some aspects of past society.

Childe's earliest research cannot be accurately described as societal archaeology. Following the conventions of the time, his focus was on delineating cultures in terms of their material and spatial expressions. In *The Danube in Prehistory* (1929), for example, he charted the course of different cultures up the Danube corridor by reference to the artifacts recovered from known archaeological sites. He refers to these key artifacts, even in his later works, as "type-fossils" (Childe 1956b:21), and he employs a somewhat simplistic, albeit then commonplace, archaeological methodology. Childe's innovation was the breadth of the knowledge he had amassed as a result of his wide-ranging visits to Europe's archaeological museums and repositories. His earliest, traditional, culture-historical research is thus distinguished more for his overtly pan-European perspective and the sheer depth of his knowledge, rather than for his advocacy of societal archaeology. By the 1940s, however, Childe was increasingly writing about societies when he was mentioning cultures. Though Childe clearly had his own ideas and his unshakeable perspectives, he was openly impressed by Clark's *Archaeology and Society*. His reading of such books, in concert with his active thinking about history, made it possible for Childe to transcend the archaeological methods of his earliest research and to transform his own archaeological efforts into a more self-conscious societal practice.

In his paper for the *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, published in 1946, Childe recognizes the affinities between the work of archaeologists and sociocultural anthropologists (see "Archaeology and Anthropology"). He observes that when conducting ethnographic research, anthropologists are able to perceive the many societal abstractions that are expressed through overt human action. The association between interpersonal behavior and kinship terms provides a clear example. But unlike anthropologists, archaeologists must content themselves with cultural activity largely defined on the basis of material culture. They cannot witness societal interactions as they occur, and so, personal and group interactions can only be inferred. At the same time, however, Childe mentions his interest in societal evolution and proposes that only archaeology could document the "earlier and simpler" states of the evolutionary process. In his mind, then, archaeological research is indispensable for providing information about the evolution of past societies.

As an archaeologist principally engaged in the examination of the tangible remains of past human organizations, Childe still feels compelled to define a culture as "an assemblage of artifacts that recur repeatedly associated together" in *Prehistoric Migrations in Europe*, first published in 1950 (Childe 1969:2). Significantly, though, he also notes the paramount importance of understanding societies as groups of interacting individuals. He makes his position mostly clearly in his statement that archaeology constitutes a social science, a discipline that can examine "the dynamics of social change" over vast periods of time (see "Archaeology as a Social Science"). In *Piecing Together the Past*, Childe (1956a:7) does not abandon his belief in the archaeological prominence of culture, but observes that archaeologists investigate the results of group behavior when individuals form themselves into societies. He chooses to define society in a classic anthropological manner, as groups of individuals "inspired by common purposes and needs and guided by a common tradition [i.e., culture]." In *Society and Knowledge*, he further outlines the sociological aspects of archaeological research and argues that "most distinctly human characters are derived directly from society" (Childe 1956c:97). But Childe presents his most well-developed statement on the archaeology of society in *Social Evolution*, a book that deserves extended comment.

As the title indicates, Childe's goal in *Social Evolution* (1951b) is overtly and unapologetically evolutionary. He proposes that the goal of societal archaeology is to establish sequences of cultures in various regions, with the cultures representing societies or the societies' developmental phases. Childe is thus overtly concerned, from a strictly theoretical standpoint, with the distinction between culture and society. He begins by elaborating a familiar theme: that archaeologists define a culture as "an assemblage of associated traits that recur repeatedly" (p. 30). The methodology of archaeological cultural analysis, when viewed in this manner, is straightforward: The perception of a past culture is only slowly amassed through the careful process of excavation, classification, and interpretation. Archaeologists have much to learn from sociocultural anthropologists about the nature of culture because anthropologists can gather information—on language, symbolism, kinship—that are difficult or impossible for archaeologists to obtain with any measure of certitude. In accordance with his reading of Marx, Engels, and even Stalin, Childe accepts that cultures are created on a natural base, and that they are thus limited but not controlled by topography, rainfall, temperature, soil quality, and mineral resources. Because he firmly believes in the interpretive and explanatory sense of Marx's historical materialism, he assigns prominence to the dialectic connections between the forces and relations of production. As he had said earlier, "It is not the forces of production that immediately constitute the determinant, but the mode of production, the economy within which these forces can function" (Childe 1947:59). This Marxian account of the motors of sociohistorical change emphasizes endogenous factors and downplays the

role of migration, conquest, and war, the exogenous causes of change typically employed in much archaeological explanation during the time Childe wrote.

Social Evolution reveals Childe's long-term commitment to perceiving human history as composed of a number of progressively more technologically advanced stages. These cultural sequences overwhelm most of his broadest interpretations of human history. But chapter 5, entitled "The Sociological Interpretation of Archaeological Data," constitutes an eloquent statement of just the topics that a politically progressive societal archaeologist would wish to investigate: the power and authority inherent in the rise of states, the division of society into hierarchical classes, the development of labor specialization, and the institution of private property. These social characteristics describe the inner workings of a culture; they exist within the evolution of cultures, but they are distinctly social in practice.

Childe had an active and far-ranging mind, and he undoubtedly felt partly constrained by the material demands required by his commitment to the study of prehistory. This commitment sometimes served to imbue his work with a certain ambiguity and partially accounts for the difficulty modern scholars have in clearly separating the many intellectual treads that run through his voluminous work (Trigger 1994:10). As a prehistorian, Childe had few if any opportunities to use text-based sources of information in his archaeological research, and so he continued to define individual cultures in terms of their material manifestations. The materiality of culture often made it difficult for him to distance himself from a purely functional interpretation of prehistory. As a committed Marxian scholar, Childe also tended to perceive a linkage between the material manifestations of culture and the broad outlines of human cultural evolution. In his work in the philosophy of history, however, he was not as constrained by material culture, even though he never moved too far away from thinking about it. Childe never lost his interest in the major transformation of human culture from savagery to civilization, but his work entitled *History* (1947) reveals his profound concern with the nature of historical analysis and interpretation, and the philosophical meaning of history.

History is a book unabashedly about human societies. The first sentence in the book reveals Childe's attachment to the concept of the social and his more overt conflation of society and culture when compared with his purely archaeological writings: "Within the last hundred years the societies inhabiting western Europe and North America have achieved conspicuous success in control over external nature" (see "History"). He accordingly defines "social environment"—what processualists would later term the "social subsystem"—as composed of the "relations between individuals, groups, nations, and classes." In *History*, Childe self-identifies as a historian and states that the goal of the historian is "to disclose an order in the process of human history." When Childe worked purely as a historian

of prehistory, he perceived archaeological information as "historical documents in their own right" (Childe 1956b:9). In *History*, because he is unrestricted from purely archaeological data, he is perfectly free to explore the ways in which different philosophers of history have devised and advocated their perspectives. Childe dedicates the final chapter of the book, entitled "History as a Creative Process," to expound his views on the utility of using historical materialism as a framework for understanding social evolution.

An important aspect of *History* stems from Childe's comments about the place of historiography in the relationship between literacy and class-based societies. He notes that "In class societies the literati or clerks, the minority of who can read and write, have nearly always belonged to the ruling class or been closely identified with it" (Childe 1947:21). He notes that beginning with the Sumerians, running through the Greeks and the Romans, and extending into medieval Europe, the men who transcribed history were either members of the ruling elite or were nurtured and protected by them. But Childe's evaluation of the role of elites in creating the documents of history is not limited to the past. He wryly observes that "Even in contemporary Britain" the primary market for history books is the ruling class "and its favoured dependants and imitators in the middle classes" (p. 22). He does not view the historical constancy demanded by the elites and their agents as impartial or benign. An unequal access to history is self-perpetuating and self-fulfilling. Publishers are willing to distribute histories that are consistent with the worldviews, outlooks, and the desires of the ruling class; they are much less eager to promote alternative readings of history that may upset or even outrage this constituency. Childe gives his important perspective on historiography added emphasis by observing:

[N]o chronicler nor historian can attempt to record all events; from the superfluity of happenings he must select what he regards as memorable. His selection is determined to a very small extent by his personal idiosyncrasies, but on the whole by tradition and social interests. . . . The writer cannot help being influenced by the interests and prejudices of the society to which he belongs—his class, his nation, his Church. (p. 22)

This insight is centrally important for understanding Childe's commitment to social archaeology in addition to societal archaeology. Childe's willingness to point toward the development of social archaeology was so foresighted that it helped to devise an archaeology that would not arise until many years after his death.

In their introductory editorial to the *Journal of Social Archaeology*, the editors expand the meaning of social archaeology in such a way that it encompasses diverse approaches and varied theoretical perspectives (Meskell et al. 2001:8–10). The inclusive meaning of social archaeology departs from a more restricted societal

archaeology because it includes the recognition that archaeological information and interpretations can be used for purposes that are entirely oriented to the present. It overtly expounds the now-commonplace understanding that archaeology is not simply “about” the past. Archaeologists now appreciate that their discipline can have significant implications for the present (for recent citations, see Little 2002; Zimmerman et al. 2003).

Archaeologists have long pondered the social utility of archaeological research. In *Archaeology and Society*, Clark (1964:251) voices a growing concern among archaeologists about the infusion of public money into archaeological practice. Many believed that the acceptance of public funds was necessary to meet the rising costs of excavation materials and labor, but concomitantly, that once accepted, the money carried with it a responsibility to make prehistory relevant to modern society. Clark understands that this issue is profoundly social in character and that it means that archaeology cannot be easily divorced from the present-day social context within which it is performed. He proposes that prehistoric archaeology has several social benefits: it is educational; it expands the human imagination; it stimulates an interest in geography; it promotes an appreciation for the use of style in material culture; and it contributes to broad historical knowledge. But for Clark, the “highest purpose” of archaeology is to promote human solidarity; archaeology has the ability to instill in men and women around the globe a sense of their common ancestry and to offer an essential linkage through their shared humanity. Clark fully recognizes that this sense of solidarity could be tragically misused—as the Nazis employed archaeology for their own nefarious goals in the 1930s and 1940s—but in the end, his outlook is optimistic.

Childe was also a firm believer in the power of social archaeology. He frequently tacked back and forth between the modern world and the distant past in his attempts to make prehistory understandable both to serious students of the discipline and to an interested public. To explain the intricacies of archaeological classification, he uses automobiles and European fashions (Childe 1956b:31); to explore the Hegelian theory of the state, he employs Elizabethan history and modern-day England as examples (Childe 1956c); and to illustrate the archaeologists’ problem of interpreting the presence of long-term, material survivals he uses flintlock rifles in archaeological deposits (Childe 1929:vi). Analyzing the evolution of human history allows him to travel intellectually from “clubs to howitzers, from promiscuity to strict monogamy, from magic to monotheism, from waist strings to trousers” (Childe 1956a:165). We may wish to view Childe’s use of such examples as merely heuristic, and he undoubtedly meant them to illustrate his main arguments, but we can also interpret his use of such examples as an indication of his deep commitment to forging archaeology as a relevant subject for the modern world. His open avowal of the Enlightenment project of improvement

in two of his most widely read, popular books, *Man Makes Himself* (1951a) and *What Happened in History* (1946b), was tempered by his comment in *History* (1947:73) that “History does not disclose an unflinching march to a predetermined goal.”

Childe’s most overt statement on the use of archaeological knowledge is arguably presented in *Society and Knowledge*, his most revealing text. This book is a work in the philosophy of knowledge: how it is acquired, what it means, and how it is used. This work, more than any other, illustrates Childe’s wide-ranging intellect and his willingness to contemplate the most profound questions that social archaeologists must confront. His ruminations on symbolism, presented in chapters 3 and 4, were far ahead of their time. In chapter 3, he asks his readers to ponder how patterns evoke meaning. He states that mindlessly tapping your fingernails on a board has no meaning until some pattern is created and recognized. To illustrate this with an evocative example, Childe asks his readers to imagine prisoners held in a dungeon by the Gestapo or the NKVD (the Soviet Secret police). Accounts from both wartime Germany and the postwar Soviet Union indicate that prisoners held in such dire circumstances regularly used patterns of tapping to communicate with one another. Childe could have easily selected another example, but his goal is to link past and present. In the next chapter, Childe provides an especially enlightening example of the misuse of words as descriptive symbols:

“Communist” once meant a person who had joined a political party with a clearly stated political and economic program and was thereby committed to work for the realization of the program. It is applied to an old-fashioned liberal, not of course to describe his political and economic views which are diametrically opposed to Communism, but as an opprobrious epithet to prevent his employment. “Fascist” is abused in precisely the same way in Communist circles! (p. 41)

Childe, a visitor to the Soviet Union, a reader of the *Daily Worker*, and an intellectual Marxist, wrote this passage during the days when left-wing scholars were being regularly attacked and denied positions because of their beliefs (see, e.g., Harris 1968:637–38; Patterson 2001:118).

The final chapter of *Society and Knowledge*, entitled “My Beliefs,” is a self-consciously revealing personal statement. In accordance with his view that knowledge is a social construct, Childe unambiguously states that “The function of knowledge is practical, to guide action” and that “Knowledge is not to be contemplated but to guide action” (Childe 1956c:126, 127). He elaborates by further stating that as an archaeologist, his job is to gather and interpret information about men and women long dead. He acknowledges that, even though he is well paid to conduct this often-esoteric research, his society (postwar England and the

West) finds little immediate, practical use for the knowledge he provides. As he phrases it, archaeological data "will not increase the production of bombs or butter." Childe fully understands that the cultural chronologies he worked so diligently to devise, and of which he was forever proud (see "Retrospect"), taken in isolation, would not have much impact on the quotidian life of the modern world. But despite this reality, he sincerely hoped that archaeological data would eventually be useful to "some society." His most profound hope was that people would learn to use archaeological knowledge "to behave more humanly." Though Childe was clearly pessimistic about the future, as evidenced by his suicide, he was in the long run an optimist who hoped that all of his toils, and those of his colleagues, would not simply generate knowledge for knowledge's sake.

Some of what Childe thought about the ancient world has turned out to be wrong. Some of his early research now appears amateurish, and his commitment to the basic outlines of the savagery-to-civilization sequence is now woefully out of date (Sherratt 1989:183). The same may be said for any pioneering scholar who charted a course through unfamiliar intellectual territory.

But the enduring aspects of Childe's body of work in social and societal archaeology remain fresh because he was an original thinker who was not afraid to be wrong about something or to misinterpret the arcana of history. We hope, by presenting this collection, that students will appreciate the depth of Childe's thinking and will begin to understand his ability to reach beyond the bounds of conventional archaeological thinking to explore new intellectual ground.

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