Gordon Childe: Paradigms and Patterns in Prehistory

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GORDON CHILDE: PARADIGMS AND PATTERNS IN PREHISTORY [1]

Andrew Sherratt

Prehistorians, by the very nature of their task, must inevitably talk in metaphors. With no names or personal motivations around which to construct an account of past events, narrative accounts of prehistory can only describe the past by analogy. Equally inevitably, therefore, the metaphors of one generation seem inappropriate to the next one: prehistory is notable for the way in which it is constantly rewritten in the light of current experience.

The last 25 years have illustrated very vividly the way in which the writing of archaeology has moved in parallel with other cultural concerns. The modernist architecture and urban redevelopment of the 1960s was paralleled by an equal determination by archaeologists to remove earlier structures and build on a clear site. Their constuctions were severe in style and massive in scale. Earlier buildings might have a quaint historical charm, but they had to be removed to make way for contemporary conceptions. New Archaeology was as unsympathetic to the history of its own subject as architects were of existing townscapes. The results, with one or two exceptions, were often unhappy and unacceptable to those who had to use cavernous concrete buildings or live with hollow law-like generalisations. The result, both in architecture and archaeology, has been a reaction that is in many ways equally objectionable: a post-modernist eclecticism characterised by an incoherent mixture of influences and misunderstood details, usually stuck on the outside of structures still designed on modernist principles.

This unhappy situation can only be remedied by a better understanding of the principles of design: historical styles must be appreciated for their coherence rather than their detail. The current revival of interest in the history of archaeology is symptomatic of this perceived need to re-make a relationship with the past and to retrieve something of what was often thoughtlessly cast away. True, this search often reveals unpalatable truths about the relationship between earlier styles of construction and discredited episodes of imperial history; but we cannot escape from the forces which have moulded the present world other than by understanding and coming to terms with them. A critical but sympathetic history of archaeology is a necessary foundation for current endeavours.

Any great writer must be appreciated in a historical context, which illuminates both the character of his effort and the extent of his achievement. Gordon Childe is undisputably one of the greatest writers yet produced by prehistoric archaeology; and this essay is an attempt to retrieve from his writings some perceptions which seem to have been overlooked in recent accounts of his work. It suggests that his most enduring contribution lies not in his espousal of particular paradigms but in his appreciation of patterns.

PARADIGMS OF PREHISTORY

All descriptions of prehistory embody recent experience and the rationalisations of it that provide paradigms for what happened in the past. Such analogies thus give unusually direct access to the stock of shared images and expectations that underlie one culture's interpretation of another. Archaeologists and ethnographers during the early 20th century approached the

prehistoric record (both of Europe and other areas of the world) in terms of three opposed but internally consistent sets of ideas: evolution ('independent development'), migration, and diffusion. These patterns of thought had their origin in attitudes to the past which had emerged in the development of European consciousness from the 16th century onwards, rooted in different regional attitudes to European history and different experiences of the European encounter with other cultures.

Consider the diversity of attitudes to prehistory evident in different parts of Europe about the beginning of this century. In France, the image of evolutionary progress was the dominant metaphor in the presentation of the past. Gabriel de Mortillet's work for the Great Paris Exhibition epitomises this attitude, with its presentation of French archaeology (and not just the Palaeolithic) as an exemplification of the *loi du progrès de l'humanité*, and its confident extrapolation to the rest of the world by means of the *loi du developpement similaire*. This assertion of local origins was reflected more generally in French pre- and proto-historic studies: it appears both in Salomon Reinach's famous article *Le Mirage oriental* (protesting at the idea of intrusions both of central-Asiatic Indo-Europeans and western-Asiatic Phoenicians), and at the same time in the presentation of the Celts as *nos ancêtres, les Gaulois*, with the apotheosis of political ancestor-figures such Vercingetorix. In all these aspects, it was an autonomist view of the past, whether in the Iron Age or back in the dawn of humanity in the Dordogne and the terraces of the Somme.

In Britain and Scandinavia, evolution was just as eagerly espoused; but with a difference: in the proto-historic period, links with the Mediterranean civilisations were constantly stressed, especially contacts by sea. The great Swedish archaeologist Oscar Montelius brought megalithic tombs from the Near East by the Atlantic seaways to Sweden; Arthur Evans and John Myres charted the stepping stones westward from Egypt and Levant to Cyprus, Crete and the Aegean, opening the way to the western Mediterranean and so to north-west Europe. Montelius invented a methodology for tracing these links, the typological method — which, although couched in the fashionable language of descent and development, was essentially a means of creating inter-regional links and tying together artifactual sequences from northern and southern Europe (especially Iron Age Italy) by the reflections of trade and contact. This outlook can be justly described as diffusionist.

Both of these regional schools, however, would not be comprehensible without the third, against which they were both consciously elaborated: the German dominance of *Mitteleuropa*. German scholarship spoke the language of migration, colonisation, *Landnahm, Ursprung und Ausbreitung, die Indo-germanisierung unseres Erdteils*, the *Völkerwanderungen*. Its language was an assertion of the importance of violent change — metaphors which constantly recur in the German intellectual tradition *(Sturm und Drang; Blut und Eisen)*. Prehistory was a *nationale Wissenschaft*, documenting the prehistoric occupation of the German lands, and Gustav Kossinna invented the methodology of *Siedlungsarchaeologie* to put it into practice. The migrations of races were the great events of history and prehistory.

These three paradigms, each typical of particular national schools of prehistoriography, survived long enough to be dressed up as scientific descriptions. As an undergraduate in the 'sixties, I remember being taught that there were three basic models of what went on in prehistory: there was evolution, diffusion, and migration. Great thinkers had grappled with this problem; migration was now increasingly discounted, and Gordon Childe (although with some migrationist aberrations) had successfully married evolution and diffusion. What was not clear to me then, and only fell into place when I tried to write an account of Gordon Childe's contribution to prehistory a couple of years ago, was that these were not carefully constructed

scientific models at all, but that each was essentially a different metaphor, employed by a different national school of prehistoriography, and was a more or less direct projection of its own recent cultural and political history. At the apex of our endeavours, therefore, to distill some abstract pattern from the past — there was nothing but our own reflection.

The metaphors which were employed in the early days of prehistoric studies were not simply creations of the later nineteenth century, preliminary essays at interpreting a growing archaeological record. Each of these paradigms had its own respectable prehistory, its own long-term rationale. Take evolution, for instance. Shorn of its biological idiom, there is much in the French evolutionary metaphor that comes straight from Enlightenment conceptions of human nature and the progress of knowledge, social conditions and morals. Prehistory was largely slotted into a pre- existing framework of *histoire universelle*, which was itself an attempt to draw together the information of ethnography and ancient history into a single encyclopaedic scheme. Nor could the enterprise be said to have begun only in the 18th century, for its precursors can be traced in 17th century Jesuit writers such as Bernard de Montfaucon, drawing especially on the experience of the Society of Jesus in the conversion of the native peoples of the New World. It is largely to them that we owe the conception of a Stone Age, followed by an age of metals including a Bronze Age and an Iron Age: for they had seen a stone age in action, across the seas. Indeed, earlier still, in 16th century Italy, the two strands of ancient mytho-history and modern ethnography had already been tied together, in the Vatican itself, where Michael Mercati — who was both museum curator and physician to Pope Clement VIII — had explicitly linked Pliny and Lucretius, Homer and the Old Testament, with ethnographic curiosities brought back from the Americas. There is indeed a sense in which *la préhistoire* was a creation of the later 19th century; but there is also a sense in which it was simply a continuation of the anthropology of the Renaissance, with a more or less continuous tradition in Latin Europe.

What then of migrationism? The obvious interpretation is that it was simply a child of the German Romantic movement. But here, too, the roots go deeper. If southern Europe produced the anthropology of the Renaissance, northern Europe produced the anthropology of the Reformation. It drew on the classics, and obviously on Tacitus; but even more strongly on the Bible. At this date, it largely lacked the overseas dimension (though I suspect that it survives today in the thinking of the South African *broederbond*). Its great theoretical concern was with the re-peopling of the world after the Flood. (Megalithic monuments, incidentally, belonged to the world before the Flood, and had been built by giants). It had a great concern for language, and especially the true language of Adam — which was thought, not surprisingly, to be German. The great migrations of races were part of the continental story from the beginning; and hence the concern with language which was later to find its expression in Indo-European philology.

Diffusionism: we are familiar in our own day with those American enthusiasts who would have the Phoenicians crossing the Atlantic to leave inscriptions at various points along the east coast. Europeans in southern Africa (mostly of British descent) have held similar views about Zimbabwe, for instance. These people are the lineal descendents of seventeenth century antiquarians who attributed Stonehenge to the Phoenicians, or — my own personal favourite — pointed out the toponym 'Avebury' as a form of 'Abury' or 'Habiru' — Hebrews. The Atlantic sea lanes were thus seen as open from the beginning, whether carrying Brutus, son of Aeneas, to found the Troynovantian dynasty in Britain, or Gomer the grandson of Noah, or indeed any of the various Lost Tribes. In the same category we may add the story of Scota, who was an Egyptian princess who gave her name to the Scots and was the wife of the Greek Gathelus who gave his name to the Gaels; though this may be a later, Celtophile, addition to the genre.

The image of diffusion or migration by sea has provided foundation myths for a whole series of western cultures.

INTELLECTUAL CYCLES

This, then, is the Braudelian *longue durée* model of European intellectual geography, with its three great ideological provinces of the Mediterranean, the North European Plain and the Atlantic. But of course it also had its *conjonctures* and its *évenements*, regional florescences which affected the development of the whole.   These provide a temporal rhythm which complements a static geographical description: a dialectical succession of opposed view-points based on the temporary intellectual hegemony of particular areas. Within this sequence a more abstract cycle of interpretations may be discerned, alternating between the determinist, comparative mode on the one hand and the mode of particularism and cultural commitment on the other. First, of course, the Enlightenment — the flowering of Renaissance anthropology with its international, comparative emphasis; then the Romantic movement, which was the reaction to it, promoting instead the anthropology of the Reformation and its more introverted concern for cultural roots. Each was both an assertion of its own viewpoint, and a revolt against the prevailing attitudes of its predecessor. Thus the Romantic movement was both a temporal and a spatial protest: anti-Enlightenment and anti-French. Any reader of Isiah Berlin knows how, from north German parsonages, the north revolted against the aristocratic, salon society of the south; how Prussian pietists, in a relatively backward corner of Europe, overturned the ordered, symmetrical, clockwork world- view of Paris, and replaced it with a disordered, creative, collective spontaneity. Rationalism was replaced by relativism; the 'state' by the 'nation'; determinism gave way to the inspiration of the *Volksgeist*.

Romanticism had a profound effect on archaeology; in fact, it largely created it as an independent discipline. Enlightenment writers talked about 'the infancy of society'; but they had largely imagined it, on the basis of ethnography. While excavation and collection were already taking place, it was largely the exemplification of what was already known — ancient art history or numismatics. Romanticism, by turning attention to local origins and their cultural record, pushed back the recognition of historical peoples deep into the prehistoric past in its search for roots. Where necessary, new and hypothetical groups were created, on the basis of their distinctive material culture. This quest thus gave archaeology the courage to tackle the unknown, and a methodology with which to do it. The metaphysical basis of this exercise was archaeology's Romantic fallacy: the assumption of a unity of material culture, language and ethnicity. This was a logical application of the ideas of writers such as Herder, that each 'people' was a distinct and distinctive entity, with its own 'spirit' — the *Volksgeist* — of which all the superficial characteristics were in some sense an expression. It was the purest Romantic conception, and it supported a necessary phase in the early development of prehistory; but unfortunately it is with us still, as what Gilbert Ryle might describe as 'the ghost in the assemblage': the equation of pots with peoples.

Overt Romanticism, of course, had a limited lifetime; the later 19th century saw a revival of positivism and evolutionary models — led by Paris, but also with outposts in Berlin and even Oxford, with its monument in the Pitt Rivers Museum. But the metaphor of descent, the concern with roots and origins in the image of the family tree, continued to be a pervasive influence: strengthened, indeed, by the new, hard imagery of race.

Anthropologists have given considerable thought to the anthropology of the body, and how social relationships are conceptualised in terms of bodily metaphors: relatives of the bone, relatives of the flesh. I have yet to see a similar study of the metaphor of blood in 19th century

Europe, though the subject cries out for such treatment. 'Truly', Rudyard Kipling told an audience of Sussex yeomen, 'ye come of the blood'. 'With me, race or heredity descent is everything; it stamps the man' wrote the anatomist Robert Knox. Not for nothing did Max Müller claim to have been a Darwinist before Darwin; the family tree was the dominant image of comparative philology, and descent in the blood line was to become the century's metaphor, as the language of stock-breeding was taken up by both science and sociology, and especially by prehistory and history. Races, like languages, had an ancestry and a pedigree; so too had cultures. The soft, ghostly entities of the Romantics became harder edged, like billiard balls, that could be scattered across a map and still retain their integrity and individuality. The image affected evolutionary views, in the form of 'social Darwinism' in which certain societies were seen as having a competitive advantage and so successfully ushered in the next phase of evolutionary advance; and it affected diffusionism, which now talked of colonies and the implantation of new stock. These metaphors provided the stock-in-trade of prehistorians down to World War II.

The post-war prehistory of the welfare-state generation is widely regarded as having effected a break with this tradition, in the form of the 'New Archaeology'. But in the perspective of centuries, what is more striking is the way in which this philosophy was in effect simply a return to the metaphors of the Enlightenment, with its comparative approach and deterministic models — now centred not in Paris but in that Enlightenment successor-state the United States of America. Population and environment became key concepts; autonomous evolution ousted migration and diffusion as the main motor of change. Even the Indo-European dispersal has been re-written by Colin Renfrew in the form of an indigenous evolution from an acceptably agrarian Neolithic starting point. But what is happening right now? Relativism, individualism, the expressive qualities of images and texts, the unique properties of the particular: it all sounds very familiar. Post-processual archaeology is re-living the Romantic revolt against law-governed evolutionary models; only the archaeology has changed. The restless search for innovation makes the philosophical wheel spin faster, but it stays in the same rut. The range of options is limited. Real advance takes place on a more tactical level of operation.

THE LOCUS OF CUMULATIVE ADVANCE

Each of these philosophical attitudes has its insights. We can look at culture from the inside or the outside, through its own logic or through some comparative perspective which attempts to go beyond the logic of our own cultural background to appreciate that of others. Indeed, such a dialectic is necessary for any cumulative advance, since we can only understand what is peculiar to our own culture by confronting it with something different. In so far as the three dominant European paradigms of cultural history are concerned, each has some measure of validity since each arises from a different experience of a real historical process. The question is not whether human groups ever migrated, or whether one culture influenced another, or whether all cultures are capable of endogenous change: all these kinds of events are known to have happened in the past. The deeper quest is for an understanding of how these metaphors of cultural experience can be combined in meaningful patterns to structure a growing body of particular observations about prehistoric and early historic times.

It has become fashionable to interpret the voluminous writings of Gordon Childe, spread over four decades of the early 20th century, in terms of the successive dominance of each of these three paradigms. Thus (very crudely) his works written in the 1920s, under the influence of Germanic scholarship mediated through Oxford classics, show the influence of migrationism; his Edinburgh works of the 1930s and 40s adopt a diffusionist perspective; while his London works of the 1950s show an explicit interest in evolutionism. Yet he cannot be counted as an

exclusive adherent to any one of them. Thus he can be described as a modified diffusionist (Daniel), technological evolutionist (Shanks and Tilley), or a migrationist-invasionist (J.G.D. Clark); but essentially his models were based on historical conjunctions, using elements from all three. Yet even though he derived ideas from a variety of different schools of archaeology, it would be wrong simply to view his attitude as eclectic or particularist. Nor can it simply be labelled 'Marxist'; for although his Marxism reflected his profound personal belief in social justice and the relevance of past societies for an understanding of his own times, his Marxist interpretations were often a personal creation, and criticised by orthodox Marxist historians as departing from basic principles (e.g. his revolutions were consensualist rather than conflictual). His models were very much his own, even when they drew on his immense knowledge of the range of European scholarship.

What recent commentators have largely failed to grasp, in looking for labels and wider ideological affiliations, was that he was primarily concerned with understanding the archaeological record, and particularly that of prehistoric Europe. Much of his general reading of philosophy and social theory was undertaken while he was a student, and general references are notoriously sparse even in his discussions of archaeological theory. Aware of all the paradigms which have historically informed the writing of prehistoriography, he was not especially concerned with trying to exemplify any of them, but rather to elaborate a set of descriptions which would cope with the growing body of archaeological evidence. He was, in a sense, the first great inductive European prehistorian.

In assessing Childe's contribution to prehistory, therefore, typological pigeon-holing has limited use. What is of lasting value in his interpretations is the more detailed level of writing, concerned with the recognition of patterns in the material he described. It is these patterns which survive as classic problems of European prehistory, even when his explanations of them are recognised as inappropriate.

It is a characteristic of his reconstruction of prehistoric Europe that much of it is wrong. Thus his whole chronology before c. 1500 BC is largely incorrect, his postulated long-distance contacts often non-existant, and his emphasis on metallurgy mostly misplaced. His specific models are often therefore simply dismissed, as aberrations resulting from anachronistic attitudes, misplaced anti-religious rationalism, and a tendency to ignore ethnography. The value of his work thus tends to be assessed in relation to its postulated ideological base. Judgements on his philosophy of archaeology typically focus on a search through his methodological writings for views which most resemble those of the author concerned. (Many commentators, of course, know nothing about European prehistory and so cannot follow the elegance of his reconstructions.) However, it was in his writing of prehistory that he found greatest satisfaction, and that he considered his greatest achievement. His models should thus be evaluated not so much for their accuracy as for their fertility, and as a stock of metaphors by which he sought to illuminate what was thought to have happened in the past. This is the most useful level at which to appreciate his contribution, since it is the aspect of the subject which provides the opportunity for cumulative understanding, as opposed to the cyclical changes of interpretative fashion. It would be quite wrong to see Childe simply as the creator of a succession of abstact ideological constructions; on the contrary, his achievement was precisely to begin the process of emancipating the prehistoric record from monolithic interpretations arising from imported bodies of ideas.

CHILDE'S PREHISTORIOGRAPHY AS A SEARCH FOR PATTERNS

To make use of Childe's heritage as a prehistorian, we must therefore avoid on the one hand simply looking at its factual base (since these observations have often been superseded by new evidence), and on the other hand simply treating it as the expression of current ideologies and paradigms. The most fruitful part of it lies in between, in its tactical deployment of analogies and inductive generalisations about how prehistory was patterned. (This methodology, incidentally, is more generally applicable to the history of scholarship, and would result in a more sympathetic reading of some classic texts: it could with profit be applied to understanding the contribution of the late David Clarke.) It should be remembered that the objective of the exercise is archaeology and not intellectual history: I am interested not so much in **why** Childe believed what he did at certain times, but in how we can make use of his ideas in the context of present problems.

To begin the process of making use of his prehistoriography, we may consider some of the characteristics of his writing. At the most general level, as expressed in his later works on method and theory, it is an assertion of the cumulation of knowledge and the irreversability of time. It is our privilege (and even more so that of future generations) to know more about the past than our predecessors; in a world of plural polities, where knowledge cannot be completely monopolised for political purposes, there is the possibility of a cumulative advance in understanding despite the constant tendency for it to be misused for contemporary ends (most obviously, in his day, by the Nazis). While all prehistoriography is of its time, it is not just the arbitrary and tendentious telling of a tale. Of itself, archaeology is neither necessarily supportive nor subversive of contemporary social values: it is capable of being an autonomous domain. At the present time, this point is worth repeating forcefully.

Prehistory itself, in Childe's view, was also cumulative, in that the increased complexity of material culture through time contained the products of many earlier creative episodes. While the meanings associated with material artifacts are subject to constant change, the material processes of their production and reproduction do indeed embody information stored in material form and transmitted between generations. Different societies make a larger or smaller contribution to the surviving pool. This surviving information is primarily concerned with 'technology' rather than (say) 'religion'; the social and ideological context may change, but it is the technology which is likely to persist between historical episodes and changes of the mode of production. Hence it is possible to write a coherent account of cumulative techno- logical progress ('evolution'), in prehistoric as well as historic times. We may differ from Childe as to how we assign a moral value to his process, but it is foolish to doubt its existence.

Nevertheless, technological progress is not an autonomous motor of societal change; Childe was in no sense a determinist. Technologies appear in response to social needs and changes of social scale. The Urban Revolution called into being improved technologies of transport and mass production, but it was not caused by them. Moreover the actual course of technological change — the nature of what is produced — is a cultural creation. Demand is not specified by technology, but rather the reverse. Culture is a social game, capable of creating its own patterns: Man makes himself. Emulation is part of this game, absorbing patterns from other cultures (as well as between different social levels within a single community), and this process has a spatial logic which can often be described as 'diffusion'. Like technological innovation, this is not an autonomous process, but a socially located set of transactions which responds to local needs within a created cultural framework: foreign introductions are selected for cultural compatibility and their attractiveness to emerging elites.

On the other hand, as Childe stressed, this process does not always take place peacefully. Not only is civilisation often introduced at the point of a sword, but so also are other 'advanced' ways of life which demand more effort or sacrifice from the local inhabitants. Some of these phenomena are aptly described as migrations, which must have been very common in later prehistoric times, and we must be careful lest in our reaction to Germanic metaphors of prehistory we discount entirely any movement of population. Sometimes people redistribute themselves in relation to resources, rather than the reverse, even in post-Palaeolithic times.

This reading of Childe's interpretative framework is admittedly selective: it omits aspects such as his personal antipathy to religion, or his specific identification of episodes of diffusion and migration. Yet as an abstract account of his approach, there is little to which a modern prehistorian could take exception. It is an appropriate set of attitudes with which to approach unwritten history. Having considered these generalities, therefore, let us look more closely at Childe's reconstructions of what happened in prehistoric Europe.

Childe viewed European prehistory as a dialectic between the Near East, the steppes, and the temperate extremity of western Eurasia which was to constitute historical Europe. During the periods which most concerned him, the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, Europe was largely a recipient of cultural elements from the other two: though it was never a passive recipient, and the elements which it received were interpreted and integrated in new ways. This vision (striking a middle way between Nordic nationalism and passive diffusionism) gave a structure to his interpretation of prehistoric developments. A glance at the maps accompanying the various editions of The Dawn of European Civilisation will show that Europe was perceived as a series of zones of cultural complexity, increasing to the south-east in proximity to the advanced cultures of the east Mediterranean and western Asia. This structure was created by the spread of farming from the Near East, and reinforced by the spread of other features during the Bronze Age − both via Anatolia and across the Pontic steppes, mediated by groups with a more pastoral emphasis.

Childe therefore correctly identified the nodal character of the Danube basin as a route of transmission to the heart of Europe. His first farmers, beginning in the Balkans, moved through the Carpathian Basin to occupy the central European loess zone, thus creating the initial contrast between southeast and northwest. In the North European Plain, the further spread of agriculture came about through the acculturation of native Mesolithic groups, drawing elements from several parts of the farming area to the south.   This, too, accords with subsequent discoveries and interpretations. Where his account has been most substantially modified, however, is in his view of the origins of early farming groups in the west. In placing his emphasis on transmission along the Danube corridor, Childe created a new pattern which broke with earlier conceptions; but in attributing the spread of farming and megalith-building to the west via the Atlantic route, he continued a traditional mode of interpretation. The pattern which he described is one which − paradoxically − is now being increasingly confirmed for Phoenician influences in the first millennium BC; but for the fifth millennium (rather than the second millennium, which is when he thought that megalith-building had spread), it is simply anachronistic. Megaliths were not a distant reflection of the Orient: they were a creation of native groups in the far west under the influence of central European timber architecture, just as they were in the North European Plain. Where he failed, was in not taking his own model far enough, and in giving too much credence to earlier views.

Childe was right, however, in stressing the antithesis between western megalith-builders and the pattern represented by the central and north European Corded Ware/Single Grave tradition, which replaced it in many areas. In this development he saw both an indigenous European

trend towards a more pastoral emphasis, and input from further east via the Pontic steppes. This insight remains a valid one, for it correctly characterises the greater mobility of later Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age settlement and burial patterns, and also the way in which these were to some extent modelled on patterns developed in the less forested areas of eastern Europe. The spread of the domestic horse is symptomatic of these new connections and possibilities. It was in this context that metallurgy became more widespread, and the emergence of larger, intercultural entities such as the Bell Beaker complex took place. These developments provided the conditions for the emergence of Bronze Age societies.

As his A.B.C. talk (reproduced in this volume) neatly summarises, this was the point at which Childe saw Europe's originality first appearing. This he attributed to the spread of metallurgy from the Near East. His emphasis on bronzeworking now appears misplaced, in that its technological significance (for instance in permitting the construction of wheeled vehicles) is exaggerated, and its supposed economic effects, in creating the need for trade, ignores the earlier circulation of items such as stone axes or shell ornaments over comparable distances. Indeed, basic copper metallurgy had been invented in the Balkans long before, at the same time as farming reached northern Europe. Yet his interpretation of the role of metallurgy was not simply an empirical description, but forms part of a wider allegory of the relationship netween Europe and the East, which is worth examining in its own right; for at a deeper level, it embodies important insights.

The image behind his interpeperetation was the transfer of technology from an old to a new society, just as Japanese industrialisation in the 19th century was made possible by earlier capital investment in Europe. European societies were similarly transformed by Near Eastern innovations, but without the social rigidity of oriental states and empires with their pyramids and ziggurats. The processes which gave rise to the civilisations of Bronze and Iron Age Greece could be aptly described in similar terms. As small political units participating in east Mediterranean trade, but at too great a distance to be incorporated into unified imperial structures, the first European civilisations did have a distinctive character, which allowed Greek philosophy and science to flourish. Other coastal states, such as Phoenicia, made notable contributions in technology and commerce before their incorporation into oriental empires. These are characteristics of 'secondary' rather than 'primary' civilisations. The distinctive political structure of Medieval and Modern Europe resulted from its plurality of competing centres, drawing on the accumulated cultural and technological expertise of earlier Old World civilisations, but not tributary to any single political focus.

In a sense, this process of technological transmission without political incorporation had been occurring throughout later prehistory: farming, wheeled vehicles, woollen textiles, advanced metallurgy, weaponry, furniture, techniques of glass and pottery manufacture, the taste for wine and many other elements successively arrived in Europe from more advanced societies in the East, in a process of continuing cultural irradiation. The arrival of the plough in the later Neolithic was perhaps the most fundamental turning point, as it greatly increased the incentive for deforestation, and so created the conditions under which larger numbers of livestock could be kept. These transmissions thus both accelerated and were superimposed on the internal dynamic of European development, and consequently created new patterns not represented elsewhere. In particular, the pattern of light farming and 'green' pastoralism (i.e. European dairying rather than the 'brown' nomadic pastoralism of the steppes and semi desert) which grew up in the Bronze Age created a series of metal-using but non-urban societies in which bronze seems to have circulated as a prestige material and medium of exchange for social and ritual obligations, in a way quite different from the use of bronze in the already centralised (and often silver-using) urban economies of the contemporary Near East.

Bronze Age metalsmiths in Europe were perhaps not the free craftsmen of Childe's imagination, and nor was the Bronze Age the beginning of a European technological superiority which would explain its later success. Bronze at this time was probably less significant as a technology than as a proto-currency in a livestock-centred economy. Nevertheless his main point, about the divergence of Europe from an oriental model, retains its validity. It is probably the role of livestock which is the fundamental aspect, for, in oriental and to some extent Mediterranean societies, pastoral production forms a largely independent sector, often involving nomadic or transhumant movement, subordinate to urban capital. In temperate Europe, however, livestock was the basic form of possession and accumulation of wealth (cf. *pecunia*), and thus of the differentiation of social status. The change which Childe identified as a shift from the 'oriental' pattern of Neolithic villages or megalithic monuments to a 'European' pattern of mobile settlement and wealth could be seen as reflecting the dissolution of social structures centred on fixed capital, (horticulture and conical clans), by segmentary societies with mobile assets. Since it was the former pattern (enlarged in scale by the use of irrigation) which continued to underlie the 'Asiatic' social structures of the first civilisations, his use of the term 'oriental' may be seen as a perceptive analogy even if it is misleading as a literal description.

Although Childe was primarily interested in this contrast between Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe, the models which he absorbed as part of his training in classics were in fact more directly applicable to the Iron Age. (His methodological remarks on matters such as skeuomorphism and the social context of burial customs still have much to teach classical archaeologists about their material!) The world of prospectors, colonists and craftsmen that he evoked for the Bronze Age is in fact a more accurate description of the processes behind the opening up of Europe by the Phoenicians and Greeks in the first millennium BC. Childe was more at home in societies with a respect for hierarchy and literary skills, both in his own life and in his imagined past. His pre-history was literally very close to history. Perhaps because of his inherited steroetype of 'savage society', he suffered from a failure of imagination when it came to dealing with societies closer to nature, such as hunters and even early farmers. Despite his programmatic remarks at the beginning of his A.B.C. talk, it is hard to imagine how he would have coped with Australian prehistory. Fortunately, this task has been more than adequately accomplished by others; and it is through a marriage of the insights of anthropological and historical archaeology that a more realistic account of the prehistoric world can now be written.

Childe wrote prehistory on a scale which is rarely attempted nowadays, and with a subtlety which often goes unrecognised. A prehistory of Europe for the current generation remains to be written. When it is, it will owe a lot to his perception and structuring of the material. The present task is to interpret the enormous wealth of local detail which has accumulated since his death within a vision of comparable scope and imagination. From the current plethora of 'case studies', we need to rediscover patterns — elusive, ambiguous, open to re-interpretation, but perceptions which will stimulate future writers to see prehistory afresh: metaphors which express the coherence of past and present experience.

THE HERITAGE OF AMBIGUITY

'There is a truth underlying Bosch-Gimpera's suggestion....': this phrase in a footnote struck me as I leafed once again through my copy of the *Dawn*. It is not a characteristic kind of phrase to find in the archaeological literature nowadays. Its disappearance reflects not just the brashness of much modern scholarship, but also a genuine loss. Archaeologists, to some extent under American influence, have become very literal- minded and unimaginative.

Articles, even whole books, are immediately pigeonholed in prepared categories. Things are either black or white, true or false: ambiguity cannot be tolerated. Even (perhaps especially) those who are loudest in proclaiming that archaeological narratives are essentially rhetorical and poetic in nature seem unable to recognise these qualities in the writings of their predecessors. This blindness to history and insensitivity to the written word goes hand in hand with an inability actually to write prehistory. Gordon Childe rewrote the *Dawn* six times in the course of a lifetime's scholarship, on each occasion adding a new richness of fact and metaphor within an original conception of how to write about the remote past. It is a humbling thought.

NOTE

1. This paper has evolved from a series of lectures and seminars, and is reproduced largely as verbally delivered. A more technical presentation of this material, together with appropriate references, is published as 'V. Gordon Childe: Archaeology and Intellectual History' in **Past and Present** 125 (1989), pp.151–85. I am very grateful for the invitation to explore some of these ideas in the present context.

Ashmolean Museum
Oxford U.K.

3–7 SEPTEMBER 1990

QUEENSLAND MUSEUM

The Queensland Museum is interested in hearing from people who wish to make presentations at the conference. The aim of the conference is to provide a forum to exchange the ideas of museum workers and others involved in the protection, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

There are currently four major themes:

• The use of museum anthropological collections — includes repatriation, research potential, display, oral histories and management.

• Art in anthropological museum collections.

• The representation of Australia's cultural diversity in museum collections.

• Cultural heritage management in the Pacific and South East Asia.

Annual Conference of Museum Anthropologists

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It is planned to present four papers and a discussion paper by the chair in each session. Each of the five papers will be allowed 20 minutes. A total of six sessions are planned.

If you wish to make a presentation of any kind, or would like further information on the conference please phone: Ms Judith Bartlett (07) 840 7668