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THE ARCHAEOLOGIES OF V. GORDON CHILDE

Vere Gordon Childe, although dead since 1957, remains the most renowned and widely read archaeologist of the 20th century (Trigger, 1992: 9).

V. Gordon Childe is one of the most controversial figures of the history of archaeology. Born in Sydney, Australia in 1892, and educated in the Sydney University and the Oxford, Gordon Childe remained an influential yet controversial scholar. He was criticized heavily for both his general theoretical framework such as for undermining the role of class conflict in social evolution (Trigger, 1980: 15), and for more specialized matters, such as his ignorance and underrating of the New World cultures and his complete misunderstanding of the content of the Maya writing¹ (Flannery, 1992: 101). All these criticisms, however, do not change the fact that Gordon Childe is still one of the leading figures of archaeology.

After graduating from Sydney University with a degree in Latin, Greek and Philosophy in 1913, Childe arrived in Oxford and studied with Sir Arthur Evans and Sir John Myres, who shifted his track from classical philology to prehistoric archaeology (Trigger, 1980: 9) and also introduced him to the perennial debate about the Indo-European origins (McNairn, 1980: 4). On his return to Australia in 1916, Gordon Childe

¹ It was brought to my attention by Stephen Houston that this case holds true for most contemporaries of Gordon Childe.

became actively involved in politics in his home country but returned to England in 1922 (McNairn, 1980: 4-5; Trigger, 1992: 9). In the early 1930s, he began to dive deeply into Marxist theory, an interest enhanced by his visits to the USSR from the 1934 on, to such a degree that he asserted he “paid lip-service to Marxism” in the 1939 edition of *The Dawn of the Prehistory of Europe* (Childe, 1958: 72). All these stages of Childe’s life – his education and his political views – had important impacts on his work.

David R. Harris (1992: 2) summarizes Childe’s relevance to contemporary archaeology under three headings: 1. The nature of cultures and the role of cultural history 2. Cultural evolution and 3. Marxist interpretations of history. These theoretical underpinnings, still under debate in archaeological thought today, found reflections in different works of V. Gordon Childe. *The Aryans* and *The Dawn of European Civilization* are generally regarded as his most “Culture-Historical” works. In *The Aryans*, ethnicity was the dominant theme (Trigger, 1980: 55), although this was an ethnicity disconnected from the racial discourses of its day and focused more on language (Sherratt, 1989: 159). In *The Dawn*, he went through a great deal of material remains, examined the material culture of Crete, Anatolia, Cyclades, Greece, Balkans, Danube, Thrace, The Great European Plain, North Europe, Sicily, Italy, Western Mediterranean Islands, Iberian Peninsula, Western Alpines, Atlantic Europe and The British Isles over the Neolithic and the Bronze Age (Childe, 1950), and concluded that “the Battle Axe culture” were the ancestors of the Europeans, and it was Anatolia that had the earliest Battle axe tradition (Childe, 1950: 336). Although Childe should be criticized for the bold conclusions he reached with his unpromising material, he should be applauded for having incorporated such a great range of geography into *The Dawn*. Given that one of the main traits of Culture-Historical

Archaeology was its homogeneous approach towards the “culture”s it examined in isolation, this approach of Childe was clearly valuable. In the end, however, he could not escape diffusionism. For him, migrations from the Ice Ages onward (1965: 53), mobile groups and trade resulted in the “diffusion of civilization” from “the great civilizations” of Egypt and the Near East (1965: 110-113). Although its intensity decreased, this discourse of diffusionism never left Childe’s works.

His work in cultural evolution was visible in all of his publications, with concepts like “Revolutions”, and the “Savagery-Barbarism-Civilization” triad. Close examination of materials from a vast geography drove him to make comparisons, first in temporally fixed geographies, as in *the Dawn*, and then in diachronic perspectives as evident in *New Light on the Most Ancient Near East*, which introduced, at last, his famous “Revolutions”. In the *New Light*, he examined the diffusion of different artifacts (like the knot-headed pin, seal technology, the Sumerian shaft-tube axe, etc.) and metal technology in general, which led him to conclusions about chronologies, and his postulation of a functional succession of cultural traits, which he treated as “proofs of diffusion” (Childe, 1957: 241-244).

Numerous examples can be given regarding the “old-fashioned” ways of Gordon Childe – which would extend the limits of this paper. Andrew Sherratt, who states that Childe was “fighting 19th century battles”, summarizes the reasons of Childe’s failure: the answers he provided were already out of date, European prehistory was lacking a sound chronological base, Childe had a lot of anachronisms as well as backward projections of modern concepts, and what he borrowed from Marx was his most eminent 19th century aspects (Sherratt, 1989: 181-183). It is thus once more evident that Childe hardly is the

person to trust in terms of conclusions. What I want to focus on more is, however, his bearing on current and future archaeologies.

Flannery admits that “There had been no overarching theory for the early Near East before Childe. He had taken a mass of data, collected almost entirely by others, and put it into a framework” (Flannery, 1992: 101). It is no longer relevant to argue the data that Gordon Childe studied in great detail. Ongoing excavations, surveys, and new archaeological technologies such as resistance survey or metal analyses have greatly enhanced our view of the Old World archaeology since Gordon Childe conducted his studies. His real worth, however, lies in *how* he approached the data. Rather than trying to rule him out with all his errors of chronology or socially unsound interpretations, we can try to learn from his cross-geographic approach, his belief in interaction (he visited the USSR many times for museum visits, learning about the data first-hand, and most importantly, to learn how Soviet archaeology and Soviet archaeologists worked), his command of a variety of ancient and modern languages, and his ability to derive inspiration from a variety of sources.

From my perspective, the most important value attached to Gordon Childe is how he interpreted the role of archaeology as a discipline. At a time when racist and national discourses were in the hands of dictators and when archaeology was becoming an instrument of fascist expansion, Childe specifically stood up to this, and advocated that “the study of the past has to be liberating” (Rowlands, 1992: 49). He was equally frustrated with the Soviet government’s insistence on telling the archaeologists how to interpret their data (Trigger, 1992: 18).

Another striking feature of Childe is his journey through archaeology(ies), and the resemblance of this journey to the history of the archaeological tradition of the 20th century. Bruce G. Trigger (1992: 11-24) distinguishes four paths of thought that Childe passed through, in chronological order; the Culture-Historical, the Functional, the Evolutionary and the Symbolic². A very similar configuration was echoed in the 20th century archaeology, with the Culture-Historical model being replaced gradually by New (Processual) Archaeology, Neo-evolutionism beginning to appear in the scene in the 1950s and 1960s (Trigger, 2006: 387), while Post-Processualism was the major intervention of the 1980s (Trigger, 2008: 386). Although his connections with Post-Processualism should be debated and should be seen as Trigger's wholehearted stand for Gordon Childe, the rest can be taken as markers of why Childe remained relevant to mainstream archaeology throughout the 20th century, and at least until now, in the 21st century.

Among these theoretical genres, it is the New (Processual) Archaeology that Childe came to be associated with most. Renfrew (1992: 122), who sees Childe as a pioneer of this movement, gives Childe's case study of the spatial distribution of chamber tombs on the Orcadian island of Rousay as a perfect example of his leading role in site patterning, spatial analysis, and the relations between spatial and social organization. Harris (1992: 5), similarly, sees Childe's work on settlement forms as a breakthrough for the development of New Archaeology.

² More elaborate and much detailed accounts of these phases are given in Trigger's book on V. Gordon Childe, not necessarily with the same labels, but with regards to "The Dawn and The Aryans" (standing for the Culture-Historical Period), "Prehistoric Economics", "Human Progress and Decline" and "Societal Archaeology".

This continuous relevance, however, brought continuous revision of Childe's work, not necessarily always on the primary source, and a persistent erosion of the ideas and concepts he used. A good example is the well-known concept of "Revolutions". I agree that serious problems exist with the use of this concept, since the Neolithic and Urban Revolutions of Childe were, in the first place, interpreted as preludes to the Industrial Revolution. He advocated that the Neolithic and Urban Revolutions resulted in dramatic changes comparable to the Industrial Revolution, and they should be judged with the same criteria and standards (Childe, 1965: 9). Therefore, in Childe's hands, they constantly suffered by association with Industrial Revolution, perhaps an inadequate analogy (Trigger, 1980: 74-75). However, as the "Revolutions" were cited more and more, they came to be seen as defining moments of transition in the human history, which brought Childe much criticism (Wailes, 1996: 1, cf. esp. note 1). In the original context, Childe's "Revolutions" were more progressive than modern views of him. In his own words: "Food-production – the deliberate cultivation of food-plants, especially cereals, and the taming, breeding, and selection of animals – was an economic revolution" (Childe, 1957: 23). Furthermore, he saw another revolution in human knowledge, which generally escapes unnoticed. For him, the accumulated experience of the Near East constituted one continuous revolution (Childe, 1965: 179), for which he went through various examples of writing, mathematics, measurements, medicine, and astronomy (Childe, 1965: 181-226).

In sum, V. Gordon Childe was a controversial scholar in his time, and he remains so. However, as I tried to emphasize throughout the paper, there is a value attached to his work, which is his way of interpreting archaeology as a discipline, and the way he approached a great body of material that went unscrutinized or poorly scrutinized before him.

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