Spells of History: Childe's Contribution to the European Identity Discourse

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It is now ten years since the Council of Europe's grand art exhibition 'Gods and Heroes of the Bronze Age – Europe at the Time of Ulysses' toured Europe as a means to 'increase the awareness of the value and the significance of the archaeological heritage' of Europe (AH 2008). Presenting the 'first golden age' of Europe, the Bronze Age exhibition was one of the first steps towards a more defined European cultural politics. The campaign represented something new in European politics, but the idea of the Bronze Age as a golden age in European history is not new. This article draws attention to the archaeological heritage which enabled such an idea to be put forward: Childean prehistory.

The Grand Narrative

Research on Bronze Age Europe, and European prehistory more generally, can be divided into two large research traditions: micro and macro studies. While the first, dedicated to local or regional studies of a limited geographical area, is by far the most common, it is the latter, macro studies, or the grand narratives, exploring the continent over a longer period of time, which will be discussed here (Oma 2007: 28). The grand narratives of V. G. Childe represented a break with the archaeological practice of their time, that was mainly occupied with the development of regional and national typologies and chronologies. Childe established the first thorough grand narrative of European prehistory and a model for explaining the cultural changes witnessed in prehistory. Thus he can be described as a founding father of a truly *European* prehistory.

Towards a *European* Prehistory

Childe's early works were produced within a social and political climate, when Europe as an entity was, at the very best, weak. While a few organisations such as the Pan-European Union existed, Europe was politically dominated by nation-states. Furthermore, the picture of Europe as a united area and the civilised and progressive centre of the world gradually fell apart (Hayes 1994: 1–2; Kaelble 2005: 19, 23). Rather than unification, the period is therefore characterised by break-up and crisis, and with the old ideas of European-ness falling apart (Delanty 1995: 100–114). Yet it was in many ways the old patterns of oppositional classification that enabled Childe to move towards a conceptualisation of the Bronze Age as 'the dawn of European civilisation'.

Childe was the first to use the older Western binary model of Europe versus the Orient actively in the interpretation of archaeological material, and to argue that prehistory provided the answer to the divergence of Europe and the Near East. As such Childe's argument can be inter-textually linked to the philosophical debates of Montesquieu, Hegel and Marx concerning the relationship between the Near East and Europe (Rowlands 1987). This was possible because Childe was one of the few who had extensive knowledge about both European archaeological material and Near Eastern material. By being able to contrast and compare archaeological materials, he created a model for interaction between the Near East and Europe.

Already in the first edition of *The Dawn of European Civilization* Childe's aim was to investigate 'the foundation of European Civilization as a peculiar and individual manifestation of human spirit' (Childe 1925: xiii). In the Preface Childe presents two schools of thought: an Orientalist view that argued

that the roots of Western civilisation were to be found in the Ancient East; and an Occidentialist perspective that argued that 'all the higher elements in human culture' originated in Europe itself (Childe 1925: xiii). Childe, however, argued for a middle position where the Orient was seen as a centre for development whilst still emphasising that 'the peoples of the West were not slavish imitators' (Childe 1925: xiii). Rather he argued that European civilisation was 'a specific and individual expression of human activity [that] only began to take shape during the [N]eolithic epoch' (Childe 1925: 1). In this process of Europeanization it is, however, the Bronze Age that stands out: the Bronze Age is considered to be the period when Europe moved from adopting and adapting, to drawing on the innovations of the Orient in order to develop their own innovations and cultural expressions. Thus Childe argued the pre- and protohistory of the Ancient East should be seen as 'an indispensable prelude to the true appreciation of European prehistory' (Childe 1928: 2).

The theme of the Near East-Europe relationship therefore enabled Childe to establish a framework where prehistoric Europe expressed an overreaching unity despite its many 'cultures'. Both entities were clearly diverse, but the general synthesis made it possible to view Europe and the Near East as opposites where the internal differences were of less importance. Following the archaeological norms of the time, Childe uses the differences in material culture to argue for the contrast between European and Oriental spirit:

> We find in Crete none of those stupendous palaces that betoken the autocratic power of the oriental despot. Nor do gigantic temples and extravagant tombs like the Pyramids reveal an excessive preoccupation with ghostly things. The consequences of this distinction are reflected in Minoan art. The Cretan artist was not limited to perpetuating the cruel deed of a selfish despot nor doomed to formalism by the innate conservatism of priestly superstition. Hence the modern naturalism, the truly occidental feeling for life and nature that distinguish Minoan vase paintings, frescoes and intaglios. Beholding these charming scenes of games and processions, animals and fishes we breathe already a European atmosphere. Likewise in industry the absence of the unlimited labour-power at the disposal of a despot necessitated a concentration on the invention and elaboration of tools and weapons that foreshadows the most distinctive feature of European civilization. (Childe 1925: 29)

Hence the difference in material culture enabled Childe to put forward interpretations and comparisons between the immaterial character of peoples of the Near East and Europe. As such the material expressions become symbols for norms, values and qualities of the peoples who once created the monuments and so forth. In this manner the material culture is also understood as expressive of social and political structures of the societies.

Due to the absence of such monumental structures in Minoan culture, and even more so in the later Bronze Age societies of Europe, the 'Europeans' are interpreted as free, independent and innovative. According to Childe the Minoans were 'deeply indebted both to Mesopotamia and Egypt', but their civilisation was no mere copy; it had an 'original and creative force' (Childe 1925: 29). Thus Childe argued that Minoan civilisation 'stands out as essentially modern in outlook' and that 'the Minoan spirit was thoroughly European and in no sense oriental' (Childe 1925: 29). Furthermore, the variety of tools and weapons is thought 'to illustrate the originality of the Minoans and their influence in Europe' (Childe 1925: 33). It is, for example, argued that the Minoans, after drawing on Egyptian and Sumerian technical innovations, gradually 'outstripped the dwellers on the Nile's axe technology' (Childe 1925: 34). From early Minoan Crete this, so to speak, transforming process of Europeanization can be seen in the spread of type artefacts through trade. In this way Childe's early works are good examples of the culture historic archaeology normative understanding of culture; the difference is that he, unlike his contemporaries, interpreted this from a large-scale perspective. The end result is a situation in which the diversity of the European material is united when seen in relation to the Near East.

The Bronze Age as a Key to European-ness

By 1945 the grand narrative of European prehistory was well known and been taken up and developed

by for example C. F. Hawkes (1940). Until his death Childe continued to develop and re-interpret his grand narrative, and a series of new interpretations and additions to older works emerged in the 1950s. Towards the end of his life Childe once again returned to exploring and presenting the Bronze Age as the turning point in history. According to Childe (1962: 7–8) it was Hawkes that made him aware of the importance of the Bronze Age: '… C. F. Hawkes … insisted that the European Bronze Age, far from being a just a degradation of the Oriental, already exhibited progressive and distinctively European innovations …'. Childe's point of departure is therefore that 'It was with the Bronze Age that the course of Europe's history – social and economic as well as technological and scientific – began to diverge both from that of the New World and from that of the Ancient East' (Childe 1957: 2; see also 1962: 7–8; 1973[1957]: 33). Thus he is able to situate archaeology in the wider context of the Hegelian notion of history, and follow Marxist traditions, and the model of thought such as the Asiatic mode of production, to further differentiate Europe from the Near East (Rowlands 1987, 1994).

Already in his early work Childe emphasised the importance of the use of bronze material on the road towards civilisation. Hawkes (1940) had, to a larger extent elaborated on the role of bronze in the process of Europeanization, and in Childe's last works *bronze* become *the material* which differentiates European and Oriental Bronze Age societies. Childe stressed that the Bronze Age was more than just a technological stage emphasising that with the use of bronze: one got a more efficient means of production; new theoretical sciences emerged with the smelting and locating of ores (geology); organised international trade was initiated; and a new population of full-time specialists, the bronze smiths, originated (Childe 1957: 3–4). Furthermore he argued that 'metallurgy was the small beginning of … secondary industries' (Childe 1957: 5). Building on his older opposition between the Orient and Europe, Childe emphasises the *societal differences* between them when he claims that the beginning of the Bronze Age in Egypt and Mesopotamia 'coincided with a social revolution – the 'Urban Revolution'… the establishment of totalitarian regimes under which a surplus was systematically extracted from peasant masses and gathered into centralized royal or temple granaries' (Childe 1957: 6). He argues that totalitarian economies must have been essential for the early development of metallurgy, because a relative large surplus must be present for 'men to adopt the hazardous professions of prospector, miner, smelter, distributor, and smith' (Childe 1957: 8). According to Childe this totalitarian economy led to a situation where those involved in metal production were liberated from agricultural production only to become completely dependent on the court or temple. This situation guaranteed the metal producers regular supplies of raw material. However, this soon resulted in a situation where illiterate lower classes produced metal on the demand of the court/temple. As a result there was no longer a close relationship between the theoretical and applied sides of metal production.

In Europe, Childe argues, the situation was different: metallurgy developed later and the social setting was different. Rather than cities, the Aegean region consisted of smaller townships without strong class divisions (Childe 1962: 150–156). The first manufacturing industries might have been introduced by 'immigrant specialists' who later trained native apprentices that took on and blended traditions from both Egypt and Mesopotamia in order to create a truly Aegean fashion, which was progressive and innovative. In contrast to the Oriental craftsmen, the European craftsmen had not been reduced to an underclass as no class division existed. Rather the European craftsmen were free and could travel about and choose their markets (Childe 1957: 9–10). Drawing on Homer, Childe (1962: 114, 157) explains the smiths' freedom arguing that 'a craftsman is welcome everywhere'. Furthermore, he argued that this creative and progressive situation was maintained because the Aegean region was too remote to be 'the victim of Oriental imperialism' (Childe 1957: 10; also 1962: 160–161). They might have been aliens in a society organised around kinship and landless, but the European smiths held a particular position in Bronze Age society due to their skills and achievements. In fact, the travelling smiths are thought to have been core actors in establishing what from around 1500 BC was '… an *international commercial system* linked up with a turbulent multitude of tiny political units' in temperate Europe (Childe 1962: 172, my emphasis). In order to sustain the flow of raw materials, the smaller city-states or tribes had to surrender their economic independence. This did, however, lead to a situation in which '… they

also benefited from a free circulation of ideas and their exponents' (Childe 1962: 172). As such bronze becomes the key for understanding the difference between the Orient and Europe, and provides us with ideas of what it means to be European or what characterises European-ness.

Linking Past and Present

While all of the above contributes to the idea of the Bronze Age as a period of outstanding importance in European history and a perfect European golden age, Childe's linking of the past and the present is equally important. It should be noted that Childe's interlinking of the events of the Bronze Age and later European history has a rather small place in his works. However, these sentences are concluding remarks in his last works and in many ways function to legitimate the idea of the 'long duree' of European identity. According to Childe the early Bronze Age metal-smiths represent the first scientists, and can be seen as 'the lineal ancestors of the natural scientists who since Galileo, Newton and Pascal have been pooling their results in an international society' (Childe 1957: 14). Furthermore, he argued that 'Links between the two groups can be found in the travelling scholars and migrant guildsmen of Medieval Europe and in less familiar figures in the Dark Ages and Iron Ages' (Childe 1957: 14). This link between the past and present is further explored in the ending of his last book *The Prehistory of Europe*:

> The national states that eventually emerged were indeed enormously larger than our Bronze Age tribes and fewer in number. But they have all shown themselves just as mutually jealous in policy and as competitive economically. All have been increasingly dependent on a supra-national economic system for vital raw materials as well as the disposal of their own products. While peasantries have often been reduced to serfdom even more rigorously than under the despotic monarchs of the Bronze Age Orient, craftsmen, the exponents of applied science, have preserved their traditional freedom of movement within a supranational economy. The metics at Athens, the way-faring journeymen of the Middle Ages, and the migrant craft unionist of the nineteenth century are the lineal descendants of the itinerants just described. But so were the Natural Philosophers and Sophists in Classical Greece, the travelling scholars of medieval Europe, and the natural scientists who from the days of Galileo and Newton have freely exchanged information and ideas by publication, correspondence, and visits regardless of political frontiers. (Childe 1962: 172–173).

Thus 'the dawn of the European civilisation' is traced back to the Bronze Age, and is characterised as a period when a number of traits of European society emerged.

While it is unknown why Childe returned to this topic at this point in time, it might have been related to the political climate of the 1950s, and not only to his ambiguous attitude to his own work caused by the new method of radiocarbon dating. During the early post-war period Europe was gradually changing: the quest for peace had pushed forward a new focus on the necessity for collaboration. European integration was only in its infancy, but already from its onset, culture and heritage had their place, even if they were largely forgotten in the decades that followed (for details, see Høllleand 2008). Culture and heritage were emphasised as essential aspects for ensuring unity and peace in Europe, by both Sir Winston Churchill (2008[1946]) and more formally, by inclusion in the Council of Europe's *Cultural Convention* (CoE 2008[1954]). As a politically conscious person, it is at least highly likely that Childe was very much aware of these early attempts at the political and cultural process of European integration. With growth in the emphasis on Europe, and a belief in restoring Europe, a proper prehistory for Europe would be, and also seem more politically, if not correct, at least possible.

Childe Revisited

By the 1950s European archaeology was at a crossroads, with the culture historic tradition being gradually challenged by ecological and functionalistic approaches, and the style of grand narratives was losing ground (Prescott 2007: 16). Already in the 1930s Childe had expressed deep doubts about the scientific value of the culture historic approach to archaeology (Childe 1933). However, he never developed new methods or theoretical frameworks to properly challenge it. In particular, his last works

on European prehistory do not incorporate the critical attitudes of his time; rather they are embedded within the culture historic tradition. With the ground-breaking changes in late twentieth century Europe, Childe, ironically, considering his awareness of the political use of the past, provided the foundations for a common European past, from which European identity was further developed.

Awareness of the need for a European identity escalated during the 1970s, but it was not until the 1980s that the important relationship between identity and heritage was realised. During the 1980s the theoretical foundations for this relationship were established through documents such as the *Solemn Declaration on European Union* (EC 2007[1983]), and the document series on 'A People's Europe' (Adonnino 2007[1985]a, b; EC 2007[1986]; Muhr 2007[1985]). The work of the 1980s was implemented in the 1990s with the inclusion of a cultural dimension into the Treaty on European Union (EU 2008[1992]), the cultural programs of Kaleidoscope, Ariane and Räphael, and the Council of Europe's work with *The Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage of Europe* (the Valletta Convention). With the Valletta Convention the 'European Plan for Archaeology' was developed, and one of the major activities for the upcoming five-year period was the creation of a heritage campaign about the Bronze Age.

Through the campaign a number of texts, that can be described as heritage presentations, were published. By 'heritage presentations' I mean texts that are made for general public audiences rather than for the archaeological community. As the archaeological period between ca. 1960 and 1990 represents a return to micro studies, so a consequent return to the grand narratives of Childe was natural. It should be noted, however, that the heritage presentations of Bronze Age Europe also covered newer archaeological research tendencies, such as cosmology and world system theory. Finally, it is important to stress that since the 1990s a new set of grand narratives has emerged (Kristiansen 1994, 1998; Sherratt 1993; and later Kristiansen and Larson 2005). However, these will not be discussed here. (For a full discussion of publications in relation the European identity discourse see Hølleland 2008).

As discussed above the Europe-Near East opposition was central to Childe's conceptualisation of the Bronze Age as 'the dawn of European civilisation'. It is therefore interesting to note that Childe's intense focus on the Europe-Near East opposition no longer plays a central role in either archaeological publications or archaeological heritage presentations. However, many of the related concepts leading to the Childean conceptualisation of European-ness are still very much present. The idea of unity, and hence the existence of a pan-European Bronze Age culture remains central, and is yet again explored through the topic of trade and the use of bronze material. In *European Heritage* Trotzig (2007[1994]) argues that a network of trade connected centres and peripheries, and thus enabled the first golden age of European civilization to blossom. This is developed further by O'Brien, who argues that it was the '… demand for metal [that] laid the basis for an enduring trade network, which created a dependency between different regions'. This is reiterated in the Bronze Age Exhibition to explain that 'The *Homeric* world of the Bronze Age owes its dynamic economic condition to the establishment of long-distance trade on a European scale' (Mohen 1999: 22). As bronze was 'the common medium of exchange', it is bronze that enabled Europe to develop 'into a coherent trading system' (Jensen 1999: 92). In this manner Europe is, so to speak, made smaller – at least for its social elites. While Childe did not bring heroes into his interpretations, one can in many ways compare them to Childean metal-smiths. Essentially they both represent agents that connect Europe through travel: as the demand for metal created dependency between different regions, the trade networks became an important aspect of an integrated Bronze Age Europe.

It goes without saying that when the Bronze Age is presented as part of pan-European heritage some aspects of the period will be highlighted, while others will be downplayed. As noted earlier, when highlighting parts of the grand narrative, it is the *unity* rather than the diversity that is emphasised. This follows research traditions, but it is also an aspect which can easily be used politically, as the Secretary General of the Council of Europe states: 'Diversity is doubtless a richness but it is not by stressing our differences that we shall improve the lot for our children. So now and again it is refreshing

and healthy to recall what unites us all and from long ago' (Tarschys 1999: v).

While unity was of most importance for the early European identity project, the strongest and most direct link between the Childean, and the recent archaeological heritage presentations, is the linking of past and present. As part of an identity project, it is not surprising that parallels between the Bronze Age and present-day societies are explicit. This is made particularly explicit in the *European Heritage* issue – the first of the publications on the Bronze Age as pan-European heritage:

> While the Bronze Age was undoubtedly a turbulent period marked by warfare and migrations, it did make a lasting contribution to modern European society. Through their mastery of the earth's resources, their technical skill and trading pursuits, Bronze Age people contributed greatly to the advance of human civilisation. The Minoan and Mycenaean civilisations in particular occupy a special place in the birth of Europe.

> The Bronze Age was not just a period of technological progress, but also saw important developments in the wider social and economic fields. The appearance of powerful regional leaders and a social hierarchy continues to find expression in the Europe of today. This period of prehistory mirrors to a great extent our Europe, a shifting mosaic of regional identities bound closer by a common interest in trade and enterprise. (O'Brien 2007[1994]).

This link between past and present is also made in the exhibition *Gods and Heroes of the Bronze Age* which states that it 'seeks to explore the conditions under which European history was born – at time when the modern Europe is in the process of creating, building on foundations which, though as yet little known, are not far removed from those of its origins and myths' (Hvass, et al. 1999: viii). Here again we see the reference to the Bronze Age as *'the dawn'* or *'the birth'* of European history and culture.

Furthermore, in a similar fashion to Childean prehistory, heritage interpretations enable continuities to be constructed by arguing, for example, that '… the Bronze Age was a time when many of the traits which we identify with Europe found their first expression' (Trotzig 2007[1994]) or that 'Many of our Western values today – enterprise, inventiveness and individuality – stem from the advances in this period' (O'Brien 2007[1994]). Essentially the archaeological heritage presentations stress *continuity*. In this manner the Bronze Age is made meaningful for the present, because it enables us to understand our origins, as well as enabling a 'domestication' of the period, by singling out aspects of it that people of today can identify with. Hence one can argue that the use of adjectives makes it possible to create 'personhood continuities' which try to link Europe's past and present.

Spells of History

The past, as well as the practice of archaeology, are always situated in a present. Nevertheless, the role of the past, as well as of sciences dealing with the past, will vary from society to society. The inter World War period in which Childe worked was a time when the past and present were increasingly interlinked, particularly in Nazi Germany. This, of course, would have made him very much aware of archaeology's role in contemporary politics – a topic that has, since then, been popular with archaeologists and historians. During the course of the late twentieth century, the way in which the past has been integrated into nationalism, has been extensively studied (e.g. Anderson 1990; Gellner 1983; Graves-Brown et al. 1996), and as a result the processes by which social groups are able to 'certify' national identity by 'proving' connections to the land through historical sources and/or archaeological material, are better understood. Through this decoding of what can be termed the 'identity formula', where concepts of land, people, culture and nations are connected to the past through golden ages, one has, in many ways, created an easily accessible 'recipe' or guideline for the political use of the past – or at least how the 'deep' archaeological and early historic past has been used in the politics of the recent past. With the heritage boom and large scale reconceptualising of Europe, this identity formula was revitalised in the 1980s.

The European identity project of the 1980s and 1990s follows the 'recipe' of the use of archaeology

in nationalism, and in need of a common golden age the Bronze Age was once again chosen, as it has not been used or represented as a specific national golden age, nor has there been any tradition of dividing the material into distinct cultures and peoples. Of equal importance is of course Childe's work. Clearly somewhat dated and debated within the archaeological community, Childe's idea of the Bronze Age as 'the dawn of European civilisation' continues to function as an academic alibi for the heritage campaign. Decades after his death, his grand narratives become what they were not intended to be: building stones for an attempt to create a European identity. Childe's contributions to the development of archaeology are immense, but his unwitting contributions to the creation of a new political identity are one of the unfortunate and unexpected ironies of history.

The European identity project's political aspirations for further European integration have been rather unsuccessful, and this has now been abandoned in favour of a focus on diversity and citizenship. It is perhaps, not a surprise, as its source of inspiration is a framework over a century old, developed within smaller national contexts. As such the project failed to realise the changes that the EC and EU themselves have caused (for full discussion, see Hølleland 2008). Nevertheless, the European identity project has provided a number of opportunities and developments for Bronze Age research, and so we wonder – is it Childe that gets the last laugh?

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