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Binford versus Childe: What makes an archaeologist influential?

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ABSTRACT

This article asks whether Lewis Binford or V. Gordon Childe was the most influential archaeologist of the twentieth century. This is, quite frankly, a question that has no objective answer, but asking it leads us to consider what makes an archaeologist influential. The answer lies in knowing the field widely and well, in thinking about big questions, and in providing what the field needs, in its current historical condition, to answer those big questions.

1. Introduction

Soon after Binford's death, *Science* asked if I would provide a retrospective of him, and I was honored to oblige. Although there was plenty about Binford that was controversial, I still thought it possible to claim in that retrospective that "Lewis Binford was the most influential archaeologist of the 20th century" (Kelly, 2011a: 928).

But a short time after the retrospective appeared, Michael Smith wrote me and pointed out that only two years earlier he had written that "V. Gordon Childe (1892–1957) was the most influential archaeologist of the 20th century" (Smith, 2009: 3). Who is right? Certainly, Childe and Binford were both influential, of that there is no doubt. Both were prodigious authors, received accolades during their lifetimes, and merited multiple obituaries in high profile outlets from various places in the world (e.g., Braidwood, 1958; Rouse, 1958; Meltzer, 2011; Fagan, 2012; O'Connell, 2012; Paddayya, 2011; Rigaud, 2012), including the New York Times (Binford) and the London Times (Childe). But was one more influential than the other?

I have my bias. I studied under Lew in the late 1970s, listened to him lecture in class and at conferences many times, and read nearly everything he wrote. Lew was interested in hunter-gatherers and so am I; he took a materialist perspective and so do I. Childe (1892–1957), on the other hand, died when I was seven months old. I have read Childe, but I've not read all his work; and Childe was primarily interested in "complex" societies and "civilizations," had "a curious blind spot" for New World archaeology (Hawkes, 1982: 278; but see Peace, 1988), and he was an ardent Marxist. Obviously, I lean toward Binford.

Influence is a nebulous subject, one that is not easily measured, and one that we cannot truly consider until someone has been gone for a long time so that we can see how their work stands the test of time. Coupled with my personal bias, this means that I cannot resolve whether Binford or Childe was the more influential today. I suppose we could, with Solomon's wisdom, simply divide the century, giving the first half to Childe and the second to Binford. But Solomon never intended to cut the baby in two, so this would be cowardly. Therefore, I will tilt toward this particular windmill – not to find an answer but to see what it takes to be an influential archaeologist.

2. Balancing Binford and Childe

Influence is difficult to measure. We cannot simply vote, because that would degenerate into a mere popularity contest – and Binford would probably win today simply because he is the more recent. Another way might be to see if people remember a person many years later, to see if his or her work has "legs." Childe is clearly not forgotten, given the published biographies and retrospectives (e.g., Harris, 1994; Gathercole, 1971, 1987; Greene, 1999; Green, 1981; McNairn, 1980; Patterson and Orser, 2005; Peace, 1988; Shennan, 2011; Tringham, 1983). This issue of JAA is one such retrospective for Binford; but we'll have to wait another 50 years to see if Binford is remembered as well as Childe is today.

Both Childe and Binford published prodigiously. They both began their major period of publication at about age 30, and although Childe died at 65 and Binford at 79, Binford published relatively little after the age of 69 (when he completed *Frames of Reference*). So, both scholars had about equal time to publish, although Childe has the more extensive record (22 books and 225 articles; Binford's CV lists about 100 papers, not including comments, replies, etc., and fewer books, if we leave out edited books, three compilations of his papers, and translations). Is one cited more than another? A simple Google

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scholar search (May 18, 2012) returned 15,500 hits for Childe and only 8,160 for Binford. (Childe also won a Google Fight – 5470 to 1820 hits.) Childe wins in Google. Childe also wins in Google Ngram (1920 to 2008; 10/14/2013, using V.G. Childe + V. Gordon Childe versus Lewis Binford + Lewis R. Binford): his mention in Google's scanned books peaks at 1960, then declines; he and Binford have equal mentions by 1984, and they remain roughly equal, both beginning to decline about 1996. Binford's mentions peak at 1980, and is less than twice as high as Childe's peak (Binford is more commonly mentioned in American English books after 1979; in British literature, Binford's mentions peak in 1986, and always remain just slightly below mentions of Childe.

However, using the software Publish or Perish, "VG Childe" returned 8312 and "LR Binford" 16,429 hits (June 1, 2012); Childe has a contemporary h-index of 13, while Binford's is 26. From the Web of Science we find that Binford has four articles in the top 10 cited articles from *American Antiquity*: numbers 1 and 2 (Binford, 1980, 1962), and 8 and 9 (Binford, 1965, 1978a) – no other author even has two. (I checked *Antiquity* for Childe but found none of his articles cited in the top 10.) Also from the Web of Science, Childe's most cited paper is his posthumously published 1958 retrospective (25 citations); Binford's is his 1980 "Willow Smoke and Dogs' Tails" paper (556 citations).

However, we cannot compare citation indices directly since there is an enormous difference in publication outlets between the first and second halves of the twentieth century. There's also a huge difference in the size of the practicing population who could cite Childe or Binford when each was alive. And search engines make a selective recording of citations (e.g., from newer publications and selected journals) and therefore we might also expect citations acquired through Google or citation indices to work against Childe.

Maybe popular references tell us who had more influence. Both Binford and Childe have entries in Wikipedia. Binford merits a song on YouTube ("Hey There Lew Binford"), but Childe has a mention in the film, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (the library scene). But these may only tell us which individual has become a popular icon, a mysterious property of cultural systems; they do not necessarily say anything about influence (James Dean, for example, had speaking roles in only three movies, and yet remains a cultural icon more than 50 years later; and he is remembered more for capturing the beat generation's angst, as well as for his untimely and horrific death than for his contributions to the field of acting).

Being known and read by members of other disciplines is also a signal of influence. Childe may win here as he influenced the historian Arnold Toynbee (Trigger, 1980). Childe's death notice appeared in *The Labour Monthly* (November 1957), hardly an archaeological publication, calling attention to his application of Marxist ideas to prehistory. And one of his most influential papers (see Smith, 2009), "The Urban Revolution" (1950) was published not in an archaeology outlet, but in the *Town Planning Review*. I am not familiar with links Binford had outside of archaeology.

Childe lived at a time when academics (perhaps especially, British ones) were expected to be part of larger intellectual discussions, and conversant in many different subjects, which was possible when the literature was considerably smaller than it is today. Maybe that fact gives him an unfair advantage (but should not detract from Childe's accomplishments), but it's probably cancelled out by the communication systems of the latter half of the twentieth century – the internet, proliferation of journals and presses, and the relative ease of travel (Childe never had to deal with the TSA, but he did live through two world wars). Born in Australia, Childe traveled widely, perhaps more than other archaeologists of his time, including Europe, the UK, the US, Iraq, and the Indus Valley (Tringham, 1983). However, I suspect Binford traveled even more (e.g., Australia, the UK, South Africa, Tanzania, Argentina, China, India, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Japan). Both have had their works translated, although Childe was never well known in the U.S. (Trigger, 1980: 11) except perhaps among Mexican archaeologists, who were strongly influenced by Marxist theory (Flannery, 1994). (In Google's Ngram Childe's mentions in Spanish books peak at 1969, later than in other languages; and his mentions always beat those of Binford.)

On the other hand, papers in this number point to Binford's influence on archaeology from the Lower Paleolithic to the origins of agriculture; from faunal analysis and site structure, to stone tool microwear and ceramics (the last two being fields in which he never published, discounting his paper on ceramic pipe stems as a chronological device). If we added more of his students to this issue we would expand this list of topics and geographic range even further. Childe was not known for methodological contributions (though he could be a strong critic of methods, as a letter he sent to Soviet archaeologists demonstrated; see Harris, 1994) but Binford contributed to the methodology of the analysis of faunal assemblages (Binford, 1978b).

Both men heavily influenced their students. Binford had access to graduate students at all of his academic appointments. Childe had only undergraduates at his first appointment at the University of Edinburgh (although influencing undergraduates should not be underestimated: Binford influenced Michael Schiffer, when Schiffer was an undergraduate at UCLA [Schiffer, personal communication, 2011]). I can personally testify to Binford's effect on his graduate students, and, although all accounts suggest that Childe was a shy, private man, he too "inspired great affection among graduate students at the Institute of Archaeology" (Trigger, 1980: 18). It may be significant that almost half of the doctoral students listed on Binford's CV are women. Childe was a great influence on Kathleen Kenyon (Dever, 2004) but he almost certainly, given the era, did not influence both genders equally. Still, photos show him with female students (see Trigger, 1980); I know of no evidence that Childe rejected them (when many other contemporary male archaeologists did).

Childe and Binford did different things. Childe was a synthesizer of archaeology, and a brilliant one at that, as demonstrated in *New Light on the Most Ancient East (1934)*, *The Dawn of European Civilization (1925)*, as well as *Man Makes Himself (1936)* and *What Happened in History (1942)*, though the latter two were popular works with Marxist leanings, and many professionals did not take them seriously (Tringham, 1983). Nonetheless, Childe put prehistory together, revealing its grand narrative. He gave us the concept of "revolutions" (Neolithic and Urban) – which for Childe, a socialist, really were revolutions; they are less so today, but they are nonetheless important concepts to organize prehistory textbooks and they drew attention to certain periods of rapid and pervasive change. Childe was interested in progress, and he used the archaeological record to demonstrate it.

Binford was also interested in the big picture, as demonstrated in his final book, *Frames of Reference* (2001) and in the lectures he gave in England and Europe that were transcribed for *In Pursuit of the Past* (1983). But Binford was not a prehistorian per se. Instead, he was concerned with how we interpret the archaeological record, with middle-range theory. He argued that the meanings of things were not self-evident, and that we needed to give explicit attention to the basis of our interpretations of archaeological data. His focus turned out to be faunal remains, and so taphonomy, hunting, and butchering. In his work, he focused on what he called "organization," an idea that was most notably developed in matters of technology and settlement patterning. Binford envisioned "organization" as how energy moved through a system. For example, the key difference between foragers and collectors, his two "types" (and I use that word loosely) of hunter-gatherer settlement systems, was that foragers moved consumers to food and collectors moved food to consumers. Binford saw that changes in how energy flowed through systems over time were what prehistory recorded.