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### News

### Writing the Past Backwards: The 2019 Childe Lecture

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# Writing the Past Backwards: The 2019 Childe Lecture

*Matthew Johnson*

I was flattered and honoured to be invited to give the Gordon Childe Memorial Lecture at the UCL Institute of Archaeology on 12 December 2019. Childe is a hero of mine; as a student I devoured his books, the commentaries on his work by Trigger, McNairn and others, and especially Sally Green's vivid account of his life and time at the Institute (1981). Childe's thinking on culture and cultural identity, and his role and stature as a public intellectual, remain an inspiration to those of us thinking and working at archaeology today. This article is a summary of some of the themes of my lecture.

I am writing a book on the archaeology of English landscape and settlement, in the context of the Isles (referred to by others as the British Isles) and the north Atlantic. The book spans the second millennium CE. It starts with English migrations to, and colonial encounters with, other peoples in the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It asks about the identity of these English people and suggests that the answer to that question should be grounded in material practices.

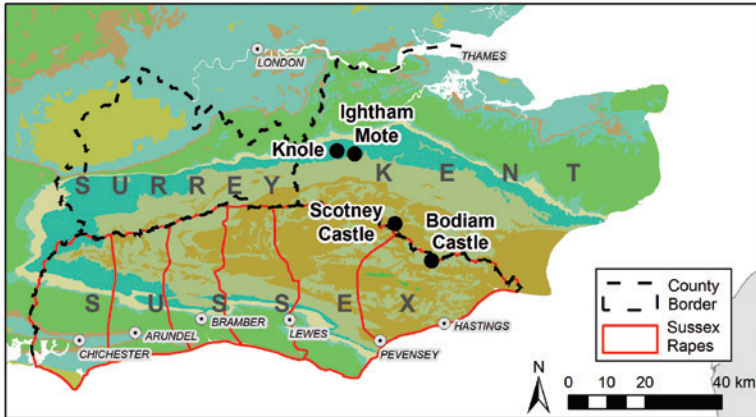
Such an approach, I argue, is distinctively archaeological in several senses. First, it is material. It asks about how the English acted on the world, and how the world acted on them. Specifically I ask about the 'second nature' (Cronon 1991) of English landscapes – that is, I ask

about the patterns of fields, routeways, buildings that these people left behind them, patterns that structured everyday life and accepted practices of English people of different classes. Second, it is relational. A key element in understanding English identity is how it was formed through encounters and interactions with the landscapes and peoples of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. I am interested in the way both old and new practices in the landscape structured and mediated these encounters; for example, through the archaeology of frontiers and boundaries. Third, it tries to keep it simple – to look for broad archaeological and material patterns and processes over the very long term.

Where did the ‘second nature’ of the seventeenth-century English landscape come from; how can we explain its origins? I looked at two key ruptures: the sixteenth-century Reformation, which destroyed and transformed not just the monasteries but a whole network of religious landscape, and that of the rural depopulation and enclosure of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. These transformations, however, took place within the interstices of a continuing infrastructure. In other words, the seventeenth century landscape – the fields, routeways, buildings – have to be understood as a creation of the earlier Middle Ages.

I then examined in more detail the way later landscapes, in their turn, owed their form to an earlier, feudal settlement in different contexts: in the towns and castles of Norman settlement of Wales and Ireland, most obviously, but also more subtly in the case of regions like Sussex in southern England. Our recently published research project, *Lived Experience in the Later Middle Ages*, looked at the way the form and siting of later medieval places such as Bodiam Castle could only be understood in terms of an earlier medieval structuring of the landscape (Johnson 2017; Figure 1).

Understanding different forms of landscape in this way means working backwards, to the earlier Middle Ages and beyond. Ultimately, some of the themes I touched on run back further still into prehistory – the ambiguous place of ‘English’ landscapes in the Isles as a whole, the difficult relationship between the geography of the nation-states of England and her neighbours with Cyril Fox’s Highland and Lowland Zones, and their relationship in turn to Continental Europe, is a story which could be argued to originate in Doggerland, over 10,000 years ago (Fox 1932).



**Figure 1** The later medieval sites of Bodiam and Scotney, castles built by gentry families, sit within the interstices of an earlier, feudal system of ‘rapes’ or lordships. These lordships have a ladder-like form, running across the grain of the geology: each lordship had its share of grain- and rent-producing villages, water and woodland resources, etc. Thus politics, lordship, landscape type and geology are layered on top of one another. (Image credit: after Johnson 2017, Figure 12.5; drawing by Kathryn A. Catlin)

The past is not often written backwards in archaeology. On reflection, this is a surprising state of affairs. There is after all an extensive theoretical literature on scales of time, and time as socially embedded. And the notion of going backward in time is a recurrent motif of literature and culture, from William Wordsworth to *Quatermass and the Pit*. But with a few exceptions such as Christopher Hawkes and the direct historical method (particularly as applied to Africa; for example, Stahl 1994), archaeologists remain largely silent on the topic.

However, working backwards is not some theoretically avant-garde innovation: one of its strengths is that it is firmly rooted in what archaeologists do at a basic level of practice. Archaeological excavation is about peeling off the layers in reverse order. Landscape survey relies on ‘regression’ or working backwards, as does buildings archaeology.

The third and final part of my lecture turned to the implications of such a perspective for questions of cultural identity, both past and present. I explored an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, a stress on the long term and on tracing antecedents is one that seemingly

emphasises continuity and time-depth. On the other hand, so much work on cultural identity emphasises constant fluidity and change that identities are always up for renegotiation.



**Figure 2** Professor Johnson with the Director of the IoA, Professor Sue Hamilton, after the lecture. The chair was Gordon Childe’s IoA office chair (conserved by Dean Sully, IoA Conservation) and the spear shown was made by Indigenous Australian people and used by Gordon Childe as a lecture pointer (IoA collections). (Image credit: Andrew Gardner and Edith Colomba)

This tension or contradiction is especially sharp when thinking about the archaeology of the English. So much traditional writing advocates for the deep roots of Englishness, going back to the early medieval period and beyond – while so much recent work looks at the contingent and negotiated character of English identity, and particularly its place within a changing British identity from 1707 onwards. My suggestion is that working backwards, peeling off the archaeological layers, is a productive metaphor for reconciling this tension. Each generation

makes history as it pleases, but it does so on a terrain, a depth of accumulated cultural deposit, that has been moulded and transformed by past peoples over millennia.

The perspective I am thinking through here offers the chance to bring 'old-school' thinkers like Fox and Crawford (1953, 51–2) on landscape-as-palimpsest into dialogue with more recent postcolonial thought. Landscapes and material practices can endure and have very deep histories, but they can also be reused and repurposed in very new ways. It is the task of the archaeologist to understand this tension and explore its dimensions not just with reference to the Isles, but around the globe.

In conclusion, can I thank the Director of the Institute, Prof Sue Hamilton, and the organiser of the lecture, Dr Andrew Gardner, for hosting the event and making me feel so welcome (Figure 2).

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