

CRETE, GREECE AND THE ORIENT IN THE THOUGHT OF
GORDON CHILDE
(WITH AN APPENDIX ON TOYNBEE AND SPENGLER: THE AFTERLIFE OF
THE MINOANS IN EUROPEAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY)

ANDREW SHERRATT

ABSTRACT

Reconstructing the patterns of thought of our intellectual ancestors requires two exercises: to bear in mind the state of knowledge at the time, and to consider the assumptions which underlay discussion of this information. Childe was both a theoretician with his own agenda (to some extent Marxist, but to a greater extent in the tradition of his teachers, John Myres and Arthur Evans) and also a great inductive prehistorian, whose reading encompassed the literatures of prehistoric Europe, the Aegean, and the Near East. His work is therefore an unusual combination of synthesis and creative historiography, which strove to make sense of interconnections and relationships between these areas. This chapter sets Childe's attempt in the context of discussions at the time, noting the gaps in existing knowledge and the generally accepted assumptions on the part of himself and his contemporaries. The presentation of the Minoans is particularly significant, with an inherent ambiguity between their 'oriental' background and their role as the 'first European civilisation'. These tensions are explored as part of a continuing coming to terms with the longer past revealed by archaeology, and still demanding explicit answers.