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ON DEEP HISTORY AND THE BRAIN



DANIEL LORD SMAIL

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The Grip of Sacred History

Like any author engaged in the task of building a plot, the historian must grapple with the question of where to begin the story. For historians of the particular, the problem of origins is not especially acute. We choose some reasonably datable event and have that mark the beginning of our particular histories. General historians face a slightly different problem. General history, as defined by Herbert Butterfield, is a rational account of man on earth that explains “how mankind had come from primitive conditions to its existing state.”¹ I use the term to embrace the universal histories of the ancient world and medieval Europe, the general world histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the histories found in modern history textbooks, syllabuses, and lectures. Whatever their differences, all purport to begin at the beginning. But if one’s object is humanity, all humanity, where, exactly, is the beginning?

For several thousand years, historians writing in the Judeo-Christian tradition were untroubled by this question of origins. Sacred history located the origins of man in the Garden of Eden, and that is where the general histories of late antiquity and me-

dieval Europe began the story. In the eighteenth century, proposals for shortening the chronology proper to general history began to circulate, as the new fad for catastrophism brought historical attention to bear on the Universal Deluge. Since human societies were rebuilt from scratch after the Deluge—so the thinking went—it was the Deluge that marked mankind's true beginning. And in the philosophy of the Neapolitan historian Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), the Deluge made all prior history unknowable anyway, since it destroyed all the documents from which we could write such a history. As an event that set the civilizational clock back to zero, the Deluge marked an epistemological break between humanity's origin, which we cannot know, and the present stream of history, which we can.

Although the flood itself has long since receded in historical consciousness, the sense of rupture, a legacy of sacred history, remains. On the heels of the time revolution of the 1860s, historians gradually came to accept the long chronology as a geological fact. But we have not yet found a persuasive way to plot history along the long chronology, preferring instead to locate the origins of history at some point in the past few thousand years. In Western Civ textbooks, which offer a convenient distillation of widely held ideas, that point of origin has been similar to what it had been under sacred history, though the creation of man was duly transformed into a secular event, the birth of civilization. Elsewhere, as I shall argue in this chapter, history's plotline was even more dramatically compressed by the growing sense that early medieval Europe had been so thoroughly barbarized that it could stand in for the Paleolithic past. If one's goal is to describe the progress of human civilization, why fret about the epistemological veil that screens us from the speechless past? Far better to

start with a knowable point of origin in the barbarian invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries. This view of medieval Europe, already in circulation by the late nineteenth century, became entrenched in the first generation of textbooks published in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth. The rise of medieval studies in North America from the 1920s onward owes a good deal to this reconfiguration of history's chronology. Although medieval history has long since forgotten its debt to the long chronology, echoes of the latter still linger in the textbooks devoted to medieval Europe.

As a device for plotting history, there is nothing wrong with the idea of rupture. We routinely begin our particular histories with plagues, wars, revolutions, and sudden transformations of all sorts. But no one claims that history *begins* in 1348 or 1789. The event we choose serves as a fulcrum, the pivot point of a teeter-totter. We might prefer to write our histories from a position astride the upswinging arm. But no one can afford to overlook the balance of the chronology on the other side. Yet this is exactly how historians, until recently, have mapped history. "History begins in the Near East," the distinguished authors of the *Columbia History of the World* told us in 1972.² Another textbook tells us that "history begins in Sumer,"³ and a textbook widely used in the 1960s was actually entitled "History Begins at Sumer."⁴ What were history students supposed to conclude from this? That our African ancestors lived without history? That early humans were biological entities without any meaningful culture? Can we really blame our students and our fellow citizens if they confuse the Garden of Eden with the irrigated fields of Mesopotamia?

One of the projects of the Enlightenment was to expose the products of human contrivance and replace them with timeless

truths embedded in a natural reality. Thus, units of measurement should not be dependent on the whims of particular regions but should conform instead to universal or natural truths, an idea that eventually resulted in the meter, the gram, and the liter. This chapter engages, unabashedly, in an Enlightenment project. It seeks to expose the grip of the short chronology as a human contrivance that will dissolve in the gaze of natural reason. I am aware that a history diagrammed along the full time of human history is just another contrivance, since all questions about where to begin—with the species; with the genus; with the earth itself—are equally vexed. But my purpose is served if we can acknowledge that the short chronology is indeed a contrivance, that history need not be so limited in its span, and that something we can and should call “history” begins a long time ago in Africa.



Like many before and since his time, the Greek poet Hesiod (ca. 700 B.C.) was captivated by the muse of origins. To satisfy his curiosity, he invented a Golden Age of Mankind: our origin, the place where it all began. To postulate a Golden Age was to cast a jaundiced eye toward all that came after, and, in the historical trajectory that followed from Hesiod’s thought, decay emerged as the dominant metaphor. Ancient and medieval historians writing in the Judeo-Christian tradition were equally captivated by the idea of a Golden Age, though theirs went by the name of Eden. Over a period of a thousand years, after the Roman Empire absorbed Christianity, historians writing in Latin and Greek became accustomed to beginning their histories in Eden. To au-

thors like Eusebius, Gregory of Tours, and Otto of Freising, Genesis provided a necessary point of origin, an anchor by means of which they rooted their histories in time and space. The roots, admittedly, were thin and insubstantial, as authors hastened past Genesis to get to contemporary affairs. Perhaps sensing this lack of enthusiasm, the modern historians who study these texts are equally prone to skip past the preambles and go straight to the histories. But the tendency to anchor universal history in Eden was nonetheless a compelling part of medieval historiography. And though universal histories became less fashionable in early modern Europe, the impulse to begin at the beginning never wholly waned. Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World in Five Books*, first published in the early seventeenth century, began in Eden and worked its way down to the Roman period. Bossuet's famed *Universal History* (1681) also began the story with Genesis.⁵

The practice of writing mainstream, professional histories rooted in Eden would persist well into the nineteenth century. But even in Raleigh's day, historians and commentators like Jean Bodin (1529–96) were trying to bring a progressive element into the writing of history, a trajectory at odds with the dominant metaphor of decay. Influenced by the natural histories of the ancient world that had identified the aboriginal state of humankind as primitive, Bodin denied the existence of Hesiod's Golden Age and made much of the lawlessness and violence of the early phases of society.⁶ These ideas were shared by other sixteenth-century anthropologists who proposed the idea of a progression from pastoral to agricultural society.⁷ The conjectural schemes subsequently developed by philosophers, economists, and ethnographers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were also influenced by the growing number of reports concerning the sav-

age peoples of the Caribbean, North America, Tierra del Fuego, and elsewhere. In an influential argument, the seventeenth-century German jurist Samuel Pufendorf compared savage with civilized man to show how the establishment of private property marked the boundary between primitive and modern society. By the eighteenth century, there was a common understanding that humans had progressed through several economic stages—savagery, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce were the usual suspects—and that each stage was associated with a particular set of political, social, legal, and intellectual institutions.

But how could the progressive fashion be squared with the chronological facts and descending trajectory of sacred history? The two were like the X formed by the up and down escalators in a department store. Peter Bowler has remarked that the idea that man acquired civilization in gradual stages required more time than was allowed by biblical chronology.⁸ Yet in fact the authors of conjectural or philosophical histories did not necessarily offend a biblical time frame. Conjectural history, the great fashion of the eighteenth century, was a style of writing history in the philosophical mode. Freed from the obligation to work with evidence, the conjectural historians associated with the French and Scottish Enlightenments allowed themselves to extrapolate past conditions on the basis of present-day trajectories. Chronological signposts were not essential to the project. Condorcet, for example, dodged the issue of chronology by refusing to assign any dates to the stages he proposed. Others, notably the French physiocrat Baron de Turgot, were quite willing to squeeze the stages of progress into the short span of time made available by Holy Writ.⁹ Adam Ferguson similarly framed the history of mankind in the limited time period allowed by sacred chronology.¹⁰ Few

saw an essential contradiction with sacred history, since no one knew how long it took societies to evolve.

The chronological conundrums were easy to square. Sacred and conjectural histories, however, were profoundly incompatible in another way, for they disagreed on history's direction. Is it from Eden downward, as proposed by Judeo-Christianity? Or from the primitive upward, the trajectory favored by conjectural historians? Yet there was a potential solution to this problem, if only one could jump off the down escalator and join the up at the point where the two cross. Embedded in the famous historical scheme promulgated by Turgot in *A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind* (1750) was a kind of biblical catastrophism, the idea that an event or events described in sacred history had wiped the slate clean and reset the clock of civilization to zero:

Holy Writ, after having enlightened us about the creation of the universe, the origin of man, and the birth of the first arts, before long puts before us a picture of the human race concentrated again in a single family as the result of a universal flood. Scarcely had it begun to make good its losses when the miraculous confusion of tongues forced men to separate from one another. The urgent need to procure subsistence for themselves in barren deserts, which provided nothing but wild beasts, obliged them to move apart from one another in all directions and hastened their diffusion through the whole world. Soon the original traditions were forgotten; and the nations, separated as they were by vast distances and still more by the diversity of languages, strangers to one another, were almost all plunged into the same barbarism in which we still see the Americans.¹¹

This, the crucial compromise, allowed conjectural history and economic stage theory to be reconciled with sacred history. Sa-

cred history provided historians with at least three catastrophes—the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the Universal Deluge, and the destruction of the Tower of Babel—that could be said to have returned humankind to a primitive condition. The ascent of man, as predicted by theories of progress, could begin from any of the three points.

Of these, the Deluge loomed largest in the historical imagination. An event of monstrous significance, the Deluge has seldom failed to grip the European imagination.¹² It was a prominent feature in the geological treatises of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and figures significantly in other writings. But the implications of the Deluge were not lost on historians and economists. In his *On the Origin of Laws, Arts, and Sciences* (1758), Antoine-Yves Goguet argued that the Deluge caused humans to forget the use of iron and other metals and return to the use of tools based on stone.¹³ Ferguson, writing about how the human race had again been reduced to a few people, alluded at least indirectly to the Deluge.¹⁴ And it was not just conjectural historians who played with the idea. Bossuet's great *Universal History* suggested how mankind was reduced to nearly nothing after the Deluge and then, by degrees, emerged from ignorance, transforming woods and forests into fields, pastures, hamlets, and towns, and learning how to domesticate animals and use metals.¹⁵ This use of the Deluge as a resetting event in both sacred history and geology would persist into the nineteenth century.¹⁶

Conjectural historians, it is true, were not much interested in origins. Sacred historians like Raleigh and Bossuet, in turn, wrote much about the Deluge but were correspondingly less interested in outlining the stages of postdiluvian progress. It was Vico who,

in his *New Science* (1725), most persuasively reconciled the Deluge with the theory of human progress.¹⁷ Vico was not widely known in his own day, but *New Science* was rediscovered in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and his reputation was resurrected to a point where he and Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) have often been called the fathers of modern history. Vico's emphasis on the Deluge was the key element of a philosophy designed to orient history around the proper interpretation of myths and legends, thereby avoiding idle speculation and armchair philosophizing. A consequence of this approach was to exclude sacred history from the terrain of the secular historian, on the theory that no documents apart from the sacred writings carried by Noah had survived the flood.¹⁸

Vico was clearly attracted to the idea of progress. But whereas Bodin was not interested in the Deluge, preferring instead to describe ante- and postdiluvian societies as identical in their primitiveness, Vico molded the Deluge into a powerful punctuating event.¹⁹ The singular importance of the Deluge in Vico's history is reflected in the chronological table printed in *New Science*, which begins in the year 1656 A.M. (*anno mundi*), the year of the Deluge. In a telling phrase, Vico actually describes his work as "a new natural history of the universal flood."²⁰ By the light of this natural history, the Deluge was seen as a catastrophic event that forced humans into the most primitive of conditions, far more abject than anything experienced in the preceding 1,656 years of sacred history. His enthusiasm reflected in his redundancy, Vico writes in many places of a period of brutish wandering during which the three tribes of men were scattered throughout the world's forest and copulated promiscuously with mothers and daughters, unmindful of kinship. Much that Vico wrote was

compatible—and designed to be compatible—with the anthropology of his day.

Far more than Turgot's, Vico's concept of historical chronology was thoroughly permeated by a philosophy of catastrophism. The dominant paradigm in eighteenth-century geology, catastrophism was not antithetical to conjectural history. Conjectural historians, concerned with process, did not trouble themselves with origins. To make their schemes work, all they needed was a set of primitive or presocial conditions. They could make their peace with the idea that a catastrophe like the Deluge had reset the clock to zero. In this view, history did not have to begin with human origins, where general historians like Eusebius or Raleigh had chosen to begin. Instead, the catastrophic paradigm authorized a history that began in the middle, on the heels of a catastrophe. The philosophy promoted so vividly by Vico, in other words, authorized the compression of historical time. This compression would persist long after the Deluge had vanished from the historical imagination.



The compression of historical time made little practical difference as long as historical time itself was of short duration. Until the discovery and acceptance of deep time in the middle of the nineteenth century, human history, as imagined in the Judeo-Christian tradition, was coterminous with the history of the earth itself.²¹ Speculations on the age of the world greatly engaged ancient and medieval philosophers. Historians writing in the Judeo-Christian tradition could hardly resist the temptation to assign a date, and they assiduously combed the book of Gene-

sis for clues. Genesis, alas, speaks of generations, not dates, and historians were forced to count generations in the manner of previous Greek, Syrian, and Jewish scholars. In the fourth century, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, had Adam created 5,198 years before the birth of Christ, and this was the figure used by Jerome, Paulus Orosius, and many other Christian historians. In the seventeenth century, the busy recalculations of a number of scholars resulted in estimations for the earth's age ranging from 3,700 to 7,000 years of age, though the date favored by James Ussher, 4004 B.C., soon emerged as the consensus.²² A chronology beginning at this date was then added to the margins of English editions of the Old Testament so that readers could, at a glance, locate themselves in time. Bossuet's *Universal History* likewise provided chronologies in the margins that served to date events both by counting up, from Creation, and by counting down, to the birth of Jesus.

The chronological scaffolding generated by this computational industry was an important intellectual step because it provided a ready means for making instant comparisons between the chronologies of different civilizations. The idea was central to the work of some ancient historians and had significant influence on early modern historians.²³ In the sixteenth century, Bodin and Joseph Scaliger massaged the existing schemes into a grand system of universal time. The concordances promoted by this work suggested problems with conventional Judeo-Christian dating, for growing contact with Chinese, Indian, and Aztec civilizations exposed Europeans to timescales that were not counted in the mere thousands of years. As Paolo Rossi observes, Scaliger pointed out that Chinese cosmology went back more than 880,000 years, and in 1658 the Jesuit Father Martini found that Chinese annals, suitably transposed onto a Christian dating

scheme, were reliably recording events that took place more than six hundred years before the Deluge.²⁴

The great antiquity of Sumerian, Chaldean, and Egyptian civilizations was equally problematic. Work on Egyptian chronology suggested that Egyptian civilization dated back nearly to the Deluge itself, perhaps even before. How could so sophisticated a civilization have arisen in so short a time? Bodin was much troubled by these problems. The answer he and others proposed was that all non-Mosaic chronologies were either fabulous or written in the spirit of envy.²⁵ A second solution was to prefer the Greek Septuagint over the Hebrew Bible, since the Septuagint allowed an additional 1,440 years. In such ways, the intellectual challenge posed by lengthy Egyptian, Indian, and Chinese chronologies was, at least temporarily, absorbed and overcome.

But challenges to the grip of sacred chronology were not coming from historians alone; geology, paleontology, ethnology, and natural history also found Ussher's date too constricting. That marine fossils such as shells and sharks' teeth were found on mountaintops had always been something of a problem. One could suppose that they were just odd-looking rocks or freaks of nature laid down by a playful God. Alternatively, they were carried aloft by the waters of the Universal Deluge. Fossils embedded in rock were also a conundrum. By what process could a solid object enter another solid object? For those who admitted the natural origin of such fossils, the solution lay in the proposal that rocks formed in layers through a gradual process of sedimentation.²⁶ The resulting realization that layered strata represented geological time did not immediately subvert biblical chronology, since no one knew how long it took for the layers to

form. Imaginative solutions were also devised for other emerging problems, such as the tilting of the bedding planes of geological strata, the discovery of strange creatures like ammonites, and the presence of humans in the New World. Even so, by the 1750s the loosening of the grip of sacred chronology had proceeded to a point where some were postulating an earth that was millions of years old, though such opinions were decidedly in the minority.²⁷ In his private notes, the French naturalist the Comte de Buffon played around with a date of three million years, and he argued in print for an earth some 75,000 years of age.²⁸ Decades earlier, Benoit de Maillet had proposed an earth more than two billion years in age.²⁹

The idea of a very old earth was easily dismissed by orthodox Christian theologians and by distinguished scientists alike, for it created as many problems as it solved. Critics seldom failed to notice that mountains had not eroded away in all the time supposedly available. This particular obstacle was solved by the Scottish geologist James Hutton, who argued in the late eighteenth century that mountains were being continually uplifted and continents remade in a process that “has no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end.” Hutton did not insist on an eternal, uncreated earth. All he claimed was that no trace of the primeval earth could have survived the endless recycling of materials. Eschewing the search for origins, he focused instead on geological mechanisms, in much the same way that conjectural historians typically avoided questions of human origins and instead focused attention on lawlike processes.³⁰

Despite well-reasoned scientific objections, evidence for the antiquity of the earth continued to mount in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and the field of geology developed apace.

By the 1840s, geology's basic chronology, based on the succession of strata, had been worked out by the British geologist Charles Lyell, who published his *Principles of Geology* in the 1830s and remained a powerful advocate for the new scheme over the next forty years. Lyell's ideas were contested in his own day, and in 1868 the estimate made by the future Lord Kelvin that a molten earth first consolidated a hundred million years ago—a figure later reduced to twenty to forty million years—put an end to any ideas of an eternal earth.³¹ Yet the Aristotelian idea of an eternal earth has been vindicated in a sense by the current estimate that the earth is around four and a half billion years old, easily old enough to accommodate the gradual geological and biological processes on which people like Lyell and Charles Darwin were most insistent.

Even as the field of geology was emerging as a science in the first half of the nineteenth century, antiquarians in Denmark, England, and France were excavating strata in which early human stone tools, eoliths, lay alongside extinct animals such as cave bears and mammoths.³² The implications were obvious and had been noted since the last decade of the eighteenth century. Yet Lyell originally resisted the attempt to associate geological time with human antiquity. A British chauvinist, he dismissed the archeological evidence for man's antiquity compiled by French archeologists. A sensational archeological discovery in 1859, this time on English soil, finally convinced the geologists to support the idea that humans lived in the Ice Age. Paleontology and prehistoric anthropology sprang up as legitimate scientific disciplines in the 1860s, and the proposition that humans moved through stone, bronze, and iron ages emerged as the fundamental chronological scheme of archeology. John Lubbock later sub-

divided the Stone Age into old and new, Paleolithic and Neolithic, the latter associated with the agricultural revolution. Ethnologists like Lewis Henry Morgan found the long chronology wonderfully liberating and took to it with great enthusiasm.³³ A crucial link in the time revolution was Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, because it offered a way to link the history of life and the descent of humanity to the emerging geological timescale, thereby unifying biological time.³⁴ *On the Origin of Species* was soon followed by Lyell's *The Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man* (1863) and Lubbock's *Pre-Historic Times* (1865), the three works that lie at the heart of the time revolution of the 1860s.³⁵



The stages of the discovery of deep time are well known to historians of science and figure in the standard disciplinary narratives of the great historical sciences. But what were historians doing as the understanding of time was transformed in the second half of the nineteenth century? Looking back from the early twentieth century, the historian James Harvey Robinson could still reflect on the event with wonder: "Half a century ago, man's past was supposed to include less than six thousand years; now the story is seen to stretch back hundreds of thousands of years."³⁶ Other historians were indifferent. Yet despite the magnitude and implications of the revolution, the question of how historians accommodated deep time has not been seriously addressed until recently.

The later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the great age for patriotic histories of particular nations. In this cli-

mate, the urge to write universal histories was partially eclipsed. Even so, a good many works of general history circulated in the United States in the decades following the time revolution of the 1860s, including works imported from Europe as well as home-grown products.³⁷ Some of these were written for the general market. Others—a growing number—were explicitly designed for use in the classroom. Out of this pool of ideas and threads eventually emerged the narrative forms that would take shape as Western Civ textbooks, first published in the early decades of the twentieth century. In all these sources we can find clues revealing what happened to history's plotline as historians faced the challenge of deep time.

In an age when so eminent a figure as the geologist Louis Agassiz could persist in his adherence to the chronology of sacred history, it would be surprising if all historians accepted the long chronology without demur. The last edition of Royal Robbins's *Outlines of Ancient and Modern History* (1875), first published in 1830, was uncompromisingly sacred and treated Darwin as an infidel.³⁸ Reuben Parsons's *Universal History* (1902), written for an American Catholic audience, included an unapologetic defense of sacred history.³⁹ An especially significant source of resistance came from Ranke, the great German historian, who continued to affirm the truth of sacred history in his unfinished *Universal History* and argued that no history could address a time before documents. In contrast, the Oxford historians Edward Freeman and J. R. Green were remarkable for their cautious but sincere and early acceptance of the long chronology.⁴⁰ Amos Dean, in his seven-volume *History of Civilization* (1868), acknowledged the probability "that human life has existed on the planet during a much longer period than has been generally sup-

posed,” even though he perceived no investigative need to breach the barrier created by the Deluge.⁴¹

Rather than assess nineteenth-century historians according to the litmus test of belief, however, it behooves us to ask whether the long chronology made any difference to the framing of history, even among those who accepted it. Daniel Segal has recently argued that few late-nineteenth-century historians made a serious effort to build a meaningful historical continuum bottomed in the deep past.⁴² In the general histories published before 1900, prehistory was simply tacked on at the beginning, or even reduced to a footnote.⁴³ What they offered, moreover, was little enough. In his important *Outlines of Universal History* (1885), one of the earliest books designed explicitly for use as a textbook in American secondary schools, the American historian George Fisher gave just a few paragraphs summarizing recent archeological discoveries.⁴⁴ In a general history first published in 1883, the Frenchman Victor Duruy, one of Fisher’s sources, offered a little more. Even so, his contribution, in the 1925 English edition, amounted to no more than seven pages in a text 892 pages in length.⁴⁵ One of the most sustained efforts by a historian to summarize the discoveries of archeology can be found in the tenth edition of the *Storia Universale*, published in 1884 by the Italian general historian Cesare Cantù, who was deeply engaged with biological, archeological, and geological discoveries. The prefatory material is studded with references to scholarship on geological and prehistorical time, and Cantù devoted four chapters to the primitive world and theories about early human society.⁴⁶ But this incorporation of the paleoanthropological evidence was a curiously ironic gesture, because Cantù believed in sacred history and discussed the paleoanthropological evidence only so as to disprove it.

Cantù's skepticism aside, the problem of incorporating prehistory into the narrative was not only one of belief. It was also one of imagination. One could be open to the idea of deep history without knowing quite what to do with it. One solution to this narrative difficulty was to reimagine the European Middle Ages as a period of darkness so profound as to duplicate the social state of primitive savagery. In this new schema, ancient history stood in for the golden era of antediluvian sacred history, and early medieval Europe was transformed into the bestial and primitive world of the immediate postdiluvian age, the center of the X formed by the down and up escalators. In an echo of a Huttonian geology that eschewed the search for origins and focused instead on process, general historians of the nineteenth century found they had no need for Genesis and, like Vico, could focus instead on the progress that humankind had made since the most recent catastrophe.

The very idea of a pseudoprimitive Dark Age influenced the ways in which nineteenth-century historians framed medieval European history. The Enlightenment denigration of the European Middle Ages had made it easy to view the original inhabitants of Europe and the invaders of Rome as crude barbarians, little different from the primitive peoples that figured in conjectural histories and anthropological prehistories. Ferguson made the parallel explicit, describing the Gauls, Germans, and Britons as resembling the natives of North America in their ignorance of agriculture and their tendencies to paint themselves and wear the skins of animals.⁴⁷ Edward Gibbon himself wrote of a "deluge of Barbarians," using a word freighted with meaning.⁴⁸ These barbarians gradually came to stand in for Paleolithic man in the developmental schemes of Western history. Doris Goldstein, writ-

ing about Freeman and Green, has suggested that “their forays into what they described as the ‘primeval’ or the ‘primitive’ were closely related to their interest in the early history of the Teutonic tribes.”⁴⁹ Medieval historians in the United States, deeply influenced by the idea of biological evolution and geological time, routinely referred to the early Germanic tribes using words like *primitive*.⁵⁰ They used the word in a positive developmental sense, as this 1899 paean to the era makes clear: “In the middle ages we are to see the beginnings of ourselves. We are the perfectly legitimate descendants of mediaeval men, and we have no ideas, no institutions, no manners that are not shot through and through with thread of mediaeval spinning.”⁵¹ Nineteenth-century historians were deeply attracted to the idea that progress followed on the heels of a Viconian resetting event. All that changed was the event itself: the aqueous Deluge was transformed into a deluge of barbarians.



By the turn of the century, some of the more robust intellectual obstacles to prehistory were fading. Lord Kelvin’s thermodynamic principles showed that the earth had a datable point of origin that was immensely old. Prehistorical dates were circulating widely in the works of acknowledged authorities like Sir Arthur Keith, providing the chronological scaffolding on which history arranges itself.⁵² The tendency to focus exclusively on the political or constitutional history of nations was being challenged by the rise of social and economic history, fields that focused on how people lived in the past, not just on how they were governed.

In the wake of these changes, the 1910s and 1920s saw some remarkable attempts to bridge the gap between prehistory and history. In 1913, the English historian James Bryce spoke enthusiastically about the possibility of a chronological expansion of the historians' terrain.⁵³ In 1916, the Berkeley historian Frederick Teggart suggested that "the historian has come to see that there is no hard and fast boundary between 'historic' and 'pre-historic' times, between 'historical' and 'unhistorical' peoples; the history of Man includes man everywhere and at all times. . . . Anthropology and History differ only in so far as each represents the use of a special investigative technique."⁵⁴ Around the same time, Robinson was arguing forcefully for a historical understanding that would embrace the Paleolithic, and he castigated his peers for their failure to make the mental switch:

There may still be historians who would argue that all this has nothing to do with history,—that it is "prehistoric." But "prehistoric" is a word that must go the way of "preadamite," which we used to hear. They both indicate a suspicion that we are in some way gaining illicit information about what happened before the footlights were turned on and the curtain rose on the great human drama. Of the so-called "prehistoric" period we, of course, know as yet very little indeed, but the bare fact that there was such a period constitutes in itself the most momentous of historical discoveries.⁵⁵

If the time revolution of the 1860s had caused the bottom to drop out of history,⁵⁶ "prehistory and its living representatives were a means of 're-bottoming' history." This is how Segal has characterized the result of Robinson's unprecedented engagement with the long chronology.⁵⁷ In this schema, the primitive

conditions of the Paleolithic, serving as a convenient measure for our subsequent progress, are an essential element of the story of Western Civilization.

There is much truth to this argument. The paragraph or two devoted to prehistory in nineteenth-century works like Fisher's *Outlines* generally grew to a chapter or more in the textbooks and professional histories published in the United States after the 1920s.⁵⁸ Yet when Robinson actually applied this idea in his own textbook, *An Introduction to the History of Western Europe*, first published in 1903, the results were curious. Consider the question Robinson posed at the very outset of the book:

One of the most difficult questions that a historical writer has to settle is the point at which he is to begin his tale. . . . How far back shall we go to get a start? Modern research seems to show that man was a wandering, hunting animal for hundreds of thousands of years before he learned to settle down and domesticate animals, cultivate the soil, and plant and reap crops.⁵⁹

So where did he begin? The answer is surprising: the European Middle Ages. Eschewing the need to return to the Paleolithic bottom, Robinson argued that, since our civilization has descended directly from the fusion of Roman civilization and medieval Europe, there is no particular need to go any earlier.⁶⁰ Recapitulating this argument in *The Ordeal of Civilization* (1926), Robinson noted that “the development of our present civilization began with the first inventions and findings-out of mankind, of which no records remain.” This was the great Viconian conundrum: how to study an age without documents? “Fortunately,” Robinson went on to say, “we can take up the story with the decline and break-up of the Roman Empire.”⁶¹ Subsequent pas-

sages reveal Robinson's assessment of where medieval Europe belongs on the scale of civilization:

It seemed for a few years as if the new German kings . . . would succeed in keeping order and in preventing the loss of such civilization as remained. But no such good fortune was in store for western Europe, which was now only at the beginning of the turmoil which was to leave it almost completely barbarized, for there was little to encourage the reading or writing of books, the study of science, or attention to art, in a time of constant warfare and danger.⁶²

Much like nineteenth-century historians, Robinson sought to find the primitive in medieval Europe so as to have a more recent foundation on which to build history's narrative of progress. Despite Robinson's engagement with the long chronology, in other words, he ultimately arrived at a fundamentally Viconian solution, where the events of the Dark Ages stand in for the Deluge.

As Segal has noted, Robinson never really overcame the idea of rupture, the idea that some gulf separates us from the Paleolithic. With rare exceptions, textbooks and general histories published over the twentieth century followed more or less in Robinson's footsteps.⁶³ In these works, authors sometimes sought to define what it was that made civilization "history." In the process, they came to the conclusion that the Paleolithic simply was not historical.

In the nineteenth century, *prehistoric* meant "undocumented." A new shade of meaning was added in the twentieth, when prehistoric came to mean a time before history, as if history had not moved in the eons before civilization. Current in some anthropological circles around the turn of the century was the belief that

progress itself was highly unusual—authors like Henry Sumner Maine and Walter Bagehot had spoken of stationary societies and “fixity.” Several decades later, Oswald Spengler wrote of a culture in stasis as being caught within a “historyless” period.⁶⁴ Ideas such as these, when applied to the deep past, constitute the myth of Paleolithic stasis. This myth configured humanity’s deep past as a grim and changeless era. The authors of a world history textbook for use in Catholic secondary schools, published in 1958, conveyed the idea nicely:

Our imagination fails us when we try to see in the mind’s eye the uncounted generations of Paleolithic people. We know what men have proved capable of accomplishing—their sciences and arts and great civilizations. Why, then, did they live for so long in the wilderness? It appears as if some great calamity had fallen upon human nature itself, as if some sentence of banishment and damnation had been laid on man by his Creator.⁶⁵

Paleolithic stasis, in this admittedly atypical view, was the result of the Fall. But what broke the stasis and set man on the move? Rather than catastrophe, some general histories of the twentieth century proposed the idea of a catalyzing event that introduced progress or direction into a society hitherto without history. Mott Greene characterizes the argument in this mordant way: “At some point a leap took place, a mutation, an explosion of creative power—the ‘discovery of mind,’ or the ‘birth of self-consciousness’—interposing a barrier between us and our previous brute, merely biological existence.”⁶⁶ For John Hoyland, the author of *A Brief History of Civilization* (1925), the events that brought humankind out of the “darkness” included the warming of the earth’s climate as well as the arrival of the Aryan race on the scene.⁶⁷ Hermann Schneider waffled between

environmental changes and the fortuitous blending of human stocks.⁶⁸

An especially important catalyzing event was the invention of writing. Eighteenth-century historians were not particularly sensitive to the invention of writing as a historical event, since the Word was considered the gift of God. By the nineteenth century, however, the invention of writing was beginning to figure prominently in historical accounts.⁶⁹ In 1928, Geoffrey Parsons introduced his chapter on the dawn of civilization in this way: "After 100,000 years of savagery and 10,000 years of barbarism the beginnings of writing and of civilization appeared at the eastern end of the Mediterranean."⁷⁰ Schneider identified the discovery of the art of writing and working in metal as crucial events in Near Eastern history.⁷¹ Writing, in later accounts, was thought to have allowed humankind to preserve valuable learning for posterity and thus, for the first time, permitted human civilization to build upon itself in rapid Lamarckian fashion.⁷² Historians like Vico and Ranke had long argued that writing made the past knowable. The belief in writing as a catalyzing event was a much more profound concept. Writing, in this view, actually put civilization on the move and created history out of the historyless Paleolithic. The catalyzing events described in these accounts are secular. Nevertheless, they function in the narrative in a fashion identical to the infusion of God's grace. I make no claim, would in fact resist the claim, that the authors of these accounts were crypto-creationists. The problem lies in the grip of the narrative itself, whose rhythms and patterns were left essentially unchanged as the sacred was translated into the secular.

In the same way that the chronology of the sacred histories of the nineteenth century persisted in the general histories of the

twentieth, so too did sacred history's geography carry over from one era into the next, as the Garden of Eden was translated into Mesopotamia. Eden was not always in the Middle East. In medieval Europe, virtually all observers associated the Garden of Eden with the Far East. Eden formed part of the lure of the East, and some of the great *mappaemundi* even illustrate the garden hovering there at the top of the map, roughly in the spot where Japan or China would now be found. Over time, however, the Garden of Eden shifted westward, toward the Near East, where both Bodin and Vico were inclined to place it. Armenia was the location preferred by the church historian George Smith in his *Patriarchal Age* (1847).⁷³ In Smith's case, the reasons for this shift are especially interesting. Armenia, he noted, is where Noah and his sons settled after the Deluge. In this vision, the Ark, scarcely drifting at all on the waters of the Deluge, settled on Mt. Ararat after the flood subsided. Smith was insistent on Armenia because it was close to the geographic roots of the Indo-European peoples—and hence better suited to Smith's purpose, which was to argue that the historical splitting of the Indo-European linguistic family was identical to the Confusion of Tongues.⁷⁴ Twentieth-century history and archeology would soon arrive at a consensus that Mesopotamia was the birthplace of writing. The Sumerian origins of writing joined with the relatively new myth of a Mesopotamian Eden in confirming the Near East as the cradle of humanity. The rise of Mesopotamia is palpable. General histories and textbooks published in the later nineteenth century typically had history begin in Egypt, then considered the oldest civilization.⁷⁵ In most post–World War II textbooks, however, Mesopotamia supplanted Egypt as the point of origins.⁷⁶

The deep gulf separating the Stone Age from civilization, backward Africa from progressive Mesopotamia, was humanity's Rubicon. Crossing it at some point late in the Neolithic era, just before the invention of metallurgy, humanity entered on the road to civilization, creating history in the process. The Neolithic Rubicon performs a narrative function eerily similar to the Viconian Deluge. There are some obvious differences. The Deluge was a resetting event, plunging humanity into the primitive conditions demanded by conjectural history. The Neolithic Rubicon was a passage from stasis to progress. But both sit astride the buffer zone between nonhistory and history. Both act as a rupture, generating a discontinuous narrative.

By this analysis, the Paleolithic "bottom" to the narrative of Western Civ was a false bottom. Robinson was earnest in his desire to integrate the Paleolithic into the stream of history, but his own texts were perfectly content to use the European Middle Ages as the Western world's point of origin. But even as Robinson was perfecting his textbooks, others were having a go at rebuilding the narrative of history and coming up with very different results. In the 1920s, the reading public was fascinated by the vertiginous prospects of deep history. Some measure of this fascination can be found in the phenomenal success of H. G. Wells's *The Outline of History*, whose first edition was published in 1919.⁷⁷ From his opening chapter, Wells rooted history in deep geological time, even astronomical time, and devoted far more attention to the Paleolithic and Neolithic than other histories of his time. Moving continuously from geological and biological time to historical time, the narrative does not postulate a rupture. Several books and series published in the wake of *Outline* were equally

ambitious and equally seamless. A remarkable exemplar is a ten-volume series called *The Corridors of Time*, published in 1927.⁷⁸ Beginning with a volume entitled *Apes and Men*, the series develops a natural history of humanity that runs down to the agricultural revolution and beyond. In *The Stream of History*, a general history published in 1928 that moved from the origins of the earth to the twentieth century, Geoffrey Parsons devoted 142 pages, a quarter of the total, to prehistory. These and other works entered the space first opened by Wells.⁷⁹ The modern-day descendants of this narrative include trade histories written by Jared Diamond and others whose disciplinary affiliation is not with history.⁸⁰

As William T. Ross has pointed out, *Outline*, with its frank Darwinian message, was aimed at a middlebrow audience “obstinately unwilling to subordinate itself to any older ‘blue-blood’ elite.”⁸¹ The response was immense: the work sold 150,000 copies in its initial British edition and 500,000 copies in the subsequent U.S. edition. The work’s appeal lay in the message that biology, not genius, was responsible for getting us where we are today.⁸² This was an explicit attack on the university-educated political elite who were inclined to explain history’s progressive direction as a function of 6,000 years of careful political stewardship. Political elites were not necessarily anti-Darwinian. Instead, they favored the older narrative, suitably shorn of its sacred underpinnings, for the political myth it conveyed—leaderless, Paleolithic man was doomed to live in a world without history; properly submissive to the benevolent rule of far-seeing and learned elites, mankind may ascend the ladder of civilization.

The captivating possibility of Ross’s argument is that the historians responsible for writing and teaching the first generation of Western Civ textbooks had political motivations for placing

the Paleolithic on the other side of a gulf. Adopting the long chronology, after all, might invite the dangerous idea that political hierarchies emerged as the result of natural or Darwinian processes. To believe this would be to doubt the civilizing function of education; the blessing that is writing; even the beneficent role of academia itself.



By the early twentieth century, most professional historians had abandoned sacred history. Yet the chronogeography of sacred history and its attendant narrative of rupture has proved to be remarkably resilient. History still cleaves to its short chronology. The otherwise meaningless date of 4000 B.C. continues to echo in our histories.⁸³ Authors still use the narrative device of rupture to create an artificial point of origin, reducing the Paleolithic to the status of a prologue to history, humanity's "apprenticeship." And history's point of origin is still Mesopotamian, or even more recent than that, given how the myth of the medieval origins of the modern world has embedded itself in the historical community. First told by Robinson, the myth has been peddled industriously by medieval historians who understandably desire a fair share of the curriculum and all the resources that go with it. Yet in this scramble for resources, it is the Paleolithic that gets left out of the history. A cynical comment, perhaps, but one that suggests how the exclusion of the Paleolithic did not derive just from the failure to break the plot of sacred history. There has also been resistance.