

b2 The Recent < Holocene >

If Judaism is the father and Christianity the mother, how can I find my place? The right response is not—as Freud did—to try to answer this question, but to break with the [Oedipal] fantasy that prompts it. Give up the fantasy that civilization has a developmental structure.

—Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, 2000.¹

Charles Lyell (1797-1875) used “Recent” for the duration of time when “not only all the shells but all the fossil mammalia are of living species.”² As such, his “Recent” included historical time *and* the last moment of prehistory for which there is archeological evidence of humans who made pottery, polished stone tools by grinding, worked metal, farmed, and tendered domesticated animals.

At the third International Geological Congress in 1885, Paul Gervais proposed the term Holocene (Gk. *holo*, whole) for the *most recent part of prehistory* “when have existed familiar organisms and modern humans.” The new name was particularly acceptable because it continued the use of the suffix *-cene* (var. of Gk. *ceno-*, *kainos*, common) which had been used by Lyell for his other time-subdivisions of the *latest part of prehistory* “before the existence of modern humans.” It also freed up the word Recent.

Many authors, as we will, now employ *Recent* to refer exclusively to *historical time*—the time since the invention of writing or, what fosters it, the existence of agrarian cultures: the time for which, as Gore Vidal wryly puts it, there is an “agreed-upon historical record.”³ Caveat lector. The saw: “History is written by the victors” is true of national epics. The intent has been, to quote Phyllis Trible, “ideological and theological—not to record history (in the modern sense) but to appropriate the past for the present.”⁴ The writings of “Father of History” Herodotus (ca. 482-425 BCE) are a romantic meld of folk law, religious belief, rumor, and a smattering of lived mundane facts.⁵ Interrupting a listing of progenitive humpings of gods that pique interest hardly more than Old Testament begats, Hesiod’s *Theogony* (late 8th century BCE) inadvertently, though unfortunately of no use for a nascent geology (as to see starkly what is described, needs the modern eye of a Mott Greene), includes graphic descriptions of major volcanic events.⁶

For the Recent back through the Holocene and Late Pleistocene, a division of time in Europe, on the criterion of decreasing human cultural levels, ranked as: Glass Age (**Footnote b2.1**), Iron Age, Bronze Age (2800-4000 years ago), Copper Age (or Chalcolithic “period,” that in the Levant, lasted for two thousand years and began about 6500 years ago), and Neolithic Age associated with cave art that began 30,000 years ago, cannot be exact. Inadvertently, such encourage the false principle, of which Oswald Spengler warned,⁷ that cultural advance is inevitable and has been synchronous worldwide. Stone age hunter-gathering societies (339 extant at last count, is a sample described by Lewis R. Binford in *Constructing Frames of Reference*, 2001)⁸ have, some, come into being in historical times (Amazon Indians), others persist (the !Kung of Botswana), and in southern Africa “Neolithic” rock art dates a scant 500 to 3,600 years old.⁹ Skills can be invented and lost. □

Footnote b2.1 Alan Macfarlane and Gerry Martin in *A World of Glass* summarize: “Glass beads, counters, toys, and jewelry were produced almost universally throughout Eurasia before 1850, with glass becoming a substitute for precious stones. The great developers of glass vessels, vases, and containers were the Italians, first the Romans and later the Venetians. The use of glass vessels was largely restricted to the western part of Eurasia until the 1850s, with little evidence of use in India, China, and Japan. In the Islamic territories and Russia, the use of glass declined dramatically from about the 14th century until modern times due to the Mongol incursions.” The mere making glass is not enough to account for the change in western Europe in art and architecture, and improvements in transport, housing, energy sources, agriculture, and manufacturing. Emergent was a triangle of knowledge-innovation-quantification. This feedback cycle burgeoned production of glass scientific instruments, bottles, window panes, and the enabling benefits of these. Tellingly, Macfarlane and Martin “randomly picked 20 famous experiments that changed our world—Thomson’s discovery of electrons [in 1897], Faraday’s work on electricity [in 1821], and Newton’s splitting of white light [in 1665] into its component colors with a prism, for example—and found that 15 of them could not have been performed without glass tools. That the knowledge revolution of the last 500 years took place in western Europe and not elsewhere, can be attributed in part to the collapse of glass manufacturing in Islamic civilizations and its diminished importance in India, Japan, and China.”¹⁰