

**‘Primevalism:
Saluting a Renamed Prehistory’
by Penelope J. Corfield**

Epilogue to
PROBLEMATISING TIME AND HISTORY IN PRE-HISTORY

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‘Prehistory’ is a positively unhelpful term. It implies that the very lengthy early millennia of the human experience are somehow not ‘real history’, constituting no more than a prelude to the ‘real deal’. Yet these years are actually foundational.

That point is no doubt one which all practitioners in the field known as ‘prehistory’ highlight in their opening lectures or first chapters. Terminological criticisms have long been voiced. Custom and usage, however, still sanctify the use of this unhelpful and misleading phrasing. It has now prevailed for over a century. The old nomenclature referring to a period known as ‘prehistory’ (1871), studied by ‘prehistorians’ (1893), pervades in academic departments, research institutions, learned societies, job descriptions, teaching courses, examination papers, academic journals, books, blogs, conferences, publishers’ preferences for book titles, and popular usages – let alone in scholars’ self-definitions. Little wonder that updating is not easy.

Nonetheless, this essay, written by a frank friend, calls for the systematic renaming of ‘prehistory’ as ‘primeval times’. In detail, the ensuing discussion analyses: firstly, the case for an alternative terminology; secondly, the shifting intellectual context which has generated the re-emergence of Big History which means that the long millennia conventionally known as ‘prehistory’ are now being absorbed into a much bigger and longer history of the cosmos; and lastly,

the case for integrating various key discussions from primeval times into longitudinal themes which are relevant to historians of all eras. Why confine big debates about the fundamentals of human life into an outmoded intellectual box named ‘prehistory’?

A prompt to such thoughts was provided by a casual visit, in summer 2016, to the ancient burial tomb known as Arthur’s Stone, high on a ridge in Herefordshire between the Wye and Golden Valleys. It’s a very modest monument, today guarded by English Heritage. It has never been excavated (Sant, 2000, p. 14); and it has become considerably dilapidated, since its first construction in c.3000 BCE (For dating style, see Corfield (2007), p. xviii).



**Fig.1 Arthur’s Stone (Herefordshire),
constructed c.3000 BCE
Source: photographer Tony Belton (2016)**

Yet while it began in what is conventionally known as ‘prehistory’, the Stone has great diachronic (through-time) resonance. At some stage long before the thirteenth century CE, the monument, like many other stones and relics, became associated in popular legend with the feats of King Arthur. (Did he win a battle there, rumour speculated, or slay a giant?) The site then witnessed real-life dramas. In the fifteenth century, a knight was killed there in a fatal duel. And in September 1645 the embattled Charles I dined at the Stone with his royalist troops. Perhaps he intended the occasion as a symbolic gesture, although it did not confer upon him sufficient pseudo-Arthurian lustre to defeat Cromwell and the Roundheads.

For nearby villagers in Dorstone and Bredwardine, the site was also a midsummer venue for popular festivities, dancing and ‘high jinks’. This long-standing tradition continued until well into Victorian times. As a sober counter-balance, too, the local Baptists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries organised an ecumenical religious service there each June/July. Implicitly, they were acknowledging the Stone’s sacral nature, whilst simultaneously purging its pagan associations. With great research serendipity, I met by chance there a local resident who recounted her memories, as a child before World War II, of joining her schoolfellows to sing hymns at the site each midsummer. (Corroborated by other local sources). This experience and later visits confirmed for her the special nature of the place. Thus throughout its five thousand years of existence, Arthur’s Stone has had multiple meanings for the witnessing generations. (Grinsell, 1976; Beckensall, 2006) It’s very old but it cannot be confined into a historical ante-chamber. And the same point applies to all ancient monuments, many of which are much bigger and more famous. They are all prompts to full diachronic analysis, and are open to exploration as such.

Renaming ‘prehistory’

One common definition of ‘prehistory’ is the prolonged period of time from the advent of *homo sapiens* some 200,000 years ago to the advent of literacy in Mesopotamia some 5,200 years ago. However, since literacy appeared at different dates in other cultures in other parts of the world, ‘prehistory’ is also used to refer to a stage of history, as well as a period of time. There is no universal chronology that applies across the globe (Finneran, 2007, p. 33). That flexibility gives the concept of ‘prehistory’ a certain ambiguity: is it a stage or an era? And, more fundamentally, is it well named in either context?

In recent years, the quality of scholarly research into ‘prehistory’ has become impressively great. The absence of written records has stimulated ingenious methodologies which combine invaluable insights from archaeologists, anthropologists, palaeontologists, geneticists, climatologists, and ‘mere’ historians. (Gamble, 1993; Renfrew, 2007; Fagan & Durrani, 2016). Experts borrow freely, as needed, from very variegated disciplines. That multi-stranded approach is now relatively common across all historical studies – whether the discipline of History be viewed as purely one of the Humanities or as one overlapping with the Social Sciences. Eclecticism rules (contrast Tosh, 2010; Trigger, 1968). Multi-faceted approaches are now common – even commonplace. Holism is admired. Both subjective and objective viewpoints are alike surveyed, combined, and critiqued.

But such radical initiatives in the field of ‘prehistory’ have not yet extended to updating its name. When definitional terms dating back to Victorian times are challenged, especially by outsiders, there is often group resistance to change. Familiarity, inertia and institutional embeddedness make the case for continuity, which is in itself a powerful force. Similar resistance, incidentally, is encountered by parallel attempts at rejecting the over-simplified categories of ‘Ancient’, ‘Medieval’, ‘Renaissance’, ‘Early Modern’, ‘Modern’ or even the elusive – and now fast evaporating – ‘Postmodern’ stages of history (Corfield,

2010). Those who do reject the old terms and definitional concepts often find the decision liberating. Yet so far the weight of collective usage, bolstered by institutional practice, is proving hard to shift.

Of course, it's always relevant to ask: What's in a name? Scholars sometimes argue that the descriptive tag of any given era does not matter, as long as its contextual application is generally understood. Furthermore, some urge specifically that a problematic terminology functions as a helpful heuristic device. It enables experts to start their courses and books by amusingly dissecting and rejecting the implications of the headline name of their subject.

And yet ... there are limits to the value of any terminology, if it is outright nonsensical. To repeat, naming a period or stage of development as 'prehistory' implies that it is but a prelude to and, by implication, a feebler, pettier version of the 'real thing'. Yet everything that happened before the advent of writing is as much part of the collective human experience as everything that has happened and is happening afterwards. Naming, far from being an optional extra, is fundamental to understanding rightly.

Already, much older references to 'primitive' history have been jettisoned by scholars. That condescending adjective misleadingly implied a linear development along a qualitative line, whether (for optimists) from primitive savagery advancing towards civilisation or (for pessimists) from primitive simplicity degenerating into decadence (Zerubavel, 2003). So it's now time for a further update. 'Primitive' history has been abandoned, as a historical curiosity. 'Prehistory' should similarly disappear.

These points now have a further practical salience. Since 2010, a number of experts from the humanities, social sciences and sciences have been working together on what is known as Big History. It has already generated a number of assertive textbooks (Christian, 2004; Spier, 2010). And it is supported since 2010 by an international learned society (www.ibhanet.org). Big History really thinks big. It takes as its focus either the entire history of the cosmos, from the

start to the present day, or at very least the entire history of Planet Earth. As an approach, it marks the return of the diachronic with a vengeance. In this new intellectual scenario, the advent of the species of *Homo sapiens* is already a long way down the chronological line. The years before human literacy do not constitute a preliminary ‘prehistory’, before things begin to happen – but instead form part of a much bigger, longer and even more epic process of cosmic and/or global development.

Existing subject specialisms, it should be stressed, are by no means bypassed or rendered obsolete by the Big History project. The in-depth research contributions of the precise sciences (astronomy, cosmology, physics, chemistry, biology, genetics, zoology, climatology, geology), the social sciences (anthropology, geography, environmentalism, palaeontology, archaeology, demography) as well as the humanities, including notably the history of all regions and eras, are needed more than ever. Otherwise, Big History risks becoming schematic and far too superficial. But its advent is one of many signals that long-term diachronic frameworks are currently – and rightly – becoming re-appreciated as integral to the quest for historical understanding. Synchronic immersion on its own is not enough.

Any non-specialist may have personal views on how ‘prehistory’ should be renamed. But real changes will only come from experts who study the field in depth. They bear the heat and burden of the day. However, since updates often come insidiously, out of a variety of options, it’s worth considering some alternatives.

Ideally, a descriptive term which is positive in its own right, and not defined as ‘pre’ or ‘post’ anything, would convey the clearest message. The ‘tool-making’ era might, at first stab, seem relevant here, since tool-making was such a distinctive feature of early human development. But that suggestion clearly doesn’t work. Humans have continued to make old and new tools, of greater or lesser complexity, in all eras, adding new inventions while

incorporating the best elements from the traditional repertoire. Hence the ‘modern’ motor car travels on wheels, whose first invention dates back to ‘prehistoric’ times.

Other possibilities include ‘pre-recorded’ history, meaning specifically the era before written records. However, that usage too is misleading. It obscures the fact that records of the past do not come purely in written form. Ancient monuments, like Arthur’s Stone, are visible and tangible sources of information in their own right. Indeed, there are so many ingenious ways to gain understanding, from radiocarbon-dating, to statistical modelling, to excavations, to DNA-profiling based upon ancient teeth and bones, to the (much-debated) analyses of cave-art, and so forth, that written records no longer constitute the sole research grail.

Further circumlocutions, such as references to ‘pre-literacy’ or ‘pre-writing’, are explicit about historical sequencing but, alas, misleading in everyday usage. It’s hard to imagine scholars welcoming the label of ‘preliteracy-historians’. It makes them sound as though they are either personally deficient in staple skills – or, alternatively, specialist experts in language acquisition among the young. The same applies to ‘pre-writing’ in use as a single historical descriptor. However, references to the advent of literacy can be useful in longer descriptions. It is the ‘single name’ problem which poses the greatest challenge.

‘Foundational’, for example, says something accurate about the years before societies learned and shared the art of reading and writing. It has solid meaning. And it does not imply either foundational vice or foundational virtue. However, the term is not sufficiently self-explanatory. ‘Foundational history’ seems too much like a first-year introductory course.

Indeed, all single-quality adjectives risk seeming too simplistic when applied over millennia that saw many complex transitions. That’s why the once common references to the Stone Age, which still appear in casual parlance,

became greatly sub-divided with further research. Time-markers were one way of marking distinctions. Thus there are references to the Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age), Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age), and Neolithic (New Stone Age). But those sub-divisions became disputed in turn. Another variant refers to the advent of metal-working, which appeared historically before the advent of writing. So rival usages such as the Bronze Age and Iron Age were then introduced. However, these too were disputed in terms of chronology – and did not apply equally in all ‘prehistoric’ cultures around the globe. It’s hard to find definitions that embrace variety but without generating further confusions.

Perhaps referring to these pre-writing years as ‘early history’ or the ‘early millennia’ would suffice. Such terms still imply a temporal succession, but without any implication that one stage is more important or better than another. But ‘earlybird’ usages lack romance. They are also liable to promote confusion, if ‘early’ history is then followed by the ‘ancient world’ of classical Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and so forth. What is seen as ‘old’ or ‘new’ depends very much on the vantage point of the time traveller. ‘Ancient’ itself is another ultra-flexible term, which is loosely applied to many different past periods, rather like ‘classical’, and is also overdue for reconsideration

My own preference for the era before literacy is ‘primeval’. Or even ‘primordial’. These are Latinate terms for things that are very, very old. ‘Primeval’ in particular has the ring of primacy and antiquity, but without implications of ‘primitivism’ or backwardness.

True, scholars of ‘primeval history’ probably won’t want to be called ‘primevalists’. Yet, after all, there is no obligation for scholars to be named after their specialist fields. A number of historians of later eras, like myself, reject being pinned down as ‘medievalists’ or ‘modernists’, let alone the vanishing ‘postmodernists’. Those period labels are increasingly disputed in their dates and meanings. Instead, there’s merit in big inclusive names, like ‘historian’ or

‘archaeologist’. Such broad terms give practitioners free rein to look analytically up and down the centuries, as their investigations require.



**Fig.2 Clay figures of seated man and woman, Cernavodă (Romania),
fired in c.5000 BCE: primeval but not ‘before history’
Source: image in public domain**

Returning to an ultra-protracted Big History

Putting all the eras together entails a welcome end to the undue fragmentation of historical research. In-depth surveys are now being complemented (not replaced) by a growing interest in long-swing analysis. It amounts to a positive ‘historical turn’. (Armitage & Guldi, 2014; Corfield, 2015). For much of the twentieth century, it is true, there was a swing among many historians and social scientists to give analytical priority to space over time. Or, to put the same point another way, there was a tendency to prioritise the synchronic then-and-there (events in one location) over the diachronic flow (whether deep

continuities or long-term trends). There were reasons for that shift, as there are now reasons for righting the pendulum.

Einstein's intellectual impact was important in generating the changing intellectual climate in the early and mid-twentieth century. After formulating his new theories of relativity, he pronounced that: 'Time is no longer absolute'. And Hermann Minkowski expanded the point in 1908 when assessing the impact of Einsteinian physics: 'Henceforth Space by itself, and Time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality' (cited in Corfield, 2007, p. 9).

Such dramatic pronouncements encouraged a quizzical attitude towards temporality itself – an attitude which spread gradually both among intellectual circles and within Western popular culture. 'Everything's relative' was the catch-phrase that registered scepticism about all old certainties. If the space-time continuum, in Minkowski's summary phrase, could bend or become warped in certain specific contexts, then old-style linear models of history could be rejected as naïve and simplistic. Confidence in 'time's arrow' was shaken.

'Grand narratives' or big-picture histories (also known as meta-narratives) continued to appear for some time. Historians did not immediately switch wholesale to micro-studies. Oswald Spengler's gloomy *Decline of the West* appeared in 1918 (revised 1922/3) and Arnold J. Toynbee's twelve-volume account of the cyclical rise and fall of world civilizations followed in stages between 1934 and 1956. Yet these works were the last of their kind to command great heights of public adulation, excited commentary and earnest refutation. Toynbee, as the professional historian of the two, was seen as the most impressive. Nonetheless, his reputation, after reaching its zenith in the mid-1950s, has since collapsed dramatically. That shift has happened in part because Toynbee's account of historical change as a process of 'challenge-and-response' seems, upon close inspection, to be more of a description than an explanation. But his reputation also withered because grand, sweeping histories in his style

were falling out of analytical favour in many intellectual circles. That sceptical response was especially sharpened after World War II.

Western beliefs in the ‘march of progress’ were undermined by mass experiences of the devastation caused by total warfare in the twentieth century. Above all, the emerging revelations after World War II of the scale and infamy of the Holocaust sealed the end of easy optimism that ‘all was for the best’. At the same time, a gradual process of erosion was similarly undermining the Marxist faith in history as one of non-stop class struggle (known theoretically as ‘dialectical materialism’), which would lead inexorably to a proletarian-communist revolution. Revelations about the blood-thirsty nature of Stalinist rule were then supplemented by Russia’s heavy-handed suppression of resistance in Hungary (1956) and later Czechoslovakia (1968). Long-term trends turned out to have a continuing capacity for surprise. The world’s first communist revolution, which was to lead, in Engels’s euphoric phrase, to a new Kingdom of Freedom, had not unfolded as promised. It seemed that neither marching towards ‘progress’ nor getting there by revolutionary leaps had worked.

Hence it may have seemed for a time more plausible to shrug and to see history as ‘one damned thing after another’ (with a stress on the adjective *damned*) than to formulate a big new alternative. Perhaps wiser too, as some academics thought for a while. In-depth micro-studies became all the rage, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. In this context, there was no intellectual pressure to re-unite ‘prehistory’ with the rest of the subject. If there was no long-term pattern to history, it did not matter whether the foundational stage of human development was either one of primitive barbarity or of primitive simplicity.

Doubt rather than certainty became the new intellectual mood-music in the West in the 1980s and 1990s (although of course, there were always dissentient voices). Above all, postmodernist theories, influential with many disillusioned

left-wingers, stressed the problematic nature of all knowledge about the past (Jenkins, 1991). One central tenet of this attitude was an ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’, as proclaimed by the French social philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard, 1979, 1984). Time’s arrow did not point in any specific direction, it seemed.

Taking scepticism yet further, Lyotard’s protégé the literary destructionist Jacques Derrida asserted that temporality itself has no independent reality. For him, time is a concept which ‘belongs entirely to metaphysics’. (Clearly, that formulation was not meant as a compliment). As his preferred alternative, Derrida evoked an atemporal spatiality, which he named as *khôra*, borrowing a Greek word for a site or receptacle (Hodge, 2007, pp. ix-x, 196-206, 213-214). Unsurprisingly, however, the plan by an adventurous architect Peter Eisenmann to build, for public display in a Paris park, a physical model of this nebulous concept, depicting space without time, came to nothing.

Instead, the negativism of postmodernist theory was eventually followed by a justified intellectual recoil. Historians *en masse*, while tending to reject grand narratives, had never gone to the other extreme. They did not accept that the past has no meaning, or that studies of history are purely subjective accounts. Doubts need not be universal. Paradoxically, the postmodernists’ assertion that an old era of so-called ‘modernity’ had been superseded by their new age of sceptical ‘postmodernity’ displayed their own confidence that the course of history could be deciphered and, furthermore, proclaimed to be favourable to their own views. In other words, their critique of meta-narratives did not inhibit them from producing a new meta-narrative of their own. Belief in some pattern to the long-span unfolding of historical events was not so easily jettisoned.

Above all, it can now be seen that the ‘heresy’ of Time denial, which recurs as a persistent minority view among some philosophers, social analysts, and physicists (Barbour, 1999, pp. 324-5), ignores the real insights of Einstein.

His physics did not reject the phenomenon of temporality or imply that there were no absolutes in the physical universe. Instead, the deep implication of Einsteinian physics is that there is no need (and no serious chance) to opt between time and space. They form one continuum. Together, they frame the unfolding cosmos. Minkowski named their union as space-time. A minority of commentators, myself included, prefer the terminology of time-space, as giving priority to the dynamic properties of time. Perhaps the perfect collision of the two words into one portmanteau noun (in English) would suffice, making the ungainly '*sptimace*' (Corfield, 2007, p. 16).

Be that as it may, the point is that time and space – history and geography – are all one. Thus the intellectual shock-waves, emanating from Einsteinian physics, plus the collapse of some famous grand theories of history, have now been absorbed. The outer bounds of extreme scepticism have been encountered and rebutted. It's time instead to re-acknowledge space and time as inextricably yoked together in space-time, as they are (Holford-Strevens, 2005). As a result, it is implausible to conceptualise about different forms of (as opposed to different ideas about) temporality in different eras. Diachronic long-span history is best understood within the continuous unfolding of space-time, co-extensive with both time and space. Long- and short-term are related. Hence, to repeat, the diachronic always remains within the synchronic, as well as *vice versa* (Corfield, 2007, p. xv).

Research becomes liberated by a return to the long-term, as in practice eclectic historians have always known. Traditional sub-divisions of history into separate sections or stages can be adapted or subverted. Outmoded and unhelpful temporal or thematic bunkers can be overthrown. Research projects can take the form of either micro-studies or macro-studies or some interaction of the two, as the dictates of specific themes require. Even as protracted a period as that traditionally known as 'prehistory' can be re-examined with profit in whatever longitudinal frameworks are helpful.

Genetic history provides a pertinent example of the value of very long-run analysis. Studies of the human genome cover the entire lifespan of the human species. During those millennia, adaptations arise along the way. These micro-changes then illuminate the complex history of human diasporas, intermarriages, genetic divergences and/or genetic convergences between regional populations, and inherited/acquired medical conditions, from the origins of the species until now (Cavalli-Sforza & Cavalli-Sforza, 1995; Rech, 2018).

The spatial range of such population studies is global. The periodisation is protracted and ultra-inclusive. And the analytical outcomes are freed from prior assumptions about inevitable destinations. It appears that humans have always been globe-trotters, as they remain today. And, it may also be added for good measure that they all constitute peoples within one world-wide biological race, who can inter-breed (as the definition of a species specifies), rather than represent a ranked hierarchy of separate races.

Reverting again prosaically to Arthur's Stone, its survival signals it as a persistent product of time, made manifest in space. It functions as both a spatial and a temporal marker. In that, it forms part of the perennial human interest in creating monuments and/or demarcating places of special significance, which continues today. At various times, Arthur's Stone has been a local focus for burial, ceremonial, religious, military, and festive functions, as well as a modest venue for tourist visiting. Indeed, it was anciently associated with special walkways (Loveday, 1998, pp. 25-30), leading to and from the site. Possibly too Arthur's Stone was used as an astronomical observation point, in conjunction with other nearby stones (Watkins, 1928) – a function which is claimed (and debated) in the case of many monuments. Certainly, it is likely that there were many linkages between this site and others nearby, known to archaeologists as the 'Severn-Cotswold' group of chambered tombs.

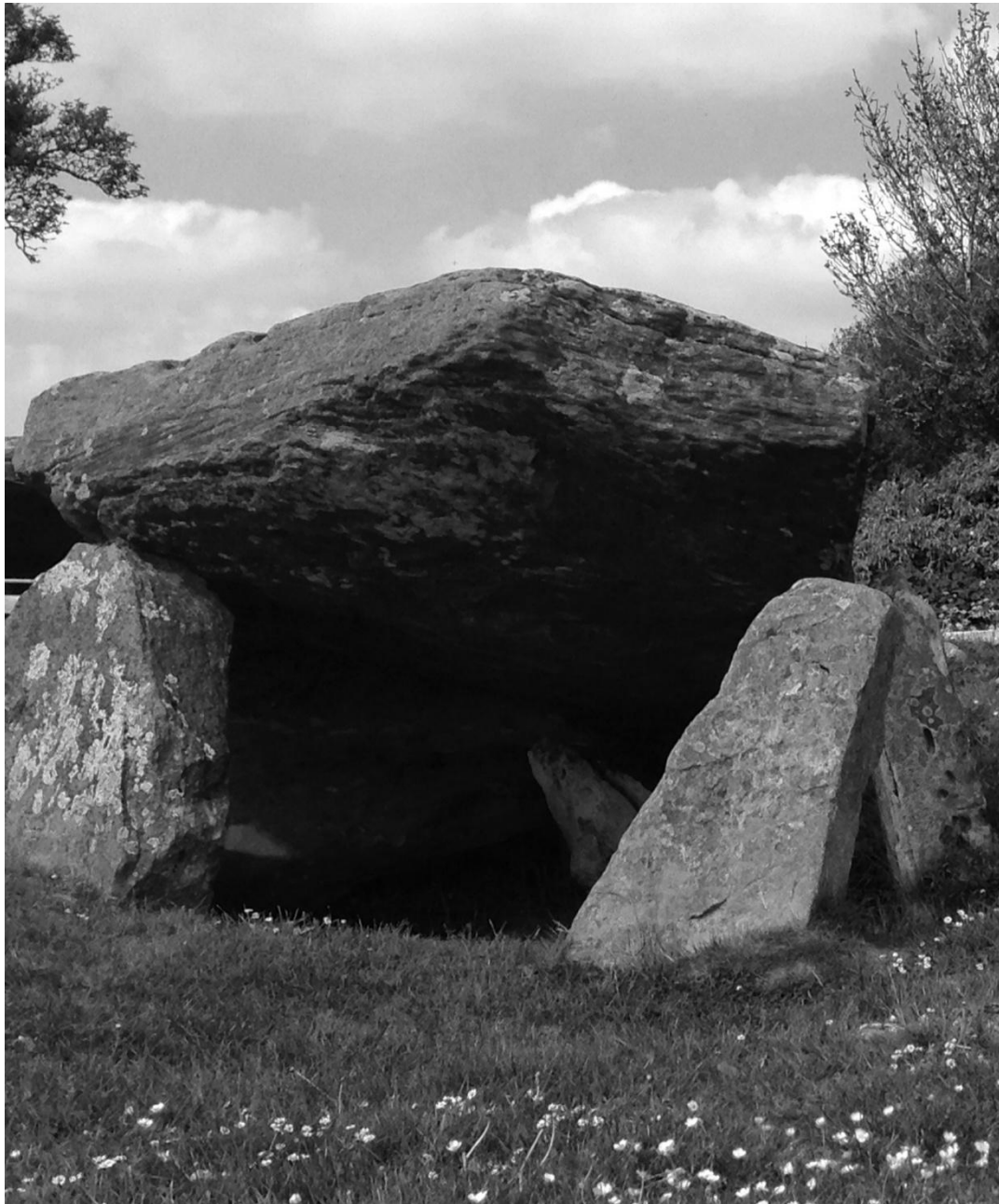


Fig.3 Close-up of Arthur's Stone, Herefordshire
Source: photographer Tony Belton (2016)

All such monuments, large and small, invite further probing, to understand their construction, uses, and changing through-time meanings (Renfrew, 2008, pp. 153-7). The legends attached to Arthur's Stone are modest, lacking in great drama. They do not equal the philosophical reverberations of a Shelleyan *Ozymandias*.

Nevertheless, the mundanity of Arthur's Stone is in its way as much of an analytical challenge as the magnificence of a grand monument like Stonehenge. None of these sites were constructed out of the blue. They indicate the existence of societies capable of planning, organisation, and technical accomplishment. It is significant therefore that, in the vicinity of Arthur's Stone, even older flint flakes and arrow-heads have been found in some abundance. Ingenious tool-making skills were necessary precursor capabilities for the later building of special monuments; and such skills were to put into action at many different places across the landscape. It's too schematic to insist upon specific stages in technical accomplishment. But there was certainly a degree of progression, learning, skills transmission, and change. Defining all pre-literate societies simply as 'prehistoric' unhappily implies that they were all somehow static, in the antechamber to 'real' history. Instead, primeval societies were decidedly fecund: they contained deep continuities – but also many forms of change.

**Longitudinal studies in turbulence, momentum,
and deep continuities**

Not only does Space have its familiar three dimensions: length; breadth; depth; but Time can usefully be viewed in terms of its own three interlocking dimensions. I define these as deep continuity (persistence); micro-change (evolution/momentum); and radical discontinuity or macro-change (turbulence). In their changing combinations, they constitute a process of historical 'trialectics' (Corfield, 2007, pp. 122-3, 211-16, 231, 248-9). But whether that particular invented terminology is acceptable or not, these three dimensions remain analytically applicable through time. Longitudinal themes demand longitudinal approaches.

Looking at these dimensions in turn: there are certainly plenty of cases of revolutionary macro-change (turbulence) or radical discontinuity in history (Corfield, 2007, pp. 89-112). During the protracted aeons conventionally known

as ‘prehistory’, prime examples include the very arrival of *homo sapiens* as a species. And after that, there were numerous other epic changes. Examples are: the adoption of clothing; the taming of fire; the invention of tools; the refinement of tools and weapons with handles; the invention of the wheel; the arrival of speech; the advent of decorative arts; the formulation of burial rituals; the domestication of animals; the development of a calendrical consciousness; population fluctuations including survival during the Ice Age; the start of permanent settlements and farming; and, ultimately, the genesis of reading and writing.

None of these radical discontinuities are easy to date and decipher. Fascinating debates continue to simmer and at times to escalate, for example over the timing and causes of the advent of speech (Hurford, 2007; MacNeilage, 2008; Berwick & Chomsky, 2016). And no changes were inevitable. On the other hand, they happened, in different circumstances in different parts of the world. The wheel was invented and set to use in Mesopotamia from c.4000-3500 BCE onwards, while in the different terrains of Central and South America the wheel long remained a decorative toy (Buliet, 2016).

Issues such as these highlight pertinent themes about human adaptability, including, topically enough, the human species’ fluctuating numbers and variegated global distribution in response to changing climate conditions. *Homo sapiens* has always shown the capacity to innovate. Yet by implication the reverse was also possible. Why were there long periods without major transformations? Renfrew calls this ‘the sapient paradox’: if experts laud the intrinsic dynamism of *homo sapiens*, why did it take so many thousands of years for settled agriculture, known as the first ‘agricultural revolution’, to emerge (Renfrew, 2007, pp. 84-5)? In fact, the early millennia of human history also saw prolonged continuities, described as ‘many thousands of years when nothing seems to happen’ (cited in Gamble, 1993, p. 248). Hence historians of primeval times grapple to assess the balance between great upheavals and

enduring stasis. Such big themes remain relevant to the continuing historiographical debates about the timing of both revolutions and failed transitions in all periods of history (Among a host of studies, see Gamble, 2007; Barham, 2013; Jones, 1988). Primeval case histories are particularly stark in their focus and thus particularly apt for general contemplation.

Further complicating the picture – and turning to a second distinctive historical dimension – is the fact that many changes were evolutionary in their unfolding (Corfield, 2007, pp. 57-79), even if revolutionary in their implications. Fast and slow transformations interact. Some historically great changes began as macro-shifts (the advent of language). which then became transmuted into micro-change (the evolution of language). Or, at other times, the reverse happened: an accumulation of incremental adjustments (the use of tools) can germinate in the very long run something fundamental (technological transformation).

Either way, evolutionary change, being much more gradual and much less dramatic than revolutionary upheaval, remains a quiet force in history. Too often it is under-recognised. Historians, egged on by their publishers, find it more dramatic to discover ‘revolutions’. But there are plenty of examples of very slow and virtually invisible evolution.

To take an example from human biology, the average size of the human jaw is, over very many millennia, getting smaller, increasing the chances of dental overcrowding. Partly in response to that, genetic mutation is producing a matching evolutionary response. Growing numbers of humans (myself included) are being born with fewer than the standard 32 adult teeth. In some parts of the world, such as in China today, that heritable condition, known as ‘hypodontia’, is found in over one third of the population. As an evolutionary adaptation, it is far more common than the reverse syndrome, of being born with an excess number of supernumerary teeth (‘hyperdontia’) (Brothwell, 1963, pp. 179-90). Moreover, the long-term trend towards smaller jaws and

fewer teeth is highly likely to continue. But biology is not working hurriedly to reduce either human toothache or dental overcrowding.

Evolution, moreover, operates as a socio-cultural process as well as a biological function. Changes in human powers of communication provide a case in point. The arrival firstly of spoken, and, later, of written languages did constitute epic transformations. But, after the first dazzling creativity, the refining and diffusion of new skills in communication proved to be a slow, incremental process, not least because children in every generation learn gradually. Hence the evolution of specific languages has taken millennia. And the process continues today. All living languages change relatively slowly in their deep grammatical structures, albeit much more rapidly in vocabulary and current usages. Consequently, the analytical challenge is to disentangle the intricate mixture of turbulence and gradualism, as slow adaptations often continue to embed macro-transformations once begun.

Broadly speaking, process changes are not only generated from within human communities but are also triggered from outside, through planetary variations such as climatic fluctuations. Human responses to the waxing and waning of Ice Ages are a case in point. (Fagan, 2009). These are clearly challenges/responses which, again, are not confined to any one era, but apply to the whole picture. Primeval case histories are thus particularly apt in highlighting the interlocking nature of rapid and gradual changes.

Complicating all these themes yet further, the missing third of the trialectical dimensions within Time remains to be evaluated. If the power of evolution is often underrated by historians, then deep continuity (persistence, inertia) is habitually even more neglected (Corfield, 2007, pp. 26-48). Nevertheless, there is much evidence for its potency, which is often hidden in plain sight. (One indicator of the power of persistence has already been mentioned: the unwillingness of scholars to rename their period specialisms).

Experts in primeval times have a particular expertise as analysts of continuity. As already noted, there were many long ‘slow’ millennia of human existence before the advent of literacy when transformations were generally (but not invariably) few and gradual. The contrast between those years, and the post-writing experience of relatively ‘fast-change’ during the last five thousand years is marked. That acceleration indicates how improvements in methods of communication, and the speed of information flows, trigger further innovations, whilst advancing the accumulating human stock of knowledge. Nonetheless, even amidst grand upheavals, far from everything changes. For instance, the art of human communication via pictorial signs remains absolutely basic. To take just one example, very similar line drawings of the horse recur through time (Kenin, 1974; Forrest, 2016) – see Figs. 4-6. The everyday practice of drawing is thus found today in literate societies as much as from the very earliest times before the invention of writing. Little wonder that one analyst firmly attributes the advent of the ‘modern mind’ to the world’s oldest evidence of representational art (Cook, 2013). ‘Modernity’ (which also needs redefining) is not a condition which applies only to ‘advanced’ societies but can be detected at any time.



(L) Fig.4 Horse profile, Creswell Crags Cave, Nottinghamshire, 12,000 BCE

Source: Trustees of the British Museum

(Centre) Fig.5 Horse profile, silver hemidrachm, Thessaly, fifth century BCE

Source: image in public domain

(R) Fig.6 Horse profile, 2017 CE

Source: free icon from www.flaticon.com

Another fascinating example also comes from the lengthy history of non-speech communication skills. Initially, humans relied totally upon gestures, empathetic body language, expressive sounds, making marks, and the power of copying (mimesis). Moreover, even when speech and then writing were added, the old signalling systems were not discarded, but were retained alongside. People in all cultures today continue instinctively to use sounds and gestures to communicate. They don't think twice about deploying such primeval skills. It is true that the specific forms of gesturing display many historic and cultural variants (Bremmer & Roodenburg, 1991). But these semi-instinctive semi-socially-learned bodily signals remain an invaluable resource, usually forming a contrapuntal accompaniment to speech. Moreover primal gestures remain a vital resource for communication between peoples without a common language. The net effect is a layering of human skills, as both old instincts and culturally learned conventions coexist.

More than that, with the most recent technology-led shifts in quick-fire communications via social media, people are finding that the option of expressing personal viewpoints both instantly and anonymously is encouraging, in some quarters, unfettered expressions of deep and positively 'primal' emotions. Unrestrained fears, anger and hatreds are being voiced as lavishly as unqualified love, admiration and happiness. Yet sending on-line messages is done without the crucial face-to-face element to which people are biologically and culturally accustomed. (Even skypeing does not permit the same interactivity as is generated by bodily presence). Hence the social media can be operated without the social, cultural and legal regulations, which have been developed over time to frame older processes of communication. The cacophony of voices on social media can be welcomed up to a point as venting the collective 'wisdom of the masses'. However, unfettered expressions of ferocity and rage constitute a distinct societal challenge (Reagle, 2015).

Past experience suggests that humans will eventually find a way to cope effectively with the latest macro-change in methods of communication. Indeed, longitudinal studies tend to point encouragingly to the highly adaptive capacities of primeval societies. Humans constitute a species known for both problem-creating and problem-solving. But finding solutions is not necessarily a quick or painless process.

Various assertions have repeatedly sought to encapsulate the basic qualities of humankind. The botanist/biologist Carl Linnaeus began the taxonomy in 1758 by offering *homo sapiens* (the knowing species). This collectively flattering term is now widely adopted – by humans. But other qualities have been highlighted too. Options range from *homo faber* (the tool-maker); to *homo loquens*, 1772 (the speaking ape); *homo ridens* (the only species which laughs); *homo religiosus* (the prayerful); *homo ferox* (the fighter); *homo ludens*, 1795 (the playful); *homo socius* (the sociable); and *homo economicus* (the rational economic calculator), even while that definition is rightly criticised as overdoing the rationality (which is assumed to point to one result only) and underplaying the effect of imperfect information flows. In addition, today's human has been slyly redefined as *homo zappiens* - a donnish joke saluting the arrival of the TV remote-control zapper (Veen & Vrakking, 2006). Yet there is no one universally agreed characteristic. Instead, humans are multi-faceted – and adaptable.

Similar criticisms apply whenever singular traits are taken as universal. Humans are neither purely selfish nor purely altruistic. Equally, gender stereotypes, invoking the mythical 'Stone Age man' (and woman), are unconvincing. There is no 'pure', unbiased evidence on these questions. Instead, declarations on all such matters are rightly open to dispute (see Buss, 2005, and attendant debates). The scanty evidence from primeval times does not warrant the assumption of one monochrome psychological profile, rather than a range of common characteristics, for an entire species.

What does persist is the quest (and need) to study all aspects of human biological and behavioural traits. These are not questions of which our species is likely to tire. Thus, again the evidence – or lack of evidence – from primeval times remains highly relevant here.

Coda: saluting primeval times

Historians, archaeologists and museum curators regularly confront the deep linkages between past and present. Questions both ethical and practical are particularly highlighted when debating the display of long dead human bodies (Williams & Giles, 2016). These corpses are generated by the same lengthy human history, which stretches from primeval times until now. Due sensitivity is required, to balance respect for the dead with the need to share knowledge.

Things that happened long ago are not sealed away from contemporary times. All history is one. Complete with radical turbulence, evolution, and deep continuities too. Consequently, let's hope that foggy, misleading 'prehistory' gets renamed.

Nomenclature really does matter. Misleading names do mislead. The foundational pre-writing eras which launched, rather than antedated, human history, need a better and more resonant label. Farewell to 'Prehistory'. Elements of long ago persist today. Let's instead salute the fascinatingly cross-time relevance of Primevalism.

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