

# Preface

All arguments about the past are shaped by rhetorical and narrative devices. It is not just an assessment of “the facts” that helps us decide whether a historical account is convincing: facts emerge as such, and acquire their power as evidence, within narrative structures. The story of an empire’s rise or a nation’s collapse may be filled with dates and textual sources, which can be right or wrong, reliable or dubious; but the story’s integrity as history also depends on a deeper architecture of likenesses. Empires and nations, though they consist of millions of individuals who do not know each other, are often treated as if they were physical bodies. They are born, mature, and die in history books. They have (or appear to have) character traits; they make decisions, acquire friends and enemies, form and dissolve unions. They are compared, in countless ways, to persons, families, and bodies. At a certain level we know these likenesses are metaphorical, but doing without them is difficult. When the metaphors seep into everyday usage among historical actors, we can even say that they shape the evidence and events that historians choose to write about. Metaphors determine what goes into a historical argument, what is left out, and how new forms of historical argumentation can be developed. What matters to good history writing is to develop a knowing relationship with the narrative motifs and metaphors that we employ.

This is a book about the deep history of humankind, a domain of inquiry that extends millions of years into the past. Although it might seem the perfect subject matter for historians, this vast time-space was left out of

most historical writing almost as soon as it was discovered. Humans have always been interested in their origins, but the deep past, as typically understood by modern historians, is never deeper than antiquity and is sometimes positioned in an even more recent era. Awareness of a time before antiquity became acute only in the nineteenth century, as the Darwinian revolution displaced the widely shared belief that the world was only 6,000 years old. The new age that suddenly opened up before Eden, dividing the human past into long and short chronologies, soon became the object of systematic study. Yet deep time seemed impervious to the methods of conventional historical writing, a state of affairs captured in the word coined to describe this newly remote past: *prehistory*.

As this volume demonstrates, the assumptions that initially conspired to mark off prehistory as a time before history are still very much with us. At stake is a methodology based on written evidence, along with a commitment to a powerful set of narrative motifs, most of them grounded in notions of progress and human mastery over nature. Together these commitments have made the deep past an unsettling place for academic historians. Thanks to the industrious work habits of archaeologists and paleoanthropologists, prehistory today is carefully mapped, meticulously dated, and creatively analyzed. In recent decades, discoveries about the evolution of humans and related hominid species have been accumulating thick and fast. But for all that, the deep human past remains curiously off limits to many anthropologists and historians, even to those interested in the big questions of what it means to be human. In fact, the chronological domain of the research explicitly described as historical has narrowed dramatically in scope over the past century, even as our knowledge of human prehistory has expanded. Most historical research is now concentrated in the centuries that followed the global expansion of the European powers, in times vaguely described as “modern,” in societies described as colonial and postcolonial.

This volume grows out of our discomfort with this trend and our desire not only to explain it but also to create alternatives to it. We do not think that the systematic neglect of deep history among historians and anthropologists—two fields that make the human past their business—is a product of ignorance or disdain. Nor is it a simple byproduct of specialization. It arises instead from the architecture of historical arguments, from the narrative motifs and analogies preferred by the writers of history. A century ago, the simplistic notions of progress and the misapplications of Darwinian evolutionary theory that dominated history and anthropology conspired to make all premodern civilizations

inconsequential except, perhaps, as living evidence of Europe's primitive past and a way of understanding its rise to global superiority. All that has changed. Historians and anthropologists today routinely invoke a new set of patterns, such as diaspora, subalternity, hegemony, resistance, commodification, and agency, to characterize the intricate feedback patterns that accompanied the emergence of the modern world system. The triumph of the global perspective shows how, through concentrated effort, the very patterns of historical writing can be transformed. In this transformation, the formerly irrelevant is made intensely relevant not through a new set of facts but through a new set of intellectual devices for describing the arc of change. Yet the very success of the global paradigm has revealed the continuing absence of the patterns and forms that might allow us to recuperate the deep human past.

The goal of this book is to offer a set of tools—patterns, frames, metaphors—for the telling of deep histories. These include kinshipping, fractal replication, exchange, hospitality, networks, trees, extensions, scalar integration, and the spiraling patterns of feedback intrinsic to all coevolutionary processes. Skillfully deployed, these frames and the narratives and evidence they create offer a dynamic of connectedness that can render deep time accessible to modern scholarship, thereby bringing the long ages of human history together in a single story. In offering these analytical innovations, we do not insist on the jettisoning of narrative patterns that describe histories of origin, birth, or decline. Instead, we want to call attention to how these narrative devices, sometimes unwittingly, evoke transitions from nature to civilization, from biology to culture, from traditional society to modernity. These devices may work in a limited array of circumstances. As general means for the relating of deep history, however, they are highly problematic. They tend to postulate an age-old, unchanging, or primal humanity that is awakened from its slumbers by a stimulus external to this “state of nature.” The external force might be culture, language, civilization, or even climate, but the creationist roots of this imagery are not hard to discern. The move from nature to culture, from prehistory to history, brings to mind the clay that is given life by the breath of God. In almost all cases, this is bad science, and it is equally bad history. There are better ways to account for change.

The editors of this volume, Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail, belong by disciplinary training to the tribe of humanists and social scientists. Even so, we share the fascination for the deep past that animates our colleagues in archaeology, human evolutionary biology, historical

linguistics, genomics, and primatology. Concerned by an apparent erosion of historical interest in eras predating the modern, and inspired by a belief that history could be written on much larger scales, we invited a number of colleagues to join us in January 2008 for a workshop at the Radcliffe Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to begin discussions of how we might develop a new architecture for human history. In May 2009 a nucleus of authors returned to the Radcliffe Institute for another workshop to sketch out the chapters that appear in this volume. We decided early on not to produce single-authored chapters. Though this approach would have been more efficient and certainly less time-consuming, it would not have allowed us to achieve our aim of transcending specialization. Instead, we grouped ourselves by theme and tackled our subjects collectively, generating chapters that are genuinely transdisciplinary. By dissolving the monographic voice and developing a collaborative one in its place, we sought to escape the untidy polyphony that can mar collections of this kind. We very much hope that readers will hear unexpected intellectual harmonies in this volume. This effect is the result of many conversations, robust editing, and tremendous goodwill on the part of all involved in this project.

Our debts of gratitude go, first and foremost, to the Radcliffe Institute for hosting two wonderfully productive seminars, and especially to Phyllis Strimling and Allyson Black-Foley, who handled all the arrangements for the workshops with impeccable attention and efficiency. The participants at the first workshop included Ann Gibbons, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, Christopher Loveluck, Michael McCormick, Gitanjali Surendran, Christina Warinner, and David Sloan Wilson; their enduring influence has shaped the volume in many important ways. Colleagues and students too numerous to name here have read proposals or chapters and helped with conceptual issues and references; we thank all of them for their enthusiasm as well as their words of advice, caution, and correction. Jennifer Gordon helped us put the illustrations in order, and Mary Birkett designed several of the book's figures. Niels Hooper, Eric Schmidt, and Erika Bůlky offered wise editorial counsel. Finally, we are deeply appreciative of our entire author team, whose patience, thoughtfulness, and dedication have been exemplary. Our labors have been shared in the most profound way.

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