

Conclusion

Region, Nation, World

Remarks on Scale and the Problem of Periodisation

Sanjay Subrahmanyam 

In the 1620s, Henry Lord, a Protestant chaplain employed by the English East India Company, found himself in the great port of Surat in western India. Here, in the space of the urban trading establishment (or ‘factory’), he had regular occasion to come into contact with Indian traders, whom he describes as men “cloathed in linen garments, somewhat low descending, of a gesture and garbe as I may say, maidenly and well-nigh effeminate; of a countenance shy and somewhat estranged: yet smiling out a glosed and bashfull familiarity.”¹ Enquiries revealed that these men were known as “Banians” [*baniyās*], and that they belonged to “a people forraigne to the knowledge of the Christian world.” Encouraged in his curiosity by the head of the English trading establishment, a certain Thomas Kerridge, Lord then decided to look more closely into the beliefs and world-view of these men, despite his firm prior conviction that they were engaged in “rebelliously and schismatically violating the divine law of the dread Majesty of Heaven, and with notably forgery coyning Religion according to the Minte of their owne Tradition.”² He apparently questioned them on their views of cosmogony, that is regarding “the Creation of the World,” as well as “the first Man and Woman, and the Progeny from them descending.” From their conversations, it emerged that the *baniyās* believed that all of time since the very beginning could be

* I am grateful to Perry Anderson and Carlo Ginzburg for helpful suggestions. Neither is responsible in any way for the views expressed here.

- 1 Henry Lord, *A display of two forraigne sects in the East Indies: vizt: the sect of the Banians the ancient natives of India and the sect of the Persees the ancient inhabitants of Persia together with the religion and manners of each sect collected into two bookes by Henry Lord sometimes resident in East India and preacher to the Ho[noura]ble Company of Merchants trading thether* (London: Francis Constable, 1630).
- 2 *Ibid*; for a discussion, see Will Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism: ‘Hinduism’ and the Study of Indian Religions, 1600–1776* (Halle: Franckeschen Stiftungen, 2003), 64–88.

divided into a series of “Ages” (*yugas*), each conceived of as a complete cycle of emergence, consolidation and destruction: “These Ages they call by four names: the first Curtain [*krta*]; the second, Duaper [*dvāpara*]; the third Tetraioo [*treta*]; the fourth Kolee [*kali*].”³ The first of these Ages had ended on account of “a Flood, that covered all Nations in the depths,” the second because of a powerful tempest, and the third as the result of a great earthquake. As for the fourth and current one, Lord notes (quite incorrectly, as it happens) that “they suppose this Age shall be longer than any of the rest,” but that it too would eventually come to an end through fire. The fact that this conception could not be reconciled with the standard Biblical chronology to which a Protestant like Lord adhered, naturally meant that he considered it to be a mere tissue of superstitious beliefs, or a curiosity, rather than as a proper intellectual challenge.

As Lord’s experience nevertheless suggests—and as this book has amply shown—periodisation, namely the division of historical time into a well-defined sequence of periods, is not only an ancient and widespread intellectual activity, but also a highly contested one. Wherever inter-cultural encounters have occurred, periodisation schemes have regularly come into conflict with one another. By the seventeenth century, the tradition of the four-*yuga* cycle, going back perhaps as far as the *purānas*, or the epics like the *Mahābhārata*, was well-entrenched in many parts of India. Only a decade or two before Lord, a well-known Muslim intellectual of Iranian origin, Muhammad Qasim Astarabadi (usually called by his pen-name ‘Firishta’), was also confronted in western India by views that he found not merely strange but downright abhorrent. He wrote in turn: “Turning on its pivot, the changes in Time—according to the blind beliefs of the people of Hind—make up four periods: the first is Sat-jug, the second [Treta]-jug, the third Dvapara-jug, and the fourth Kal-jug.” Since these periods were taken to have lasted over four million years, Firishta naturally found the whole concoction to be absurd. He then adds:

The infidels [*kāfirs*] of India like those of China say that Noah’s tempest did not reach their country, and instead reject it [...]. They attribute strange and bizarre deeds to Ram, Lakhan et cetera, which do not correspond to the human condition [*hāl-i bashar nīst*] [...]. All this is words and sound which has no weight in the scale of reason [...]. The Hindus say that from the time of Adam more than 100,000 years have passed. This is totally false, and the fact is that the country of Hind, like the other countries of the inhabited quarter of the world, was settled through the descendants of Adam.⁴

3 The order of *yugas* given here is wrong, as *treta* should appear before *dvāpara*. Further each *yuga* is shorter than the previous one, which Lord misstates.

4 Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah Astarabadi, *Tārīkh-i Firishta*, ed. Muhammad Riza Nasiri, vol. 1, *Az āgāz tā Bābur* (Tehran: Anjuman-i Asar va Mafakhir-i Farhangi, 2008–09), 28–29. Translation by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam.

Both the chronology and the periodisation proposed to him by his Indian interlocutors thus displeased and unsettled Firishta as much as they did Henry Lord. Eventually, while writing his elaborate history entitled *Gulshan-i Ibrāhīmī*, Firishta thus settled on a form of political periodisation based on dynastic history, for here at least, he and his Indian informants could find some sort of a common ground.

* * *

We have seen it already in the introduction: even today, while some historians consider periodisation to be central to their profession, others tend to disdain it as of little epistemological value. Further, its use is by no means confined to historians, since periodisation can also be a significant tool employed by literary scholars, or analysts of art or architecture, to name only two examples. From a professional viewpoint, employment in all these activities in the last century or more, could be strongly defined by period: an old-fashioned job description in a history department might ask for someone who could teach British history in the ‘Tudor and Stuart period,’ or Italian history during the ‘later Renaissance,’ or Indian history in the ‘Mughal era.’ George Orwell, who in his youth was apparently not a great fan of history as it was taught in British public schools, recalled the following:

History was a series of unrelated, unintelligible but—in some way that was never explained to us—important facts with resounding phrases tied to them. Disraeli brought peace with honour. Clive was astonished at his moderation. Pitt called in the New World to redress the balance of the Old. And the dates, and the mnemonic devices [...]. I recall positive orgies of dates, with the keener boys leaping up and down in their places in their eagerness to shout out the right answers, and at the same time not feeling the faintest interest in the meaning of the mysterious events they were naming.⁵

In turn, these dates apparently marked dramatic changes, by transforming one “period” into another. Here is Orwell again, now in an even more sarcastic vein:

When I was a small boy and was taught history—very badly, of course, as nearly everyone in England is—I used to think of history as a sort of long scroll with thick black lines ruled across it at intervals. Each of these lines marked the end of what was called a ‘period’, and you were given to

5 George Orwell, *In Front of Your Nose, 1946–50*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 2000), 337.

understand that what came afterwards was completely different from what had gone before. It was almost like a clock striking.

For instance, in 1499 you were still in the Middle Ages, with knights in plate armour riding at one another with long lances, and then suddenly the clock struck 1500, and you were in something called the Renaissance, and everyone wore ruffs and doublets and was busy robbing treasure ships on the Spanish Main. There was another very thick black line drawn at the year 1700. After that it was the Eighteenth Century, and people suddenly stopped being Cavaliers and Roundheads and became extraordinarily elegant gentlemen in knee breeches and three-cornered hats. They all powdered their hair, took snuff and talked in exactly balanced sentences, which seemed all the more stilted because for some reason I didn't understand they pronounced most of their S's as F's. The whole of history was like that in my mind—a series of completely different periods changing abruptly at the end of a century, or at any rate at some sharply defined date.⁶

He then added:

Now in fact these abrupt transitions don't happen, either in politics, manners or literature. Each age lives on into the next—it must do so, because there are innumerable human lives spanning every gap.⁷

The existence of such continuity, on the other hand, was not enough to do away with the problem of periods altogether. It may merely have required those who did the periodisation to be subtler than Orwell's purveyors of "thick black lines."

A well-known recent reflection on the question comes to us from the great French historian Jacques Le Goff, in a late and brief essay provocatively entitled *Faut-il vraiment découper l'histoire en tranches?* ("Should we really slice up history?").⁸ Le Goff begins by noting the existence of ancient schemes of periodisation in the Judaeo-Christian world, such as that in the Book of Daniel, with its four successive kingdoms, or the six periods proposed by Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) in his *City of God*. These schemata were marked by a broad declinist narrative, with each period being inferior to that which had preceded it, leaving aside the final possibility

6 George Orwell, *My Country Right or Left, 1940–1943*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 2000), 197.

7 George Orwell, *My Country* (see note 6), 197.

8 Jacques Le Goff, *Faut-il vraiment découper l'histoire en tranches?* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2014); there is an English translation, *Must We Divide History into Periods?*, trans. Malcolm DeBevoise (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), but I have preferred to use the French original.

of redemption as a closure to the whole cycle. As we know, the Book of Daniel continued to play a significant political and cultural role well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and not only for Jews and Christians (as Le Goff suggests), but also for Muslims, usually in the context of millenarian and apocalyptic visions of history. However, Le Goff argues that in the fourteenth century, a new tripartite conception of periodisation arose, with a somewhat different logic than those that had preceded it. Abandoning the declinist conception, this was a view of a first period of glory, followed by a second one of darkness, and eventually a revival or return to a positive trajectory. Associated by him with a figure such as Petrarch (1304–74), this view wished to “define, in a pejorative manner, the period from which they were all too happy to escape,” and this led ineluctably to the conception of the “Middle Ages” [*Moyen Âge*]. Le Goff thus makes it clear that those who lived in the alleged “Middle Ages” never had any awareness that they lived in an epoch distinct from “Antiquity.” This was instead a view that was imposed retrospectively on this period by intellectuals from the fourteenth century on, and especially after the seventeenth century, as a purely negative characterisation.

Unfortunately, the remainder of Le Goff’s essay—which he terms its “essential object”—is concerned with a rather petty and somewhat sectarian quarrel, notably his desire to downplay the importance of the Renaissance as a period in history, and to suggest instead that “in fact, it is only a late sub-period of the long Middle Ages.” This simply dusts off and revisits the position of critics of Jacob Burckhardt, writing already in the 1920s and 1930s, such as William T. Waugh.⁹ Denying all real significance to the transformations wrought by the Mongol unification of large parts of Eurasia in the thirteenth century (including the Black Death and its aftermath), or to the Columbian Exchange of the sixteenth century, Le Goff wishes to insist that the only epochal change of significance since the (largely unspecified) beginning of the Middle Ages was produced by the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The “history” of the essay’s title turns out to be a very narrow version of western European history, and much of the rest of Eurasia barely features in the discussion, to say nothing of the other continents. To summarise, Le Goff is happy to embrace the schematic and inherited tripartite periodisation, so long as the three parts are Antiquity, the Middle Ages (beginning, let us say, at some time between the third and the seventh century of the Common Era), and a Modern Period that, for him, only begins with the Enlightenment. The reader may finally rest assured: it is alright to slice up history, so long as one has the ‘right’ slices.

By the time of the publication of Le Goff’s work in 2014, the debate elsewhere on periodisation had moved on to quite different ground, of which he seemed to be largely unaware. A first important move had been made by the American historian

9 William T. Waugh, *A History of Europe: From 1378 to 1494* (London: Methuen, 1932).

of early modern Europe, Jerry Bentley, who in fact began his career by working on Renaissance Italy before terming himself a “world historian.” In an influential and frequently cited essay published in the *American Historical Review* in 1996, entitled “Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History,” the gauntlet was thrown down from the very outset. Bentley wrote:

Historians have long realized that periodisation schemes based on the experiences of Western or any other particular civilization do a poor job of explaining the trajectories of other societies. To cite a single notorious example, the categories of ancient, medieval, and modern history, derived from European experience, apply awkwardly at best to the histories of China, India, Africa, the Islamic world, or the Western hemisphere—quite apart from the increasingly recognized fact that they do not even apply very well to European history.¹⁰

He therefore proposed a new set of periods, that would be applied to world history as a whole and would derive from the rhythms of interactions between different part of the world. The forms of interaction that he chose to focus on were above all three in number: mass migration, imperial expansion, and long-distance trade. Based on this, Bentley proposed a six-part periodisation, which ran as follows: (1) an age of early complex societies (3500–2000 BCE); (2) an age of ancient civilisations (2000–500 BCE); (3) an age of classical civilisations (500 BCE–500 CE); (4) a post-classical age (500–1000 CE); (5) an age of transregional nomadic empires (1000–1500 CE); and finally (6) the modern age (1500 CE to the present). Several criticisms could immediately be made of this set of divisions, beginning with their dependence on overly neat dates to mark transitions. An example of this is the use of 500 CE to demarcate the ‘classical’ from the ‘post-classical,’ which is justified very loosely on the basis of “cross-cultural interaction [between] the Tang empire in China, the Abbasid empire in Southwest Asia, and the Byzantine empire in the eastern Mediterranean basin,” when in reality the Tang dynasty was founded after 600 CE, and the Abbasid revolution only dates to 750 CE. It could also be suggested that this exercise largely consisted of splitting the traditional categories of ‘ancient’ and ‘medieval’ into two halves, respectively periods (2) and (3), and periods (4) and (5). The major innovations seem to be limited to adding the first period of “early complex societies” to the list, and collapsing what would conventionally be termed the ‘early modern’ and ‘modern’ into a single period.

Nevertheless, Bentley’s scheme has had quite considerable influence in many quarters, especially among writers of books on world history, whose emphasis in

10 Jerry H. Bentley, “Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History,” *American Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (1996): 749–770.

recent times lies not so much in juxtaposing the biographies of ‘civilisations’ in the manner of a Toynbee, but rather in emphasising processes of large-scale exchange and interaction.¹¹ However, Bentley still leaves himself open to the charge of beginning his periodisation far too late, as a result of still being in the “grip of sacred history.” The European medievalist Daniel Smail, in a polemical essay from 2005, demanded to know what the real justification was for separating ‘history’ from ‘pre-history,’ and proposed that histories should at least begin with the origins of *homo sapiens*, and fully take into account the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic periods beginning some 200,000 years ago. The research of several generations justified this, he wrote: “archaeological research has demonstrated the existence of late Paleolithic villages and towns numbering in the hundreds, even thousands, of people, proving that complex political organization owes nothing to agriculture, still less to the invention of writing.”¹² Less extreme than the proposal of ‘big history,’ which suggests abolishing the distinction not just between history and evolutionary biology, but also between history and an account of the universe since its origins (usually seen as the task of astronomers or cosmogonists), Smail’s proposal is now accepted in many circles. The European Research Council’s panel on history is entitled “The Study of the Human Past,” and takes both the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic fully into consideration. The recent multi-volume *Cambridge World History* (of which I was one of the editors), also accepts this longer chronology (and its resulting periodisation), and is no longer beset by postdiluvian anxiety.¹³ At the same time, it must be admitted that ‘world history’ accounts for only a fraction of the historical discipline and its practitioners. Furthermore, by claiming to be everyone’s history, it is in effect no-one’s history, and there is little by way of political or emotional investment in it, as there might be in an object such as ‘Germany,’

- 11 For examples, see Robert Tignor, Jeremy Adelman, Stephen Aron, Stephen Kotkin, Suzanne Marchand, Gyan Prakash, and Michael Tsing, *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017); Bonnie G. Smith, Marc van de Mieroop, Richard von Glahn, and Kris Lane, *Crossroads and Cultures: A History of the World’s Peoples* (Boston: Bedford-St. Martin’s, 2012).
- 12 Daniel Smail, “In the Grip of Sacred History,” *American Historical Review* 110, no. 5 (2005): 1337–1361. Smail appears somewhat naïve in proposing the integration of prehistory (and archaeological evidence) into history as a panacea; for a counter-view, see Nathalie Richard, “Archaeological arguments in national debates in late 19th-century France: Gabriel de Mortillet’s ‘La formation de la nation française’ (1897),” *Antiquity* 76 (2002): 177–184, and more generally Jean-Claude Gardin, *Archaeological constructs: An Aspect of Theoretical Archeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
- 13 Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, gen. ed., *The Cambridge World History*, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). The periodisation adopted there is as follows: vol. 1: *Introducing World History, to 10,000 BCE*; vol. 2: *A World with Agriculture, 12,000 BCE–500 CE*; vol. 3: *Early Cities in Comparative Perspective, 4000 BCE–1200 CE*; vol. 4: *A World with States, Empires and Networks, 1200 BCE–900 CE*; vol. 5: *Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500 CE–1500 CE*; vol. 6: *The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE*; and vol. 7: *Production, Destruction and Connection, 1750–Present*.

‘Mexico’ or even ‘Europe.’¹⁴ The question therefore arises as to what happens when we turn to a smaller scale. What are the debates on periodisation when one looks to national history instead?

* * *

Today’s history-writing still carries in its structure and logic strong traces of national history as it came to be practised in the course of the nineteenth century, in Europe, as well as in the Americas, and eventually in other nations such as Japan, China, or Iran. Contemporary French historiography, to take one example, still seems incapable of exorcising the ghost of Jules Michelet (1798–1874), whose works were characterised by a combination of republican nationalism, anti-clericalism, and hostility to regional traditions.¹⁵ Le Goff, in his book cited earlier, continues to employ Michelet as his foil, seeing him as more important than Burckhardt and a host of others. However, the difficulty faced by national historians in the nineteenth century was that they did not exactly plough virgin soil. Rather, layer upon layer of earlier histories existed, often conceived within the framework of the monarchical state and its dynastic logic. Such earlier histories obviously had a simple device for periodisation, namely the transition from one dynasty to another. Seen from this perspective, one could neatly produce a sequence for France as follows (on the assumption that a true “national” history could only be traced to the post-Roman world): Merovingians, Carolingians, Capetians, Valois and Bourbons. Of course, as the medievalist Patrick Geary has pointed out, many of these dynasties hardly fit neatly into the “national space” of France, while at the same time, such a sequence requires us to consciously ignore many divergent regional political histories in the interests of the unique national narrative.¹⁶ On the other hand, dynastic history was hardly the preferred mode of republican nationalist historians in France. Rather, they preferred more neutral terminology, referring to such notions as the ‘medieval’ and the ‘modern,’ but also insisting on an important caesura with the French Revolution in 1789, which separated the *moderne* from *l’Époque contemporaine*. While the significance of 1789 has been repeatedly challenged in the last three decades or more, by ‘revisionists,’ both in France and elsewhere, the use of that date as a fixed marker of periodisation still seems to be quite unshakeable, separating the *Ancien Régime* from what came afterwards.

14 Cf. debates on textbooks to propose ‘national histories’ in Özlüm Caykent’s chapter in this volume.

15 On Michelet, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres: La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1989), 235–246; also see, the less critical view in John R. Williams, *Jules Michelet: Historian as Critic of French Literature* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 1987).

16 Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The medieval origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Therefore, no matter what the methodological and other divides that separate historians within France—say, those of the Sorbonne from the heirs of the erstwhile *Annales*—we can still discern a relatively high level of coherence to the schemes of periodisation employed by the majority, which are in turn the consequence of a high degree of homogeneity in terms of historians' social origins and forms of training.

Matters are far more complex when one turns from a national space such as that of France, to one as diverse and complex as that of India, where—to further complicate matters—we must also contend with the difficult inheritance of British colonisation, also aptly discussed in this book in the chapters by Milinda Banerjee and Anubhuti Maurya. Let me offer a schematic view here of the contending versions of periodisation in Indian history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, prior to the British conquest, many forms of history writing flourished in India, from local and regional histories to grand imperial chronicles written for the Mughals. These often chose the dynastic route to periodisation, although there are a few exceptions to this rule. However, in the early nineteenth century, these historical traditions were progressively discredited and set aside, even if they never completely disappeared. Instead, the British wrote their own version of Indian history, and generations of Indian historians who received a colonial education followed the template set by them, although some (such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan), did still look back to elements of the earlier historiography.¹⁷ One of the most important and influential texts was that written by the Scottish utilitarian philosopher, James Mill (1773–1836), and titled *The History of British India* (1817). Mill had no real knowledge of Indian languages and was broadly hostile to the intellectual current known as 'Orientalism,' even though he used the works of the Orientalists themselves quite opportunistically.¹⁸ Nevertheless, he produced a tripartite division of Indian history, separating the periods dominated by the Hindus, the Muslims, and the British. This was the classic tripartite scheme we have seen above (discussed by Le Goff), which has been discussed at several points in this book (e.g. in the chapters by Nipperdey and Moshfegh), but with the categories named differently and given an explicitly religious colouring. We can then observe, from the table below, how this has formed the basis for most subsequent discussions of periodisation used in India, including by semi-official organisations such as the Indian History Congress (founded in 1935). Mill also was not concerned with the question of change or movement within the 'Hindu' period. His chapters regarding it are thematic, on subjects such as caste, religion, literature, and so on,

17 See C. M. Naim, "Syed Ahmad and His Two Books Called 'Asar al-Sanadid,'" *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 669–708.

18 James Mill, *The History of British India*, 3 vols. (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1817). For a useful analysis of Mill's context (but which does not engage in a close reading of his text), see Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's 'The History of British India' and Orientalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

and draw indifferently from materials in translation, caring little whether they belong to the same epoch or from widely separated periods. While he has little to say that is positive about the Hindus, the period of Muslim rule that succeeded is portrayed as being even worse. Naturally, this provided a crude alibi for British colonial rule. But this work also laid aside the claim—common in East India Company circles in the 1770s or 1780s—that the British were inheritors of the Mughals, engaged in the “redeployment of Mughal constitution.”¹⁹ As a depiction of the course of history, we may say that it employed the familiar U-shaped pattern, known to us from Petrarch or Giorgio Vasari. Little wonder that colonial intellectuals in eastern India began to speak of something called the ‘Bengal Renaissance,’ referring to the revival of an ancient ‘Golden Age.’²⁰ (Tab. 1)

A century after the publication of Mill’s work, a number of concrete criticisms of it had emerged, even from colonial administrators such as H. H. Wilson. However, its structure proved far harder to dislodge than its specific contents. As Indian nationalist historians began to be professionalised, they certainly debated whether the Muslim conquest of northern India (around 1200), had produced positive or negative effects, but they did not deny its role as a decisive break. The progressive discovery through archaeology of a pre-Vedic past in northern and north-western India (the so-called Indus Valley culture), also was integrated quietly into the tripartite structure. The growing influence of Marxist historiography after 1950 eventually introduced some more complexity into this picture, but this largely took the form of arguing that the ‘ancient’ period itself needed to be sub-divided into several internal phases: that of the Indus valley, that of the ancient chiefdoms that became empires, and finally a phase that was termed ‘Indian feudalism,’ running from roughly 300 to 1200 CE. It was argued that this last phase was the product of a process of de-urbanisation, the reduced use of money, and a return to a rural society of limited horizons. This was effectively a Marxist redeployment of Henri Pirenne’s posthumously published explanation for the emergence of the politico-economic structure of Carolingian rule in Europe.²¹

19 Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Cf. the discussions in Anubhuti Maurya’s chapter in this volume.

20 David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The dynamics of Indian modernization, 1773–1835* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Samira Sheikh, “A Makeshift Renaissance: North India in the ‘long’ fifteenth century,” in *The Routledge History of the Renaissance*, ed. William Caferro (New York: Routledge, 2017), 30–45.

21 R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism: c. 300–1200* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1965); Henri Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, ed. Jacques Pirenne and F. Vercauteren (Paris: F. Alcan, 1937). For a survey of the debate in Asia, see Harbans Mukhia, ed., *The Feudalism Debate* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999).

Table 1 Periodisation Schemes in Indian History

James Mill	'Nationalists' (1930s–50s)	Nationalist-Marxists (ca. 1970)	Subaltern (R. Guha et al.)	Post-1980 'revision'	Language-based periodisation (S. Pollock)
Hindus (beginning with the 'Institutes of Manu' etc)	Ancient (extended chronology to Indus Valley)	Ancient, beginning with Indus Valley	No concrete interest in 'ancient'	New category of 'early medieval'	Emergence of pre-cosmopolitan Sanskrit (to 300 CE)
Mahomedan or Mussulman (after 1200 CE)	Medieval (starting 1200 CE)	Ancient chiefdoms	Use of 'Feudalism,' to include early Sanskrit texts	New category of 'early modern'	'Sanskrit cosmopolis' (300–1300 CE)
British (after 1757)	Modern (colonial period, starting 1757)	Ancient kingdoms and empires to 300 CE; followed by 'Feudalism,' 300–1200 CE	'Feudalism' still runs to 1757		'Vernacular millennium' emerges (1000–1500 CE)
		Medieval (Sultanate and Mughal)			'Death of Sanskrit'; End of 'pre-modernity'
		Modern (or colonial, starting 1757)	Modern (or colonial)		Colonial modernity

Somewhat surprisingly, the emergence in the late 1970s and early 1980s of 'Subaltern Studies' changed none of these conceptions, largely because of the indifference shown by historians of this area to history before 1800. In the view of Ranajit Guha, for long its dominant theorist, the long centuries of pre-1800 India could be covered by the blanket term 'feudalism,' and discussed using normative texts in Sanskrit

drawn indifferently across many centuries.²² At much the same time though, other historians began to tentatively try out some new terms: the ‘early medieval,’ used by B. D. Chattopadhyaya and others, for the period from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries; the ‘early modern’ to refer to the period after 1600, or in some instances after 1500.²³ These were not concerted efforts and may even have been contradictory in some instances. Part of the tension arose however from a specific problem.

The schemes of periodisation shown above, while all deriving from the experience of northern India, assumed that they could be applied equally all over the sub-continent. But historians of southern India had, for most of the twentieth century, refused to use these schemes. Their alternatives may be found below (Tab. 2), beginning from the time when K. A. Nilakantha Sastri (1892–1975), was the dominant figure on the South Indian scene. As we see, even the Marxist and neo-Marxist historiography on South India failed to agree with the template given as a general framework for all of India. This was so for at least four reasons: (1) a divergence regarding the early period (the so-called Cankam in South India); (2) the consolidation of important state structures in South India in the seventh to thirteenth centuries; (3) the distinct chronology of Islamic influence in southern India; and (4) the limited impact of the Mughal empire in the region.

Recent research has shown how a received framework heavily influenced some of these conceptions and periodisations, notably in respect of the ‘Kalabhra Dark Age,’ which Sastri and others clearly conceived of as the direct counterpart of the relationship of the Salian Franks, or the Visigoths, to Roman power. As it turns out, this ‘Dark Age’ is little more than a myth resting on some tenuous fragments of unconvincing evidence.²⁴

What rendered matters even more complex was the fact that historians of one part of South India—the south-western strip of Kerala—refused to conform to the

22 Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and for a critique of such loose uses of ‘feudalism,’ Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). See also the discussion in the chapters by Milinda Banerjee and Anubhuti Maurya in this volume.

23 On the ‘early medieval,’ see B. D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Kesavan Veluthat, *The Early Medieval in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009). On the uses of ‘early modern,’ see John F. Richards, “Early Modern India and World History”, *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 197–209. For a general reflection on these periodisation questions, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Waiting for the Simorgh: Comparisons, Connections, and the ‘Early Modern,’” in *Delimiting Modernities: Conceptual Challenges and Regional Responses*, ed. Sven Trakulhun, Ralph Weber (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 99–121. The chapter by Anubhuti Maurya in this volume also addresses the topic.

24 See Valérie Gillet, “The Dark Period: Myth or Reality?,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 51, no. 3 (2014): 283–302.

Table 2 Periodisations for South India

Nilakantha Sastri (1950s–1960s)	Nationalist-Marxist	Other Marxist (Japanese school)	Revisionist neo-Marxist (Burton Stein)	Kerala
Cankam	Early South India, pre 3rd century BCE			Late emergence of state society from chiefdoms
Kalabhra Dark Age (3rd–6th century CE)	Ancient society, with chiefdoms (3rd century BCE to 3rd century CE)		Kalabhra Dark Age	Ceras of Mahodayapuram (9th–12th century CE)
Pallava and Cola, bureaucratic empires (7th–13th century)	Long transition	State society, based on slavery (10th–13th century)	Emergence and consolidation of 'segmentary state' (7th–13th century)	Fragmentation of power; militarised society (12th–17th century)
Vijayanagara military confederation (14th–16th century)	Early medieval, emergence of state society (7th century CE on)	Military feudalism (14th–17th century)	'Military fiscalism' under Vijayanagara (15th–17th century)	Centralisation of power under Tiruvankod (18th century)
Chaotic decentralisation (17th–18th century)	Consolidation of medieval state society under Colas (10th–13th century)	Unspecified leading to colonial period	'Early modern Sultanism' in Mysore, 18th century	
Colonial rule, post 1800	Unspecified, leading to colonial period		Colonial rule, post 1800	Colonial rule, post 1800

general periodisation for the region. Thus, what appeared at first to be opening a Matryoshka, was more akin to throwing open Pandora's Box. Changes in scale had a major destabilising effect on schemes of periodisation, as one moved from 'nation' to 'region,' and the other way around.²⁵

* * *

"We cannot not periodize," wrote the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson in a celebrated and controversial phrase from 2002.²⁶ This seems hardly to be a credible description of the current state of either literary or historical studies. Another way of presenting matters would be to suggest that periodisation is no more than an orientation device (among others), used by some, but not all historians. This standpoint is discussed in detail in this volume by Özlem Caykent and Heather Ferguson. On this basis, one could even suggest that periodisation has more of an effect on the form of the presentation of history, than on the real content of research problems. But the unfortunate fact is that periodisation often serves to reify, and to lead the historian to reason in a circular fashion, finding those traits that they are looking for anyway—this is very clearly the case in Turkish textbooks as discussed by Özlem Caykent, but also in Histories of Islam as discussed by David Moshfegh. The launching of the idea of 'Indian feudalism' led to a spate of studies which were determined to show the prevalence of barter, and the disappearance of urban life. On the other hand, the unpopularity of even the idea of the 'medieval' among historians of China led historical studies to be conceived quite differently there than in India.²⁷ In the context of the divide between the medieval and the modern in Europe, it has even been claimed that "it works less as a historical marker than a massive value judgment, determining what matters and what does not."²⁸ This point has been widely discussed, also for the application of *Eurochronologies* or *chronotypes* in other parts of the world throughout this volume, and especially pertinently in the chapters by David Moshfegh, Heather Ferguson and Özen Dolcerocca. To the extent that periodisation is almost always accompanied by specific labelling, it thus has consequences. This is possibly why one

25 For similar observations, see the chapters by Milinda Banerjee and Anubhuti Maurya in this volume.

26 Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002), 29. For a critical discussion, see Jennifer Summit and David Wallace, "Rethinking Periodization," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007): 447–451.

27 See Timothy Brook, "Medievality and the Chinese Sense of History," *The Medieval History Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 145–164. A rather different view regarding the universality of the medieval is put forward by the editors of a recently founded Vienna-based journal: "Introduction," *Medieval Worlds* 1 (2015): 2–4.

28 See Margreta de Grazia, "The Modern Divide: From Either Side," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007): 453–467.

prominent group of late twentieth and early twenty-first century historians—those associated with Italian *microstoria* like Carlo Ginzburg—have shown a marked distaste for periodisation as an exercise, as part of a larger argument regarding nominalism.²⁹ More surprisingly, some epistemologists have argued that even the influential work of Reinhart Koselleck should be read as an exercise “against periodisation,” and that what is often termed ‘periodisation’ in his work is the result of the mistranslation of his notion of a *Theorie der geschichtlichen Zeiten*. Thus, Helge Jordheim argues that for Koselleck, “the multiplicity of historical temporalities, represents one of the most viable alternatives to periodisation as a way of organising historical knowledge and knowledge production.”³⁰ We are enjoined to recall that even the periodising concept of *Sattelzeit* was more or less abandoned by Koselleck himself, who apparently admitted: “Initially conceived as a catchword in a grant application, this concept has come to obscure rather than to advance the project.”³¹

Less radical in my views of periodisation than Ginzburg, I am nonetheless inclined to treat it as little more than a fragile tool, open to disingenuous manipulation, and often a way of introducing claims that cannot in fact be openly defended.³² At the same time, it is difficult to see how it can be avoided in certain contexts: for instance, when dealing with long periods of time without assuming stasis or structural stability; or while organising history in certain didactic situations, and so on. Here, the reflections of the Islamic historian Fred Donner appear to me rather helpful. In a recent essay, Donner notes:

Periodization and spatialization, as two aspects of a single problem of managing the unmanageable interconnectedness of everything, are of course often intimately related. A periodization may seem perfectly obvious or sensible within a given spatial framework, but if we change that spatial framework, our periodization may no longer seem appropriate.³³

29 This may also have to do with the initial opposition between serial history and *microstoria*, though Ginzburg’s reticence seems to run far deeper. (My observations are based on private conversations with Carlo Ginzburg, since he appears to have published nothing on the subject.)

30 Helge Jordheim, “Against Periodisation: Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities,” *History and Theory* 51 (2012): 171.

31 Jordheim, “Against Periodization” (see note 30), 156.

32 From the viewpoint of literary history, see the comparable observations of David Matthews, “Periodization,” in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 253–266.

33 Fred M. Donner, “Periodization as a Tool of the Historian with Special Reference to Islamic History,” *Der Islam* 91, no. 1 (2014): 21. Donner’s essay seems intended in part as a belated response to another proposal (in his words), “with marked overtones of ethnic-nationalist conceptualizations”: this is Shelomo Dov Goitein, “A Plea for the Periodization of Islamic History,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 2 (1968): 224–228.

Here, the question seems principally to concern the transportability of periodisation schemes, but as I have tried to show above, the same problem can occur with shifts in scale. Donner further adds:

[...] various periodisations are tools used by historians to highlight the particular themes or developments in which they are interested. They may [...] have a strongly polemical intent, but in any case, they are designed to focus attention on a particular issue. It is thus futile to expect a single periodisation to be comprehensively satisfactory, to be in some sense an 'idea' or 'absolute' periodisation that is equally relevant for all aspects of history, although, obviously, some periodisations may be more narrowly conceived than others.³⁴

And he concludes: "As with any tool, the secret to using periodisations is to choose the right tool for the particular job at hand and to remain flexible and creative in using it."³⁵

This to my mind approximates a combination of scepticism and flexibility that resonates with my own pragmatic understanding. Let periodisation not become one of those idols that we first create, and then either fear or worship.

34 Donner, "Periodization as a Tool" (see note 33), 32.

35 Donner, "Periodization as a Tool" (see note 33), 36.