

AN INTERPRETATION OF PLACENTIA HISTORY

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To walk or hike along the paths, trails or walkways of the Placentia area is to follow in the footsteps of many whose identities and engaging personalities have filled the roster of history. Names such as Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, Prince William Henry or Richard Welsh wander inadvertently into our minds. More recent words and thoughts, such as the painful benefits of resettlement or the recognised creative and artistic potential of Placentia, never fail to trigger our emotions. The following is a journey through the tapestry of history that has touched Placentia.

Many whose names are hidden from us by the veil of time have laid their diverse marks on this region. This includes those who have settled in the area over recent years, decades and centuries. It also includes members of the First Nations whose livelihoods motivated and provoked them to also trod this area and leave their imprint. While written history cannot probe deeply into the background of First Nation peoples, archaeology has answered the call and provided insight into these reaches. For instance, archaeologists have pieced together some of the history that animated the northern part of Newfoundland as well as Labrador. People belonging to the Maritime Archaic tradition and those who were Palaeo Eskimo appeared and then disappeared from the archaeological record. Groups such as the Early, Middle and Late Dorset¹ then emerged with the Early Dorset appearing approximately between 2400 BP and 1200 BP.²

Relevant for Placentia is the Recent Indian population, comprised of Cow Head, Beaches and Little Passage complexes.³ From their findings, archaeologists believe that by the 15th century, the people belonging to the Little Passage complex had evolved into the Beothuk. These First Nation peoples loom large in the history of Newfoundland and Labrador in general, their lives converging with that of Europeans, primarily in the 17th century for Placentia. Hence, in the early 1600s, after settling Cuper's Cove (now known as Cupids), John Guy, a Bristol merchant of the London and Bristol Company, had sent a retinue of explorers to investigate and help to verify the presence of Beothuk in the area. Although they did not encounter any Beothuk, the letters of John Guy tell of how this group did find a path that crossed the isthmus, leading to Placentia Bay. This would suggest that the Beothuk were no strangers to Placentia Bay. Another First Nations group also feature in the history of Placentia, their presence being somewhat more clear. For instance, the records of both the French and English speak of Mi'kmaq families hunting, fishing and trapping on the southwest coast of Placentia Bay (Pastore 1998).

Evidently, efforts were being made by those not indigenous to North America to find its shores. For instance, historical and archaeological evidence have worked together to show that non First Nations or Inuit had reached the shores of Newfoundland and Labrador close to the year 1000 (Wallace 2003). Sites such as L'Anse Aux Meadows offer ample proof of this with remnants of a Norse⁴ settlement being found in the northern part of the Great Northern Peninsula of

1 People belonging to the Late Palaeo Eskimos are referred to as the Dorset culture (See "Palaeo-Eskimo Peoples" <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/aboriginal/palaeo.html>)

2 BP refers to Before Present with the standard date being 1 January, 1950 (for example, 2400 BP refers to the year 900 CE (Common Era).

3 "The term 'complex' is used by archaeologists to describe a pattern of similar tools used throughout a region over a period of time, particularly when comparatively little is known about the people who produced those tools." ("The Recent Indians of the Island of Newfoundland" <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/aboriginal/recent.html> Last visited 7 June, 2012)

4 This term is used to refer to all those of the Viking Age (c. 750-1050) and mediaeval Scandinavia (Wallace

Newfoundland and Labrador. The remnants of their presence were identified and excavated by Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad (Ingstad 1969). Guided by the initial discovery of Leif Eiriksson, other Norse arrived to live in what has become L'Anse Aux Meadows National Historic Site of Canada (Parks Canada 2009). Since this time, L'Anse Aux Meadows and what it contributes to Newfoundland and Labrador has been incorporated into the identity and history of settlement in Newfoundland and Labrador (Thoms 2000). Despite these explorations and settlements, further attempts at finding any land across the sea lay dormant over the next five or so centuries.

However, the surge to explore and eventually settle Newfoundland and Labrador was gradually re ignited in the late fifteenth century. As some historians point out, it is difficult to say where Venetian citizen Zuan Caboto or as he has come to be known, John Cabot, landed (Pope 1997). Educated studies state that it would have been somewhere between Sandwich Bay, Labrador or White Bay, Newfoundland. Furthermore, debates surround the possibility that John Cabot was not the first European to find Newfoundland and Labrador. For instance, it is known that English ships were exploring further westward into the Atlantic Ocean. John Day, an English merchant, had written a letter to the "Lord Grand Admiral" (likely Christopher Columbus), between December 1497 and January 1498 (Williamson 1962). In it, he stated how, "It is considered certain that the cape of the said land was found and discovered in the past by the men from Bristol who found 'Brasil'⁵ as your Lordship well knows." Although steeped in debate, his words indicate that John Cabot might not have been the first to find what was purported to be the "Isle of Brasil." Was this indeed Newfoundland and Labrador that had been found? This is the question these words unsurprisingly bring to mind.

Despite these uncertainties, in 1497, the voyage of John Cabot furthered the growing momentum of what Newfoundland and the New World held for the European states. Already from the 15th century, fisherman from regions in France, Spain, Portugal and England had sought the fish that swam and spawned here. And by the 1590s, apparently close to 60 fishing ships were to be found anchored in the harbour. Still, nations such as France and England were not eyeing Newfoundland and Labrador for the purposes of settlement. The aim was solely the rich resources and power of "New founde Iland" (Williamson 1962, 222) as it was known to the English. Therefore, it remained a "migratory fishery," wherein ships and crews sailed back and forth between their home nation, often France or England, and the fishing locale. But by the 1600s, the English recognised the need for settlement, however informally that transpired⁶, in order to maintain their control over the resources of Newfoundland and Labrador. And in Placentia, this translated into the French monarchy (ruled by King Louis XIV), an opponent of England, encouraging settlement in what was Plaisance. Already in the 1650s, the French Basque fisherman

2003).

5 This refers to the Island of Brasil, a mythical island that was believed to have situated to the west of Ireland.

6 Nonetheless, there remained a reluctance of the English government toward settlement from the 17th and into the early 19th century. In 1634, London's Court of Star Chamber issued the Western Charter which formalised the role of Fishing Admirals, the first Captain to arrive in a harbour of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Charter gave the Fishing Admirals legal jurisdiction over all but capital crimes. Certainly, during the later 1670's, the English government sought to impede transportation of passengers to Newfoundland and Labrador. However, overall, little attention was dedicated to what became the growing settlement and population in Newfoundland and Labrador (Cadigan 2009). Even as late as 1775, the Palliser's Act was directed toward encouraging the fishery and also "... securing the return of the fishermen, sailors, and others employed in the said fisheries ... at the end of the fishing season" (Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador 2011).

may have been over wintering in Newfoundland and Labrador. So, the sentiment to stay was already present. It is at this time when John Guy had settled Cuper's Cove and had sought to establish contact with the Beothuk.

To further their aims of control, in 1658, the French monarchy named Nicholas Gargot as the Count of Placentia and in 1660, he became the second governor of Plaisance.⁷ This action was among the many that France, in opposition to England, used to cement their place and control in Plaisance. While there were complaints to this settlement, two years later, in 1662, led by the Governor Thalour Du Perron, the attempts of settlement were again pursued and resulted in the French establishing a fort in Plaisance (settlement of Plaisance continued to be a difficult task, evidenced by the fact that Du Perron and the priest were among the 13 killed during unrest).

Although the colonisation was an off-shoot of the French monarchy, people pursued the migratory fishery using the Placentia beach, naturally composed of stone and rubble and thus eliminating the need for built structures or flakes, to dry their fish. However, the French failed to establish a secure hold in Plaisance and by 1692, the Gaillardin Redoubt was built and from 1693 to 1703, the French constructed Fort Royal, (both these fortifications would come to be part of Castle Hill National Historic Site of Canada).

Unsurprisingly, the perennial agitation between France and England affected Plaisance. In 1695-96, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville commanded a troupe that marched overland from Plaisance, leaving in their wake the remnants of the English settlements, homes, stores and flakes they had attacked or destroyed. This occurred during the Nine Years' War that lasted from 1688-97 and included England and France.

Afterwards, throughout the War of the Spanish Succession, (1702-1713), a war in which Newfoundland represented one of the battlegrounds, the French were able to successfully resist the onslaughts of the English Navy. And with this in mind, one might surmise that Plaisance could remain in the hands of the French. Yet, Newfoundland was only one of the regions that experienced the tumult and tension among the English and French, in addition to the myriad powers from nations we now know as Spain and Portugal. Hence, with the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, Plaisance was ceded to the English. To help fortify their acquisitions, the English began construction of New Fort which overlaid the former Fort Louis and in 1720, built Fort Frederick.

With the control of Plaisance changing hands from the French to the English, Plaisance became Placentia. The French inhabitants of Plaisance could either return to France or emigrate and re-settle in Ile Royale (Cape Breton Island) with the majority choosing the latter. Subsequently, the fishery of England took hold with ships from the West Country in England stopping in at Irish ports to obtain provisions as well as Irish servants. Some individuals also prosecuted an independent Irish fishery. For instance, well known figures such as Richard Welsh, who hailed from New Ross, Ireland began a successful merchant firm in Placentia that eventually involved merchants, William Saunders, Roger Sweetman, as well as Roger F. Sweetman. The history of Saunders and Sweetman is a part of the fabric that, even now, can be found in homes such as Fleur de Sel Vacation Home, a house built by Patrick O'Keefe from wood salvaged from the Saunders and Sweetman business, Fish Store #7 (Browne 2007).

While the developments surrounding the mercantile business of the fishery were occurring in the 18th century, the animosity and chafing between the French and English, in addition to other powers in Europe, was coming to a head. And therefore, the Seven Years' War raged primarily from 1756-1763. This consumed the New World with the iconic Battle of the Plains of Abraham. Placentia was a part of this conflagration. In 1762, with the occupation of St. John's by

⁷ Sieur de Kéréon was the first appointed governor in 1655. However, due to opposition from Breton given their fishermen who were already fishing at Plaisance, he never served.

the French, Governor Thomas Graves sought refuge and security in Placentia. What was Fort Royale was re-named Castle Graves (apparently it was British engineer Richard Dawson who first used the words “Castle Hill”). And with the Treaty of Paris, the Seven Years’ War ended, ushering in a relative peace as well as the supremacy of the English, a situation that characterised the 18th and 19th centuries.

Despite the discord and dissent among the reigning powers in Europe, the lives being led in Placentia continued unabated. The connections with the English monarchy led to the much storied stay of Prince William Henry in Placentia. Prince William Henry (later, King William IV) functioned largely as a surrogate court judge. But his stay is also interwoven with places such as St. Luke’s Anglican Church. While other families contributed money to St. Luke’s, one of the most remembered is Prince William Henry. History tells us of how Prince William Henry financed the building of the church that preceded the current St. Luke’s. He also presented the church with a silver Communion Service and a Coat of Arms. While the Service is now at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in St. John’s, the Coat of Arms is still to be found hanging in St. Luke’s Anglican church.

Still, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the growth of Placentia drew on the ingenuity and initiative of people such as Thomas Saunders, Pierce Sweetman and his son, Roger Forstall Sweetman. The Saunders and Sweetman families span the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, as indicated earlier, were major contributors to the merchant industry of Placentia. For instance, with his son, Roger F. Sweetman,⁸ Pierce Sweetman worked to improve and enhance the strength of the firm’s role in the fishing industry. Nonetheless, with the death of Thomas Saunders in 1808, Pierce Sweetman in 1841 and the later death of Roger Forstall Sweetman in 1862, this chapter of the economic life in Placentia came to a close.

Nonetheless, other developments were fast occurring. The discovery of the Stoney House Cove or Stoney House copper deposit by Harry Verran, a young Cornishman who was the first mining engineer to work in Newfoundland, followed his resignation from the La Manche mine. The La Manche mine changed hands between English and American companies, but conflicting views on safety and the engineering needed to extract the ore spelled its end. The Stoney House ore did not fare much better with Father E. Condon of Placentia apparently pleading with Harry Verran to return from a business trip to St. John’s due to the pitiful condition of the Stoney House mine. As with other figures such as the Saunders and Sweetmans, Mr. Verran continues to make an imprint on Placentia history. He married the daughter of Roger Forstall Sweetman,⁹ Mary J. Sweetman. Their son, Henry or Harry Verran built the Verran House in 1893. The present history of Placentia draws on this past as the Verran House has been renovated, rejuvenated and renamed the Rosedale Manor Bed and Breakfast Inn.

The developments regarding the Stoney House and La Manche mines are indicative of later attempts. In 1883, Francis Ellerhausen began to work in Little Placentia or as it is now called, Argentia (a term taken from the French *argent*, meaning silver). Having acquired the Silver Cliff mine, Ellerhausen started work. However, in the following year, he left Silver Cliff, due to complaints of the former owners unskilled mining attempts and inefficiency. Later attempts at the Silver Cliff Mine also met with little success. These changes and developments were testament to the growth of Placentia in the nineteenth century. The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries subsequently emerged from this history and in like fashion, people and events have contributed their own characteristic thumbprint to the overall and continuing history of Placentia.

⁸ Roger Forstall Sweetman was the great-grandson of Richard Welsh.

⁹ Roger F. Sweetman was the son of Pierce Sweetman and grandson of Roger Sweetman who is believed to have married Mary Welsh, the daughter of Richard Welsh (Mannion 1987).

For instance, Jerseyside¹⁰ rose to prominence due to the location of the Railway station which was on a hill above this community. This branch line opened in October 1888. Branch lines such as those to Placentia, Carbonear and Bonavista operated until the 1980s¹¹. In addition, the early 1900s witnessed the development of the logging industry in places such as Colinet. One of the prominent mills was owned by Hugh Simmons who hailed from Whitbourne. In the early part of the twentieth century, it was the largest sawmill, a role that earns it pride of place in the rich heritage of this resource in Newfoundland and Labrador. The prominence of this mill can be found today as it supplied the lumber to all parts of the province including the Cataracts Bridge, now a part of Cataracts Provincial Park.

Despite the benefits and growth that symbolised Newfoundland and the wider world in general, the tribulations of the twentieth century remained to affect Newfoundland and Labrador. As in centuries past, the incendiary struggles among various powers in Europe culminated in World War I. Similar to other countries, Newfoundland and Labrador endured the loss of life at battles such as that of Beaumont Hamel. And lest we forget and perhaps learn from these losses, in 1920, the Placentia War Memorial was unveiled. Following the end of World War I, Placentia and Newfoundland and Labrador in general, were destined for increasing changes, ones that were linked to the different forms of government attempted in Newfoundland and Labrador.

As 1933 came to an end, the Dominion was bankrupt and after the government closed, it was replaced by the Commission of Government. This development followed other forms of government in Newfoundland and Labrador. For instance, by the mid-1820s, government in Newfoundland was administered by a governor appointed by the British government, along with other officials. However, there was a push by some to have a governing body that could represent the unique needs of Newfoundland. Thus, from 1832-1855, the Representative Government existed in Newfoundland, consisting of an Assembly and Legislative Council. Unfortunately, Representative Government was fraught with tensions and irreconcilable differences born of religious and political allegiances that, except for some useful legislation, rendered it largely ineffectual.

Representative Government was eventually replaced by Responsible Government from 1855 to 1933. Responsible Government was certainly challenged by denominational rifts. And from 1864, debates surrounded confederation with other British North American colonies. Ultimately, corruption, high debts and a subsequent economic recession after World War I fuelled further divisions within the government and a loss of faith felt by the people. Consequently, the government of Newfoundland surrendered self-government in 1933.

And so, on the 16 February, 1934, the Commission of Government followed the Responsible Government. The Commission of Government, comprised of three Newfoundlanders and three British civil servants, were charged with reviving the economy. Actions taken by the Commission of Government included investigation and reporting of wage inequities and health concerns (the Cottage Hospital system was one of their initiatives). And it was through the actions of the Commission of Government that initiatives such as the “Markland Experiment” were played out.

People such as William Lidstone, a veteran of World War I suffering under the weight of poverty, and nine other men and their families were given two year’s worth of support money to purchase supplies and other equipment in order to establish a farming community. Markland,

¹⁰ Jerseyside is a community that amalgamated with the municipalities of Dunville, Freshwater, Placentia and the unincorporated area of Argentia in 1994.

¹¹ In 1923, the Newfoundland government acquired the railway and coastal boat services from the Reid Newfoundland Company.

approximately 50 km from Placentia, was located on just over 100 square kilometres of land between Whitbourne and Colinet. The successes of this so called experiment were apparent: the successful farming of the land in addition to the growth of Markland with 1934 witnessing the settlement of ten more families. Unfortunately, Markland was a created and highly controlled settlement and the lack of independence and freedom spelled its end in the latter 1930s. While these events were consuming Markland, events beyond Newfoundland and Labrador were gradually unfolding in the world.

In 1939, World War II began. Like countless other men and women, the people of Placentia served and died in this war. But the role of Placentia looms larger in the events that have become deeply inscribed in the world. In 1941, the site of the failed Silver Cliff mine entered a new and different chapter as part of the United States Argentia Naval Base. With the Leased Bases Agreement with England was signed on 27 March, 1941 although a preliminary deal had been reached already on 2 September, 1940. This allowed the United States to legally appropriate land to build its bases.

In the throes of the Second World War, England was in no position to resist the stipulations presented by the United States. Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent a personal letter that was to be published in *St. John's*. In it, Mr. Churchill recognised "... to the full the considerable sacrifices made by Newfoundland to the cause which we all have at heart and her splendid contribution to the war effort, we ask her to accept the Agreement ..." Thus, the American Bases Act was enacted on the 11 June, 1941. And the development comprised both boon and bane. The naval base led to such things as increased employment for many men and women of Newfoundland and Labrador. But it also resulted in the removal and resettlement of entire communities, as well as their cemeteries, to Freshwater. Lives were disrupted, and despite the benefits that arose from the relocation, the sadness and regret have been etched into the history of the Placentia area.

Other events near Argentia have made a similar impact on the history of Placentia. In August of 1941 when the construction of the Argentia Naval Base was nearing completion (it would be fully functional by December of that year), U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt met with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill aboard the USS *Augusta*. The highly guarded meeting resulted in the historic *Atlantic Charter*, a joint declaration that "... was not a treaty between the two powers. Nor was it a final and formal expression of peace aims. It was only an affirmation, as the document declared, 'of certain common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they based their hopes for a better future for the world'" (United Nations 2010). It was on the 24 September, 1941 when ten governments¹² met and signed a declaration. The *Atlantic Charter* went on to form the basis for the United Nations. Although World War II had four more years of sorrow and pain to create and disperse, it drew to a close in 1945.

After the end of this war, the economy in Britain was nearing failure. It lacked the resources to continue its support for former colonies and Dominions such as Newfoundland. Regarding factors of politics, economy and society, delegations to London, England and Ottawa were part of a National Convention to decide the future of Newfoundland and Labrador. Following heated debate, by the close of the Convention, a referendum was devised to give the people of Newfoundland and Labrador a choice of Responsible Government; Continuation of the Commission of government; and finally, Confederation with Canada¹³. Having garnered the lowest

¹² These governments were the USSR and the nine governments of occupied Europe: Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Yugoslavia and by the representatives of General de Gaulle, of France (United Nations 2010).

¹³ Discussion regarding joining the Confederation of the British North American colonies had occurred in

number of votes, the Commission of Government was dropped for the second ballot. Thus, after two referendums (the second needed to reach a result surpassing 50%), the majority of the votes were in favour of Confederation with Canada. The Terms of the Union was then signed on the 11 December, 1948. Given the results of the referendums and following a highly volatile campaign pitting confederates against non-confederates, on 31 March, 1949, Newfoundland and Labrador became the tenth province of Canada.

This marked significant change – politically, economically and socially. Joining the Canadian Confederation resonated with the mantra of modernisation with industrialisation being one of the tactics to encourage and enhance the strength of Newfoundland and Labrador. For instance, the phosphorus plant at Long Harbour developed in 1968 using silica supplied by the Dunville Mining Company. Other initiatives following 1949 stemmed from the belief that “growth centres” were needed as nuclei for further growth. This lent impetus and strength to resettlement programmes that developed and altered the cultural and social landscape from the 1950s to 1970s. It resulted in the abandonment of communities located on the islands in Placentia Bay. Today, many of the people who live in Placentia were born on, or can trace their families, to these islands. Names such as Merasheen Island, Red Island, Great Bruley or Tacks Beach remain in the hearts and minds of many.

For places such as Placentia, more recent history has been punctuated by expected economic concerns related to the resources of the fisheries, mining and oil production as well as the significant changes such as the Cod Moratorium in 1992. As noted by Sean Cadigan in *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History*, “[t]he social upheaval of the crisis in the fisheries further divided coastal communities” along various lines, including the lack of compensation for secondary service providers such as the truckers who were reliant on the fishing industry (in opposition, fishers and plant workers received some compensation). Like all communities in Newfoundland and Labrador, this change to the economic, social and cultural base has led to out migration in Placentia, a response to the departure or severe reduction of a livelihood that had previously supported families. For instance, the population of Placentia has steadily declined since 1991 when it was 5013. The censuses completed for 2006 (population 3,898) and 2011 (population 3,643) indicate that the population for Placentia had declined by 6.5% between these years. However, despite these setbacks, communities in the Placentia area have successfully sought to tackle these changes and the related challenges.

Several businesses and organisations have developed that signify a change in mindset that recognises the new opportunities that exist in the social, cultural and economic environments. Like the fishing and mining industries and other economic developments of the more distant past, the economic environment of the recent history of Placentia has grown and changed. The Placentia Area Chamber of Commerce, Placentia Area Development Association, Festival of Flags, Argentia Management Authority and the Avalon Gateway Regional Economic Board provide promotion, as well as vital services and support for the array of businesses in the Placentia area.

As one example, the Argentia Management Authority came into being in the wake of the closure of the U.S. Naval Base in Argentia. Undergoing environmental remediation, given the need to remove structures or potentially harmful materials left by the U.S. Navy, it is well on the way to being the home of new businesses. The development of the Long Harbour Nickel Processing Plant has offered some redemption. But like other chapters in the history that define Newfoundland and Labrador, this development also lies at the heart of opposing views as to its long term benefits and the impacts on the social and physical environment. However, most

the past. In 1864 when Ambrose Shea and Frederick Carter were sent as observers to discussions that eventually led to four colonies joining in 1867 to form Canada. The next discussions took place in 1895.

recently, Husky Energy has committed to a new project that will be completed in Argentina. It is part of a \$2.5 billion West White Rose development and will involve the construction of a well-head platform.

Culturally, a host of organisations reflect the seedbed of artistry and creativity that fruitfully exist in Placentia. These include the Placentia Bay Cultural Arts Centre, Rosedale Manor Bed and Breakfast and Inn, mentioned earlier, Philip's Café, Fleur de Sel, Christopher Newhook's Orcan Art & Design, the Three Sisters Pub, in addition to the work of theatre organisations such as Placentia Area Theatre d'Heritage (PATH). All are steeped in the history of Placentia. And like many of these developments, Castle Hill National Historic Site of Canada (NHSC) embodies much of the history in the Placentia area. Castle Hill NHSC was designated in 1968, "for the important role that its defences played from 1692 to 1811 in the defence of Placentia and the larger economic interests of France and Britain. ..." Along with daily guided tours of the remaining fortification, exhibits and accounts of the deep history of the Placentia area, Castle Hill NHSC also participates in community events. Thus, similar to the other developments in the Placentia area, such events suture it firmly to the present.

The recent history of Newfoundland and Labrador, in many ways, echoes that of other parts of Canada. Still, it retains the unique qualities that characterise the people who call this province home. The people, places and events of Placentia plumb the depths of a rich and, at times tempestuous, history. It is a history that encompasses the First Nation peoples whose way of life brought them to the Placentia area. And well rehearsed, it is also a history that extends into more recent centuries when European activities and settlement took hold, leaving a unique and indelible imprint. It is also a settlement that remains vibrant today. As has always been the situation, the names and faces may change, but the sentiments and reasons to stay retain their vibrancy.

Without question, a quiet walk in Placentia, a wander through the remnants of the various fortifications such as Castle Hill NHSC or Fort Louis at its base, opens the door to this tapestry, a history that extends from past millennia to the present.

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