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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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OUR OWN ICE AGE

Europe's recent spell of cold weather is a reminder of the fact that, though glacial periods are usually referred to in the past tense, we are now living in one. The Quaternary Ice Age is not over. Of the ice blankets totaling 12,000,000 square miles in extent, beneath which, when this frigid period was at its height, about one-fifth the total land surface of the globe lay buried, only about half has melted away. The rest remains in the polar regions and on the slopes of mountains in other parts of the world.

The later stages of the last ice age in the lowlands of the north temperate zone were so near our own times that science has found means of dating them with considerable accuracy. This has been accomplished in several ways; especially, in recent years, by an ingenious process of measuring and matching the layers -- called "varves" -- seen in the beds of former lakes that were fed by the melting of the ice sheet; where each layer represents an annual deposit of silt and sand. Such evidence shows that the border of the ice took 7,000 years to recede from Long Island to the White Mountains; a distance of 210 miles.

In Europe, where this method of investigation was first employed, the chronology of the ice age has now been plausibly joined on to that of historic times; so that, for example, the leading student of "varves", Baron de Geer, finds that the ice sheet began to leave southern Sweden 13,500 years ago.

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