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ICE AGES AND GLACIAL PERIODS

Though most dictionaries and other reference books have not yet discovered the fact, the conceptions of ice ages and glacial periods now current among geologists are quite different from those that prevailed when science knew of only one period of widespread glaciation in the earth's history, which was called either "the" ice age or "the" glacial period. The definite article thus used embodies obsolete ideas and so does the use of "ice age" and "glacial period" as synonymous terms.

In the geological past there have been several great ice ages. The latest one, called the Quaternary Ice Age, probably began some 700,000 or 800,000 years ago, and we are apparently living in a mild stage of it today. Since it began the earth has passed through a series of cold "glacial periods," alternating with mild "interglacial periods." It is likely that the earlier ice ages were similarly broken up into relatively cold and relatively mild periods, though there is not much evidence on this point.

In general, each of the ice ages lasted several hundred thousand years, while the intervals of time between them, during which the climate of the earth was probably much milder than it is now, lasted tens of millions or hundreds of millions of years. Thus an ice age is a relatively brief episode in the climatic history of the earth, and a glacial period is a still briefer episode of an ice age.

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