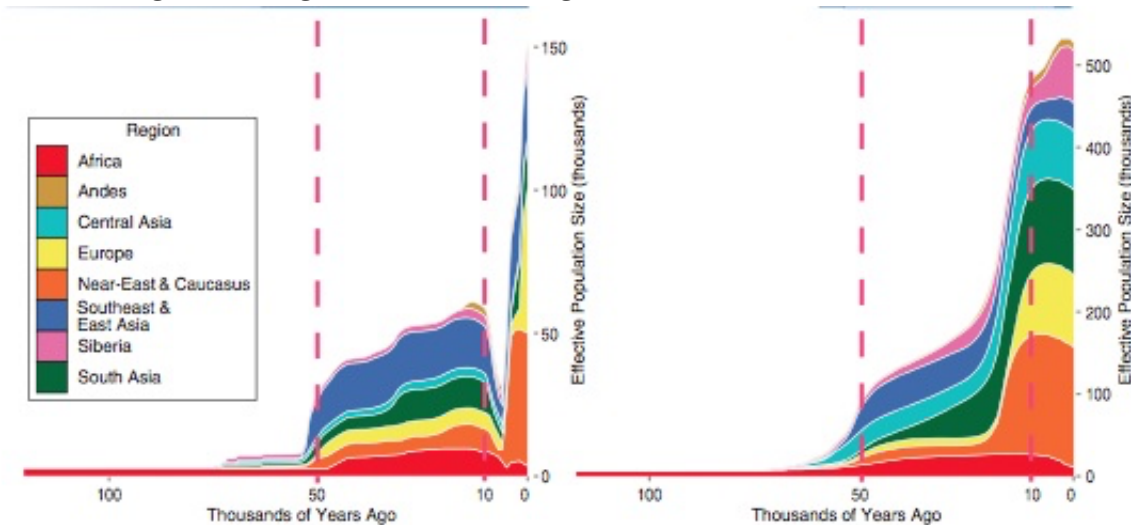


# Logarithmic History

The history of the universe — from the Big Bang to the end of the year — day by day

## The Patriarchal Age

The time of the Biblical Patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is sometimes called the Patriarchal Age. If there is a kernel of truth to the Biblical stories, the Patriarchal Age probably goes back to the early third millennium. But the concept applies more broadly. A recent title says it: “A recent bottleneck of Y chromosome diversity coincides with a global change in culture.” This figure shows it.



The left panel shows effective population sizes based on Y chromosome DNA, transmitted down the male line. The right panel shows effective population sizes based on mitochondrial DNA, transmitted down the female line. The dramatic dip on the left panel, where effective population sizes go way down in the last ten thousand years, means that there was a period, from the initial spread of major language families to near the dawn of history, where just a few men were leaving lots of descendants in the male line. This must reflect a time when polygyny – some men taking multiple wives, others not reproducing at all – was common. But this pattern probably reflects more than just polygyny. It probably also reflects a continuing advantage, carried over many generations, for some male lines of descent. In other words, back in the day, not just did Lord Y (or whoever) have many wives and many sons, but his sons, his sons' sons, his son's son's sons, and so on, had many offspring. This probably implies some kind of long-term social memory, such that the “Sons of Y” or the “House of Y” had a privileged position for many generations.

Australian Aborigines, subjects of our last two posts, often have high frequencies of polygyny, but mostly don't keep track of genealogies over the long term. Men can tell you what kin terms they apply to other people, but they mostly don't know their ancestry past a few generations. If I'm an Aborigine, it's enough to know that my father called some other man "brother," to know that that I call that man's children my "siblings." I don't have to know the actual genealogy. But many Eurasian societies have been different. People can give you a line of be-gats stretching back many generations. Having prominent ancestors in that line is a form of social capital. Very large groups may claim descent from ancestors going way back. These stories – the tribes of Israel going back to the sons of Jacob, Greek patrilineages going back to the sons of Hellen (a guy, no relation to Helen of Troy), Indian Brahmins belonging to different ancestral gotras (patrilineal clans) going back to Vedic times – must have been heavily fictionalized. But maybe not completely.

Eurasian history is often told as the story the rise of states and empires. But it's also the story of the rise of patrilineal descent groups (and the heavy policing of female sexuality to make sure of paternity in the male line). One thing we'll see in posts to come is how the relationship between State and Clan played out differently in different civilizations.

This entry was posted in Uncategorized and tagged kinship, language history on September 27, 2015 [https://logarithmichistory.wordpress.com/2015/09/27/the-patriarchal-age/].

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## 6 thoughts on "The Patriarchal Age"

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**Bernard Yomtov**

August 14, 2016 at 3:53 pm

Very interesting. Could it also be the case that there was a big enough gap in survival rates between children born to prosperous families and those born to poor ones to account for some of this? What if infants in (neces-

sarily) well-off polygynous households were better cared for than others?

**logarithmichistory**

Post author

August 15, 2016 at 1:36 pm

Sure there could have been an advantage in infant/child survival rates, but that on its own wouldn't give you the huge discrepancy between Y- and mtDNA

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