

century few churchmen questioned the claim that the fossils were relics of the Biblical Flood.⁴ One of the strongest influences which prepared the way for the great polemical conflicts of the late 18th and early 19th centuries was the publication and wide circulation of the book Sacred Theory of the Earth. This was an eloquent four-volume work published in England, in the late 17th century, by the theologian Thomas Burnet. Burnet was highly respected as a royal chaplain and as a cabinet officer, and his work remained popular for at least a century. It was even translated into some other languages. Burnet put great emphasis on the Biblical Flood as the force, or series of forces, responsible for practically all geologic features observed upon the earth today. Taking II Peter 3:5-6 as his premise, he developed a highly imaginative and detailed description of the work of the Flood in producing the present, observable form and characteristics of the earth. He held that "before sin brought on the Deluge, the earth was of perfect mathematical form, smooth and beautiful, 'like an egg,' with neither seas nor islands nor valleys nor rocks, 'with not a wrinkle, scar or fracture'...."⁵ He greatly stressed the "breaking up of the fountains of the great deep," spoken of in the Old Testament, asserting that this cataclysm released the water from the interior of the earth, to fracture and erode the earth's surface into its present rugged form, and to deposit the fossiliferous strata which are now so abundant.⁶

Georges Buffon

In the late 18th century the work of geological science began to take on a more organized form. During this period the French scholar Georges Buffon attempted what were perhaps the first scientific, numerical estimates of the various phases of the earth's past history. His work was soon stopped by the theological faculty of the University of Paris, which forced him to make a public recantation. However, he later regained courage and in 1778 published his work entitled Epochs of Nature. The opening paragraph of this book summarizes the method of his work:

Just as in civil history we consult warrants, study medallions, and decipher ancient inscriptions, in order to determine the epochs of the human revolutions and fix the dates of moral events, so in natural history one must dig through the archives of the world, extract ancient relics from the bowels of the earth, gather together their fragments, and assemble again in a single body of proofs all those indications of the physical changes which can carry us back to the different Ages of Nature. This is the only way of fixing certain points in the immensity of space, and of placing a number of milestones on the eternal path of time.⁷

Buffon did not reject the Biblical account of creation, but rather attempted to keep his work within the bounds of the Scriptural framework. He considered each "day" of the creation to be an "epoch," estimating the length of each epoch by mathematical calculations based on the length of time required for the cooling of certain types and amounts of matter. (He considered the earth to