

The geologic timescale: Where did these names come from?

Phanerozoic eon – Greek for “visible life”

Cenozoic era – Greek for “new life”

Quaternary – Latin for “fourth”

Holocene – Greek for “entirely new”

Pleistocene – Greek for “mostly new”

Neogene – Greek for “new birth / generation”

Pliocene – Greek for “more new”

Miocene – Greek for “less new”

Paleogene – Greek for “ancient birth / generation”

Oligocene – Greek for “few new”

Eocene – Greek for “dawn of the new”

Paleocene – Greek for “ancient new”

* **Tertiary** (Latin for “third”) is an archaic term left over from the Wernerian chronology. It is no longer officially used as part of the geologic timescale.

Mesozoic era – Greek for “middle life”

Cretaceous -- Latin word for chalk (“creta”) and was first applied to extensive deposits of this age that form white cliffs along the English Channel between Great Britain and France.

Jurassic – named after the Jura Mountains between France and Switzerland, where rocks of this age were first studied.

Triassic – refers to the threefold division of rocks of this age in Germany.

Paleozoic era – Greek for “ancient life”

Permian – named after the province of Perm, Russia, where rocks of this age were first studied

Pennsylvanian – named after the state of Pennsylvania (USA), where rocks of this age are widespread

Mississippian – named after the Mississippi River valley (USA), which contains good exposures of rocks of this age

Devonian – named after Devonshire, England (UK), where rocks of this age were first studied

Silurian – named after a Celtic tribe called the Silures (UK).

Ordovician – named after a Celtic tribe called the Ordovices (UK).

Cambrian – Roman name for Wales (UK), where rocks of this age were first studied

Precambrian* – all the time prior to the start of the Cambrian (not a formal era/eon name)

* synonymous with “**Cryptozoic**” – Greek for “hidden life”

Proterozoic eon – Greek for “former life”

Neoproterozoic – Greek for the “new” Proterozoic

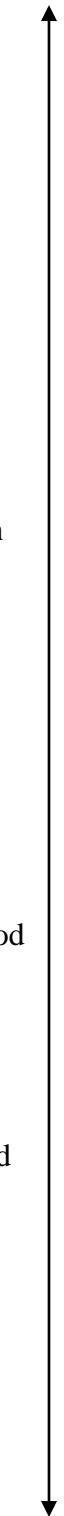
Mesoproterozoic – Greek for the “middle” Proterozoic

Paleoproterozoic – Greek for the “ancient” Proterozoic

Archean eon – Greek for “ancient”

Hadean eon – Greek for “hellish” or “unseen” (the Netherworld)

Most
recent



Most
ancient