

## Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic Societies

### The Stone Age

One of the principal characteristics separating hominids from their immediate ancestors was tool use; it has been traditional to divide human prehistory into eras based on levels of technological capability. Hominids made their tools out of many materials, such as wood, bone, and animal skins. But the most noteworthy were the ones made of stone. The first period of history is known as the Stone Age. This era is broken down into at least two periods: the Paleolithic or Old Stone Age (10,000 to 2.5 million years ago) and Neolithic or New Stone Age (5,000 to 10,000 years ago). The change from Paleolithic to Neolithic is associated with the end of the Ice Age. Many historians claim that there was a Mesolithic era or Middle Stone age around 10,000 to 12,000 years ago marking the transition between the Old Stone Age and the New Stone Age.

1. How is prehistory divided?
2. What is the difference between the Old Stone and the New Stone Age?

### Early Tool-making

During the Paleolithic era, *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus* used crude tools, including clubs and choppers to crack open bones, rudimentary axes, and scrapers to prepare animal hides. The earliest humans—Neanderthal, Cro-Magnon, and *Homo sapiens sapiens*—improved upon these tools and created new ones. Tools were generally designed to provide shelter, protection and defense, and foods and clothing. The earliest hominids lived in natural shelters like caves and canyons. Fire was developed one million years ago and then hominids made tent like structures and simple huts to live in. By the end of the Paleolithic era and beginning of the Mesolithic era the hominids were building more advanced wood and stone structures. They also developed weapons like clubs and rocks. They devised tools for hunting and food preparation which could also be a weapon, such as the bow and arrow, spears, axes and knives.

1. How did tools and weapons improve in the later Mesolithic era?
2. What were these tools used for?

### Paleolithic Religion

Paleolithic peoples were very spiritualistic. Animism is the belief that everything had its own spirit: people, animals, trees, rivers, mountains, and the sky. The interaction of these spirits within this unseen world was what shaped the visible events of everything around them: weather, wars, and health.

Those who demonstrated certain powers, the shamans or witchdoctors, were both greatly respected and greatly feared. They were understood to possess special magical powers that could be worked to the good--or the bad--of the community. The community as a whole felt that it exercised some controlling influence over events--by their ability to "pre-enact" the necessary events of their lives. Thus the community engaged in ritualistic war dances, hunting dances, rain dances, medicine dances and rituals, which supposedly had the power to predispose or control the behavior of the unseen spirits in order to assure a forthcoming favorable outcome--whatever the event or whatever the community's particular need.

1. Describe Animism.
2. What other rituals would the Paleolithic people use to help control their world?

### Hunting and Gathering: the New Stone Age

As time passed hominids began to organize themselves in social groups. This would eventually give birth to family units and these families would tend to cluster together by ties of kinship. As clans became larger they usually mixed with neighboring groups that grew into bands or tribes.

Paleolithic and Mesolithic groups sustained themselves by hunting and gathering. This practice is known as foraging. Rather than produce food themselves, hunter-gatherer societies lived off the resources from the land. They killed birds and animals for food, especially mammoths, bison, deer and rodents. They also picked roots and berries from surrounding trees. When the resources dried up, the band or tribe moved to a new area with sustainable resources.

The early tribes also developed a form of government. This organization was based on chiefs, leaders and religious figures to head the tribe. They were to main figure to these early hunter-gatherer societies and are responsible for keeping them together. The early tribes also worshipped deities and practiced a variety of religious rituals. It is said that Cro-Magnon buried their dead over 100,000 years ago, indicating the belief in an afterlife. The religious ceremonies became more sophisticated with the sacrificing to gods, goddesses and spirits. The early tribes were very artistic people, they were known to play music and paint on cave walls.

1. How did early groups survive?
2. What were some characteristics of these early groups?

### The Neolithic Revolution

The end of the Great Ice Age around 10,000 to 12,000 years ago gradually brought about milder conditions and warmer temperatures. These and other climate changes profoundly altered the lives of Stone Age people. To begin with, human population increased rapidly. Another important change was in how the people lived. Although the hunting and gathering lifestyle did not cease, different groups in various parts of the world started to produce their own food. This depended on new skills: the domestication of animals and plants. These skills gave birth to the practices of pastoralism which is based on the raising and herding of livestock and agriculture. Both allowed humans to manipulate their environment to a greater degree. Agriculture encouraged closer social ties and the formation of long-lasting settlements. These settlements allowed pastoral societies to herd animals like horses, dogs, buffalo, oxen and other animals. These animals also produced fertilizer for agriculture and foods for the society. The tremendous importance of pastoralism and agriculture has made it traditional for historians to refer to their emergence as the Neolithic Revolution.

1. What two new skills were developed in the Neolithic era?
2. Why are they so important?