

The Stone Age

The Stone Age represents the earliest and longest chapter of human prehistory, spanning from approximately 3 million years ago until around 4,000 years ago in Britain, when the use of metal tools signalled the beginning of the Bronze Age. Archaeologists divide this vast period into three phases: the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic.

The Palaeolithic, or Old Stone Age, was by far the longest phase. Early humans lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers, moving across the landscape in pursuit of large prey such as woolly mammoths, aurochs and wild boar. They crafted sophisticated tools from flint by a technique called knapping, made clothing from animal hides and created extraordinary cave art, most famously at Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain.

The Mesolithic period began approximately 10,000 years ago following the retreat of the last Ice Age glaciers. A warmer climate transformed Britain's landscape into dense woodland. People adapted by developing smaller, more versatile flint tools called microliths and establishing semi-permanent camps near rivers and coastlines.

The Neolithic Revolution, beginning around 6,000 years ago, fundamentally transformed human society. People abandoned nomadic life to establish farming communities, cultivating crops such as wheat and barley and raising livestock. This surplus of food allowed populations to grow and communities to specialise. The cooperative construction of megalithic monuments, including Stonehenge and Avebury, demonstrates the remarkable social organisation these early farming communities had achieved.

Questions

1. When did the Stone Age end in Britain, and what replaced it?
2. What does the word "archaeologist" mean and why are they important for studying the Stone Age?
3. What technique did Palaeolithic people use to make flint tools?
4. Name two locations where famous cave paintings from the Palaeolithic period can be found.
5. What is a "microlith" and during which period were they used?
6. Why did people begin to settle near rivers and coastlines during the Mesolithic period?
7. Approximately when did the Neolithic period begin in Britain?
8. Name two crops grown by Neolithic farmers.
9. Name two megalithic monuments built during the Neolithic period in Britain.
10. The article says that a food surplus "allowed populations to grow and communities to specialise." What kinds of specialised roles do you think might have developed in Neolithic communities, and why would a food surplus make this possible?



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