

The Palaeolithic Age

The **Palaeolithic Age** — derived from the Greek words *palaios* (ancient) and *lithos* (stone) — is the earliest and most extensive period of prehistoric human history. Spanning from roughly **2.5 million years ago** to around **10,000 BC**, it represents well over 99% of the time humans and their ancestors have existed on Earth.

During this era, humans lived exclusively as **hunter-gatherers**, organised into small, nomadic bands. They left no permanent settlements, had no agriculture and produced no written records. Their survival depended on an intimate knowledge of their natural environment — tracking animal migrations, identifying edible and medicinal plants, and understanding seasonal changes.

Shelter varied according to climate and geography. Caves provided natural protection, while in open landscapes people constructed temporary structures from timber, hides and — in some regions — mammoth bones and tusks.

The defining technology of the period was **stone tool manufacture**. Through a technique known as **knapping**, early humans shaped flint and similar rocks into increasingly sophisticated implements: hand axes, scrapers, blades and projectile points. This gradual refinement of tools reflects growing intelligence and problem-solving ability over generations.

The mastery of **fire** was among the most significant achievements of the Palaeolithic period. Beyond warmth and protection, cooking food made nutrients more digestible, potentially supporting brain development.

Some of the most extraordinary evidence of Palaeolithic life comes from **cave art**, such as the stunning paintings at Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain. These images — of animals, hunts and abstract symbols — suggest that early humans possessed imagination, culture and symbolic thinking.



Questions

1. What language do the words "Palaeolithic" come from, and what do they mean?
2. Approximately when did the Palaeolithic Age begin and end?
3. What percentage of human history does the Palaeolithic Age represent?
4. What does "nomadic" mean?
5. Name two things that hunter-gatherers needed to understand about their natural environment to survive.
6. In open landscapes, what materials were used to build temporary shelters?
7. What is knapping?
8. Name three types of stone tool produced during the Palaeolithic Age.
9. Beyond warmth and protection, how did cooking food benefit early humans?
10. The article states that cave art suggests early humans had "imagination, culture and symbolic thinking." What do you think this tells us about the difference between early humans and animals? Use evidence from the article to support your answer

