Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MESOLITHIC MAN & WOMAN PH 32

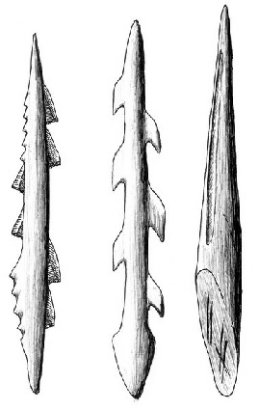


The term 'Stone Age' is used by archaeologists to designate the vast prehistoric time period during which humans used stone for toolmaking. In 1865 John Lubbock subdivided the Stone Age into the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. These three periods were further subdivided. In reality, the succession of phases differs enormously from one area of the world to another.

The word palaeolithic is derived from two Greek words, *paleos*, meaning old and *lithos*, meaning stone; in other words 'Old Stone-Age'. It covers a very long period from the introduction of the first stone tools by predecessors of Homo Sapiens around 2,000,000 years ago and ending in various places between 40,000 and 10,000 years ago.

This was followed by the Mesolithic Period. The word mesolithic is derived from the Greek word *mesos*, meaning middle, and *lithos*, meaning stone; in other words 'Middle Stone Age'. It began in Britain with the end of the last glacial period over 10,000 years ago. At this date temperatures began to rise and Britain was gradually separated from the continent. Mesolithic peoples lived as hunters-fishers. Some settlement sites from this period are known in Britain, including a famous one at Thatcham, Berkshire, although they would only have been inhabited sporadically. Mesolithic cultures lasted in Britain until about 4,500 BC.

The photograph above right shows a reconstruction of a Mesolithic shelter based on rings of post-holes uncovered by archaeologists at Howick, Northumberland. This site was excavated during the summers of 2000 and 2002. Radiocarbon dating of charred hazelnut shells, found in a sequence of hearths, has shown that the house was first built about 7,800 BC, and indicates it was in use for at least 100 years, though whether this was on a permanent or seasonal basis is not clear.



Right: Bone harpoon points from a late neolithic site in France. The model of a man is shown holding a spear with a similar barbed blade.

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We do not know what kind of clothes people wore in the Mesolithic period. No items of clothing have survived from so long ago and they have not left pictures of themselves. The famous cave art which had survived from as early as the Palaeolithic period shows animals, hand-prints and occasional stick-like human figures.



The archaeological record gives us tantalising hints of their clothing. Lots of needles, for example, have been found. The picture on the right shows a fine needle which has been worked from a splinter of bone from a large mammal. It was found in Church Hole, Creswell Crags, a site which has recently revealed extensive remnants of cave art. Needles like these were most probably used for sewing and mending clothes. This needle was made about 12,000 years ago. The female figure in this box is shown holding a similar tool.



Another relatively common find are shells and stones which have had holes drilled in them to form beads. The cowrie shell on the right was found in a cave on Caldey Island, Wales. It is less than 1cm in length and has two holes drilled in it. It could have either been sewn onto clothing or formed part of a bead necklace, like the one shown on the female model. Perforated cowrie shells are generally dated to the end of the last Ice Age or shortly after.



The picture on the left shows stone beads that were found at Nab Head, Pembrokeshire. They are made from stone discs that can be picked up on the surrounding beaches today. The beads, each of which is less than 15mm in diameter, are perforated using simple flint drills and could have been used as jewellery or possibly sewn onto clothing.



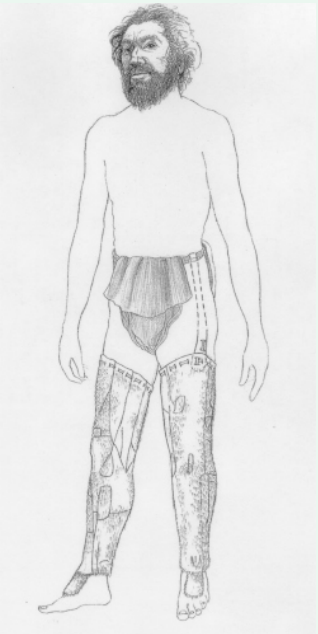
A more unusual find was made at Star Carr, Yorkshire. In the early Mesolithic period Star Carr was situated on the edge of a lake surrounded by open woods of birch and pine trees. During the excavation of the site, twenty-one adult red deer skull parts with antlers were found. All had holes made through the back of them. The antlers were also broken off and the remaining stumps thinned down and trimmed around the base. These worked antlers are thought to be head-dresses. The holes would have been used to tie them to the head with a leather thong. They may have been worn by hunters as a disguise, but it is more likely that they were part of a costume worn on special occasions, perhaps during religious ceremonies.

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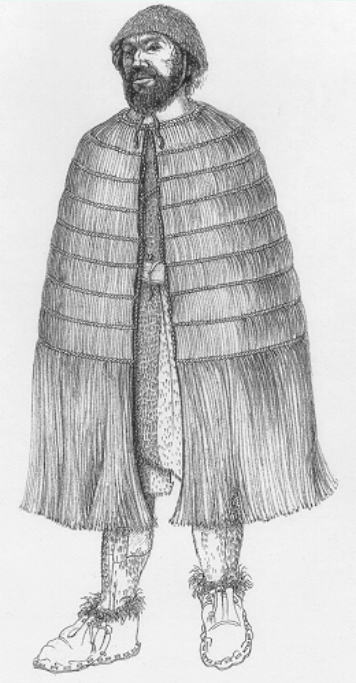
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Some clothes have survived from the Stone Age, although from later than the Mesolithic period. For example, in 1991 a well preserved body of a man was found in the Alps (nicknamed Ötzi, after the Ötzal area where he was found). The man is believed to have lived about 5,300 years ago. Various items were found with the body including a copper axe, a flint knife, a quiver full of flint-headed arrows and an unfinished yew longbow that was taller than he was. A scan of the body revealed an arrowhead lodged in one shoulder when he died, matching a small tear on his coat.

Ötzi was wearing more than just a coat - he was dressed in several layers of clothing. His wardrobe included a woven grass cloak, a leather vest and shoes. The shoes were waterproof and wide, seemingly designed for walking across the snow; they were constructed using bearskin for the soles, deer hide for top panels, and a netting made of tree bark. Soft grass went around the foot and in the shoe and functioned like warm socks. The illustrations below show the complexity of his clothing. However, whether similar clothing was made in the Mesolithic period is uncertain.







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Some people also use evidence from hunter-fisher communities which survived into the twentieth century to speculate about how Mesolithic communities might have organised themselves. The pictures below are of the Selk'nam people, nomadic hunters-fishers who survived in Tierra del Fuego, Patagonia, until the early twentieth century. The last pure-blooded Selk'nam died in 1974.

The photographs show both thick fur clothing and painting of the naked body for religious rituals. Evidence from peoples such as the Selk'nam is tantalisingly suggestive. European Mesolithic people may also have had a similar variety of clothes and body adornment, but this can not be proved.

