

Introduction to Prehistory

Prehistory is a period where there are no written records. Because of this, we need to use other methods, such as archaeology, to find out about the people that lived during this time. This time is often split into three different eras: **Stone Age, Bronze Age, & Iron Age** but these are modern classifications based on technology and wouldn't have been recognised by the people living at the time.

CLASS DISCUSSION:

How might we know about these humans without written documents?

Stone Age

The first piece of evidence we have of people in Britain is some stone tools that date to around 950,000 years ago. This marks the beginning of the Stone Age. The Stone Age is broken into three eras: **Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, & Neolithic** but is perhaps more usefully divided into **early Stone Age hunter-gatherers and Later Stone Age farmers.**

Early Stone Age

Main concept – mobile hunter-gatherer communities

Palaeolithic: this period covers a huge time range from around 950,000 to 12,000 years ago. During this time more than one types of human lived in Britain – these included *Homo heidelbergensis*, *Homo neanderthalensis* (Neanderthals) and our own direct ancestors, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Britain was in the grip of the Ice Ages for much of this period and, although there were extremely cold periods, there were also much warmer ones and it was during those periods that humans thrived. These peoples used stone tools to butcher animals that they had scavenged and to forage for other food. Very little evidence has



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been found about what they lived in or what they wore but animal skin tents and clothes were probably important.

Mesolithic: The period after the Ice Ages. Homo sapiens sapiens are the only people living in Britain. The technology is characterised by specialised stone tools often using tiny, carefully-shaped pieces of flint.



Later Stone Age

Main concept – the first farmers

Neolithic: The first farmers. Pottery and weaving equipment have been found. Stone tools include axes and adzes used to fell trees and shape wood. Some axes were made from local flint and were probably purely utilitarian, others were made from stone from exotic places such as the far west tip of Cornwall, the Cumbrian fells and even the Italian Alps – these must have been status symbols or of some other cultural importance. Flint arrowheads were still used for hunting and warfare during this era. Sickles (see image) would be hafted onto curved wooden handles and used to cut cereal crops.



CLASS DISCUSSION:

Think about the types of tools we use in our everyday. For example, tools we use to cook and eat dinner. Compare this to what Stone Age societies might have used.

Bronze Age

Main concepts – cultural and technological change probably driven by population change. Devon's mineral resources (tin) were of international importance.

- ▶ There was a gradual shift to making some tools from bronze rather than stone. Bronze axes and spearheads replaced some stone ones while new types of object such as bronze swords were developed.
- ▶ Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin (sometimes also with lead). Tin is a rare mineral and so tin from Cornwall and Devon was valued across Europe.
- ▶ Many tools and weapons were still made of stone. Everyday tools such as knives and scrapers were usually made from flint. Flint arrowheads were still used for hunting and warfare.
- ▶ We think there was a large population migration into Britain in the early Bronze Age bringing with it new cultural ideas and new technologies
- ▶ Huge earthwork building projects were made in this era. Burial mounds, ditches and standing stones would have taken a lot of labour to construct. Perhaps this tells us about Bronze Age concepts of status and hierarchy.
- ▶ Buried hoards of bronze objects have been discovered which might have been offerings to gods or ancestors.



CLASS DISCUSSION: **Why else might valuable bronze be buried?**

Iron Age

Main concept – a developing hierarchical society bringing social and cultural change – massive earthwork constructions and individual displays of wealth and power.

- ▶ Just as the Bronze Age gradually shifted from stone to bronze, so too the Iron Age saw a gradual move from bronze to iron.
- ▶ From later historians (such as the Romans) we hear about Iron Age tribal communities. For example, the Dumnonia tribe in Devon and Cornwall.



- ▶ In other parts of Britain, coin currency systems were introduced. These never appeared in Devon or Cornwall. There may have been alternative currency systems such as bars of iron that archaeologists call currency bars. We don't think currency bars were used like modern money but might have been ways of showing off how wealthy you were.
- ▶ Developments in society:
 - As with the Bronze Age there are massive communal construction projects such as the building of hillforts including Hembury, near Honiton.
 - This may be because society was hierarchical and leaders could call on huge amounts of labour (possibly including slave labour).
 - We don't really know whether these projects were for defence, religion, trade and exchange or prestige for the elite or even the whole community.
 - When the Romans invade Britain there is a gradual process of Romanisation. To a lot of people Iron Age life would have continued largely unchanged until well into the Roman period. There is a very fuzzy boundary between prehistory and history.

CLASS DISCUSSION:

How do you think Iron Age currency is different to ours today?