

15,000 BCE: THIS IS YOUR LIFE

with

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Earth's beginnings can be traced back 4.5 billion years, but human evolution only counts for a tiny speck of its history. The Prehistoric Period—or when there was human life before records documented human activity—roughly dates from 2.5 million years ago to 1,200 B.C. It is generally categorized in three archaeological periods: The Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. From the invention of tools made for hunting to advances in food production and agriculture to early examples of art and religion, this enormous time span—ending roughly 3,200 years ago (dates vary upon region)—was a period of great transformation. Here's a closer look at the Stone Age.

Divided into three periods: Paleolithic (or Old Stone Age), Mesolithic (or Middle Stone Age), and Neolithic (or New Stone Age), this era is marked by the use of tools by our early *Homo sapiens* ancestors (who evolved around 300,000 B.C.) and the eventual transformation from a culture of hunting and gathering to farming and food production. During this era, early *H. sapiens* shared the planet with a number of now-extinct hominin relatives, including Neanderthals and Denisovans.

In the Paleolithic period (roughly 2.5 million years ago to 10,000 B.C.), early humans lived in caves or simple huts or tepees and were hunters and gatherers. They used basic stone and bone tools, as well as crude stone axes, for hunting birds and wild animals. They cooked

their prey, including woolly mammoths, deer and bison, using controlled fire. They also fished and collected berries, fruit and nuts.

Ancient humans in the Paleolithic period were also the first to leave behind art. They used combinations of minerals, ochres, burnt bone meal and charcoal mixed into water, blood, animal fats and tree saps to etch humans, animals and signs. They also carved small figurines from stones, clay, bones and antlers.

The end of this period marked the end of the last Ice Age, which resulted in the extinction of many large mammals and rising sea levels and climate change that eventually caused man to migrate.

During the Mesolithic period (about 10,000 B.C. to 8,000 B.C.), humans used small stone tools, now also polished and sometimes crafted with points and attached to antlers, bone or wood to serve as spears and arrows. They often lived nomadically in camps near rivers and other bodies of water. Agriculture was introduced during this time, which led to more permanent settlements in villages.

Finally, during the Neolithic period (roughly 8,000 B.C. to 3,000 B.C.), ancient humans switched from hunter/gatherer mode to agriculture and food production. They domesticated animals and cultivated cereal grains. They used polished hand axes, adzes for ploughing and tilling the land and started to settle in the plains. Advancements were made not only in tools but also in farming, home construction and art, including pottery, sewing and weaving.

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