**Human Prehistory**

Human prehistory was the period between the use of the first stone tools c. 3.3 million years ago and the invention of writing systems. The earliest writing systems appeared c. 5,300 years ago, but writing was not used in some human cultures until the 19th century or even later. The end of prehistory therefore came at very different dates in different places, and the term is less often used in discussing societies where prehistory ended relatively recently.

Sumer in Mesopotamia, the Indus valley civilization and ancient Egypt were the first civilizations to develop their own scripts. This took place already during the early Bronze Age. Neighboring civilizations were the first to follow. Most other civilizations reached the end of prehistory during the Iron Age. The three-age system of division of prehistory into the Stone Age, followed by the Bronze Age and Iron Age, remains in use for much of Eurasia and North Africa, but is not generally used in those parts of the world where the working of hard metals arrived abruptly with contact with Eurasian cultures, such as the Americas, Oceania, Australasia and much of Sub-Saharan Africa. These areas also, with some exceptions in Pre-Columbian civilizations in the Americas, did not develop complex writing systems before the arrival of Eurasians, and their prehistory reaches into relatively recent periods.

The period when a culture is written about by others but has not developed its own writing is often known as the protohistory of the culture. By definition, there are no written records from human prehistory, so dating of prehistoric materials is crucial. Clear techniques for dating were not well-developed until the 19th century.

Beginning

The term “prehistory” can refer to the vast span of time since the beginning of the Universe or the Earth, but more often it refers to the period since life appeared on Earth, or even more specifically to the time since human-like beings appeared.

End

The date marking the end of prehistory in a particular culture or region, that is, the date when relevant written historical records become a useful academic resource, varies enormously from region to region. For example, in Egypt it is generally accepted that prehistory ended around 3200 BC, whereas in New Guinea the end of the prehistoric era is set much more recently, at around 1900 AD. In Europe the relatively well-documented classical cultures of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome had neighboring cultures, including the Celts and to a lesser extent the Etruscans, with little or no writing, and historians must decide how much weight to give to the often highly prejudiced accounts of these “prehistoric” cultures in Greek and Roman literature.

Time periods

In dividing up human prehistory in Eurasia, historians typically use the three-age system, whereas scholars of pre-human time periods typically use the well-defined geologic record and its internationally defined stratum base within the geologic time scale. The three-age system is the periodization of human prehistory into three consecutive time periods, named for their respective predominant tool-making technologies: Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age.

Stone Age

The concept of a “Stone Age” is found useful in the archaeology of most of the world, though in the archaeology of the Americas it is called by different names and begins with a Lithic stage, or sometimes Paleo-Indian. The sub-divisions described below are used for Eurasia, and not consistently across the whole area.

Paleolithic

Paleolithic means “Old Stone Age” and begins with the first use of stone tools. The Paleolithic is the earliest period of the Stone Age.

The early part of the Paleolithic is called the Lower Paleolithic, which predates *Homo sapiens*, beginning with *Homo habilis* (and related species) and with the earliest stone tools, dated to around 2.5 million years ago. Evidence of control of fire by early humans during the Lower Paleolithic Era is uncertain and has at best limited scholarly support. The most widely accepted claim is that *H. erectus* or *H. ergaster* made fires between 790,000 and 690,000 BP (before the present period). The use of fire enabled early humans to cook food, provide warmth, and have a light source at night.

Early *Homo sapiens* originated some 200,000 years ago, ushering in the Middle Paleolithic. Anatomic changes indicating modern language capacity also arise during the Middle Paleolithic. During the Middle Paleolithic Era, there is the first definitive evidence of human use of fire. Sites in Zambia have charred bone and wood that have been dated to 61,000 B.P. The systematic burial of the dead, music, early art, and the use of increasingly sophisticated multi-part tools are highlights of the Middle Paleolithic.

Throughout the Paleolithic, humans generally lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherer societies tended to be very small and egalitarian, though hunter-gatherer societies with abundant resources or advanced food-storage techniques sometimes developed sedentary lifestyles with complex social structures such as chiefdoms and social stratification. Long-distance contacts may have been established, as in the case of Indigenous Australian “highways” known as song lines.

Mesolithic

The Mesolithic, or “Middle Stone Age” was a period in the development of human technology between the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods of the Stone Age.

The Mesolithic period began at the end of the Pleistocene epoch, some 10,000 BP, and ended with the introduction of agriculture, the date of which varied by geographic region. In some areas, such as the Near East, agriculture was already underway by the end of the Pleistocene, and there the Mesolithic is short and poorly defined.

Regions that experienced greater environmental effects as the last ice age ended have a much more evident Mesolithic era, lasting millennia. In Northern Europe, societies were able to live well on rich food supplies from the marshlands fostered by the warmer climate.

The Mesolithic is characterized in most areas by small composite flint tools. Fishing tackle, stone adzes and wooden objects, e.g. canoes and bows, have been found at some sites in Africa and cultures of the Levant.

Neolithic

An array of Neolithic artifacts, including bracelets, axe heads, chisels, and polishing tools. Neolithic stone artifacts are by definition polished and, except for specialty items, not chipped.

Neolithic means “New Stone Age.” Although there were several species of human beings during the Paleolithic, by the Neolithic only *Homo sapiens* remained. This was a period of primitive technological and social development. It began about 10,200 BC in some parts of the Middle East, and later in other parts of the world and ended between 4,500 and 2,000 BC. The Neolithic is a progression of behavioral and cultural characteristics and changes, including the use of wild and domestic crops and of domesticated animals.

Early Neolithic farming was limited to a narrow range of plants, both wild and domesticated, which included einkorn wheat, millet and spelt, and the keeping of dogs, sheep and goats. By about 6,900–6,400 BC, it included domesticated cattle and pigs, the establishment of permanently or seasonally inhabited settlements, and the use of pottery. The Neolithic period saw the development of early villages, agriculture, animal domestication, tools and the onset of the earliest recorded incidents of warfare. The Neolithic era commenced with the beginning of farming, which produced the “Neolithic Revolution.” It ended when metal tools became widespread (in the Copper Age or Bronze Age; or, in some geographical regions, in the Iron Age).

Settlements became more permanent with some having circular houses with single rooms made of mudbrick. Settlements might have a surrounding stone wall to keep domesticated animals in and protect the inhabitants from other tribes. Later settlements have rectangular mud-brick houses where the family lived together in single or multiple rooms. Burial findings suggest an ancestor cult where people preserved skulls of the dead. Most clothing appears to have been made of animal skins, as indicated by finds of large numbers of bone and antler pins which are ideal for fastening leather. Wool cloth and linen might have become available during the later Neolithic, as suggested by finds of perforated stones that may have served as spindle whorls or loom weights.