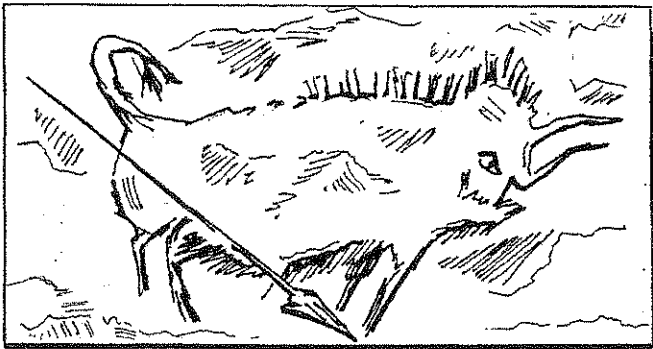


The Paleolithic Age

Humans first appeared on the scene of the ancient world in Africa 1,500,000 years ago during a period called the Paleolithic Age. The word *paleolithic* comes from the combining of two words: *paleo*, meaning “old,” and *lithic*, meaning “stone.”

Anthropologists, scientists who study human history and its origins, call these ancient humans *Homo sapiens* (meaning “wise humans”).

This Old Stone Age lasted a very long time—well over 1,000,000 years. The word “stone” is used to identify these early people because they used stones and rocks as tools, weapons, and cooking utensils. Sometimes we think of these early humans



Cave artwork depicting a prehistoric bison

as “cavemen” dressed in animal skins, carrying clubs, and grunting all the time. But this image of early humans as merely a bunch of “Fred Flintstones” may not be very accurate.

Much of what we know today about these early people comes from their artwork, which includes

small statues of women and cave paintings. Anthropologists have discovered over 200 caves where late Paleolithic artists painted pictures of animals, including bison, horses, bulls, and rhinoceroses.

These early painters used charcoal sticks to draw the picture outlines and produced colors from lumps of red, yellow, and brown clays. Feathers or ferns were used as brushes.

These ancient people were, however, primitive by modern standards. They spent their entire lives traveling in search of food. They did not understand how to plant seeds in the ground, farm, or keep livestock. Instead, they hunted animals and gathered wild plants, seeds, fruits, and nuts. For this reason, anthropologists refer to Paleolithic people as hunter-gatherers.

In a typical Paleolithic group, the men were the hunters; the women and children were the gatherers of wild plants. Most of these early people lived in organized social units, with some people considered more important than others.

For example, the men who hunted were very important in the Paleolithic social order. Also, in a time when people did not have laws, political leaders, or learned judges, the elderly members of their group were respected for the wisdom and experience they had gained through long life. Such individuals were very unique in the Paleolithic Age since most people died from disease, harsh living conditions, or accidents before they were 30 years old.

Paleolithic Hunting: The Most Dangerous Game

What will you have for supper this evening? You probably have no idea. Someone else will likely prepare it for you, and you will give little thought to where it came from or what it took to put such a meal together. For Paleolithic people, thinking about food and figuring out where it would come from was something which took much time, planning, and skill. For ancient hunters, bringing a meal to their family might even be dangerous.

These early hunters used several different techniques and a variety of weapons to help them in their efforts to track down dinner. The animals they hunted might include bison, horses, reindeer, elk, or ibex (a kind of goat). During an Ice Age, a period of hundreds of years when daily temperatures were colder than normal, these primitive hunters stalked thick-haired rhinos and now-extinct elephants called woolly mammoths.

Stone and wood provided the basic materials for Paleolithic weapons. Flint was the best stone available for making hunting points, such as spear heads and later arrowheads. Every Paleolithic hunter needed to know how to make and maintain his hunting arsenal.

Paleolithic spears served as the primary hunting tool. Another important device was a spear-thrower. This tool, made of wood or antler, included a sheath and a handle, with the blunt of the spear placed in the sheath. Working on the lever principle, the hunter could use such a tool to throw his spear with greater accuracy over longer distances, with increased force, allowing the spear to pierce the target animal's skin even deeper.

Other weapons included bone or antler harpoons, which featured not only spear points, but additional bone barbs that would hold a spear in the side of an animal without allowing the beast to wiggle the weapon out.

In time, the Paleolithic hunter added the bow and arrow to his choice of weapons. This instrument, as well as the spear-thrower, allowed the hunter to kill his prey at a safer distance.

In the field, Paleolithic hunters roamed in bands and used cooperation to outwit their quarry. Sometimes a hunting party might select an animal from a herd and simply chase it down until it was finally speared and killed.

Other methods of capturing and killing game included digging pits along frequently used animal trails and covering them with branches and leaves. An unsuspecting animal would then fall into the trap and be easily killed. Hunters also gathered along river banks, waited until a herd began crossing, then leaped out when the animals were in deep water, unable to escape.

Another method of hunting involved approaching a quarry from three sides, leaving open only one avenue of escape which led to a canyon trap or a cliff where a blindly running bison or mammoth would plunge to a violent and bloody death.

