

TOOLS OF THE STONE AGE

Tool use did not begin with humans, but can be found among even the earliest hominin species. The primary material used for creating tools was stone, which is why the earliest period in human history is known as the **Paleolithic**, meaning "Old Stone Age." While Australopithecines used simple choppers, *Homo Erectus* developed more advanced hand axes used for food preparation and protection, And they were also the first to harness the power of fire. However, humans developed even more sophisticated tools that surpassed those of other hominins, such as knives made of **obsidian**, a hard glass-like stone that could be made very sharp, spear-throwers that could hurl spears 100 mph, and eventually, about 10,000 years ago, the bow and arrow, making them superior hunters. One of the most important tool inventions was the **eyed needle**. Made from animal bone, it made it possible to sew together different fabrics to create complex layered clothing, including boots, hats, and gloves, that kept people more thoroughly protected from the harsh cold climate. While this invention may seem obvious to us in hindsight, it was a revolutionary development that enabled the survival of early humans and is still with us today.

HUNGRY HUNGRY HUMANS

During the Paleolithic era, people lived by **hunting and gathering**, also known as **foraging**. They scavenged meat killed by other predators and hunted wild animals. In fact, humans were such successful hunters of big game mammals, or megafauna, that most of them went extinct. Mammoths and woolly rhinoceroses disappeared from Europe, giant kangaroos from Australia, and mammoths, mastodons, and horses from the Americas. To be fair, climate may have also played an important role. However, the bulk of the hunter-gatherer diet probably consisted of wild-growing edible plants such as berries and nuts. Because this lifestyle meant that people had to frequently travel in search of food sources, humans could not settle in the same place for extended periods of time. This type of lifestyle is called **nomadic**, meaning moving from place to place. They did not wander aimlessly, but rather had a highly sophisticated understanding of the environment, following seasonal animal migrations and life cycles of plants. It was not until the **Neolithic Revolution**, only about 12,000 years ago, that humans first began to rely on farming and herding as an alternative way of producing food. Today, there are only a few scattered hunter-gatherer communities left in the world. Much of what we know today about the forager lifestyle comes from studying these few groups.

WE'RE WITH THE BAND

Although it is hard to know for certain how Paleolithic people lived, there is much we can learn from both archaeological discoveries and anthropological studies of the few hunter-gatherer societies that still exist today. Humans typically lived in small **bands**, or groups, of about 30 or 40 people. Because their communities were so small, and because they were always on the move, individuals did not really possess private wealth. The members of the band depended on each other and shared resources. Since there were no real opportunities for different social levels to develop, everyone was pretty much equal. Relative **social equality** may have extended even further to relative **gender equality**. Since both men and women played important roles in providing food for the band, there was no need for one gender to be seen as superior. Also, while we might assume that these nomads lived a harsh life, some scholars believe that, because of their lifestyle and diet, Paleolithic hunter-gatherers were healthier and spent less time working than the farmers who came later. However, other scholars point to evidence of frequent violence between bands in the form of raids, in which men were killed and goods and women taken, to show that life was far from perfect.

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

From the study of burials, archaeologists conclude that early humans, and even Neanderthals, had some kind of spiritual or religious beliefs. Bodies buried with care, surrounded by flowers and ornaments, suggests at least that they wanted to honor the memory of their deceased loved ones, and perhaps that they believed they were preparing them for a new life beyond the grave. While we know virtually nothing about their religious beliefs, many scholars think that some early humans practiced some kind of animistic faith. **Animism** refers to religious beliefs that focus on the spirits or forces that exist in all things. The song "Colors of the Wind" from the Disney movie *Pocahontas* makes reference to animistic beliefs in the line "I know every rock and tree and creature has a life, has a spirit, has a name." Based on what is known about animistic practice in general, scholars assume that communities would have had a religious leader, called a **shaman**, who would conduct rituals and communicate with the spirit world. In another connection to Disney, the character of Rafiki in *The Lion King* was intended to represent an animistic shaman. As these references show, animistic traditions have been practiced throughout history in various parts of the world, and exist today.

EXPRESS YOURSELF

Humans are an incredibly creative species, and early Paleolithic people's displayed this creativity in many ways. Two significant examples are Venus figurines and cave paintings. **Venus figurines** refer to small sculptures of women depicted with exaggerated sexual features. Most scholars believe the figures reflect a deep interest in **fertility**, the ability to produce offspring, and may have been used as part of a fertility ritual believed to help people to conceive children. Some of the best-known surviving cave paintings are Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain. They often depict animals, especially large game such as mammoth, bison, and reindeer. However, the paintings are usually found deep in the dark parts of caves away from where people would have lived, so they do not seem to be only for decoration. Like the Venus figurines, scholars theorize that the cave art may have also been used for ritual purposes. Shamans may have created the images as a form of magic to ensure a successful hunt of the animals they painted. Some scholars even theorize that they may have painted them after taking hallucinogenic drugs as a way of communicating with the spirit realm. Recent studies analyzing handprint art in the caves suggest the artists were primarily women.