

Paleolithic Society

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Paleolithic Era

- The Paleolithic Era is known as the “old stone age”, and comprises 99% of human existence.
- It dates from the first creation of stone tools by Homo Habilis around 2.5 million years ago to about 10,000 BCE with the beginning of the Neolithic Era. The Neolithic Era is the “new stone age” which is characterized by the development of agriculture.

Social Classes?

- In these small bands of hominid hunter-gatherers, it is unlikely that there were significant *social distinctions*. It is conceivable that one or two individuals would serve as leader or patriarch of the group, but would not be revered as a separate class of leader.
- These hunter-gatherer societies also typically had a great deal of *gender equality*, as women’s contributions were considered equally important to those of men.
- Almost by definition, hunter-gatherer societies were *nomadic*, and thus had no fixed or permanent residence. Groups of hominids were forced to be on the move constantly in search of food.
- These groupings of hunter-gatherers remained very small – between 30-50 members, and were often made up of several families. If the group became too large, there was significant threat of starvation. In very extreme cases, groups would resort to *infanticide* in order to keep their overall numbers small.



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- As time progressed through the Paleolithic Era, the social construct of early hominids changed little. Early hominids like Homo Habilis undoubtedly roamed in small groups that were only slightly more sophisticated than ape or chimpanzee groups of the time.
- This social organization of small bands of hominids probably changed little with Homo Erectus, Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens -- although the groups may have enlarged somewhat as they possessed more sophisticated language skills.
- Homo Erectus was the first to coordinate planned hunts, and thus develop a hunter-gatherer society. (Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens followed this tradition as well.)
- In a hunter-gatherer society, generally the men hunted while the women gathered eatable plants and berries. Because hunts were dangerous and not always successful in attaining food, the contributions of women to the survival of the group were considered essential.
- Homo Erectus also was the first to be able to make and control fire. As such, he successfully migrated out of Africa, but stayed in the relatively warm climates of the southern Eurasian continent.
- Neanderthal moved northward to colder climates and looked for caves for shelter from the elements. The caves were generally not permanent residences, however, as bands of hominids were almost always on the move.

