

Palaeolithic Archaeology Teaching Resource Box

Palaeolithic Chronology: Advanced

When were Palaeolithic hominins here?

The Palaeolithic occupation of Britain was not permanent. During the Lower Palaeolithic occupation was probably limited to the warm periods (the interglacials) and the earliest parts of the cold periods (the glacials), with abandonment (and a return to the southern parts of continental Europe) or local extinction during the periods of extreme cold (the full glacials).

During the Middle Palaeolithic there is evidence for an early Neanderthal occupation between c. 250,000 years ago and c. 180,000 years ago. However, there is no evidence for a Neanderthal occupation between c. 180,000 years ago and c. 70,000 years ago: it is important to remember that this was not only because of a very harsh and cold climate, as there were warm-climate loving hippopotami in Britain at around 125,000 years ago. The Neanderthal absence may be because they preferred the more open grasslands of central continental Europe to the woodlands of Britain at this time.

During the Upper Palaeolithic Britain was initially occupied by modern humans between c. 40,000 years and 20,000 years ago, but they were then driven into southern Europe by the very harsh climates of the *Last Glacial Maximum*. It was only with the improving climates after c. 13,000 years ago that modern humans returned to Britain.

Throughout the Palaeolithic the movement of hominins between Britain and continental Europe was not just controlled by the climate, but also by sea-levels: during the cold periods there was dry land between south-eastern England and north-western Europe. However the periods of lowest sea-level were also the periods of the harshest and coldest climates in Britain, so hominins may not have been encouraged to move into Britain even though there was the potential to do so.

Sub-divisions of the Palaeolithic:

The archaeology and behaviour of the Lower Palaeolithic is broadly stable throughout the period, and there is little evidence of change over time. During the Middle Palaeolithic there is something of a contrast between the earlier and later archaeology, mainly in terms of the stone tools that were made, although the overall behaviour of the Neanderthals does not seem to change too much.

However, the Upper Palaeolithic is characterised by a series of different, distinctive *cultures*: across Europe the most widespread of these are the Aurignacian (the earliest Upper Palaeolithic culture), followed by the Gravettian, Solutrean, and Magdalenian. In Britain the main cultures are the Aurignacian, the Gravettian, and a local variant of the Magdalenian known as the Creswellian.

How did the Lower Palaeolithic become the Middle Palaeolithic (and other problems)?

The transitions (the changes) between the sub-periods of the Palaeolithic were not instant events: in other words, a hominin did not go to sleep in the Lower Palaeolithic and wake up the next day in the Middle Palaeolithic. Instead the changes (including the appearance of new stone tool types and new hominin species) occurred gradually, both over time (they probably took several thousand years) and in space (the changes occurred at different times in different places). It is certainly likely that technological changes such as the appearances of new types of stone tool and new tool-making techniques took time to be widely accepted. Even one of the most dramatic changes of the Palaeolithic (the replacement of the Neanderthals with modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) at the start of the Upper Palaeolithic) took several thousand years to be completed, between c. 40,000–30,000 years ago.

Terminology:

Cultures: the nature of the archaeological record means that distinctive changes in stone tool types and manufacturing techniques are often used to define past cultures, based on the assumption that changes in behaviour (which is often invisible in the archaeological record) are reflected in the stone tools that were made.

Last Glacial Maximum: a period of extreme cold during the last glacial period, occurring around 18,000 years ago.

Quiz Questions:

1. Approximately what percentage of the Middle Palaeolithic saw Britain occupied by the Neanderthals?
2. What factors might persuade hominins to migrate to new areas?
3. How might the Neanderthals have been replaced by modern humans at the start of the Upper Palaeolithic?

Further Resources:

http://www.nhm.ac.uk/hosted_sites/ahob/ [The Ancient Human Occupation of Britain Project website, including a chart documenting the Palaeolithic chronology of Britain]

<http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/anglia-man/> [Details of new finds relating to the very earliest hominin occupation of Britain, and a discussion of the Neanderthal site at Lynford]

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Years Ago	Archaeological Period	Periods of Absence
250,000	Early Middle Palaeolithic	
240,000		
230,000		
220,000		
210,000		
200,000		
190,000		
180,000		
170,000		
160,000		
150,000		
140,000		
130,000		
120,000		
110,000		
100,000		
90,000		
80,000		
70,000	Later Middle Palaeolithic	
60,000		
50,000		
40,000		
35,000	Aurignacian & Gravettian (Early Upper Palaeolithic)	
30,000		
25,000		
20,000		
15,000	Creswellian (Late Upper Palaeolithic)	
10,000		

Hominin presence and absence during the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic of Britain