

Palaeolithic Archaeology Teaching Resource Box

Palaeolithic Chronology: Basic

When was the Palaeolithic?

The British *Palaeolithic* spans the period between c. 700,000 years ago and 10,000 years ago. In comparison to the later (and much shorter) periods of British Archaeology such as the Neolithic (the first appearance of agriculture), the Roman period, and the Medieval age, the Palaeolithic covers a massive 98.5% of the time that hominins (modern and pre-modern humans) have been here. If we assume a new generation of Palaeolithic humans every 20 years, this period of 690,000 years could potentially have included 34,500 generations.

The Palaeolithic period is divided into three sub-periods:

- The Lower Palaeolithic (c. 700,000–250,000 years ago): the start of this period sees the first hominins (pre-modern forms of humans in this case) in Britain. The start of the British Palaeolithic has only recently been pushed back as far as 700,000 years ago, on the basis of new finds from Pakefield on the Suffolk coast. Other key sites include Boxgrove (on the Sussex coast), Swanscombe (south of the River Thames in London), and Beeches Pit in Suffolk.
- The Middle Palaeolithic (c. 250,000–40,000 years ago): this period is most commonly associated with the Neanderthals. The Neanderthal presence in Britain is quite limited, although there are still some important sites, including Lynford in Norfolk and Pontnewydd Cave in Clwyd, North Wales.
- The Upper Palaeolithic (c. 40,000–10,000 years ago): this period saw the first appearance of modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) in Britain. There are a number of important cave sites in Britain from this period, including Gough's Cave in Somerset, Kent's Cavern in Devon, Creswell Crags in Nottinghamshire, and Paviland Cave in the Gower Peninsula, Wales.

Change or no change?

In comparison to the Upper Palaeolithic, the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic periods seem to be relatively unchanging over the long periods of time that they cover: handaxes are made throughout the Lower Palaeolithic for example.

In the Upper Palaeolithic however there is more evidence of change: new types of stone tools appear every few thousand years. These more frequent changes in the types and *styles* of tools seem to be a characteristic of modern humans (think how often the styles of cars and mobile phones change today).

Terminology:

Palaeolithic: the Old Stone Age, characterised by the making and use of stone tools and hunter-gatherer lifestyles. In Britain this period lasts between roughly 700,000 and 10,000 years ago, although in other parts of the world (e.g. Africa, Asia and southern Europe) the Palaeolithic stretches further back in time.

Styles: when used in reference to stone tools, style refers to those aspects of the tools that are not directly related to their uses (also known as their function), such as minor variations in size and shape.

Quiz Questions:

1. How old are the Palaeolithic sites at Boxgrove and Paviland Cave?
2. What percentages of the entire Palaeolithic are made up by the Lower Palaeolithic, the Middle Palaeolithic and the Upper Palaeolithic?
3. What can archaeologists conclude about the handaxes that were made throughout the

Lower Palaeolithic period?

Further Resources:

<http://matt.pope.users.btopenworld.com/boxgrove/boxhome.htm> [The Boxgrove Project website]

<http://www.creswell-crags.org.uk/> [The website of the Creswell Crags site]

<http://www.walesonline.com/info/hist/paviland.shtml> [Background information about the site of Paviland Cave]

Tables (all copyrights: Dr Rob Hosfield, University of Reading. Reproduced with permission):

Years Ago	Archaeological Period	Key Sites	
700,000	Lower Palaeolithic	Pakefield	
680,000			
660,000			
640,000			
620,000			
600,000			
580,000			
560,000			
540,000			
520,000			
500,000			Boxgrove
480,000			
460,000			
440,000			
420,000			
400,000		Swanscombe, Beeches Pit	
380,000			
360,000			
340,000			
320,000			
300,000			
280,000			
260,000			
240,000	Middle Palaeolithic	Pontnewydd Cave	
220,000			
200,000			
180,000			
160,000			
140,000			
120,000			
100,000			
80,000			Lynford
60,000			
40,000			
10,000	Upper Palaeolithic	Kent's Cavern, Paviland Cave Gough's Cave, Creswell Crags	

A basic British Palaeolithic chronology