

# Prehistoric Times: A Stone Age Family

By USHistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.06.17

Word Count **874**

Level **970L**



An illustration of a Neanderthal family. From the public domain.

There was no written language 50,000 years ago, so we do not have much information on how a modern Stone Age family lived. Like the Flintstones, did they have leopard-skin suits, go barefoot and use a boulder for a bowling ball?

Archaeologists and anthropologists, who study this time period, do have objects and bones that help them start to draw some conclusions. Scientists have used carbon dating to figure out the age of bones they find. Plants get carbon from the atmosphere, which helps them to grow. Humans eat the plants and get the carbon in their bodies and bones. When people die, their bodies stop taking in carbon and the carbon slowly leaves their bones over time. By measuring how much carbon is left in bones, scientists can tell how old they are. Now scientists measure potassium in the ash from volcanoes that was found alongside the bones. Because potassium is radioactive and decays over time, its age can be figured out as well. This tells scientists that the bones and objects found there can be millions of years old. Cave paintings and information about climate patterns also allow scientists to draw a picture of what life may have been like for Stone Age families.

## A big finding for the Leakeys

Our journey begins with *Homo habilis*. Mary and Louis Leakey were English archaeologists living in Africa who found Nutcracker Man in 1959. Digging in Africa's Olduvai Gorge, in present-day Tanzania, Mary Leakey found a skeleton with a giant skull that had a wide face, big cheekbones and large muscles around the face. It was almost 2 million years old. The skull also had enormous teeth that were four times the size of those of present humans. Nutcracker also had hands that began to look like ours. Its brain was nearly 50 percent larger than the brain of a later discovery named Lucy that was found in 1974. Lucy was over 3 million years old.

Nutcracker was a hairy fellow, walked hunched over and had a large brain, but he was not very smart. Because he had teeth, hands and brain power, he became a new species, *Homo habilis*. In 1970, scientists made him an early member of the human family.

### **Big brain, limited intelligence**

Next on our journey are the Neanderthals, who lived from 30,000 to 100,000 years ago in Europe. *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* had a brain larger than many human brains today. While his brain was large, his intelligence was limited.

However, Neanderthals did things that we think only modern humans do. For instance, they cared for their sick. One skeleton is that of a man who was 40 years old whose bones showed that he had severe arthritis and had lost most of his teeth. It would have been almost impossible for him to live 40 years unless someone took care of him.

Neanderthals are the first group we know who buried their dead. They were buried with tools, weapons and food. Maybe they believed that there was life after death. They may have thought there were gods, too.

They lived in caves, wore clothing made of animal skins, used fire and cooked their food. They may have even played music. An 80,000-year-old bone was found that could be made to play the notes "do, re, mi, fa."

Neanderthals had strong bodies, powerful jaws, small chins, low foreheads and heavy bones above the eyes. Some scientists believe they ate other humans.

Neanderthal disappeared without a trace around 30,000 to 35,000 years ago.

### **Responsible for cave paintings**

Now we meet the Cro-Magnons, who are *Homo sapiens*, which means man with wisdom. We are *Homo sapiens*. Cro-Magnons lived mostly in southern France and Northern Spain. They drew elaborate cave paintings in places such as Lascaux and Vallon-Pont-d'Arc in France. Paintings of bulls tossing their heads, wounded bison charging a hunter, herds of reindeer escaping, and schools of swimming trout and salmon were just some of the pictures that we can still see today.

From these paintings, we know that hunting was important. One group of people, the Magdalenians, lived in France and Western Europe some 15,000 years ago. Hunters dressed in animal skins and antlers to sneak up on the animals. Groups of hunters worked together to kill whole herds. They would chase them over cliffs or even herd them into natural corrals.

Cro-Magnon people looked somewhat like you and me. They lived on earth for thousands of years, but disappeared about 10,500 years ago.

## **A better way of living**

People living in Africa and advances in agriculture sparked the beginning of the Middle Stone Age. They began raising crops for food, which was the beginning of a new way of life for people.

The Neolithic Age or New Stone Age was revolutionary. About 10,000 years ago, people learned to make better tools and weapons, built villages, and raised animals for food and work. They were beginning to live like "modern" people.

Jarmo in present-day Iraq was one of the oldest little towns. At 8,750 years old, this town was home to 200 inhabitants. Catal Huyuk is in present-day Turkey. More than 3,000 people lived there 8,000 years ago.

Slowly but surely they changed into modern human beings.

## Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraphs from the section "Big brain, limited intelligence."

*Neanderthals are the first group we know who buried their dead. They were buried with tools, weapons and food. Maybe they believed that there was life after death. They may have thought there were gods, too.*

*They lived in caves, wore clothing made of animal skins, used fire and cooked their food. They may have even played music. An 80,000-year-old bone was found that could be made to play the notes "do, re, mi, fa."*

Which conclusion is BEST supported by the paragraphs?

- (A) Researchers are primarily interested in Neanderthals because they buried their dead.
- (B) Neanderthals spent a great deal of time together either eating or finding food.
- (C) Neanderthals enjoyed playing music as they sat around the fire cooking their food.
- (D) Researchers know little about what Neanderthals believed in and what they enjoyed doing.

- 2 Which of these sections of the article highlights the idea that information about the Stone Age has come from both science and cultural artifacts?

- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-2]
- (B) "A big finding for the Leakeys"
- (C) "Responsible for cave paintings"
- (D) "A better way of living"

- 3 Read the sentence from the section "A better way of living."

*People living in Africa and advances in agriculture sparked the beginning of the Middle Stone Age.*

Which of the following words, if it replaced "advances" in the sentence above, would CHANGE the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) developments
- (B) challenges
- (C) progress
- (D) improvements

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "A better way of living."

*The Neolithic Age or New Stone Age was revolutionary. About 10,000 years ago, people learned to make better tools and weapons, built villages, and raised animals for food and work. They were beginning to live like "modern" people.*

In the first sentence of the paragraph, the word "revolutionary" conveys a sense of:

- (A) rebellion
- (B) importance
- (C) adventure
- (D) independence