Definition: **Stone Age** from *Philip’s Encyclopedia*

Period of human evolution defined by the use of stone tools. The Stone Age dates from the earliest identifiable broken-pebble tools made by human ancestors c.2.5 million years ago. The period is generally considered to have ended when metal tools first became widespread during the Bronze Age. The Stone Age usually subdivides into the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic.

Summary Article: **Stone Age**
from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

The developmental stage of humans in prehistory before the use of metals, when tools and weapons were made chiefly of stone, especially flint. The Stone Age is subdivided into the Old or **Palaeolithic**, when flint implements were simply chipped into shape; the Middle or **Mesolithic**; and the New or **Neolithic**, when implements were ground and polished. Palaeolithic people were hunters and gatherers; by the Neolithic period people were taking the first steps in agriculture, the domestication of animals, weaving, and pottery.

Recent research has been largely directed towards the relationship of the Palaeolithic period to geochronology (the measurement of geological time) and to the clarification of an absolute chronology based upon geology. The economic aspects of the Neolithic cultures have attracted as much attention as the typology of the implements and pottery, and the study of chambered tombs.

**Old Stone Age or Palaeolithic** Palaeolithic people were hunters and their remains have been found in the caves in which they lived, and in the sedimentary deposits of river gravel. The early Palaeolithic is divided into the cultures of **Chelles** and **St-Acheul**. Its principal deposits belong to the Riss-Würm interglacial period, when the ‘warm’ fauna included *Elephas antiquus*, a rhinoceros, and *Hippopotamus major*.

The Middle Palaeolithic is characterized by Mousterian flake flint technology, and in geological time existed during the period of the Würm glacial advance (fourth stage of glaciation in the Alps). Neanderthal people of this era lived with a ‘cold’ fauna which included the mammoth, horse, ox, and reindeer.

The Upper Palaeolithic includes the Aurignacian, **Solutrean**, and Magdalenian cultures, and in geological time covered the retreat of the Würm glaciation and a dry, rather cold, subsequent period. The fauna changed when, with the onset of colder conditions, the steppe became tundra. The walls of some caves inhabited by Palaeolithic peoples were decorated with sketches and paintings of possibly magic and religious significance. Prehistoric art is often found in the Magdalenian culture of southwestern France and northwestern Spain, and its association with a hunting economy is unmistakable. An impressive series of paintings are in a cave at Lascaux, France.

**Middle Stone Age or Mesolithic** There are several distinct cultures in the Mesolithic period, all of them based on a food-gathering economy. The climate had greatly improved, and hunting and fishing are indicated by the presence of **microliths** (small flints fashioned and mounted to form a composite tool such as a saw) and fish-spear barbs. In Britain there seem to have been four cultures, one having affinities with the Baltic.
New Stone Age or Neolithic

The Neolithic period, with its colonization of mainland Europe and Atlantic coast routes, saw an advance in development based upon agriculture and stockrearing. There was wide trade in flint and stone axes, particularly from flint mines such as Grimes Graves in Norfolk, England; and the period was also marked by the spread of megaliths as tombs in long barrow (burial mounds), and the construction of causewayed camps: earthwork camps with causeways or interrupted ditches. One distinctive kind of domestic pottery found in the Windmill Hill culture near Avebury, Wiltshire, England, and also in Switzerland and France, derives in the first instance from leather prototypes. Plants, both cereal and textile, were cultivated, and sheep, oxen, goats, and pigs were domesticated.

The stone age structure found in 1997 in southwestern England at Stanton Drew near Bristol, dating from c. 3000 BC, is the largest structure of this kind discovered to date. It had a diameter of 95 m and was at least 10 m high, possibly with a thatched roof supported by more than 400 massive wooden columns. It was at least six times the size of Stonehenge.

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