

Mesolithic

c. 8500 – c. 4000 BC

The Mesolithic (or ‘Middle Stone Age’) saw the end of the cycle of Ice Ages that repeatedly covered the area now known as Scotland. The ice drove back human, animal and plant life, and also cleared away evidence of previous occupation. The last of these cold periods occurred around 10,700 BC. It is believed that Scotland has been continuously occupied since then. The size and shape of the land was very different to how it is today, and Britain was connected to Europe by a now submerged area known as Doggerland. By around 6000 BC sea-level changes caused Britain to become separated from the continent. Scotland was almost split in two at the Central Belt.



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People at this time were hunter-gatherers: foraging and catching food, and gathering materials that were of use to them. The limited evidence we have suggests that they built relatively small, light-weight structures that leave little trace, and made use of natural caves.

Although there were few year round settlements and no planting of crops, there is evidence that people were managing the landscape and resources. It seems that by burning off areas of forest they could create clearings to attract deer to hunt and encourage new growth of hazel to collect the nuts. There is also good evidence for moving from beach to beach collecting and catching fish and shellfish. Much of our evidence for the Mesolithic consists of rubbish pits (known as ‘middens’) full of shells.

The presence of materials like flint and bloodstone on sites far from where they are found naturally shows these were moving long distances. It is not clear whether this indicates individual people traveling a long way or objects being traded multiple times between groups.

Stone tools included flint and chert microliths, used for cutting and piercing. There are also ‘coarse stone tools’ such as large pebbles used as hammerstones and grinders. Tools like harpoons and mattocks have been found made out of antler or bone. We can assume that leather, textiles and wood were also made and used, although there have been no examples that have survived in Scotland.

Archaeological remains from the Mesolithic period are few and fragile. They have been more vulnerable to environmental influences like glaciation, changing sea levels and peat formation.

Things to think about:

How long did the Mesolithic last?

What sort of foods were they eating?

How could they have made their food sources secure from predators?

Why do we find so few artefacts or remains from this period?



Mesolithic antler harpoon found at Tarradale, Muir of Ord.

See also:

Box 1 object sheets: Microlith

CT Flint Knapping

CT Basketry

CT Green Woodworking

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