What Was Life Like For Early Man?
Comparing Life During the Paleolithic and Neolithic Eras

Early man lived a life very different from the life man lives today. In some ways his life was similar. The climate affected his everyday life. He interacted with the land around him. He depended on the environment for food and shelter. Today, as in the past, each of us is influenced by the environment in which we live. However, there are also major differences between early man and modern man. At first, early life could be described as plant or animal life but by 3 million years ago, human-like beings began to develop. The strongest humans survived and developed into the modern humans we recognize today. The story of early man explains how that change took place over time.

When we talk about early man, we are speaking of early human beings who lived between 3.5 million years ago and 5000 years ago. Scientists break up that time period into two broad times or periods called the Paleolithic Era (the Old Stone Age) and the Neolithic Era (the New Stone Age). Although life and the environment changed slowly throughout these periods, there are some very important differences between the Old and New Stone Ages.

Throughout the Old Stone Age, early man was a hunter – gatherer. He moved from one area to another with his own family and 30 – 50 other families searching for food. As his food supply moved, so did he. Although he didn’t have a permanent home, he found protection in caves or built simple huts or tents made of animal skins. Furs, along with the ability to start and control fire helped early man survive. Because temperatures were much colder than today, the hunter - gatherer used furs to keep himself and his family warm. Toward the end of the Old Stone Age, a hunter might even have decorated his temporary home with cave paintings. Caves were almost always built on the south side of a mountain or hill to protect humans from the wind.

Early man was tall and grew shorter as time passed. He had a large head and large jaws filled with sharp teeth. Earliest man didn’t stand totally upright but that changed throughout the Old Stone Age. His diet was healthy and on average, Paleolithic man lived a longer life than later humans. The hunter -gather and his family depended on the foods that could be found nearby to eat. Nuts, berries, animals and fish were the foods they ate. Meat from these animals was an important source of food. Nuts and berries could be picked and gathered without any tools but hunting animals and catching fish required tools. At first, the hunter - gatherer used heavy clubs to catch his prey. Later, he learned to attach stones to the clubs and make weapons that were more deadly. As time went on, he was able to carve a triangular blade called a microlith. This was very sharp and even better for the hunter. He was able to create knives from stone. Another weapon he used was a bow and arrow. The microliths were attached to arrows as well. As weapons improved, so did the food supply. As a result, early man became stronger and healthier.
Other inventions increased the food supply of the hunter-gatherer. A fishhook could be made from bone, or later in the Paleolithic era, from metal. Nets could be made from parts of animals or plants. Logs were hollowed out and used for boats, allowing the hunter-gatherer to move along water as well as land. Eventually, the hunter-gatherer didn’t have to constantly move as frequently to get his food supply. He had a variety of foods to feed his family.

The hunter-gatherer lived in a group or clan. The leader was usually the eldest male. Most of the decisions were made by the men and the hunting was done by them too. Although early man didn’t have a written language, he communicated with his clan members by sounds. The women took care of the children and helped by gathering nuts and berries. They would make clothes from animal skins and furs and fishing nets. The land was shared by everyone in the clan and no one owned their own house or property. Early man cared about his clan members. Many ancient burial pits have been uncovered and signs of burial rituals have been found. The burial pits contain examples of everyday items like clothing, food, weapons and tools as well as beautifully crafted jewelry. Cave paintings left behind clues to daily customs and types of plants and animals.

Throughout this time, the hunter-gatherers were very dependent on their environment. Their ability to change the environment was very limited. An Ice Age had covered most of the world from 1.5 million years to about 25,000 years ago. Life was very difficult and many animals and humans died. However, around 10,000 years ago the climate warmed and the environment began to change. Glaciers and thick forests that had covered the northern portions of the earth began to disappear. New forms of plant and animal life appeared and life changed dramatically. These changes led the way for the New Stone Age or Neolithic Era.

Several important developments paved the way for the Neolithic Era. Tools and weapons made of sharpened stone or simple metals protected early man and increased his food supply. As the climate changed and surpluses of food were produced, man no longer needed to move constantly to feed his family. The end of nomadic living and an increase in farming were major changes experienced during the Neolithic Era.

Neolithic man learned to save and replant seeds enabling him to grow food in a variety of places. Plants such as wheat, rice and millet were the earliest seed plants to be grown. Animals were also bred for specific uses. Some animals were used for their milk, some for meat, and some for labor. They were kept close to the homes of Neolithic men. No longer were animals mainly hunted and killed for food and warmth.

Since Neolithic man no longer needed to be on the move constantly, his home changed too. Homes were built of stone, wood, and air dried brick. Many were several stories high. They were decorated with wall paintings and animal furs. Homes were built in clusters and developed into villages and towns. Neolithic homes were also filled with decorated sun dried pottery. While some pottery was used for art, much of it was also used to hold food. Pieces of pottery, like the walls of homes, were decorated with scenes of animals and geometric designs.
The farming villages of the Neolithic Era created a need for government. Decisions about property ownership, water rights, and proper behavior had to be made. Disputes had to be settled. This led to the development of religious leaders who kept society in order, militaries that provided protection and states that were controlled by kings. Although men ruled, women were worshipped and treated with great respect.

People in the Neolithic Age were not necessarily healthier. Although they ate well, people lived closer together and were exposed to more disease. They worked harder and frequently fought with neighboring groups over land and property ownership. These dangers affected the lifespan of Neolithic man. Living together improved lives in many ways, but it also increased the need for stronger government.

The Neolithic Era was filled with change. No longer was man forced to move because he was unable to survive the challenges of his environment. During this era, man developed many survival skills that helped him shape a new society. Today, we consider this change a turning point in the history of man.

The following resources were used to develop this supplementary reading:

- *Global Studies Civilizations of the Past and Present.* New York: Amsco,
- “Paleolithic Humans vs. Neolithic Humans” http://www.diffen.com/difference/Neolithic_vs_Paleolithic