



The Stone Age
History – Junior Cert
Quick Notes

The Stone Age

Overview:

- Stone Age covers many thousands of years so is divided for convenience into three periods – **Palaeolithic** (Early Stone Age), **Mesolithic** (Middle Stone Age) and **Neolithic** (New Stone Age)
- Ireland was covered in ice during the Palaeolithic, and thus no evidence for human habitation has been found for that period so we only study the two later periods – the Mesolithic and the Neolithic

Mesolithic:

- Roughly from 8,000 BC to 3,500 BC
- First people arrive in Ireland at this time, possibly rowing across from Britain in **dugout canoes**
- Very few sites from this time have been discovered and there are **no written records** – archaeology thus very important in telling us about the period
- **All tools and weapons are made from stone** as no metals have been discovered yet
- Mesolithic people got food by **hunting and gathering** – hunting animals like deer, boar, fox and hare, fishing, and gathering wild apples, nuts and berries
- When food supplies in an area ran low, people would move elsewhere – they had a **nomadic** lifestyle
- Food was cooked over a fire on a **spit**
- Tools/weapons, mainly of **flint**, included axes, spearheads, scrapers, knives etc
- People probably clothed themselves in **animal skins** and lived in basket-like houses made from saplings driven into the ground (**post holes**) in a circle and pulled in and tied at the top with the walls and roof made from skins, reeds or sods of turf
- Our main source of evidence for this comes from the archaeological dig at **Mount Sandel** in Co. Derry

Neolithic:

- Roughly from 3,500 BC to 2,000 BC
- New settlers seem to have arrived in Ireland bringing several new skills with them – **farming, bread-making, tomb-building, pottery-making** and **sewing/needlework**

- Farming – trees were cut down to make land available for planting of crops, land was ploughed with **mattocks**, crops like **wheat** and **barley** were grown, animals like **sheep** and **cattle** were reared, hunting and gathering does continue though, but as an extra supply of food rather than the only one
- Bread-making – corn was ground into flour between two stones and the flour was then made into bread
- Pottery-making – made from local clay, used to store food, drink or sometimes ashes of cremated dead
- Sewing/needlework – bone and **microlithic** (very small stone) needles have been found suggesting clothes were woven and sewn to fit rather than simple animal skins slung around the shoulders
- Tomb-building – three main types of **megalithic** (huge stone) tomb: (1) **Court Cairns**, (2) **Passage Graves** and

(3) **Portal Dolmens**

- Court Cairns – consist of open space (**court**) at the front, which may have been used for religious gatherings, with a chamber originally covered by a mound of stones (**cairn**) behind, ashes of the dead placed inside along with **grave goods** for use in the next world, 300 still exist
- Passage Graves – large mounds of earth or stone up to 85 metres across with a passage leading inside the mound to a burial chamber where cremated remains and grave goods were placed, their size and positioning on hilltops suggest **powerful people were buried here**, 30 alone found in Co. Meath including **Newgrange**, whose **corbelled roof** is so well built that no rain has leaked in in over 5,000 years and the temperature is the same

inside all year around, and shows us the importance of the sun to Neolithic people with the **roofbox** letting the sun hit the burial chamber at the end of the passage exactly every mid-winter's day on December 21st

- Portal Dolmens – called **portal** because they look like doorways, consisted of two large standing stone with massive **capstone** resting across the top, walls would have been filled in with smaller stones but these have long since been taken away, remains of dead and grave goods were placed inside, **Poulnabrone** Dolmen in Co. Clare had 22 bodies buried in it along with stone axes, bone necklaces etc

- The huge stones for these tombs may have been floated on rafts along rivers or rolled for miles on logs – hundreds of people from all over the countryside (no towns in Ireland yet) would have been needed, great skill in engineering, architecture and a knowledge of the stars and sun would all have been required
- This tells us the Neolithic people were skilled and not savages – they were well organised, religious, keen astronomers and skilled builders and craftsmen
- Neolithic houses would have varied depending on the materials available to build with – wood or stone or both – but were sturdier than Mesolithic houses because they were **permanent**, stout poles would be driven into the ground (**post holes**) with the walls (**wattle**) weaving around them like a basket, this would be glued in place by a mud paste (**daub**) and roofed with straw or rushes

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