



Institut Català de Paleoecologia
Humana i Evolució Social

Dossier The Neolithic

Student
From 1st ESO



Evolucionaria
un projecte de l'IPHES





The Neolithic is the period of prehistory in which we began **to cultivate vegetables and to domesticate animals**, which led to a huge social change in the communities of that time. The name "*Neolithic*" comes from a new type of tools (**neo = new, lithic = stone**), in which **axes and adzes** are made with a new technique that consists of shaping rocks by scraping them. These new tools are closely related to the activity of woodworking, from cutting a tree to shaping a piece of wood in order to make a handle, for example.

From what we know so far, the Neolithic emerged in different parts of the world independently. Thus, these are the four best known places in relation to the emergence of the Neolithic: the area of Southeast Asia (India and South China), the Andes and parts of the Amazon rainforest, the Mexican Plateau and the Near East. In the Near East, they began to cultivate rye about 11,000 years ago, and wheat and barley around 9,000 years ago, probably after a period in which these species were already systematically exploited when they were still wild (**silviculture**).

In the Near East, the domestication of some animals will begin a little later, such as the mouflon (*Ovis orientalis*), the goat (*Capra aegagrus*), the aurochs (*Bos primigenius*) and the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*). Then, by selecting the young based on criteria such as growth rate, size, type of vegetation they could eat, etc., in a short time, those wild animals became the animals we know now (sheep, goat, ox and pig). Therefore, from this moment on, these communities have more resources, such as milk, wool and hide, and meat when they decided to sacrifice an animal.



Figure 1: Map with a representation of the geographical points and the animals that were domesticated in each region.



The Neolithic is a time of technological change that will bring **axes and adzes** of polished stone and **ceramics** and will impose the use of the bow and arrows, the use of the sickle for harvesting, etc., but it is also a time of change in trade relations. For example, pieces of **obsidian**, a very sharp volcanic rock, that had been transported from Sardinia were found in Catalonia. As a result of this demand for mineral materials, mining will emerge, as well as specialized communities that will take advantage of the resources in their environment, and trade with them. We have an example in the mines of Can Tintorer (Gavà, Barcelona) where, in the Middle Neolithic, **variscite** will be mined. Variscite is a green stone that will be in high demand for making necklaces and personal ornaments. This intensification of trade will lead to the need to have exchangeable materials, small and valuable, to be able to carry them during the walks that were made to transport the materials. Here, materials such as variscite, amber, or other ornamental stones, played an important role as an exchange currency in the form of pendants and beads for necklaces (Figure 4).



Figure 3: (Left) Neolithic adze made with a piece of deer horn and a wooden handle. (Right): Cardium pottery from the Early Neolithic.

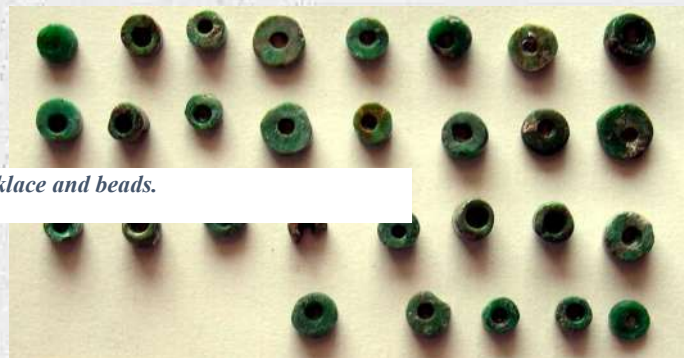


Figure 4: Variscite necklace and beads.

Figure 4: variscite necklace and beads

Gradually, people will concentrate on groups of huts that will eventually become villages. The struggle for resources (farmland, pastures or exchange goods) will make the evidence of war conflicts more abundant by the end of the Neolithic. As a result, the defensive systems of these **villages** will become increasingly important (fences, walls, perimeter pits, etc.) (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Image of the reproduction of the Neolithic village of La Draga, Banyoles, Girona

The funerary world will also change throughout the Neolithic. At first, burials will be individual, in graves or taking advantage of unused **storage pits**, and will almost always have **grave goods**. During the Middle Neolithic, we start to find collective burials, with different coverings (**dolmen, cist and mass graves**), and differences in burials and grave goods are beginning to be seen, suggesting that there is an increase in social differentiation (hierarchy).

The first metal will be **copper**, and there is evidence of its use as a decorative element from over 9000 years ago. We begin to find copper foundry from about 7000 years ago, which would indicate that they already knew the process. Subsequently, this technology will extend and gradually replace stone technologies.

Officially, prehistory ends when the first written texts appear. The oldest texts that are recognized by the scientific community as writing are about 5,000 years old and were also found in the Near East. Some previous combinations of symbols are known, but there is no consensus on their antiquity or character.

GLOSSARY

Sedentary lifestyle: when a human group establishes its permanent residence in one place. This process usually occurs during the Mesolithic and especially during the Neolithic. Sedentary lifestyle takes place when some populations begin to systematically exploit some plant resources. This initial stage would be linked to the systematic harvesting of vegetables, during the Mesolithic period. Later, they began to cultivate them, further guaranteeing the making of permanent settlements.

Ceramics: ceramics are made by shaping clay and firing it in a fire or oven, at a temperature over 400-500 degrees, in specific conditions (clay forms must be dried, and the heating should be gradual). As a result, the clay hardens and stabilizes, which makes it waterproof and resistant. Ceramics will lead to a great improvement in relation to food, both to cook and store food for longer periods of time.



Mesolithic: short period between the end of the Paleolithic and the beginning of the Neolithic (approximately 12000 to 7000 years before the present). There is no consensus on the definition of this term, which, according to the academic school, can be nuanced or even replaced by Epipaleolithic.

Outcrop: the geological level where rocks or mineral resources appear. In the case of flint, for example, it would be the specific place where the flint appears, caught on another type of rock or alone.

Megalith: funerary structure built with large rocks (slabs), like a small house, and that could have an access corridor. Inside, human bodies were deposited, usually with offerings (grave goods). They will be typical of the Neolithic, with some examples from over 7000 years ago, although they will be more abundant 6000 years before the present.

Obsidian: rock of volcanic origin that has a glassy appearance. It is formed when volcanic eruptions occur in the marine environment or right on the coast and there is a large amount of water to quickly cool the lava. As a result, obsidian is produced, a rock that, when properly worked, can generate very fine blades that cut 10 times more than a surgical scalpel.

Storage pit: pits excavated in rocks or the ground, often inside the villages, that were used to store food (usually cereal grains). Many of them were later reused, both as landfills (to dispose of waste), and also as a place to bury bodies.

Grave goods: funeral offerings. During the Neolithic, it will be common to find ritual objects at burials, usually tools such as knives, ornaments, or exotic materials brought from afar.