

Dossier: The Neolithic

Secondary education

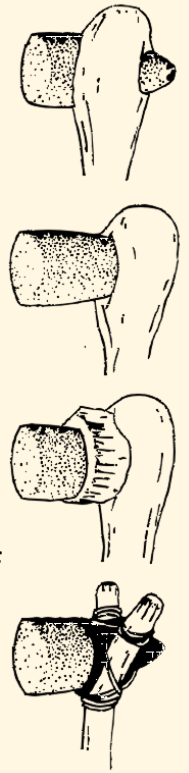
Index

1. Introduction
2. The expansion of the Neolithic
3. Neolithic tools
4. Sedentariness
5. Commerce
6. Ceramics
7. Rituals and art
8. The end of the Neolithic
9. Glossary

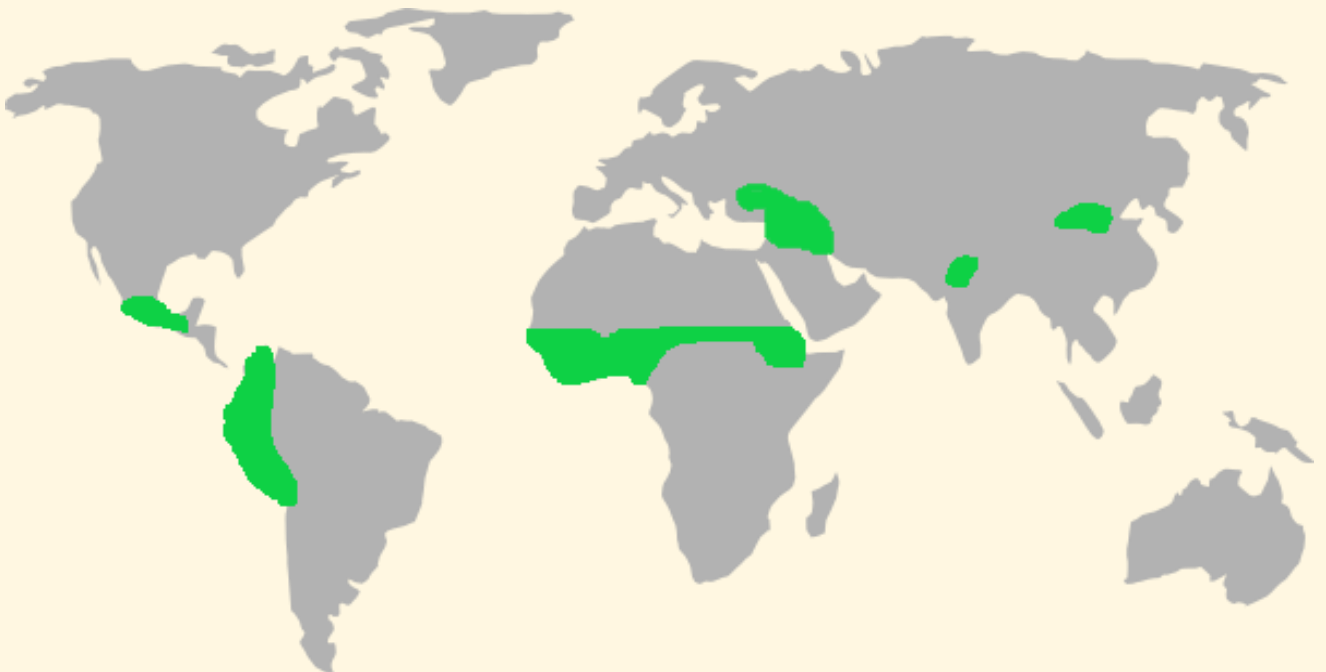
The Neolithic

The Neolithic is the period of prehistory in which we began to cultivate vegetables and domesticate animals. This caused a great social change in the communities of that time. The name Neolithic comes from a new type of tools (neo = new, lithic = stone), since axes and adzes began to be made with a new technique, which consists of polishing rocks into shape. These new tools are closely related to the activity of woodworking, from cutting down a tree to shaping a piece of wood to make a handle, for example.





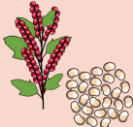





















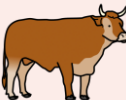

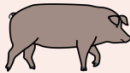

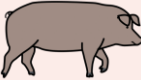



From what we know so far, the Neolithic arises in different areas of the world independently. Thus, the best-known places in terms of the rise of the Neolithic are the following: the area of Southeast Asia (in the current areas of India and China), the Andes and parts of the Amazon rainforest, the Mexico City plateau, the Sahel (Africa) and the Middle East.



Propuestas de enmangamiento de hachas pulidas (Eiroa et al., 20017)



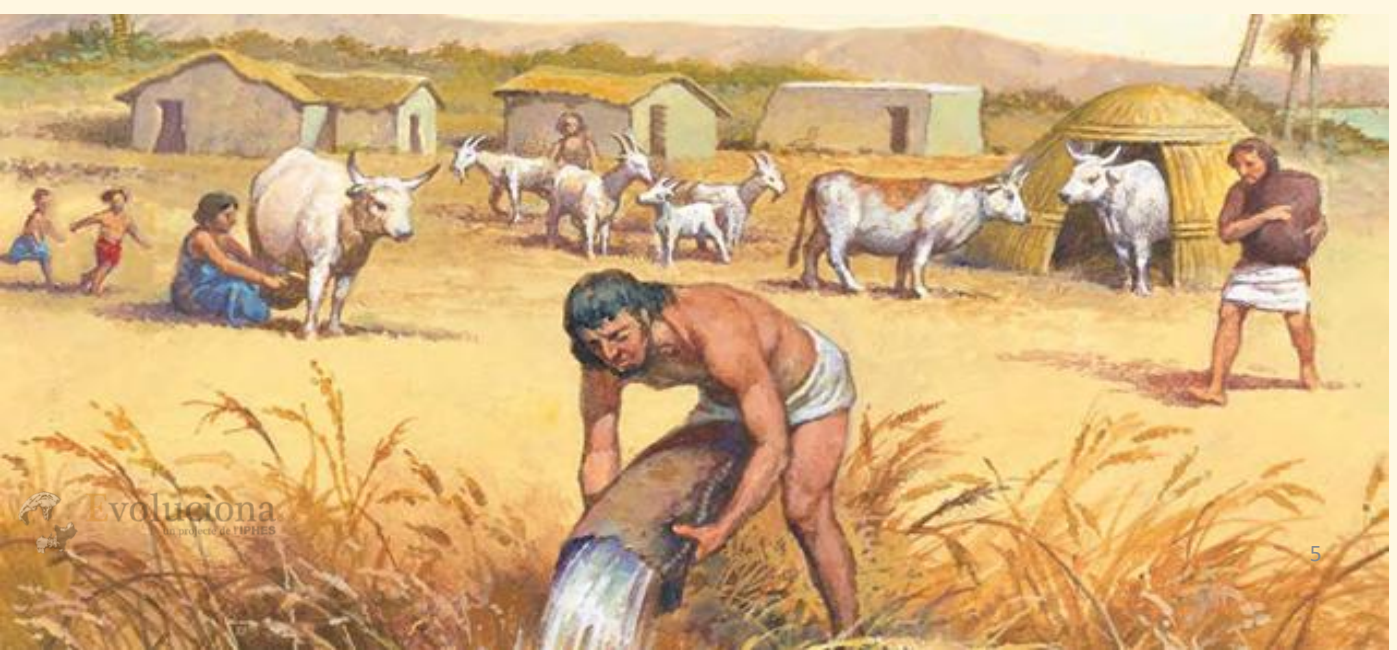
In the different areas of origin of the Neolithic, we can find the domestication of different animals and crops, depending on the resources of the area:

Middle East	Sahel (África)	Southeast Asia	Andes (South America)	Highlands of Mexico (Central America)
 Wheat	 Sorghum	 ARicerro	 Rice	 Quinoa
 Lentils	 African Rice	 Corn	 Beans	 Potato
 Barley	 Café (Coffee (Ethiopia))	 Soy	 Avocado	 Pineapp le
 Flax		 Tea	 Pumpkin	 Cocoa
			 Tomate	
			 Chilli	
 Goat	 Guineafowl	 Hen	 Turkey	 Alpaca
 Ox	 Donkey	 Pig		 Llama
 Cerdo		 Silkworm		 Guinea pig
 Sheep				

The expansion of the Neolithic

The Neolithic of the Near East is the one that will reach Europe. In this area, it seems that rye began to be cultivated around 11,000 years ago, and around 9,000, wheat and barley, probably after a period in which these species were already systematically exploited when they were still wild (forestry).

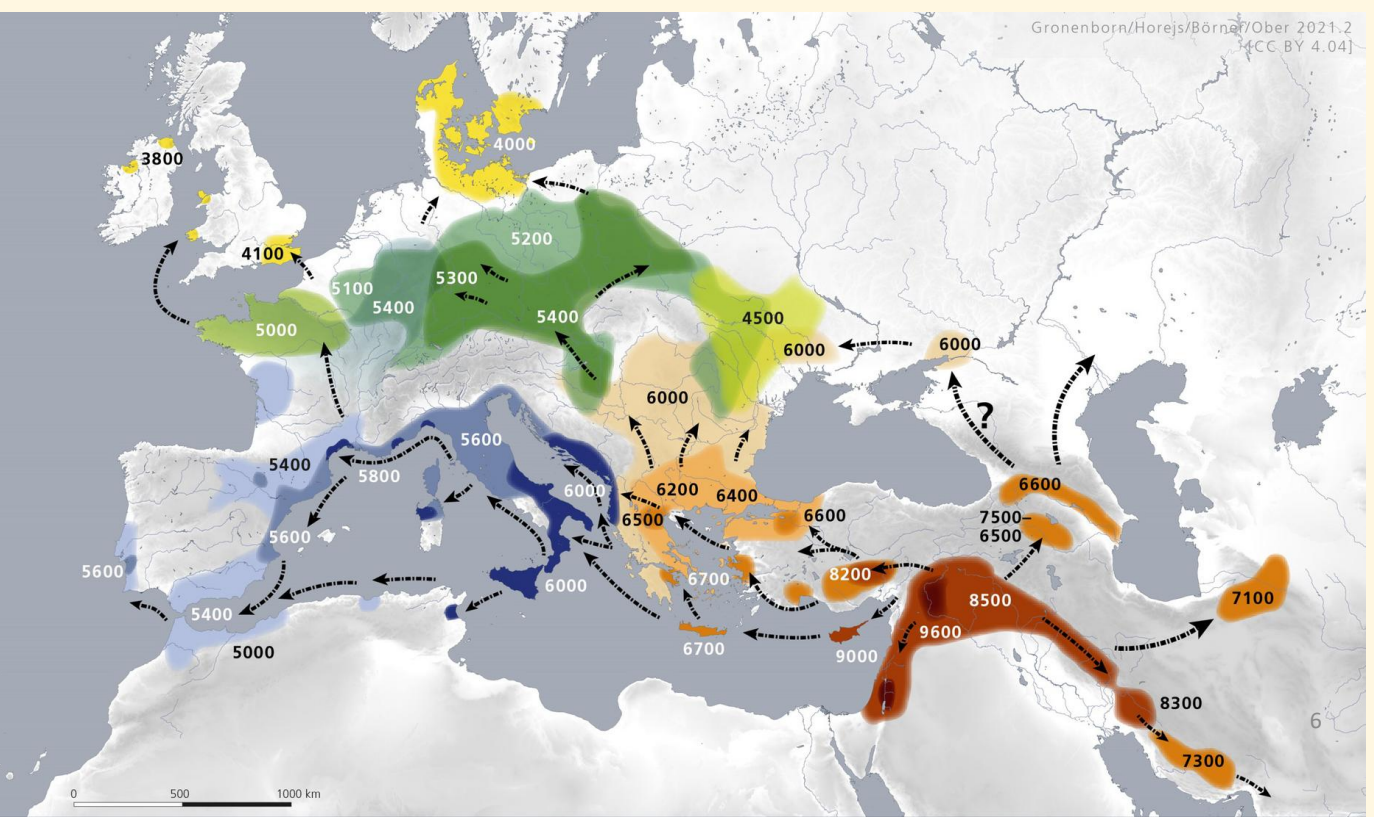
Later, the domestication of some animals began in the Near East, such as the mouflon (*Ovis orientalis*), the goat (*Capra aegagrus*), the aurochs (*Bos primigenius*) and the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*). With the selection of offspring based on criteria such as growth speed, size, the type of vegetation they could eat, etc., in a short time those wild animals became the animals we know today (sheep, goats, ox and pigs). Therefore, from this moment on, these communities would have some other resources, such as milk; and flesh and skin when they decided to sacrifice an animal. Later wool would appear, but we still do not know when exactly, mouflon sheep had hair; scientists are currently conducting experiments to try to find out when sheep started producing wool.



Traditionally, **two possibilities** have been discussed about how the Neolithic spread. The first is based on the **idea** that Neolithic arrived in Europe through trade between peoples. The second theorises that the Neolithic **peoples** arrived in Europe, where they established their Neolithic culture. Later, these peoples mixed with the culture and people that previously occupied the territory.

Genetic analyses have been able to determine that the second theory is correct. Peoples from the **Near East** arrived in Europe, where they **settled** with their crops and domestic animals. These peoples **mixed** with the **local** populations, and European animals and crops were domesticated in the same way as had been done in the Near East.

Europe, at that time, was full of **forests**. To plant the crops, they first had to cut down the forests. For this reason, the first **Neolithic axes** appeared, a tool that would become a key element in the expansion of the Neolithic.



Neolithic tools

During the Neolithic, a set of **new tools** emerged, they were designed for tasks such as **agriculture and livestock breeding** .

One of the new techniques for the production of tools during the Neolithic period is the **polished lithic industry**. Within this type of industry, we find a wide variety of tools: axes, hoes, mills, mortars, miner's hammers, chisels, gouges, stone vessels, idols, archer's bracelets, necklace beads, etc.

To manufacture axes or hoes, the operating chain consists of two parts. The first part where, once the raw material has been selected, **percussion is used to refine and shape** the tool. Once a close shape to the original one has been obtained, **abrasion** is used to achieve a smooth, shiny and threaded surface, i.e. **a polished surface**.

The polished stone axe is used to **fell trees**, a typical activity in the Neolithic, because of the need to make **soils for cultivation**. However, a set of axes that do not show signs of use have been found. These axes, usually made from raw materials from distant locations, were probably valued as **prestigious objects**, and in some cases, have been found as part of an individual's trousseau.



Una de las otras herramientas emblemáticas del neolítico es la **hoz**. Herramienta para **cortar cultivos**.

La forma tradicional de la hoz, es una herramienta con el **cuchillo en forma de curva**. De este modo se facilita el corte de un fajo de trigo. Durante el neolítico se realizaban hoces de este tipo, con un cuchillo alargado realizado con sílex, o realizado con **lâminas de sílex** pequeñas que cubrían la curva de la hoz.

De todos modos, estos no son los únicos diseños. En el yacimiento de La Draga (Banyoles, Cataluña), se ha preservado la madera. De este modo podemos observar **diferentes tipos enmangado** de las hoces, con formas muy diferentes de las que utilizamos hoy en día.



Reconstrucción de una hoz neolítica (CC0). Dos hoces del yacimiento de La Draga. Museo Arqueológico Comarcal de Banyoles.

A pesar de las nuevas tareas del neolítico, la **caza y recolección** continuará. Son actividades fundamentales para completar la dieta y obtener recursos como la piedra y madera necesaria por la fabricación de herramientas.

La herramienta más utilizada para la caza durante el neolítico es la **flecha**. Encontramos nuevas formas de puntas de flecha para mejorar su eficacia.

Hacia finales del neolítico, encontramos un **aumento de los conflictos bélicos** entre pueblos, con el arco y la flecha como arma principal. Seguramente se debe a una **competición** por los recursos y territorios.



Sedentariness

Starting to **cultivate** plants such as rye, wheat, barley or lentils made the populations stay in the territory where they farmed; there they built cabins in **settlements** or **villages**, thus becoming **sedentary**. A sedentary lifestyle and food production will lead to very important **changes** at an **economic and social level**.

Slowly, people will concentrate in groups of huts that will eventually become villages. **The struggle for resources** (farmland, pastures or exchange goods) meant that, at the end of the Neolithic, evidence of military **conflicts** was more abundant. As a result, the **defensive mechanisms** of these settlements will become increasingly important (fences, walls, perimeter trenches, etc.).



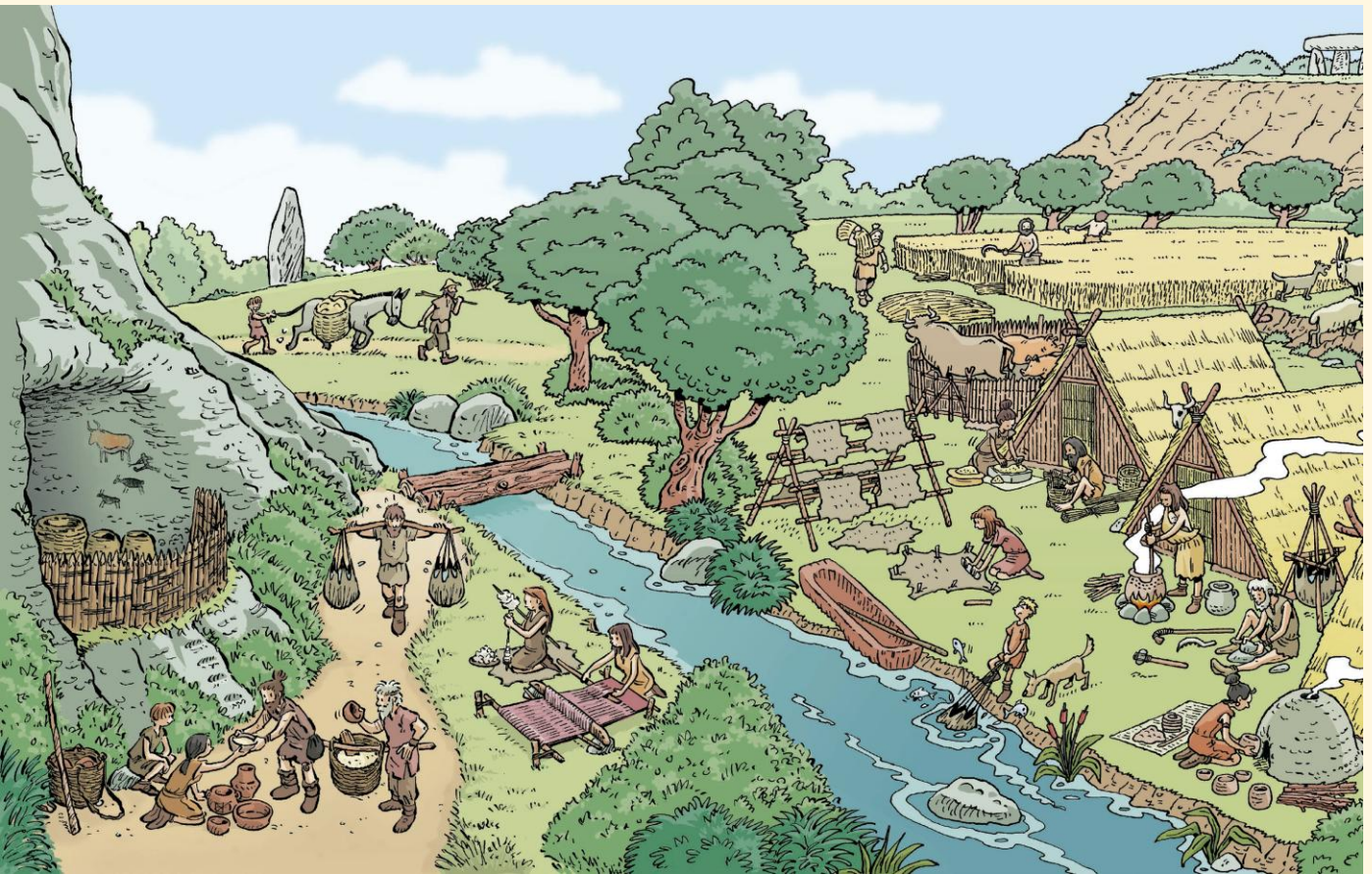
Reconstrucción del poblado neolítico de La Draga. Fotografía de Harold Abellan.

Commerce

Figures such as **merchants** appear. They were people who were dedicated to trading materials between territories (flint, honey, rare rocks, variscite to make ornaments, salt, etc.), as well as the first specialised **artisans**, who exchanged their **specialised** products.

With specialised artisans, we begin to see a division of **labor by gender**. On a Neolithic farm there is a lot of work, you have to take care of crops and animals, prepare and cook food, sew clothes, etc. The division of tasks is essential.

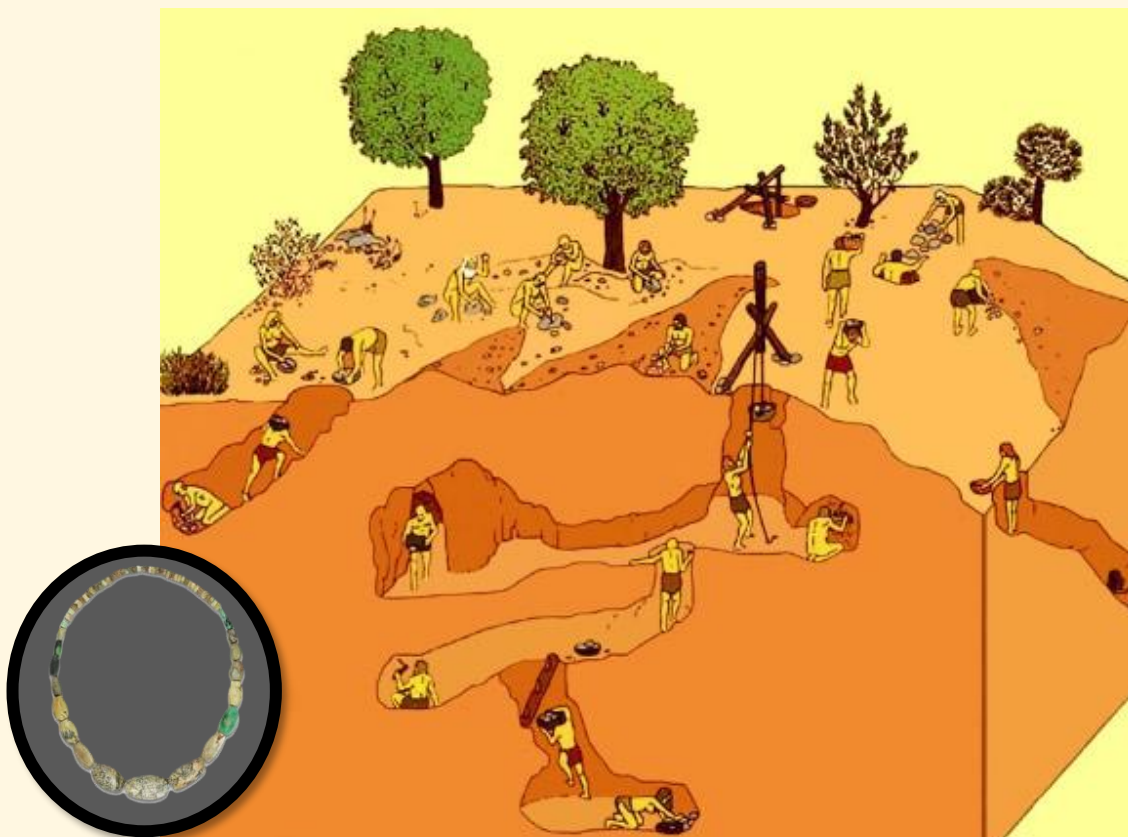
The Neolithic is a time of change in trade relations. There are peoples, who, due to the richness of some precious material during the Neolithic, decide to dedicate themselves to the extraction and preparation of these materials; which they exchange for food and other necessities.



For example, in Catalonia, pieces of **obsidian**, a very sharp volcanic rock, have been found and **transported** from the island of Sardinia. As a result of this demand for mineral materials, **mining** appears, as well as specialised communities that will take advantage of the resources of the environment, with which they will trade.

An example can be found in the **mines of Can Tintorer** (Gavà, Barcelona), where in the Middle Neolithic the mines of **variscite** were exploited, a green stone that would be in high demand to make necklaces and personal ornaments. This intensification of trade will lead to the need to have interchangeable, small and valuable materials, to be able to carry them on the trips on foot to transport the materials.

Here, materials such as variscite, amber or other ornamental stones could have played an important role as **currency**, in the form of pendants and necklace beads.



Il·lustració Parque Arqueològic Minas de Gavà

Cerámica

During the Neolithic, the production of crop fields required the creation of **storage places**, to store **surplus** food.

We began to find silos, areas where surplus cereal was stored. Containers are also used, made with plant materials, stone or clay. The latter material led to the production of **ceramic vessels**, which would become representative pieces of the Neolithic.

Pottery is used to make many objects, for example: glasses, storage containers, cooking pots, dishes, lights, etc.

In the case of cooking pots and storage containers, they sometimes use **handles** so that they can be hung in high places. Think that they have to protect the food from mice and other animals!

There are different methods to make ceramic containers, but one of the most used ways is the "**Churro Technique**". It is about making ceramics with long pieces of clay that slowly form the height of the bowl. Finally, using your hands, join the pieces of clay creating a smooth surface.

Another popular method is the "**pinch technique**," which involves shaping clay by pinching it between your thumb and fingers.



In ceramics, we find a representation of the artistic culture of the Neolithic peoples.

The pottery they use on a **daily basis** is usually very **simple**, but we also find **decorated pottery** with more complex shapes. This type of pottery was probably used in festivities, rituals or as **prestigious objects** in the trousseau of Neolithic individuals.

In the Iberian Peninsula, about 7,000 years ago, there appeared the first examples of **cardium pottery**. A type of pottery with **printed decorations**, made with shells, bones, wooden tools, combs, or any element they had at hand.

Ceramic vessels can be very complex. In the Cova de l'or de Beniarrés (Alicante) a **geminated vase** was found, a type of vessel with a very curious shape and which has been found to have different uses.

Likewise, in the mines of Can Tintorer (Gavà), a vase decorated with an **anthropomorphic shape**, heir to the anthropomorphic sculptures of the Upper Palaeolithic.



Ejemplo decoración cerámica cardial.
Alfarilici.com



Venus de Gavà. Museo de Gavà



Vaso geminado de la Cova de l'Or. Museo de Prehistoria de València.

Rituals and art

During the Neolithic, artistic expressions continued, but we found great differences with Paleolithic art.

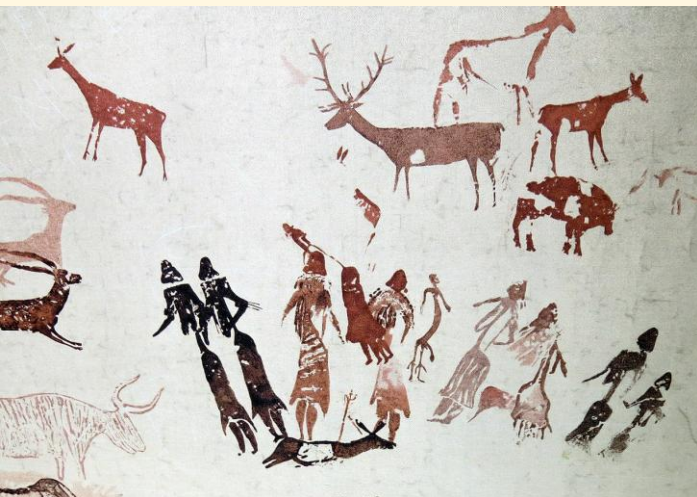
During the Neolithic period, the artistic style was characterised by **simplicity and symbolism**. The **main subject** will change from animals to **humans**, who will become the main figure in most of the paintings.

In the **Mediterranean area**, we find two contemporary artistic styles.
Levantine art and **schematic art**.

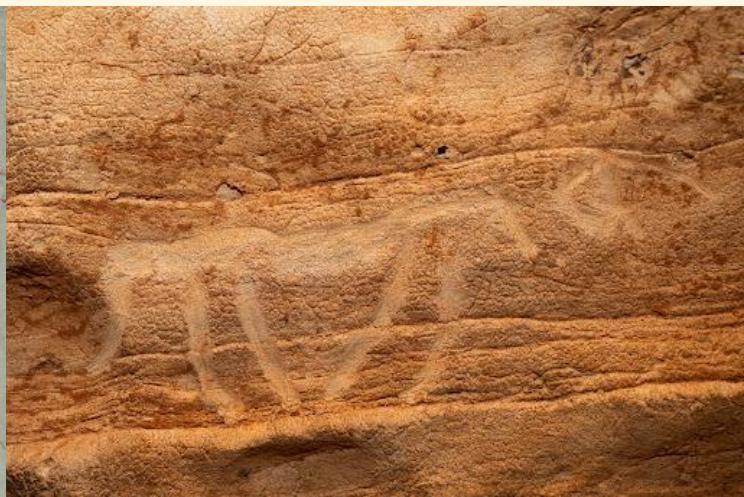
Levantine art is characterised by **scenes** of hunting, dancing, gathering, etc. Drawn in a very **stylized** style.

Schematic art is a style with **very simple forms**, with representations of humans and animals reduced to basic lines.

We find this symbolic art represented in caves and shelters, as well as in the ceramic vessels they produced.



Arte Levantino de la Cova dels Moros (El Cogul).
Exposició Museu de Gavà [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)



Arte esquemático de la Cova de la Vila de la Febró.
Foto: Maria D. Guillén IPHES-CERCA

During the Neolithic period, the **megalith** appeared. A prehistoric construction made with one or several blocks of stone, of great size. We find constructions of this style in various areas of the world. The oldest, found in eastern Turkey (Göbekli Tee, Nevalı Çori and Nahal Hemar), dates back 11,000 years, in the early phases of the Neolithic.

In **Europe**, the main types of megalith are the **menhir** and the **dolmen**, sometimes grouped together to form constructions of great complexity, such as **corridor and chamber dolmens** or **cromlechs**, in a circular shape (Stonehenge).



Stonehenge. Andre Pattenden (Comisión English Heritage)

Although the function of the **megalith** is not entirely clear, what we do know is that they are constructions that would require the **organisation and collaboration** of a large group of people. This fact indicates the growth of Neolithic peoples and the beginning of **hierarchical organizations**.

The **funerary traditions** would also change throughout the Neolithic. **At first, burials would be individual**, in pits or taking advantage of silos that were no longer used, and they would almost always include a **trousseau**.

From the **Middle Neolithic** onwards, we already find **collective burials** with different coverings (**dolmens, cists and collective graves**) and differences in burials and the trousseau, which suggests that there is an **increase in social distinction (hierarchy)**.



Dolmen de la Vila de la Gola dels Bous (Segarra, Solsonès)



Enterramiento neolítico localizado en el municipio de Vimbodí i Poblet. Museo Comarcal de la Conca de Barberà.

The end of the Neolithic

The Neolithic ended with the emergence of the **Metal Age**, when it was discovered how to forge metal. The first metal was **copper**, of which there is evidence of its use as a decorative element for more than 9,000 years. About **7,000** years ago, we began to find smelting of this metal, which indicates that they already knew the process. Subsequently, this technology would spread and slowly **replace stone technologies**.

Officially, **prehistory ends** when the first **written texts appear**. The oldest texts, recognised by the scientific community as writing, are from about **5,000** years ago, and were found in the **Middle East**. Some earlier symbol combinations are known, but there is no consensus on their age or nature.



Sociedades Argaricas. Vida cotidiana. Imagen de Miguel Salvatierra (Pastwomen)

Glossary

- **Trousseau**: Funeral offering. During the Neolithic, it was common to find ritual objects in burials, usually tools such as knives, ornaments or exotic materials imported from afar.
- **Ceramics**: Ceramics are the product of shaping clay and firing it on a fire or kiln, at a temperature of more than 400-500 degrees, with specific conditions (the clay forms have to be dried and firing has to be gradual). The result is a hardening and stabilisation of the clay, which makes it waterproof and resistant. Ceramics would bring about a huge improvement in food conditions, both to be able to cook and store food for longer.
- **Megalith**: Funerary structure built with large rocks (slabs), like a small house, and which could have an access corridor. Human bodies were deposited inside, usually with offerings (Trousseau). They would be typical of the Neolithic, although some examples of the Mesolithic are known, more than 7,000 years ago, they would be more abundant from 6,000 BC to the present.
- **Mesolithic**: It is a short period between the end of the Palaeolithic and the beginning of the Neolithic (approximately 12,000 to 7,000 years before the present). There is no consensus on the definition of this term, which depending on the academic school, can be nuanced or even replaced by Epipaleolithic.

- **Obsidian:** rock of volcanic origin that has a glassy appearance. It is formed when volcanic eruptions occur in a marine environment or just offshore, and there is an enormous amount of water to quickly cool the lava. As a result, obsidian is produced, a rock that, when properly worked on, can produce very thin blades that cut 10 times more than a surgical scalpel.
- **Sedentary lifestyle:** when a human group establishes its permanent residence in the same place. Normally, this process occurs during the Mesolithic and especially during the Neolithic. Sedentary lifestyle appears when some populations begin to exploit some plant resources in a systematic way. This initial stage would be linked to the systematic collection of these plants during the Mesolithic period. Later, they began to cultivate them, and thus this system of making permanent settlements was further strengthened.
- **Silo/silos:** These are containers dug into the rock or ground, often in villages, which were used to store food (usually cereal grain). Many were later reused, either as landfills (to dispose of waste) or as a place to bury the deceased.