

Mesolithic Twins - 9,000 years ago

The warming of the climate that heralded the end of the last Ice Age approximately 12,000 years ago caused the steady melting of the ice sheets, the raising of sea levels and the subsequent gradual inundation of vast areas of low-lying land causing the isolation of Britain from the rest of Europe. This period heralded the time when Wales probably developed the geographic shape that it has today. The warmer climate and ensuing changes in vegetation during this period allowed the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers to exploit both land and marine resources and many of the sites from this period are on the coast and around the mouths of rivers, although 10,000 years ago these sites would have been much further away from the sea edge.

The distribution map of known Mesolithic sites in Wales shows a concentration of sites in coastal locations particularly along the north and south coasts, indicating that the Welsh shoreline area offered an abundant source of food and other materials. These coastal sites include the earliest dated Mesolithic site in Wales, The Nab Head at St Brides Bay, at around 10,500 years ago.

There are also a good number of upland sites, which may have been seasonal hunting grounds, for example around **Llyn Brenig**, Denbighshire, and at **Waun Fignen Felin** in the Brecon Beacons. Some decorated pebbles have been found at **Rhuddlan**, Denbighshire and are the one of the few examples of decorative art found in Wales from this period.

As the climate warmed there were changes in the animal population from the large herds of reindeer and wild horse, pig to elk, red deer, roe deer, wild boar and aurochs (wild cattle), which would have required different hunting techniques. Stone tools were made from microliths—tiny chips of stone made from blades or bladelets and set into toothed slots in bone or antler shafts. Tools made of

composite material—bone, antlers, wood combined with stone—were used to create a variety of harpoons, arrows, and fish hooks, although some flint blade types remained similar to their Palaeolithic predecessors. Nets were developed for fishing and trapping.

It has long been thought that, as in the Palaeolithic period, the hunter-gatherer nature of Mesolithic life is the reason so few settlement sites are located across Wales or in fact the British Isles; certainly there are no examples of houses known in Wales. Excavations have, however, identified 'task sites' such as those for the processing of food or for making tools, like The Nab Head. In contrast, fieldwork elsewhere in Britain has identified Mesolithic settlements at Howick, Northumberland, and more recently in 2010 at Star Carr, North Yorkshire, where perhaps the oldest known Mesolithic house in the British Isles, built approximately 11,000 years ago, has been recorded. The house was 3.5 metres wide and was held up by a circle of wooden posts. The house was occupied over a long period of time, possibly for as much as 500 years. The site has yielded far more possessions than one would think normal for bands of hunter-gatherers on the move. These include a boat paddle, beads, arrowheads and antler headdresses, suggesting rituals developed alongside domestic life.

Below - a large Mesolithic site was discovered during excavations of the medieval town at Rhuddlan, Denbighshire. Over 13,000 stone tools were discovered, and within this assemblage were five decorated stone pebbles including one, which is engraved on both sides and might depict a human body. (Photo Amgueddfa Cymru/National Museum Wales)



Above - a stone axe being recorded during excavations at Nab Head. Left - a reconstruction of what a settlement near Nab Head might have looked like. Below - a small group from over 700 perforated shale beads discovered at the Nab Head Mesolithic site, Pembrokeshire. (Photo Amgueddfa Cymru/National Museum Wales)



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