

## Prehistory

Human prehistory is the period between the use of the first stone tools c. 3.3 million years ago by hominins and the invention of writing systems. The earliest writing systems appeared c. 5,300 years ago, but it took thousands of years for writing to be widely adopted, and it was not used in some human cultures until the 19th century or even until the present. The end of prehistory therefore came at very different dates in different places, and the term is less often used in discussing societies where prehistory ended relatively recently.

Sumer in Mesopotamia, the Indus valley civilization, and ancient Egypt were the first civilizations to develop their own scripts and to keep historical records; this took place already during the early Bronze Age. Neighboring civilizations were the first to follow. Most other civilizations reached the end of prehistory during the Iron Age. The three-age system of division of prehistory into the Stone Age, followed by the Bronze Age and Iron Age, remains in use for much of Eurasia and North Africa, but is not generally used in those parts of the world where the working of hard metals arrived abruptly with contact with Eurasian cultures, such as the Americas, Oceania, Australasia and much of Sub-Saharan Africa. These areas also, with some exceptions in Pre-Columbian civilizations in the Americas, did not develop complex writing systems before the arrival of Eurasians, and their prehistory reaches into relatively recent periods; for example 1788 is usually taken as the end of the prehistory of Australia.

The period when a culture is written about by others, but has not developed its own writing is often known as the protohistory of the culture. By definition,[1] there are no written records from human prehistory, so dating of prehistoric materials is crucial. Clear techniques for dating were not well-developed until the 19th century.[2]

This article is concerned with human prehistory, the time since behaviorally and anatomically

modern humans first appeared until the beginning of recorded history. Earlier periods are also called "prehistoric"; there are separate articles for the overall history of the Earth and the history of life before humans.

## Definition

### Beginning

The term "prehistory" can refer to the vast span of time since the beginning of the Universe or the Earth, but more often it refers to the period since life appeared on Earth, or even more specifically to the time since human-like beings appeared.[3][4]

### End

The date marking the end of prehistory is typically defined as the advent of the contemporary written historical record.[5][6] The date consequently varies widely from region to region depending on the date when relevant records become a useful academic resource.[7] For example, in Egypt it is generally accepted that prehistory ended around 3200 BCE, whereas in New Guinea the end of the prehistoric era is set much more recently, at around 1900 common era. In Europe the relatively well-documented classical cultures of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome had neighbouring cultures, including the Celts and to a lesser extent the Etruscans, with little or no writing, and historians must decide how much weight to give to the often highly prejudiced accounts of these "prehistoric" cultures in Greek and Roman literature.

### Time periods

In dividing up human prehistory in Eurasia, historians typically use the three-age system, whereas scholars of pre-human time periods typically use the well-defined geologic record and its internationally defined stratum base within the geologic time scale. The three-age system is the periodization of human prehistory into three consecutive time periods, named for their respective predominant tool-making technologies:

#### Stone Age

#### Bronze Age

Iron Age[8]

History of the term

The notion of "prehistory" began to surface during the Enlightenment in the work of antiquarians who used the word 'primitive' to describe societies that existed before written records.[9] The first use of the word prehistory in English, however, occurred in the Foreign Quarterly Review in 1836.[10]

The use of the geologic time scale for pre-human time periods, and of the three-age system for human prehistory, is a system that emerged during the late nineteenth century in the work of British, German and Scandinavian archeologists, antiquarians and anthropologists.[8]