

THE GREAT DEBATE

Archaeologists have had two very different views about the Mesolithic. These reflect the ideas of two famous philosophers who had very different views of human nature and the prehistoric past. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) in 1754 wrote people were naturally kind and cooperative and if left alone would live close to nature in a kind of Garden of Eden. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) wrote in 1642 that people were naturally vicious and selfish and would have lived like brutish animals. Archaeologists often saw the Mesolithic as either one or the other.

Nasty and brutish

The man who first described the Mesolithic, Hodder Westropp, wrote in 1872 that Mesolithic people were “scarcely less savage than the beasts of the forest”, “living in a wild and uncultivated state”, “stationary and unprogressive”, and that their “intellect was dormant”.

For Harold Peake in 1933, the Mesolithic “was a time of poverty and hunger”, in which “people were becoming poorer and more miserable”, and “degenerated fast in the miserable conditions under which they were compelled to live”.

A Garden of Eden

Christopher Tilley wrote in 1996:

“I am politically old-fashioned enough even to want to describe it as a kind of Garden of Eden before the fall. These were a series of communities in which ownership of land and resources was common or collective, sharing was generalized and no one is likely to have gone hungry.”

Neil Oliver in 2012 wrote that the Mesolithic was a period of “sophistication and complexity”, and that Mesolithic people “had learned to make life rich, comfortable and satisfying”.

Neither and both!

More recent archaeologists have been more balanced. Bill Finlayson in 1998 wrote that we should “not be fooled by ideas of a people living in a hazy dream time at one with nature”, and that though their way of life was a great success, it could not support the levels of population or social complexities of our own civilisation.

Caroline Wickham-Jones wrote in 2010 that it was a dangerous trap to assume hunter-gatherers lived in a Garden of Eden. There was archaeological evidence of violence (both neighbourly and domestic) in the period. Mesolithic people were “not happy hippies living in harmony with their environment”. But she also wrote that we can learn lessons from the period about the intertwining of people and the world they live in, using knowledge of the past to think in different ways and open up new possibilities in the present about our relationship with nature.

How to debate

A debate has two sides, who argue about which is right. Each side must use evidence to persuade the audience that they are right.

1. Decide a question which can have more than one answer.
2. A person or team of people take one answer and find evidence to support it.
3. Presenting the argument:
 - what is the answer you support
 - present three pieces of evidence for why you support it
4. Each side presents its case, then has a right to reply to the points made by the others.
 - say why your opponents three points are wrong
5. Let the audience vote on which side they think is right.

Remember that sometimes the truth lies in the middle and that each side may be partly right and partly wrong.

The question

Here are some possible questions you can debate. You can always come up with your own instead.

- People in the Mesolithic had a good way of life, which was better in many ways than our own.
- People in the Mesolithic were worse off than people living today.
- The Mesolithic was period of poverty and hunger.
- The Mesolithic was an age of equality and cooperation.

The evidence

Divide the class into groups and have them do the following activities and discussion before asking them which side of a debate they want to be on. Then get them to present their case to the others.

Look at this illustration ([Using_deer.pdf](#)) of Mesolithic life. Make a list of everything you can see that is made by the people, including their clothes. Make a list of everything in your classroom.

Which has the most things? Mesolithic people had few possessions but does that mean that they were poor? Is there a difference between being poor and being happy?

Look at this illustration ([Raven_camp.pdf](#)) of a Mesolithic camp. Make a note of what the men, the women and the children are doing. Are any of the activities more important than the others? Or, are

they all equally as important? Do you think men and women were equal in the Mesolithic?

Look at the list of foods (Foods.pdf) that were available to Mesolithic people. Now look at the nutrients in the different kinds of food (Nutrition.pdf). Do you think that Mesolithic people had a healthy diet? Was it a boring diet?

There is some evidence for violence in the Mesolithic as injuries to skulls in burials across Europe, and in a few skeletons with arrows or bone points in them. However, there is no evidence for fortresses or battles. People had to live together and cooperate. They believed in sharing their food with each other and working together. However, they might defend their land against others, and might quarrel between each other. Look at the information about burials from a cemetery in Denmark (Vedbaek.pdf). How many people might have suffered violence when they were alive? Do you think their time was more or less violent than ours?

There is no evidence for wealthy people in the Mesolithic. We find no homes that are bigger or fancier than others. People did not have money (as this was not invented at the time). Look again at Vedbaek.pdf and see whether some people wore jewellery or had fancy clothes. Do you think everyone was equal or were there rich and poor?

Imagine you are hunter-gatherers. Who would make the decisions about whether to move camp to a new area, where to go and hunt today, or calm down people who were quarrelling? Were men and women equal? Were old people more respected because they knew more than the others? Were people with better skills like hunting or tool making given more respect than other people?