

Fundamentals fact sheet: hominin behaviours 2 (fire, clothing & shelter)

Fire

- Fire has many benefits – warmth, light, defence (against predatory animals) and cooking (many cooked foods are easier to digest and provide greater amounts of energy).
- It is likely that hominins have used natural fire (i.e. wildfire) for a very long time.
- However the ability to make fire on demand probably only starts in Europe with the Neanderthals (Middle Palaeolithic) – there is evidence for fire (e.g. charcoal and burnt animal bone) on many of their sites.
- But stone-lined hearths were probably only built by *H. sapiens*, during the Upper Palaeolithic.
- Palaeolithic fires used many different fuels, including wood, animal bone, dung, and even coal.

Clothing

- Another way to keep warm is by making clothing from animal skins.
- Animal skins needed to be cleaned before they are worn – and stone tools such as scrapers may have been made and used for this purpose (see also **hominin behaviours 1**).
- Neanderthals (Middle Palaeolithic) probably wore clothing but it may have been fairly simple (e.g. animal skin capes).
- *H. sapiens* (Upper Palaeolithic) clothing was tailored (i.e. sewn) – we know this because of the bone needles that have been found.
- Although the very earliest hominins (pre-Lower Palaeolithic) probably had all-over body hair (like chimpanzees and gorillas), it is thought that body hair was lost as hominins began to live on the hot, open savannah plains of Africa (e.g. *H. erectus* in the Lower Palaeolithic).

Shelter

- Early hominins probably used trees for sleeping and protection.
- Later in the Palaeolithic, Neanderthals (Middle Palaeolithic) and *H. sapiens* (Upper Palaeolithic) made use of natural caves for shelter (and protection). Many of these caves contained fire hearths, and in the Upper Palaeolithic (*H. sapiens*) they were also decorated with paintings (see also **hominin behaviours 3**).
- However *H. sapiens* also built huts and tents outdoors: e.g. using mammoth bones or wood to build the huts and tents, and animal skins to cover them.

How do we know...they used fire?

- We have recovered charred wood and bone, and heat cracked stone artefacts, from Palaeolithic sites.
- We sometime also find ‘baked’ soils on archaeological sites – which were ‘baked’ by having a fire set and lit on the ground surface.
- When these charred fragments are only found in small areas it suggests a humanly-made fire rather than a natural wildfire.