



Hunting was central to human existence in Britain until 6000 years ago. It allowed people to cook and eat meat and offal, carve bones and antlers into objects, and work furs and hides into clothing, bedding, and even cover for shelters. Archaeologists therefore often study the tools that people used for hunting. During the Mesolithic period (c. 9600–4000 BC), the most commonly occurring type of hunting tool is the microlith; tiny, razor sharp, and skilfully made fragments of flint, which could be attached to a haft to form (amongst many other things) arrow and spear tips. Microliths come in many different shapes and sizes, and could have been hafted to form a range of different hunting tools – with almost unlimited potential for creating barbs and cutting edges designed to injure prey. Flint microliths are found at Mesolithic sites across Europe, to which Britain was joined until about 6000 BC. Interestingly, they vary in shape according to region and, throughout time during the Mesolithic.

The bow and arrow was perhaps the most important tool for the Mesolithic hunter. The technology was known from the Final Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) period (e.g. arrowshafts and arrowheads were found with the bones of c. 650 reindeer at a seasonal settlement site at Stellmoor near Hamburg), but it seems only to have come fully into its own in the wooded environment of the Mesolithic. It was used to bring down large animals like deer, wild cow (aurochs) and pigs, as well as birds, smaller game, and even fish. Deer, pig and aurochs bones found at Mesolithic sites have shown damage sustained by high-powered, flint tip weapons – and in some cases the flints themselves are found lodged in animal bones! Since wood is only preserved in areas where bacteria cannot eat away at the materials themselves – such as waterlogged peat bogs, cave sediments, or on the seabed – we very rarely get the chance to study bows and arrows in their entirety. More often than not, we are only left with the flint tips of arrows or spears, although a small number have been recovered from archaeological sites in Europe, in particular Denmark and Northern Germany. The earliest known example in Europe was discovered at the

German site of Friesack IV, has been dated between 9200 and 8700 BC, and was made of pine wood.

Similarly, Mesolithic wooden arrows are incredibly rare in the UK. However, they have been recovered from several sites in Europe. They come in many styles; some of which have simple sharpened tips which did not require microliths to make them usable. These variations in styles may relate to the hunting of different animals. The club-shaped arrow tip, for instance, could have been used for hunting birds or smaller mammals (pine marten, wild cat) without destroying the feathers or skin, which would have been valuable for fletching arrows and making clothing. Occasionally complete arrowheads have been found, such as that from the peat bog of Rönneholms Mosse in Sweden. Here, five microliths were found embedded in a wooden arrow.

Whilst flint tools are the most common Mesolithic artefact, we know that Mesolithic hunter-gatherers used a variety of other materials, such as antler and bone, to manufacture their hunting equipment. Like wood, these materials will decay over time, and so do not always survive in the archaeological record. Where bone and antler is preserved on Mesolithic sites, we find a range of barbed and unbarbed arrow and spear heads, and even bone fish hooks. Fish hooks are particularly common at coastal sites in Denmark and Norway, and vary in size and shape according to the type of fish that was exploited. In addition, pointed bone objects are occasionally found which would have been mounted on wooden prongs to form a leister (a pronged spear). Antler and bone was also used to make barbed harpoon heads – with small holes and hooks which allow for a line to be attached to the haft. This allows the harpoon head to break away from the haft and the prey to initially escape, before being retrieved by pulling in the line. They are frequently found in old waterways and may have been lost during fishing.

We know from the evidence at a famous waterlogged Mesolithic site called Star Carr

(North Yorkshire, UK) that Mesolithic people were very proficient carpenters, and finds from elsewhere in Europe support this. From Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Northern Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands, wooden fish traps and weirs (fences) have been found. Made from hazel wood that had been trimmed and woven, the fences were used to direct fish into pre-set nets and traps where they could be speared or simply lifted from the water. At some Mesolithic sites we find huge numbers of fish bones, especially eel, suggesting that fish were being caught and eaten on a large scale.

Studying the ways in which Mesolithic people made and used their hunting equipment is a very challenging exercise for archaeologists. However, the evidence from across Europe

suggest a wide range of sophisticated hunting technologies were used to hunt animals, birds and fish of many different shapes and sizes.

Further Reading

Heath, J. 2009. *Warfare in Prehistoric Britain*. Stroud: Amberley Press

Larsson, L. & Sjöström, A. 2011. Early Mesolithic flint-tipped arrows from Sweden. *Antiquity Project Gallery*, 330, <http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/larsson330/>

McQuade, M. & O'Donnell, L. 2007. Late Mesolithic fish traps from the Liffey estuary, Dublin. *Antiquity*, 81, 569–584



Left: Microliths hafted in a reconstructed arrow ©National Museum of Wales, Right: Remains of an arrow with hafted microliths from Rönneholms Mosse, Sweden

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Harry K. Robson and Ben Elliott (University of York)

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