

Section 2 – Moving Inland

Caves and Wombs

Caves are excellent habitations, and our species made great use of them. They provided shelter from weather, protection from predators and a dry place where the essentials of life such as food, skins, and firewood, could be preserved. The snow of winter could be kept outside while the cave within was warm and cosy. Conversely, as the many cave-dwellings that still exist in arid climes attest, they were cool in the summer heat.

The best caves had a narrow entrance and the people would have improved the natural defences by putting up palisades of timber or piling stone to reduce it even more. Behind this was a common fireplace, which was probably kept lit all the time, providing light and heat for comfort and cooking, keeping at bay darkness, cold and predators. Perhaps strips of meat and fish were hung above the fire, to preserve them so that they could be eaten when the hunting was slim.

Within the protection of the cave, young children could play safely while older girls helped their mothers in their daily routine, and learned the responsibilities of women in the tribe: how to forage, which plants were good to eat and which not; how to get honey from a bee-hive; how to snare small game; which plants would make a sick person better, which moulds would help a festering wound. As they were learning all these things, they were taught the stories of the tribe by their mothers and grandmothers. Boys too young to hunt would probably have helped their mothers, or possibly they were put in the care of an older man who had been injured and could no longer hunt. He would teach them how to shape flint, how to make spears and traps, and the lore of the hunter.

The caves were a kind of base-camp, from which the people went out to hunt and forage. A tribe may have had several such shelters, each used at a different time of year as they followed the game and seasonal plants. Caves were more than homes, however. Some were meeting areas, where people would gather together; the purpose being, at least in part, trade. These were the Palaeolithic market-places, where skins, ivory and bone artefacts, as well as, perhaps, jewellery and plant products could be bartered.

Caves have preserved the evidence of life for tens of thousands of years. Where they were few and far between, people built simple shelters of wood, thatch and hide that have long since mouldered to nothing, and the evidence they may have contained has been lost. However, it is likely that those who did not use caves lived similar lives to those who did.