Note: In the interest of academic objectivity, BCE (Before Common Era) & CE (Common Era) are used in place of BC and AD.

PALAEOLITHIC means Old Stone Age. There is evidence of human activity in Co. Clare dating to 10,500 BCE.

MESOLITHIC means Middle Stone Age. It is estimated that the population of Ireland at this time (8,000 BCE – 4,350 BCE) was less than 10,000 people.

NEOLITHIC means New Stone Age. Population estimates for this period (4350 BCE – 2,200 BCE) are sometimes as high as 200,000 people.

MEGALITH means “big stone”.

When the first people began arriving in Ireland it was covered by vast forests. These first people concentrated their activities near waterways, foraging at the shores of the seas, lakes and rivers. Hunting and gathering were their only means of obtaining food.

Their diet consisted mainly of deer, duck, birds, wild boar, bear, salmon, eels, flounder, bass, hazelnuts, fruits and berries. They used stone spearheads, arrows and harpoons to catch their prey. Food was cooked outside and eaten communally. These hunters and gatherers would have had to move settlements continually to follow food sources.

NAME THREE THINGS, APART FROM FOOD, THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE MADE FROM AN ANIMAL THAT YOU CAUGHT WHILE HUNTING? THINK OF ALL THE PARTS OF THE ANIMAL INCLUDING BONES/ANTLERS/HOOVES.

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CAN YOU NAME TWO NATIVE IRISH TREES?---
We know from excavation and analysis of the remains found at Poulnabrone in County Clare that the diet of the Neolithic community there was quite healthy. It consisted mainly of dairy and cereal products, fruits, vegetables, and very little meat or fish.

Dental analysis focuses on the condition of teeth and jaw bones. Remains found at Poulnabrone had quite good teeth with few cavities and little plaque. This suggests a diet of rough food that was low in sugar. Tooth loss and cavities were not common but wear on the front teeth could hint that they were often used as tools, perhaps during rope or basket making.

A new type of stone axe was developed using porcellanite, which is stronger than flint, this allowed settlers to clear larger trees and eventually move further into the interior of Ireland. Upland forests were cleared first and the areas farmed until the soil became too poor to farm further.

Why do you think people would have settled in upland (hills and mountains) areas first?

Why do you think the land may have become too poor for grazing animals or growing crops?

Dwellings were temporary, and much like camping of today. Light timber frames, made of available branches were covered with animal skins and taken apart when people moved on, bringing the animal skins with them. These huts did not have indoor fireplaces, so all cooking took place outside.

Sometime around 4,350 BCE (Neolithic period) more people began to settle in Ireland, bringing with them the practice and knowledge of farming. They cultivated cereals such as wheat, barley, oats, and corn; and introduced animals such as cows, horse, sheep, goats, pigs and donkeys.

IN THE FORESTS AT THIS TIME YOU MAY HAVE COME ACROSS THESE ANIMALS:

WILD BOAR  GREAT IRISH DEER

WOLVES  BEARS

HOW DO THINK PEOPLE LIT THEIR FIRES?
Remember there were no matches or lighters!

WHY DID THEY USE ANIMAL SKINS TO MAKE THEIR HUTS?
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**Why do you think people would have settled in upland (hills and mountains) areas first?**

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Settlements became more permanent and enclosed farming areas were built, such as the Ceide Fields in County Mayo. Houses were built out of wood and included indoor fireplaces for cooking and heating.

As communities grew and eventually produced more food than they needed, it became unnecessary for all members of the community to produce food all of the time. People began to specialise in various other roles from making pottery and tools to organising large communal projects. An example of a large communal project is Newgrange in Co. Meath.

NAME THREE “JOBS” THAT EXisted AT THIS TIME:

Neolithic communities placed a huge emphasis on rituals associated with death and burial. They used a lot of their resources and time building large stone monuments to store the remains of some of their dead and act as places for communal ritual activity. Many of these larger monuments would have taken several generations of members of the community to complete. The average lifespan at the time was under 40 years of age.

WHY DO YOU THINK THESE MONUMENTS WERE SO IMPORTANT TO THEM?
Court Tombs
Court tombs are characterised by the presence of an entrance courtyard before the burial chamber. They are found almost exclusively in the northern part of Ireland.

Can you name one court tomb?

Passage Tombs
Passage tombs are so named because of the passageway connecting the outside to the burial chamber under a mound. These can be simple straight passageways or more ornate cross shaped designs with multiple burial chambers. The largest examples in Ireland are Knowth and Newgrange in County Meath. Passage tombs are more common in the north and east of Ireland.

Can you name two other passage tombs?

Portal Tombs
These tombs include dolmens. They consist of three or more upright stones supporting a large flat horizontal capstone. This would originally have been covered with earth to form a mound. Most of them are to be found in two main concentrations, one in the southeast of Ireland and one in the north.

There are artefacts from a portal dolmen on display in the museum on the ground floor, what is the name of the dolmen?
**WEDGE TOMBS**

The most widespread of the four groups, wedge tombs are particularly common in the west and southwest. County Clare is exceptionally rich in them. They are the latest of the four types belonging to the end of the Neolithic and so called from their wedge-shaped burial chambers.

**CAN YOU WRITE DOWN THE LOCATION OF TWO DIFFERENT WEDGE TOMBS IN COUNTY CLARE?**

Wedge Tombs

**DATING REMAINS AND ARTIFACTS:**

The main technique used today to figure out the age of a bone artefact is called Radiocarbon Dating.

Bodies and other organic materials at Poulnabrone gave a radiocarbon dating of between 3,800 – 3,200 BCE.

If an archaeologist in the future found one of your bones, and using radiocarbon dating found it to be 5,000 years old, in what year in the future would that archaeologist have examined your bone?

**Taphonomy** includes the study of how a body decays. For instance, where was it placed after death, was it burned, was it moved at any time, did animals have access to it etc.

Can you name two different ways that bodies were dealt with after death during the stone ages?

**Stable Isotopic Analysis:**

Isotopes are in everything in the world but are too small for us to see. Different types of food, water, land and sea all have a different mix of isotopes. As we grow our body tissues renew themselves all the time, the isotopes that are in the food we eat and the water we drink become part of all our body tissues, including our skeleton. By measuring the mix of different isotopes in bones or teeth we can trace them back to their sources and find out many things about a person, such as what their diet was like and the environment they grew up in.

We know from this analysis that the people buried at Poulnabrone were relatively healthy as a population and that all but one of them were native to the area.

If a scientist in the future used isotopic analysis on your remains, name three things it would tell them about where you lived and what you ate?
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WELL DONE! YOU HAVE FINISHED ‘STONES AND BONES: THE STONE AGES OF IRELAND’.

For more information on exhibitions and education programmes, contact the Clare County Museum

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