

The story of  
THE FIRST  
HUMANS



*The story of*

# THE FIRST HUMANS



*illustrated by*  
Peter Scott

 Orpheus

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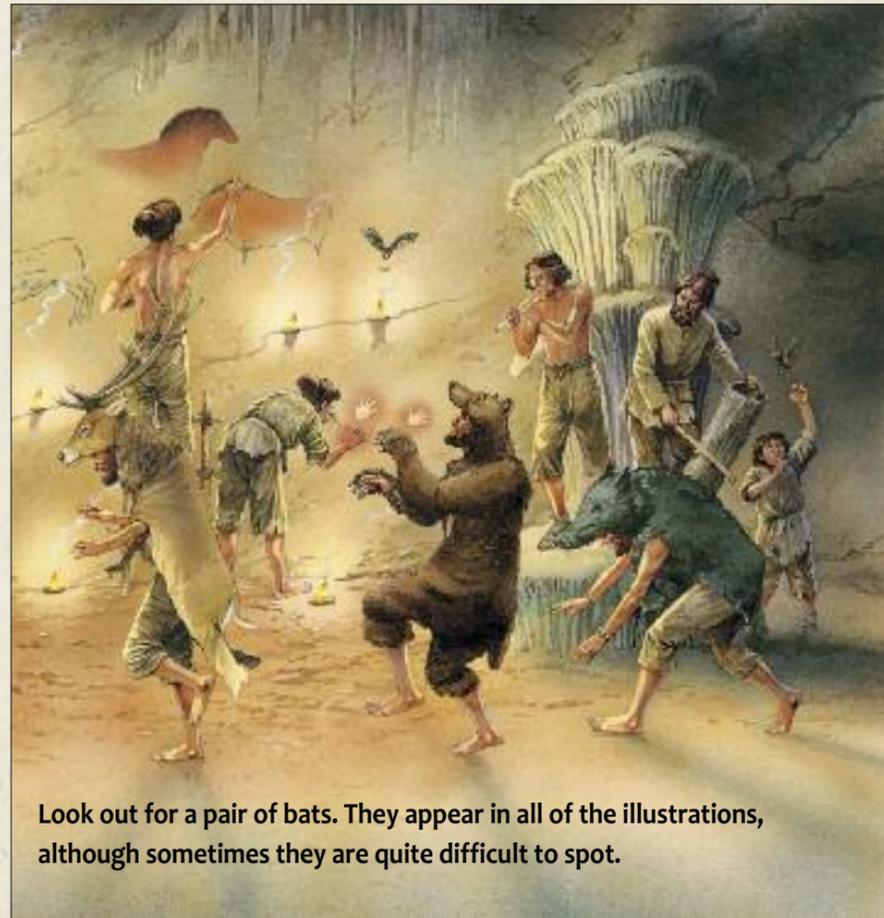
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Look out for a pair of bats. They appear in all of the illustrations, although sometimes they are quite difficult to spot.

## PREHISTORIC HUMANS

Imagine you are somewhere in Europe, at the entrance to a cave on the slopes of a mountain valley. It is hundreds of thousands of years ago. Some humans use the cave as a shelter. They wear no clothes, their bodies are covered with hair and the shape of their heads is different from ours.

As thousands of years pass, these humans evolve and change.

They become expert hunters and toolmakers, and learn to make clothes.

This is the story of our ancestors: how different kinds of humans lived before our own kind—modern humans—made their appearance . . .



Our story begins 950,000 years ago. The world is in the grip of the Ice Ages. In Europe, summers are short and cool, while winters are long and severe.

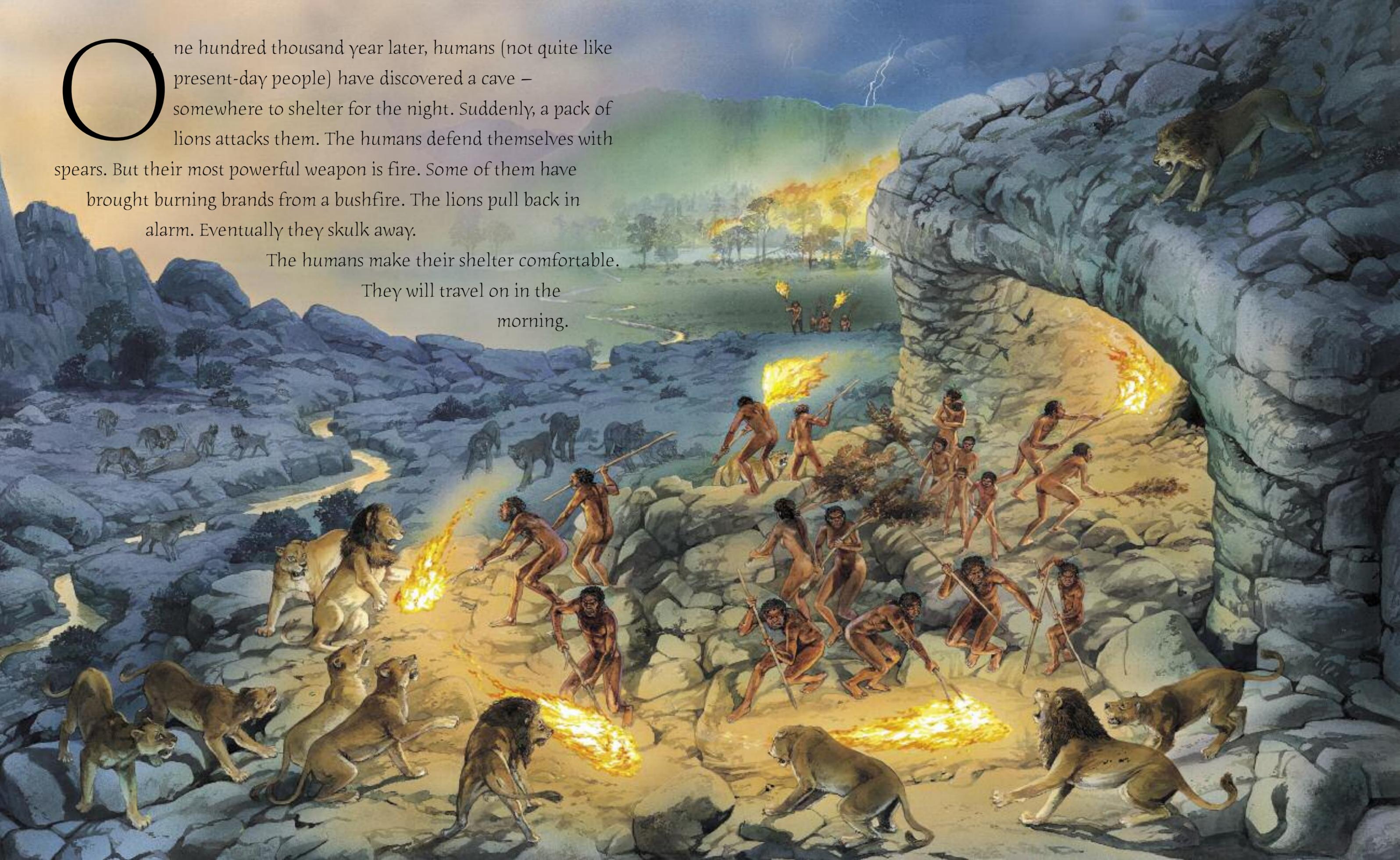
Watched by a big cat, a herd of wild horses is under attack by a pack of hyenas. Meanwhile, in a nearby cave, a cave bear spends the cold winter in a deep sleep.



One hundred thousand year later, humans (not quite like present-day people) have discovered a cave – somewhere to shelter for the night. Suddenly, a pack of lions attacks them. The humans defend themselves with spears. But their most powerful weapon is fire. Some of them have brought burning brands from a bushfire. The lions pull back in alarm. Eventually they skulk away.

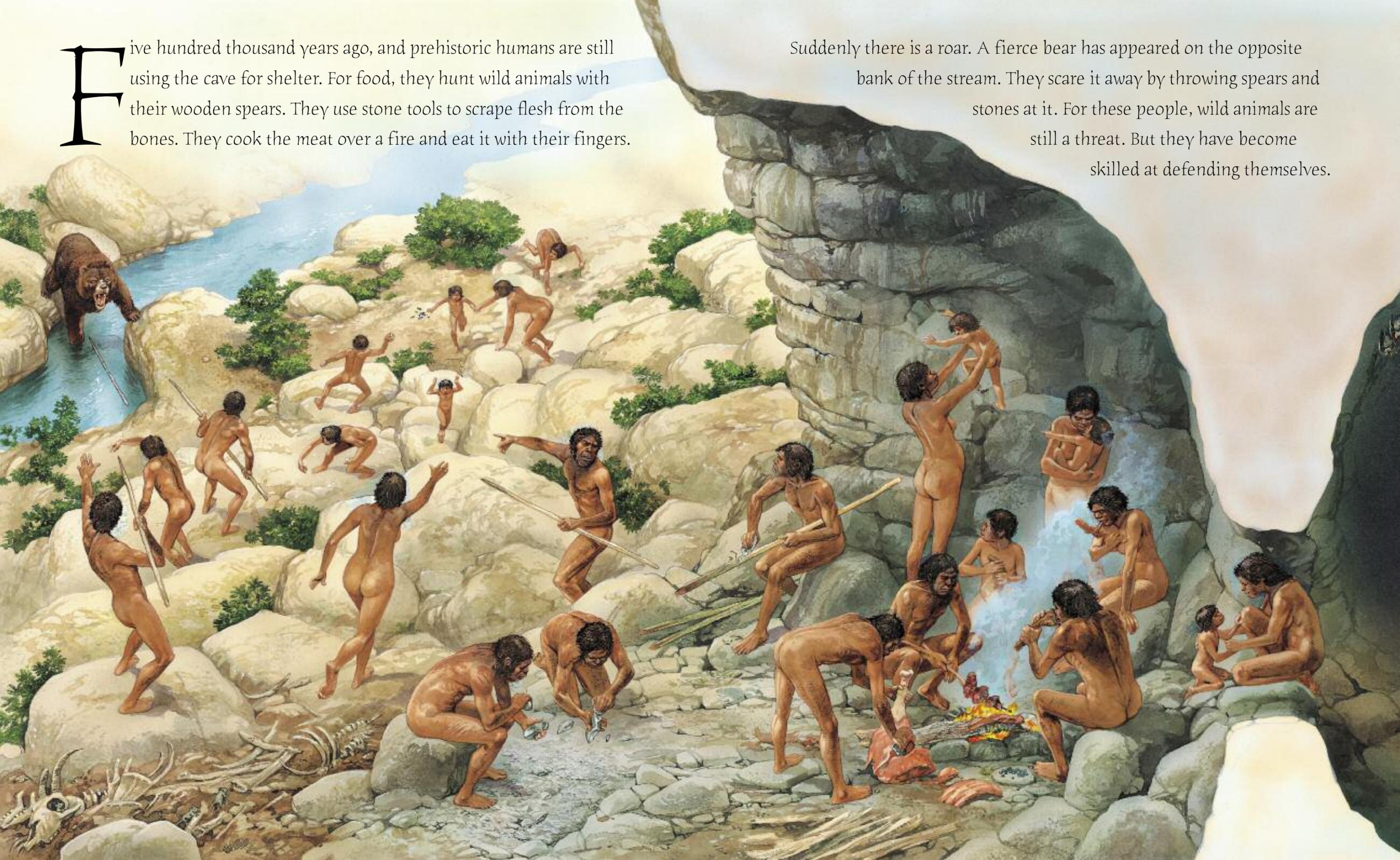
The humans make their shelter comfortable.

They will travel on in the morning.



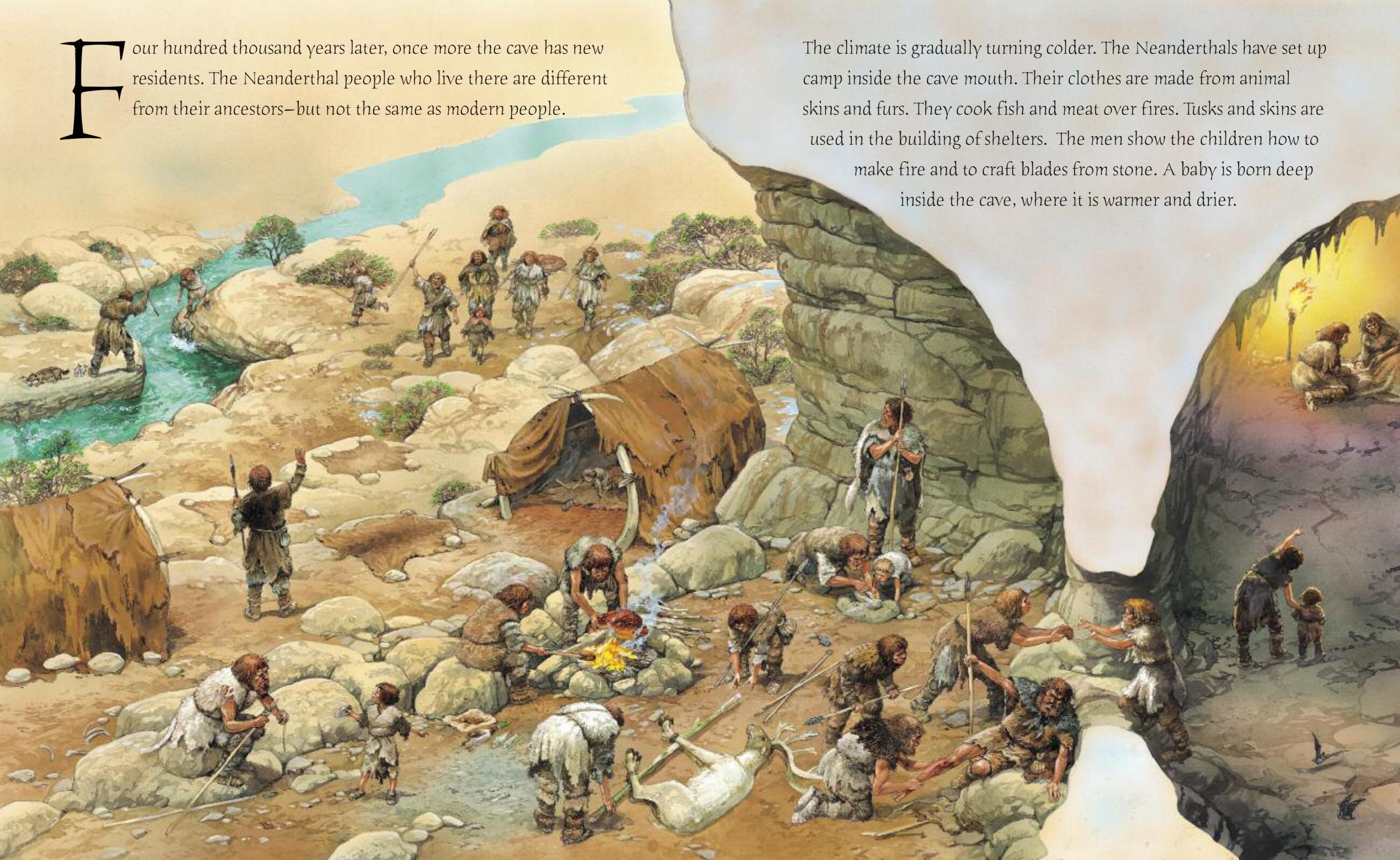
Five hundred thousand years ago, and prehistoric humans are still using the cave for shelter. For food, they hunt wild animals with their wooden spears. They use stone tools to scrape flesh from the bones. They cook the meat over a fire and eat it with their fingers.

Suddenly there is a roar. A fierce bear has appeared on the opposite bank of the stream. They scare it away by throwing spears and stones at it. For these people, wild animals are still a threat. But they have become skilled at defending themselves.



**F**our hundred thousand years later, once more the cave has new residents. The Neanderthal people who live there are different from their ancestors—but not the same as modern people.

The climate is gradually turning colder. The Neanderthals have set up camp inside the cave mouth. Their clothes are made from animal skins and furs. They cook fish and meat over fires. Tusks and skins are used in the building of shelters. The men show the children how to make fire and to craft blades from stone. A baby is born deep inside the cave, where it is warmer and drier.



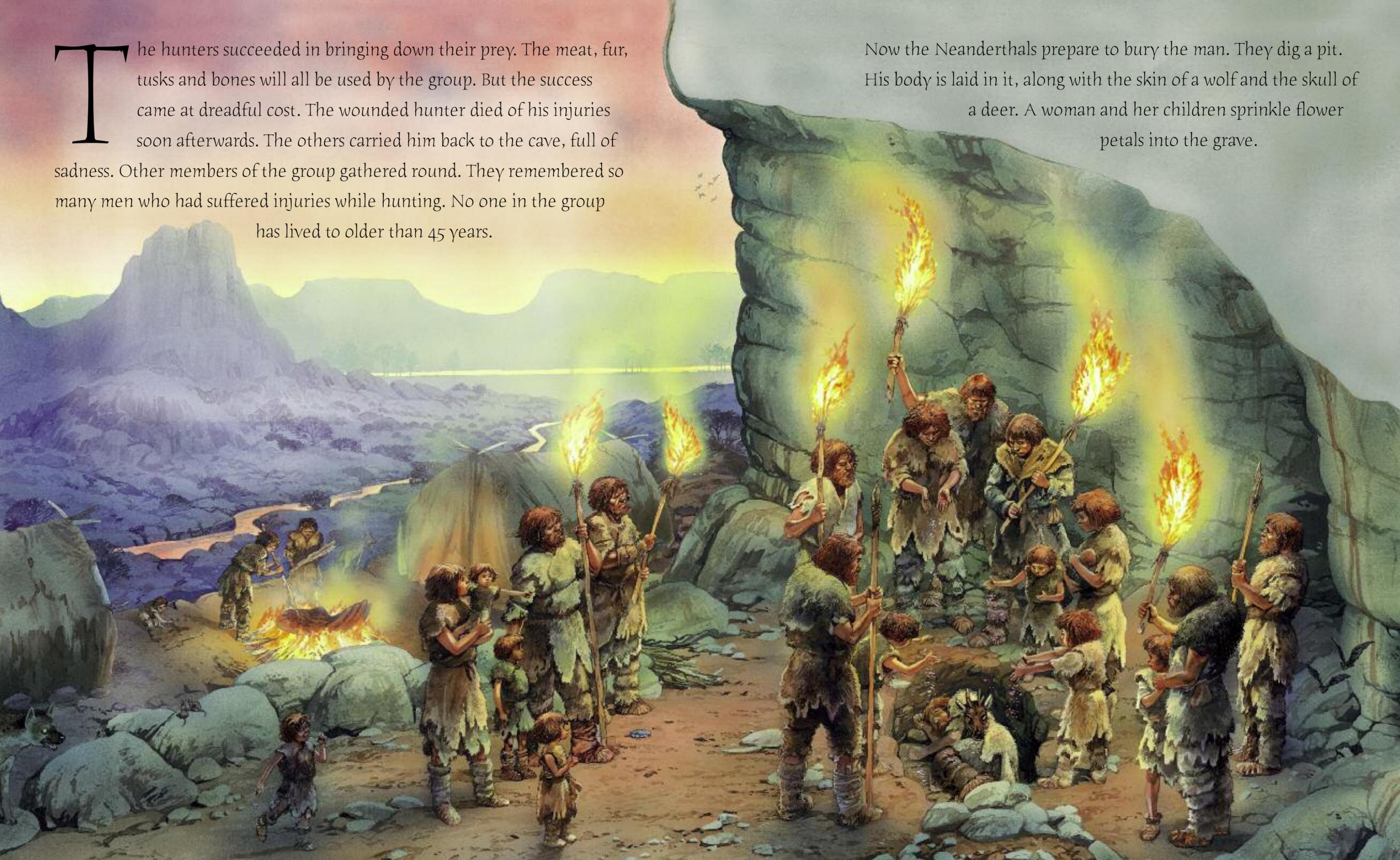
The Neanderthal hunters have trapped a woolly mammoth. They dug a pit and waited for a herd to approach. Then they rushed at the giant animals with flaming torches, driving one of them into the trap.

The mammoth writhes and roars in a desperate attempt to climb out of the pit. The hunters move in for the kill. They thrust their spears into its sides. At that moment, the mammoth suddenly rears up. Using its mighty, curved tusks, it hoists one of the hunters into the air. The man is tossed to the ground where he lands with a sickening thud.



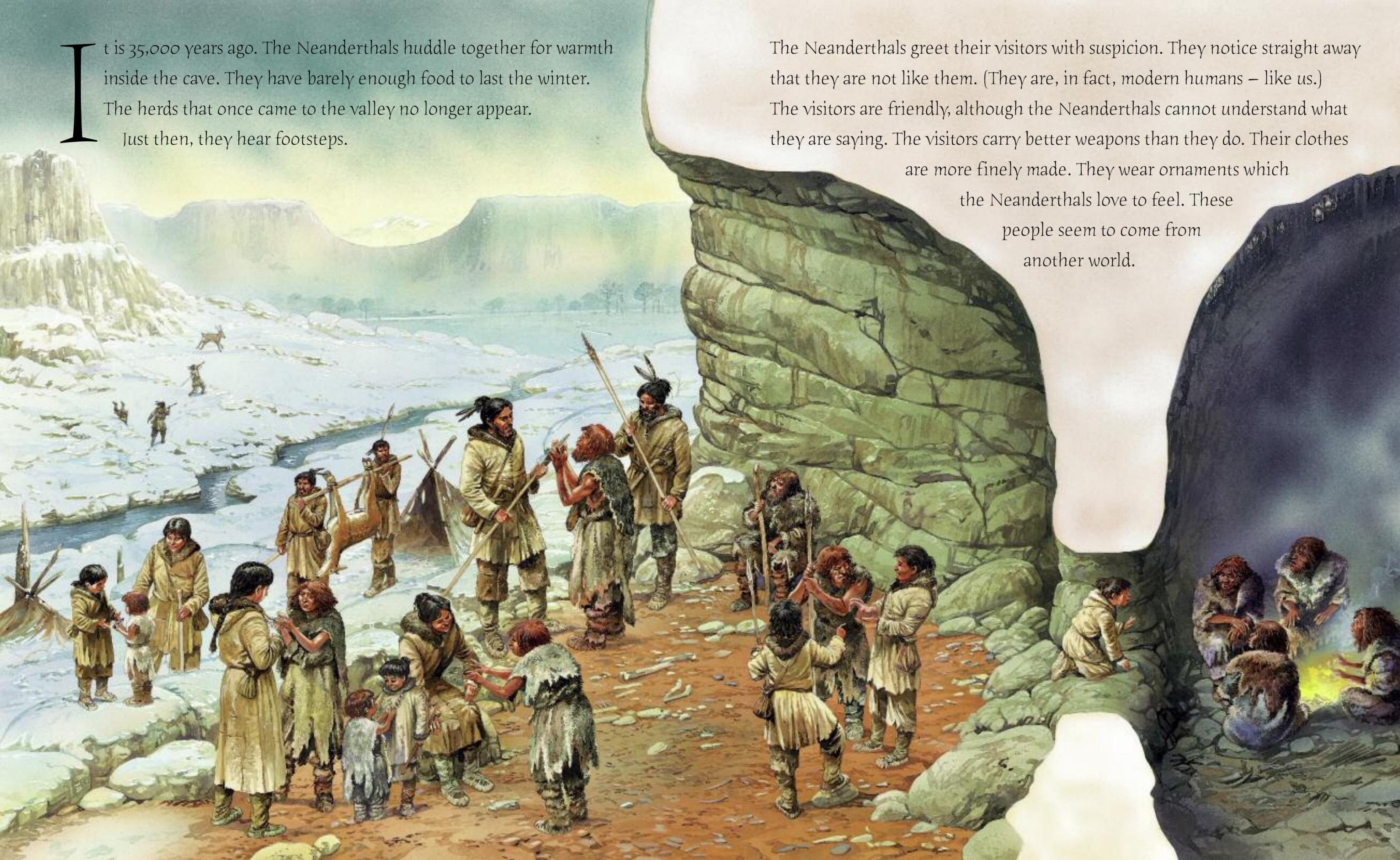
The hunters succeeded in bringing down their prey. The meat, fur, tusks and bones will all be used by the group. But the success came at dreadful cost. The wounded hunter died of his injuries soon afterwards. The others carried him back to the cave, full of sadness. Other members of the group gathered round. They remembered so many men who had suffered injuries while hunting. No one in the group has lived to older than 45 years.

Now the Neanderthals prepare to bury the man. They dig a pit. His body is laid in it, along with the skin of a wolf and the skull of a deer. A woman and her children sprinkle flower petals into the grave.



**I**t is 35,000 years ago. The Neanderthals huddle together for warmth inside the cave. They have barely enough food to last the winter. The herds that once came to the valley no longer appear. Just then, they hear footsteps.

The Neanderthals greet their visitors with suspicion. They notice straight away that they are not like them. (They are, in fact, modern humans – like us.) The visitors are friendly, although the Neanderthals cannot understand what they are saying. The visitors carry better weapons than they do. Their clothes are more finely made. They wear ornaments which the Neanderthals love to feel. These people seem to come from another world.



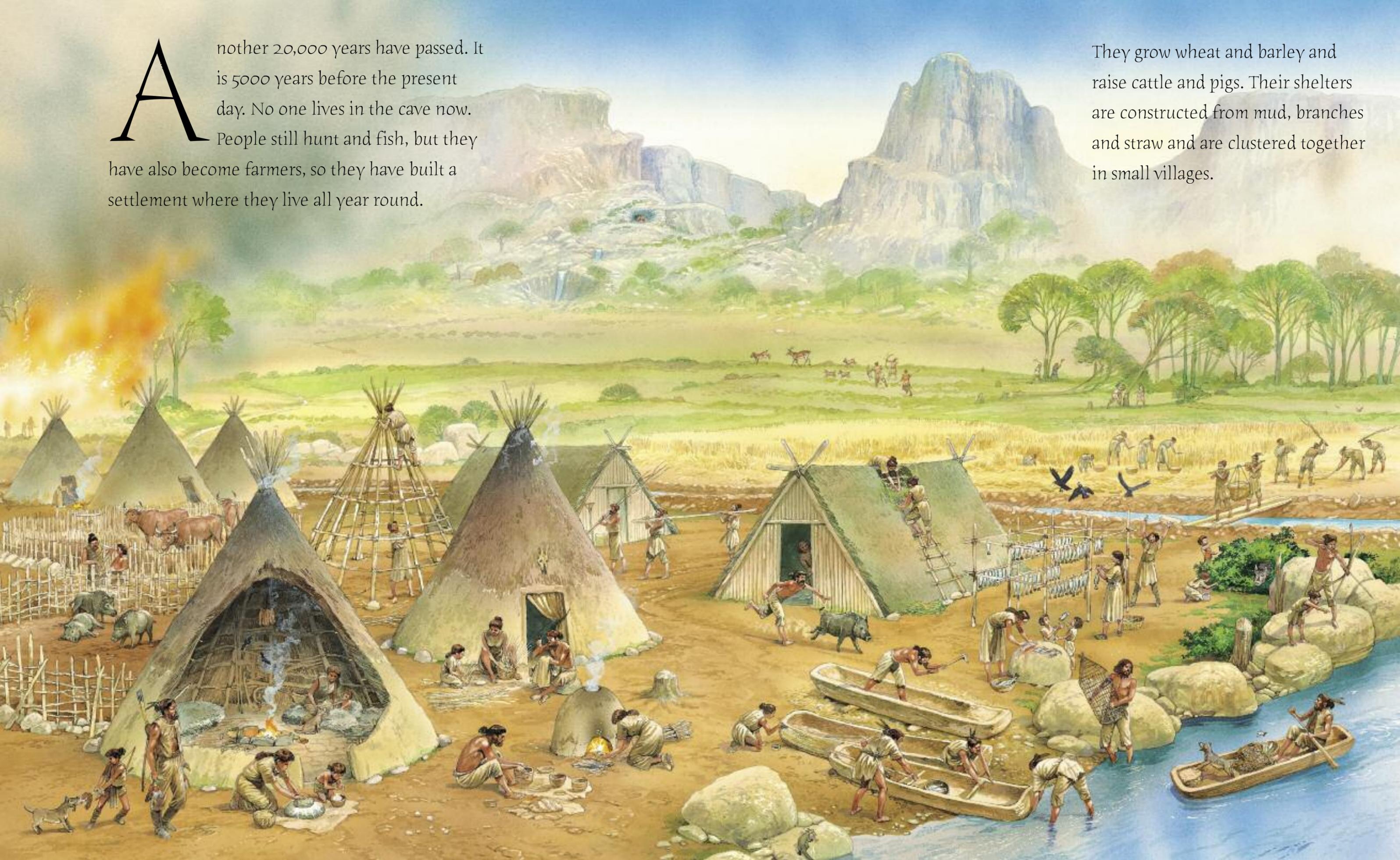


Ten thousand years later, modern humans have taken over the cave. From the depths comes drumming, dancing, clapping and chanting. Through the dim light given off by the flickering lamps and fire brands, we can just see a group of people.

Some are dressed up as animals and perform a dance to the music of a flute-player and drummer. Meanwhile, other people are at work painting pictures of animals on the cave walls. Using both tools and their own fingers, they paint with charcoal and ochre, a type of clay.

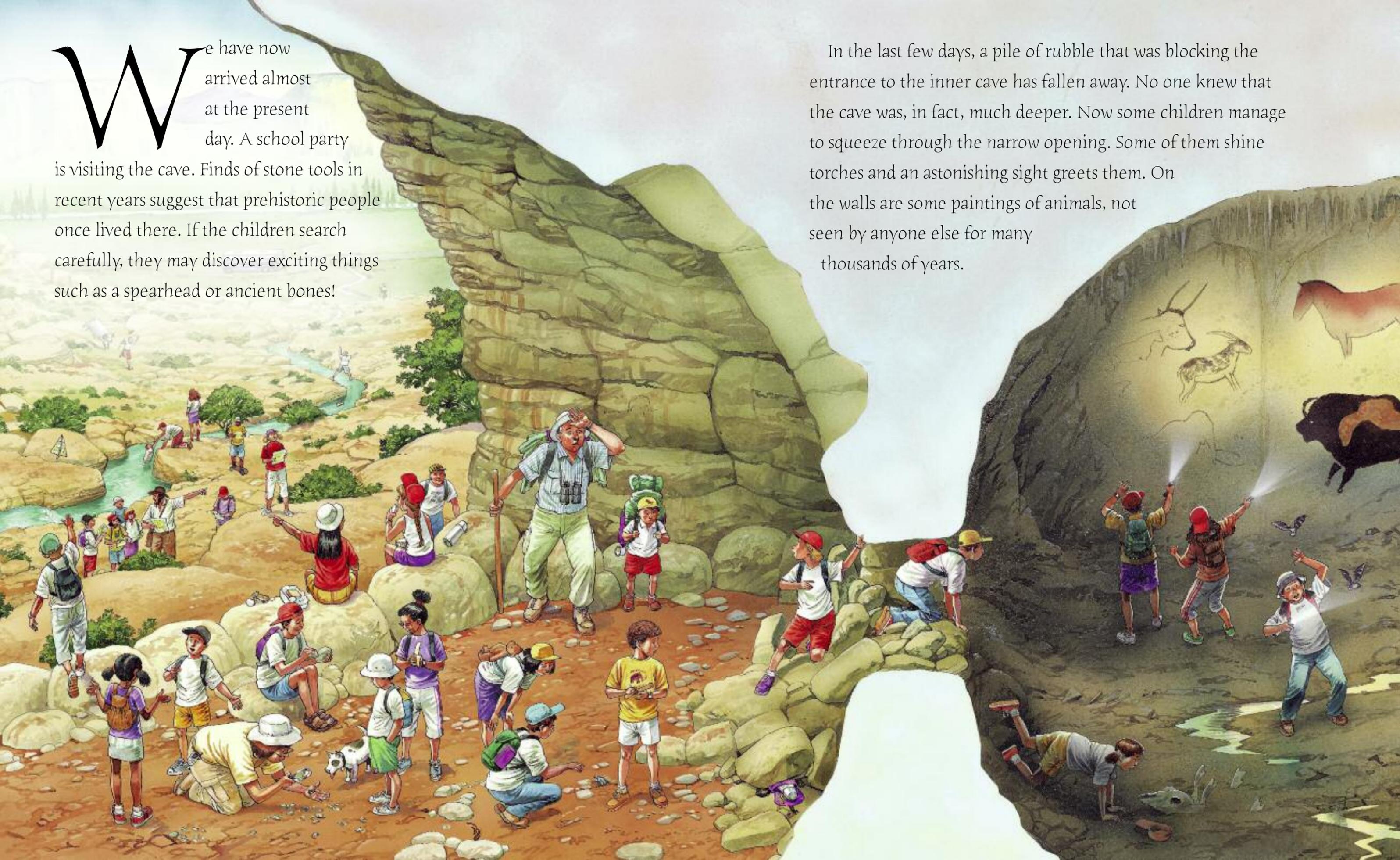
Another 20,000 years have passed. It is 5000 years before the present day. No one lives in the cave now. People still hunt and fish, but they have also become farmers, so they have built a settlement where they live all year round.

They grow wheat and barley and raise cattle and pigs. Their shelters are constructed from mud, branches and straw and are clustered together in small villages.



We have now arrived almost at the present day. A school party is visiting the cave. Finds of stone tools in recent years suggest that prehistoric people once lived there. If the children search carefully, they may discover exciting things such as a spearhead or ancient bones!

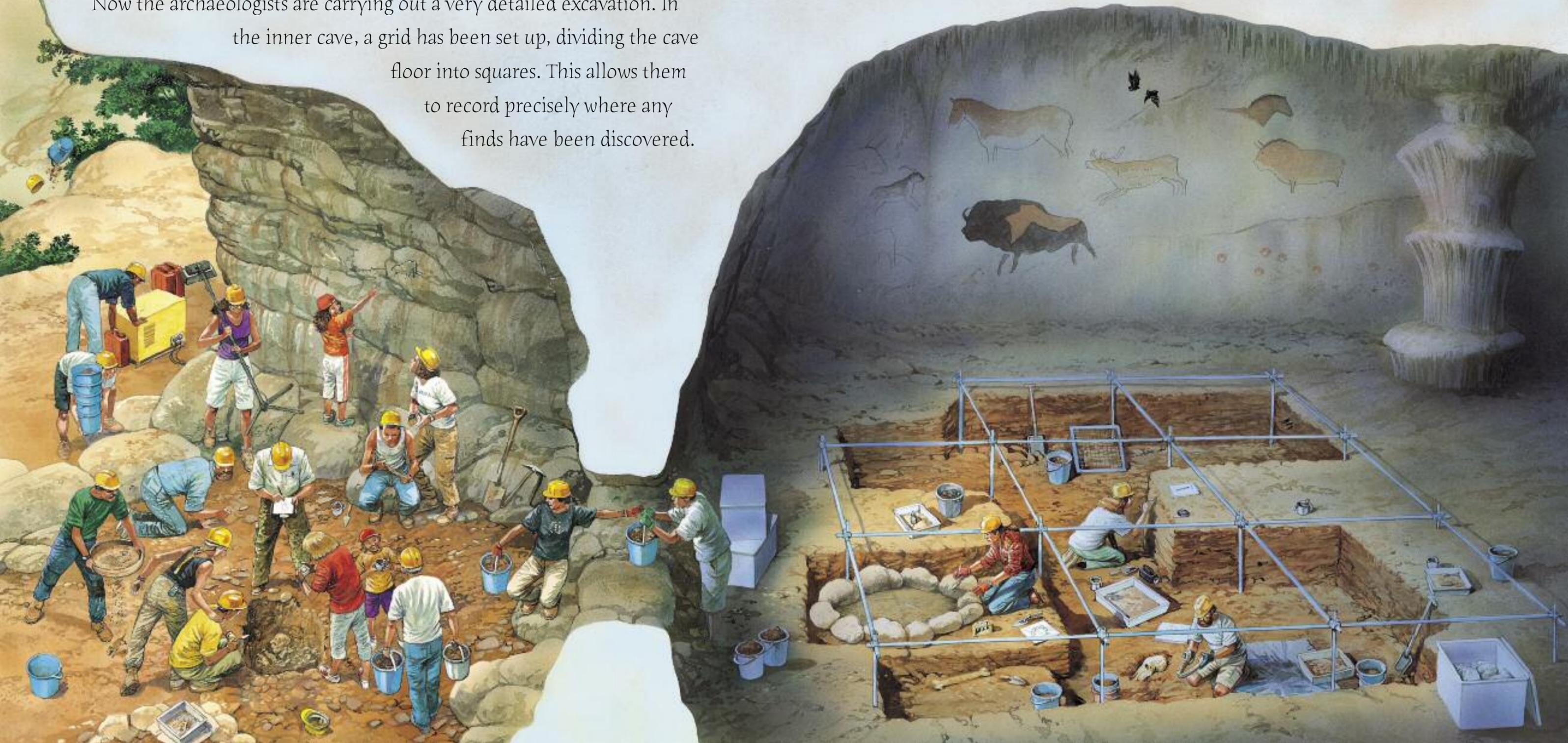
In the last few days, a pile of rubble that was blocking the entrance to the inner cave has fallen away. No one knew that the cave was, in fact, much deeper. Now some children manage to squeeze through the narrow opening. Some of them shine torches and an astonishing sight greets them. On the walls are some paintings of animals, not seen by anyone else for many thousands of years.



The children returned to their school very excited about what they had found. Their teacher contacted an expert at the local museum. Soon, a team of archaeologists specializing in early humans visited the cave. They quickly realised that the children had made an extremely important discovery.

Now the archaeologists are carrying out a very detailed excavation. In the inner cave, a grid has been set up, dividing the cave floor into squares. This allows them to record precisely where any finds have been discovered.

They carefully brush away layers of soil in their search for tools, weapons or even bones or teeth. In the cave mouth, the team dig a trench, to see what might lie just below the surface. Soon they make another very exciting discovery. They find the pit where the Neanderthal hunter was buried. His bones have lain undisturbed for 100,000 years.

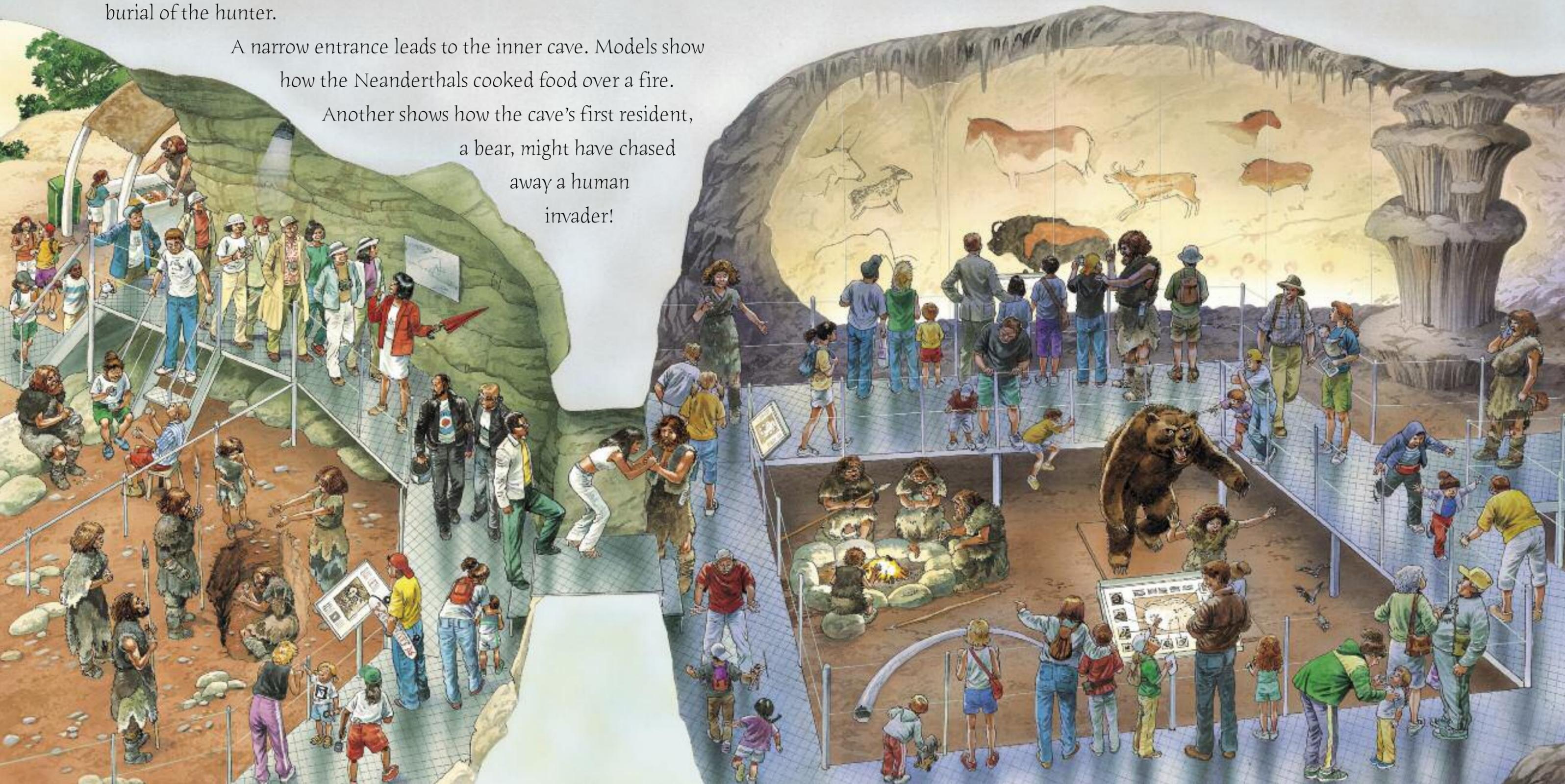


The cave, with its magnificent paintings discovered by the schoolchildren, is now a tourist attraction. Near the entrance to the cave a man dressed as a Neanderthal gives a demonstration of how his people used stone flakes as tools. Close by, actors recreate the burial of the hunter.

A narrow entrance leads to the inner cave. Models show how the Neanderthals cooked food over a fire.

Another shows how the cave's first resident, a bear, might have chased away a human invader!

The cave paintings are on display. They astonish all who see them. They have been encased in glass to protect them from the changing temperature and from moisture in the air. The visitors try to imagine how and when they were painted. You need only look back a few pages in this book to find out for yourself!



# ORIGINS OF HUMANS

Humans first evolved from apes in Africa around 4 million years ago. Early kinds of hominids, human-like beings, are known as *Australopithecus*. *Homo habilis*, whose name means “handy man”, probably evolved from a kind of *Australopithecus* about 2.5 million years ago in Africa. It may have been the first hominid capable of making simple stone tools (pictured below).



The 3.2-million-year-old skeleton of *Australopithecus afarensis*, known as “Lucy”, was discovered in 1974.

*Homo ergaster* evolved in Africa about 2 million years ago. Descendants of this kind of human, tall and powerfully built, travelled to other continents. They probably went in search of new hunting grounds, as meat had become an important part of their diet. Bones of their descendants, *Homo erectus*, have been found in Java, China and Central Asia.

By 500,000 years ago, *Homo heidelbergensis*, known as “heidelbergers”, had evolved in Europe. These new kinds



Fossilized footprints in volcanic sediments were discovered at Laetoli, East Africa, in 1976. They were made 3.6 million years ago by apemen, probably *Australopithecus afarensis*, no more than 1.5 m tall.

of human had much more brain power than their ancestors. As well as gathering fruits and nuts to eat, heidelbergers hunted large animals, tracking them and ambushing them with stealth and cunning. They worked together as a team, and were probably able to talk—although not in quite the same way that modern humans do. They used stone tools to cut up the carcasses of the animals they had killed.



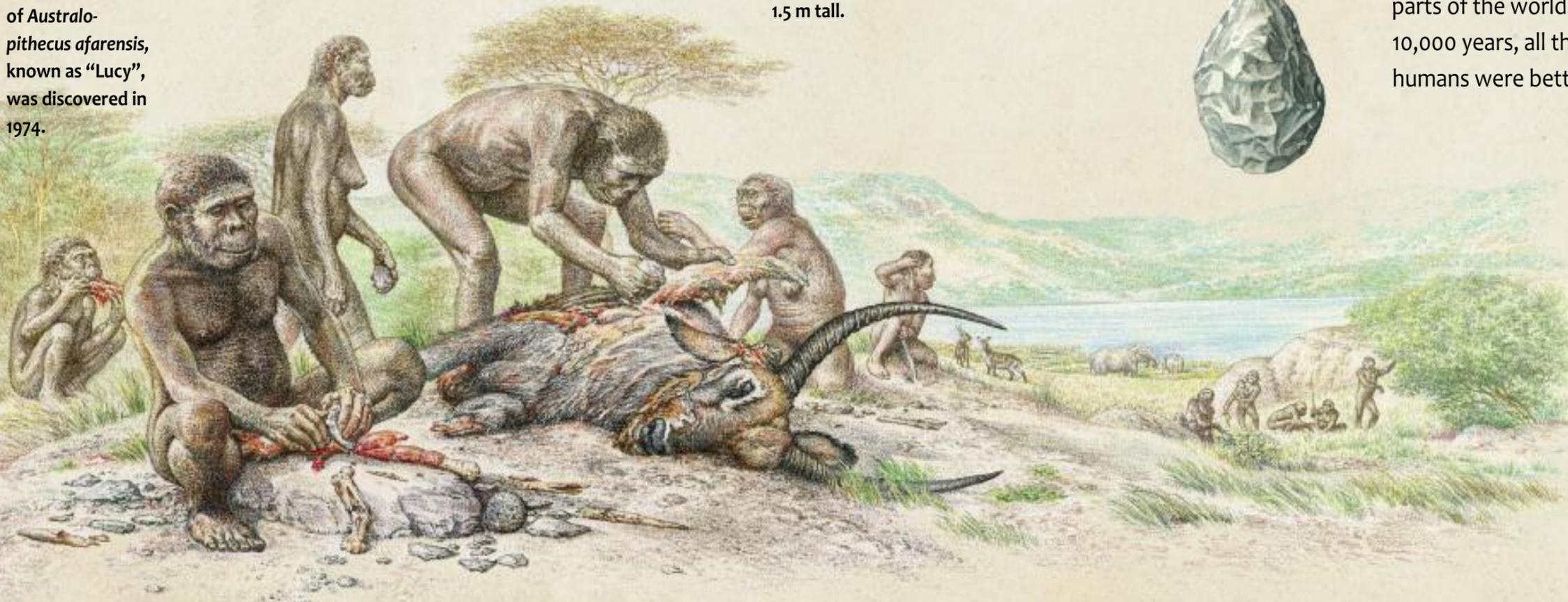
*Homo heidelbergensis* used their brains to invent better tools. This hammer head (above) was carved from the antler of a giant deer. It was used to make hand-axes (below) from flints.



*Homo ergaster* on the move

From about 400,000 years ago, some *Homo heidelbergensis* evolved into a new kind of human, called *Homo neanderthalensis*: Neanderthal. It was named after the German valley where the first fossil bones were discovered in 1856. At first, the bones were thought to belong to a horseman injured in battle with Napoleon’s armies. Scientists later realised it was a prehistoric human. Neanderthals had short, muscular bodies. Their heads had low foreheads, thick browridges and wide noses. Their brains were, on average, larger than those of modern humans.

Like *Homo ergaster* nearly 2 million years before them, *Homo sapiens*—modern humans—originated in Africa and travelled from there to other parts of the world. They arrived in Europe about 40,000 years ago. Within 10,000 years, all the Neanderthals had died out, maybe because modern humans were better able to find food and shelter than they were.



*Homo sapiens*—modern humans—probably first emerged in Africa around 200,000 years ago. About 100,000 years ago, they began to spread around the globe. They reached Indonesia and Australia 60,000 years ago. By 40,000 years ago they had arrived in Europe, and, between 35,000 and 15,000 years ago, the Americas. They crossed from Asia at a time when the Bering Strait, which divides the two continents, was dry land. They reached the southern tip of South America 11,000 years ago.



# GLOSSARY

**Archaeologist** A person who studies past human life and culture, using the evidence from finds buried in the ground.

**Australopithecus** An ape-like hominid. Australopithecus lived in Africa between 4 and 2 million years ago. Fossils of several kinds, including *afarensis*, *anamensis*, *africanus* and *garhi*, have been discovered. Some may have been ancestors of humans.

**Climate change** A region's climate, its regular pattern of weather, may change over time. In the past, climates changed because of variations in the Sun's heat or the gradual movement of the continents around the globe over millions of years.

**Evolution** The process by which forms of life have changed over millions of years, gradually adapting to make best use of their environment.

**Excavation** Digging out and removing fossils, bones or manmade objects from the ground.



The Neanderthals lived hard, dangerous lives. Many of their bones that have been discovered (such as this rib bone) show evidence of serious injury. The crippled members of the group were fed and cared for by the others.

## TOOLS AND ORNAMENTS

The Neanderthals made many cleverly-designed tools. These blades (right), chipped from flakes of rock, were made so that they fitted snugly into the hand. Teeth from elk and wolves (left) were worn as pendants.



**Flint** A hard sedimentary rock, composed chiefly of quartz and found in limestone and chalk. It may be chipped to form a sharp cutting edge and was used by prehistoric humans to make tools.



Discoveries of bones, tools and weapons in Africa all provide evidence that modern humans emerged in that continent. This carved bone harpoon (above), found in Africa, is about 90,000 years old.

**Fossils** The ancient remains or traces of once-living things, usually found preserved in rock. A living thing becomes fossilized when it is buried by sediments and its hard parts are gradually replaced by minerals.

**Handaxe** A piece of stone, shaped like a teardrop, used by prehistoric humans as a knife to cut meat.

**Heidelberg** A short name for *Homo heidelbergensis*, an extinct hominid that evolved in Europe and was the ancestor of the Neanderthals.

**Hominid** A human or human relative, including all prehistoric kinds. The word is usually used to describe early humans and their relatives.

A site that has provided a great deal of evidence about early humans is La Sima de los Huesos (the Pit of Bones) in northern Spain. Here the remains of at least 32 humans, dating to 400,000 years ago, have been found at the bottom of a 15-m shaft. The humans may have been ancestors of the Neanderthals. Their dead bodies may have been thrown into the pit by their relatives.



**Homo erectus** An extinct hominid, descended from *Homo ergaster*, that lived in Asia.

**Homo ergaster** An extinct hominid that emerged in Africa about 2 million years ago. It was the first hominid to travel out of Africa.

**Homo sapiens** The species name for modern humans, who first emerged in Africa about 200,000 years ago and later spread out to the rest of the world.

**Ice Ages** A pattern of climate change that began 2.7 million years ago. During the Ice Ages warm and cold periods alternate, each lasting several thousand years. The Ice Ages have not yet come to an end—we are currently living in a warm phase.

**Mammoth** A type of elephant, now extinct, that lived in Europe from until about 10,000 years ago. Woolly mammoths had hairy coats and long, curved tusks, and lived in cold lands.

**Neanderthal** A kind of hominid, now extinct, that lived in Europe and the Middle East from about 400,000 to 30,000 years ago.

A family of modern humans build a shelter using mammoth bones as a frame.



By about 35,000 years ago, modern humans were producing art forms. This tiny sculpture of a woman's head (above), known as the Lady of Brassempouy, was carved from mammoth ivory about 25,000 years ago.

