

REFLECTIONS

OUR SHAGGY COUSINS

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Our shaggy cousins, the Neanderthals, have had a bum rap for most of the time since the first fossil evidence of their existence turned up in the Neander Valley, “Neanderthal” in German, near the town of Düsseldorf on the Rhine, in 1856. Workers seeking to extract limestone from the floor of a cave sixty feet above the valley floor uncovered a human skull buried in the mud near the cave entrance, and then some other bones nearby—a strangely brutish skull, more or less human but long and narrow, with a sloping forehead out of which bulged an enormous ridge above the brows. The other bones—thighbones, they were—were much thicker and heavier than human bones should have been.

The first anthropologist to see them, Professor Hermann Schaaffhausen of Bonn, was of the opinion that the bones must be a relic of a primitive form of mankind, “the most ancient memorial of the early inhabitants of Europe.” Other scientists weren’t so sure. The archaeologist Rudolph Virchow examined the bones and called them the remains of a deformed idiot who had suffered from rickets and arthritis. But then, in 1859, Darwin’s theory of evolution exploded upon the world, and a few years later Darwin’s friend Thomas Henry Huxley offered support for the notion that the Neanderthal bones were those of an early variety of man, “different from *Homo sapiens* but not wholly distinct anatomically.” Huxley did not regard the bones as those of an ancestor of mankind, an intermediate form between ape and man, but rather as belonging to a parallel species, a sort of cousin of ours, more or less human but not linked to us in direct lineage. As other Neanderthal fossils, including complete skeletons, were discovered later in the nineteenth century, Huxley’s view proved to be the correct one.

The new discoveries allowed us to build a picture of the Neanderthals—burly, barrel-chested people with weak chins, heavy brow ridges, sloping foreheads, broad noses. Their mouths jutted forward like muzzles. They definitely had to be classed as a separate species—*Homo neanderthalensis*—but they looked enough like us so that, properly dressed and shaved, they could have passed among us without seeming excessively strange. By the esthetic standards of *Homo sapiens*, they were an ugly, coarse-looking race. But they probably had their own ideas of beauty and would think just as little of us, if they were still around. We know now, though, that the Neanderthals evolved several hundred thousand years ago, spread widely through Europe and the Near East, endured the rigors of the Ice Age with apparent success, and became extinct only as our own *Homo sapiens* ancestors began to filter into their territory thirty to fifty thousand years ago.

Because these extinct cousins of ours looked so brutish, even apelike, by our way of thinking, we came to have a low regard for their intelligence, and had a stereotyped comic-strip image of them as dim-witted, club-wielding barbarians who dragged their women around by the hair. In today’s political vocabulary “Neanderthal” is an epithet used scornfully about men—always just men—who are thought to hold archaic views about political and social matters. Memories of the Neanderthals may even be the basis for the legends of ogres, gnomes, trolls, and other sullen, nasty uglies of European folklore. And the assumption grew that it was easy for our ancestors to drive them into extinction because they were such stupid creatures.

But, as I said at the beginning, the Neanderthals may have been getting a bum rap.

Evidence has come to light in recent years indicating that they were far more intelligent than the popular view of them would have it. It was assumed, for example, that they were incapable of speech and communicated, at best, by bestial grunts. This idea came not only from our view of them as simple-minded dopes but out of a belief that they lacked the physical hardware needed to shape words with any precision. But in 1989 a Neanderthal fossil came to light in a cave in Israel that was seen to possess a hyoid bone, the small u-shaped bone that anchors the muscles of the tongue and makes coherent speech possible. Some apes have hyoid bones, too, but they are not positioned in such a way that the tongue and larynx can produce words. The Neanderthals' was—making it the only other hominid species able to have a spoken language.

The next step in the upgrading of the Neanderthals came in 2018 with the discovery of the first known Neanderthal cave art—ladder-like shapes, dots, and handprints, painted on the walls of caves at three sites in Spain. Cro-Magnon cave art, of course, has been known and admired for a long time, but these paintings, which the uranium-thorium system of dating gives an age of at least sixty-five thousand years, are the first indication of an artistic impulse among Neanderthals, and they are many thousands of years older than the famous cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira. So—although some anthropologists still dispute the evidence of the hyoid bone and the ladder paintings—the old harsh view of the Neanderthals as moronic subhuman creatures has begun to give way.

The idea that a parallel human species once existed in the world, similar in many ways to us but strikingly different in others, has long captivated the imaginations of writers. There is an extensive body of speculative fiction about Neanderthals, of which the best, I think, is William Golding's novel *The Inheritors*—his second novel, after *Lord of the Flies*. Golding, telling his story from the viewpoint of Lok, a Neanderthal man, brilliantly depicts a people who are reasonably intelligent, but whose intellectual processes seem murky by comparison to ours, and certainly operate out of perceptions quite different from ours. (A comb is “a hand made out of bone.” Men paddling a canoe are “sitting in a log and digging the water.” This is not simple-mindedness as much as it is *alienness*. These people think in a way very different from the way we do.) At the end of the book Golding switches abruptly to the *Homo sapiens* viewpoint and the veil of perception is lifted—the newcomers are indisputably human, and we can understand them without having to find equivalents for the often blurry and always quite strange concepts of the Neanderthals. But the novel makes it clear that Lok and his companions are human too: humans of a very different sort, is all.

Within the science fiction field itself, there is the example of L. Sprague de Camp's 1939 novella, “The Gnarly Man,” which gives us broad-beamed, stocky Clarence Aloysius Gaffney, who is earning his living in a circus pretending to be the ape-man “Ungo-Bungo,” but who is actually a Neanderthal who was struck by lightning fifty thousand years ago and thereby underwent metabolic adjustments that made him immortal. Gaffney does not speak with perfect clarity—de Camp knew nothing about the hyoid-bone discovery that would come fifty years after he wrote his story—but in fifty thousand years he has managed to master the mechanisms of human speech, and he is anything but stupid, having adapted himself cunningly to the ways of the new species that drove his own into extinction. It is a remarkably clever story.

Twenty years later Philip Jose Farmer took a second look at the same theme in “The Alley Man,” with a Neanderthal once again surviving into our modern world. In this raucous, roaring tale, though, Farmer does not favor his Neanderthal with immortality: he is a contemporary man, one of a small and secretive group of the ancient stock that has kept its blood line pure over the past five hundred centuries, “doomed

to live in shanty-towns and stay off the streets and prowl the junkpiles in the alleys.” Farmer tells us that his Alley Man is “something so squat and blocky it seemed more a tree trunk come to life than a man,” whose “forehead was abnormally low; over the eyes were bulging arches of bone. These were tufted with eyebrows like Spanish moss that made even more cavelike the hollows in which the little blue eyes lurked.” No beauty, no: but he has managed to make a life for himself amidst what he calls the False Folk, the latter-day humans who long ago displaced his own race.

Isaac Asimov’s 1958 version of the Neanderthal story, “The Ugly Little Boy,” also provides a sympathetic view of the Neanderthals. A three-year-old Neanderthal boy is scooped out of his own era by a time machine and brought to ours. For some, he is seen as little more than an ape, but the nurse hired by the experimenters to care for him argues persuasively that he is simply a human of a different physical type, a member of a race that had domesticated animals, tool-making skills, and religious beliefs. (In 1991 I expanded the original Asimov novella into a novel of the same title, in which the story loops back and forth between the adventures of the little boy in the modern world and his own prehistoric era.)

I offered my own take on Neanderthals in the 1987 story, “House of Bones,” in which a modern man, a time traveler, finds himself stranded among a tribe of early *Homo sapiens* thirty thousand years ago—and then the tribe is joined by a Neanderthal, one of the last of his kind, a straggler who drifts into the village and is adopted as a sort of pet by the tribesfolk. The story does regard the Neanderthal as a far simpler being than the more advanced people into whose encampment he has wandered, but the treatment is, again, sympathetic.

Current research has probably seen to it that the old image of the Neanderthal as a grunting savage has given way for good. We know now not to take such a patronizing attitude toward our shaggy cousins: they were different from us, but not all that different, and we need not pat ourselves on the back for being vastly superior to them in any important way. Perhaps W.S. Gilbert had it right in *Princess Ida*, an operetta written in 1884, when the Neanderthals were just becoming known, and the whole idea of Darwinian evolution was still new and strange. *Princess Ida* was intended as a satire on women’s colleges, but men don’t come out of it very well either, and Lady Psyche, Professor of Humanities, has this uncomplimentary little ditty about “Darwinian man”—present-day male persons:

*Darwinian man, though well behaved,
At best is only a monkey shaved!*

Neanderthals were not, of course, monkeys, nor even apes; but the point is still a good one. Take a Neanderthal, give him a shave and a haircut and dress him in modern clothes, and turn him loose on the streets of one of our cities, and he probably would attract no more attention than any other denizen of our own day.