

# REFLECTIONS

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## THE NEANDERTHAL CATHEDRAL

The Neanderthals have fascinated me since I was a small boy, close to eighty years ago, prowling the halls of prehistoric life at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The dinosaurs were the main attraction for me then, of course, but I did find and stare in wonder at the display of fossil skulls of early human beings, the Pithecanthropus and the Peking Man and the not yet discredited Piltdown Man and on and up toward Neanderthal Man, the most interesting of all, because the Neanderthals were so much like us and yet so different.

Even then, eight or nine years old, I was awed by the idea that another kind of man, not quite human, with bulging brows and receding chins and (I assumed, without evidence) shaggy ape-like pelts, had roamed the earth thousands of years ago, before my own unknown ancestors had appeared, and then, mysteriously, had died out. They were, I thought, wrongly, as it turned out, perhaps our own ancestors, just as the mammoths and mastodons whose fossil skeletons I saw down the hall were the ancestors of the elephants in the Bronx Zoo. I consulted books about early mankind and saw them referred to as “primitive men” and “cavemen” and even “ape-men.” A typical description of the Neanderthals back then is this, from a book called *Fossils*, by Richard Swann Lull, that my father bought for me in the museum shop somewhere around 1945, and that I still own:

Neanderthal man . . . was short of stature, stocky, but with a slouching gait and a huge bestial head thrust forward, with low skull vault and beetling brows. . . . He seems to have been the culminating member of a long-lived race that as such has ceased to be, though because of possible crossing with Cro-Magnon man, some of his blood, greatly diluted, may still exist. He had fire and practiced reverential burial, which seems to imply some conception of existence beyond physical death, whatever the form of that concept may have been.

More or less human, in other words, but rather less than more. Slouching . . . huge bestial head . . . low skull vault . . . beetling brows . . . in short, a pretty ugly customer, a savage, primitive creature somewhat more advanced evolutionarily than chimpanzees or apes, but quite different from our own tidy civilized selves. Not only were they unlike us physically, but the excavation of Neanderthal sites revealed none of the quite sophisticated cave art that distinguishes the Cro-Magnon culture of Western Europe, or much evidence of Neanderthal skill in sculpture or architecture.

When I began reading science fiction I found Neanderthals turning up frequently. H.G. Wells told of them at the beginning of the twentieth century in a story with an explicitly descriptive name: “The Grisly Folk,” saying of them:

They walked or shambled along with a peculiar slouch, they could not turn their heads to the sky, and their teeth were very different from those of true men. . . . Probably he thought and behaved differently from us. Perhaps he had a better memory and less reasoning power than real men, or perhaps he had more nervous energy and less intelligence. He had no chin, and the way his jawbones come together below make it very doubtful if he could have used any such sounds in speech as we employ. Probably he did not talk at all. He could not hold a pin between his finger and thumb. The more we learn about this beast-man the stranger he becomes to us.

Wells has it wrong, there. The more we learned about Neanderthals, the less beastly they came to seem, and that is reflected in such sympathetic views of them as William Golding's novel *The Inheritors*, or two novellas on much the same theme, L. Sprague de Camp's "The Gnarly Man," 1939, and Philip Jose Farmer's "The Alley Man," 1959, in which immortal Neanderthals somehow survive into our own time and are able to pass unrecognized. Isaac Asimov's novella, "The Ugly Little Boy," from 1958, which I expanded into a novel in 1992, depicted the Neanderthals as even closer to what Wells called "real men." I wrote a Neanderthal story myself, "House of Bones" (1988), in which one of the last of the Neanderthals wanders into a *Homo sapiens* village somewhere in Eastern Europe and is treated gently, though somewhat condescendingly, by our ancestors. I could list many other examples of Neanderthals in science fiction.

Modern work in biology and paleontology now has shown that the Neanderthals were much closer to what Wells thought of as "real men" than we believed only a generation ago. DNA research has shown a great overlap between Neanderthal genes and ours, even to the extent of demonstrating that all of us carry 2 or 3 percent of Neanderthal in our own genetic makeup. And further exploration of Neanderthal sites in Europe and western Asia has revealed surprising indications of a relatively sophisticated Neanderthal culture unsuspected by earlier anthropologists and quite different from that of the anthropoid brutes of past fact and fiction.

A significant recent work of Neanderthal rehabilitation is a book called *Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art*, by the British archaeologist Rebecca Wragg Sykes. It brings together all that has been recently discovered about these prehistoric people, showing that they ought not to be considered a primitive and inferior version of *Homo sapiens*, but a parallel race of considerable attainment, which dominated the world for hundreds of thousands of years before our own ancestors appeared on the scene a relatively short time ago, and which did not so much become extinct as become folded into our own species in the fullness of time. They were different from us, yes, but quite human in their own way—cousins, so to speak.

Chapter by chapter, Dr. Sykes demolishes the nineteenth-century stereotype of Neanderthals as shaggy, grunting, inarticulate beast-men and replaces it with the new vision of them as true humans, though humans of a different sort. She shows us their adaptability to climate change, making do through ice ages and tropical epochs alike throughout the hundreds of thousands of years of their dominance in Europe. She shows us their advanced techniques for hunting the animals that were their chief food supply and for butchering the meat on which they subsisted, and she shows us, too, how they made the elegant tools with which they carried out their butchering tasks. She tells us how they cooked and prepared their food. There is a discussion of how the Neanderthals created shelter for themselves, not simply by moving into the nearest vacant cave, but by building actual structures. Marked bones indicate the possibility that they had arithmetic of a sort. She speaks of their burial customs, which argue for religious belief. And there is much, much more, all of it revealing the Neanderthals as far more complex beings than they have generally been regarded as.

What I found most startling, however, was the account of a remarkable construction at Bruniquel Cave in southwestern France, which to me seems to be no less than a kind of Neanderthal cathedral, as awe-inspiring in its way as those of Chartres or Paris.

The extraordinary Bruniquel site was closed by natural processes in deep antiquity, and remained unknown until cave explorers dug a path through the entrance in 1990. Some preliminary carbon-14 dating of what lay within showed an age of at least 47,600 years, placing it at a time when only Neanderthals inhabited that part of France. Work then was interrupted for more than twenty years, finally to

be resumed in 2013, and the amazing results were made known to the world in a piece published in the British scientific magazine *Nature* three years later.

What the archaeologists had found, more than a thousand feet deep in the cave, was a huge chamber in which the broken stumps of stalagmites had been arranged in two circular rings, with some stacks of stalagmites (“speleofacts,” archaeologists call them) lying just beyond them. “Meticulous study found complexity at every level,” Dr. Sykes writes. “Over 400 stalagmites had been snapped off, and from among the broken pieces Neanderthals had selected wide, straight mid-portions, obviously with particular sizes in mind. By aligning their ‘speleofacts,’ they had formed two rings on the chamber floor. The largest is more than 6 by 4m (6.6 by 4.4yd), and contains two small speleofact piles, with another two heaps placed externally at either end. A second smaller but more circular ring is set to one side.”

She compares the broken columns to those of a Greek or Roman temple: no random jumble, but a carefully constructed array, the stalagmites thrust into the cave floor and supported by smaller ones propped against them. Five long ones stand up side by side as guardians of a sort, and behind them is a flat plate balanced on a cylinder. It is not an enormous leap of the imagination to see that as a kind of altar. Associated with the stalagmite “cathedral” are some burnt bones, those of a bear or other large mammal: evidence of a prehistoric sacrificial rite, maybe? That the stalagmites show signs of fire, fifty-seven of them reddened and sixty-six blackened, is a further indication of some ceremonial purpose.

One astonishing thing about this Bruniquel structure is its depth within the cave—far beyond the reach of sunlight, so all the work would have to be done with the aid of torches, an enormous task, one burning branch after another brought from the distant entrance, and the construction carried out in an atmosphere of choking smoke. That these prehistoric builders had mastered the skill of lighting a deep cave is a remarkable indication of technical prowess at an early date.

But how early? The age of the site, when revealed by modern uranium-series dating techniques, was even yet more staggering: 176,000 years. *Homo sapiens* would not reach Western Europe in its migration out of Africa for another hundred thousand years or so. It could only have been the Neanderthals who had built this strange and wondrous monument to themselves, and, so far, we know nothing else like it in all of prehistory.

Our minds can’t comprehend a span of 176,000 years. Go back a mere 250 years and what will become the United States is still the Thirteen Colonies. The Roman Empire is less than ten times as old as that. The Great Pyramid of Khufu—4600 years old—is just an eyeblink deeper into the past. The cave paintings of Lascaux are perhaps 20,000 years old. And here is the Neanderthal cathedral of Bruniquel, eight times more ancient than those.

For hundreds of thousands of years the world belonged to the Neanderthals. We will never know what rites their priests performed in the cave at Bruniquel, nor what language they spoke, or which gods they worshipped. But those eerie circular structures, deep within a cave in what would in the far future be France, speak to us of a species that had achieved considerable intellectual attainment at a time that to us is inconceivably remote. Mere grunting ape-men? No. They were human beings, different from us in a few physiological respects, but human all the same. Our cousins, if you will: our long-lost cousins, emerging now at last from the mists of deep time.