

NEANDERTHAL FUNERARY PRACTICES: TOO SAVAGE TO MOURN?

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My name is Sarah, and I'm a PhD student at the University of Southampton. I would love to be able to tell you I'm scrambling around in the dirt playing with some real archaeology, but right now I'm sat at my desk reading about how other people played around in the dirt and feeling a little envious. I'm actually reading excavation reports and articles about Neanderthal remains from across the world, from the famous La Chapelle-aux-Saints in France to Kebara in Israel.



*Cast of a Neanderthal skull on display
Sterkfontein Caves, South Africa.
Taken by Sarah Schwarz
(@archaeosarah)*

My PhD project focuses on Neanderthal funerary practices – which, in short, is anything and everything that Neanderthals could have done with their dead. (This is normally the point where the entire dinner table goes quiet and I'm left trying to decipher whether the faces staring back at me are confused, intrigued, or terrified). I'm looking for evidence of any and all types of funerary practices, such as burial/inhumation; funerary caching, curation, defleshing and disarticulation. This involves me going through every record I can possibly find of every scrap of Neanderthal remains across the world and examining each individual for characteristic signs of each type of funerary practice – for example, a pit feature for a burial or cut marks for defleshing.

But why is that important? The treatment and honour of the dead through funerary practices and rituals is a key part of our society, and although a culturally sensitive issue it's something every society does in some way. It is a key emotional display of our humanity, and the cognitive ability to understand the concept of death and being aware of one's own mortality is quite a realisation. The ability to be able to understand that death will come to us all one day, and to understand that intervention in the lives of others can at least stave off the inevitable for a little longer is an obvious conclusion for us – but it is clear

in the Neanderthal world too. For example, the 'Old Man' of Shanidar (Shanidar 1, Iraq) was an elderly individual with several traumatic injuries and deformities, which could have required the assistance of others to survive, shows that Neanderthals had this understanding. And understanding how this evolved in Neanderthals helps us understand how the same characteristics, emotions, and rituals evolved in modern humans.

What struck me was how easily the concept of a Neanderthal burying a relative or friend could be so easily dismissed, and how the idea that Neanderthals were a bit brutish and slow still seems to be the popular stereotype for this species. The idea that Neanderthals were a bit daft and weren't capable of the same things as modern humans also frustrates me – just because we haven't dug up a Neanderthal who died in middle of updating his Facebook status on his iPad, it doesn't mean they were stupid. On the contrary, Neanderthals appear to have been routinely honouring their deceased loved ones well before *Homo sapiens* ever decided to join them in Europe.



A hint that things might not be looking up for Ned...

Although I'm still in the early stages of my PhD, so far the pattern emerging appears to be that the early Neanderthals began by defleshing and disarticulating individuals (I am deliberately avoiding the use of the term 'cannibalism' because I cannot conclusively prove they were routinely consuming the remains), and from around 115,000 years BP the later Neanderthals begin burying them. And it doesn't matter if they're male or female, old or young, everyone is treated in the same way across the Neanderthal world. What a lovely thought.

I still have a lot of work to do on my research, so hopefully by next year's Day of Archaeology I will have more to tell you. But in the mean time I'm sure my cheery topic will continue to destroy dinner party conversations for some time to come, and maybe, I will be on my way to mastering the art of discussing taboo subjects without scaring the general population.

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