

Rewriting Neanderthal Prehistory and Their Relationship to Modern Humans¹



Homo neanderthalensis and their known range of habitation (images from Wikipedia).

Discovery: 1856, Feldhofer Cave, Neander Valley, Germany (1848 skull Gibraltar unrecognized).

Origin: until recently thought *Homo heidelbergensis* was a common ancestor to *Homo sapiens* (us, modern humans) in Africa, and Neanderthals in Europe, *maybe* ~700,000 years ago (700 kya).

Distribution & chronology: a purely Eurasian species (none in Africa), emerge perhaps as early as 400 kya, dying out between 40/30 kya, the latest examples in Iberia and the Ural Mountains. Habitation part-influenced by spread of glaciers (none in northern Europe), Mediterranean coast likely a long-term, warmer, attractive region, and refuge in colder periods.

Subsistence & technology: hunter-gatherers, some argue diet meat-heavy (a bias that may have contributed to their demise), animals killed with stone spear technology.

Population size: low thousands, maybe maximum of 25,000 at one time, conceivably lower.

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Homo neanderthalensis .v. *Homo sapiens* & alleged Neanderthal artwork from Spain (images from Wikipedia).

Anatomy: renowned as robust, stocky individuals compared to *H. sapiens* (but a larger brain case), likely in part due to adapting to a harsh, northern Ice Age climate (as with the Inuit).

Cognitive capabilities: long-seen as the quintessential dumb-brute, a view arguably the product of scientific racism, as much as a reading of the archaeological record. Neanderthals now viewed much more ‘like us’ (though we have to be careful in comparisons). Tools attest production complexity, genetics proves their linguistic abilities, burial practices and adornment evidence abstract thought, belief systems and symbolism; claimed seafaring ability – *why does this matter?*

Relations with modern humans: a contemporary of *Homo sapiens* in Eurasia from at least 60 kya, when modern humans migrated out of Africa. We interbred; you will all have Neanderthal genes in you. Claims that *H. sapiens* killed off the Neanderthals – directly? Indirectly by hunting competition? Or did we simply outbreed, and subsume them?

Recommended reading:

Sykes, R.W. (2021). *Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art*. Bloomsbury Publishing.