

Re: Neanderthals wore make-up and liked to chat

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- *From:* Jack Linthicum <jacklinthicum@xxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
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On Mar 28, 10:58 am, Tom McDonald <kilt...@xxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

Jack Linthicum wrote:

This is for anyone who thinks that archaeology deals only in facts, as opposed to fiction.

Neanderthals wore make-up and liked to chat

- * 09:24 27 March 2008
- * NewScientist.com news service
- * Dan Jones

Could Neanderthals speak? The answer may depend on whether they used make-up.

Francesco d'Errico, an archaeologist from the University of Bordeaux, France, has found crafted lumps of pigment – essentially crayons – left behind by Neanderthals across Europe.

He says that Neanderthals, who most likely had pale skin, used these dark pigments to mark their own as well as animal skins. And, since body art is a form of communication, this implies that the Neanderthals could speak, d'Errico says.

Working with Marie Soressi of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, d'Errico has recovered

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hundreds of blocks of black manganese pigment from two neighbouring sites at Pech de l'Azé in France, which were occupied by Neanderthals. These add to evidence of pigment among Neanderthal from some 39 other sites.

The pigments were not just smeared onto the body like camouflage, d'Errico says, but fashioned into drawing tools.

"The flat, elongated surfaces on the archaeological specimens are consistent, as confirmed experimentally, with producing clearly visible straight black lines, perhaps arranged to produce abstract designs," says d'Errico, who presented his work on 15 March at the Seventh Evolution of Language Conference in Barcelona, Spain.
Essential words

Body painting, argues d'Errico, is a "material proxy" for symbolic communication. What's more, he says, the techniques for making the symbols, and the meaning they carry, would have to be transmitted through language.

This appears to be taken from d'Errico's plenary talk at the Barcelona conference. Unfortunately, it looks like the plenary talks from the conference aren't part of the conference proceedings*, so I'm not sure whether Dan Jones was working from his notes from the talk, from a printed version of the talk, or from his notes from an interview with d'Errico.

While there are direct quotations from d'Errico in the article, I wouldn't take them as indicative of d'Errico's scholarly works.

* The conference proceedings are interesting, and from my cursory skimming of a few of them, properly tentative, with speculation noted as speculation.

The proceedings, some full papers and some just abstracts, are temporarily available for download (zip file) from:

<http://stel.ub.edu/evolang2008/proc.htm>

"Proceedings of the 7th Evolution of Language Conference (Evolang 2008)

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"Smith, A. D. M., Smith, K., & Ferrer i Cancho, R. (2008). The Evolution of Language: Proceedings of the 7th International Conference (EVO LANG7). Singapore: World Scientific Press.

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And body painting isn't the only proxy associated with Neanderthal remains. Neanderthals adorned their bodies with ornamentation, such as necklaces made from shell beads.

The sorts of beads used by modern humans, and the ornaments they fashioned from them, vary geographically. This is often interpreted as a sign of ethnic and cultural diversity among humans, and a means of symbolically binding groups and differentiating them from others. D'Errico suggests that the same holds true for Neanderthals.

Other researchers agree, and point to a double standard of some researchers in interpreting the archaeological record, including evidence of burials, care of the infirm and social cooperation. 'Inferior ability'

"Some archaeologists are happy to associate these same features with language if they occur with modern humans, but are not willing to associate them with language among the Neanderthals," says anthropologist Erik Trinkaus of Washington University in St Louis, US.

"The double standard doesn't work – if they reflect language in one, they must reflect in it both."

This seems to be a reasonable opinion.

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However, even if Neanderthals had language capabilities, that does not mean they spoke in the same way as humans.

"The archaeological record does not show that they ever attained the cultural level of the humans who could talk as we do," says Phillip Lieberman, a linguist at Brown University, Rhode Island, US.

I'm not certain about this. After all, the material culture of Neandertal and contemporary H.s. was apparently roughly equivalent. I wouldn't argue, however, against the idea that H.s.'s culture was more progressive toward the end of the period when the two species (or sub-species—I'm a taxonomic romantic) co-existed.

"Neanderthals possessed language, but their linguistic and cognitive ability was inferior to the humans who replaced them," he says.

I think this is going beyond the evidence. I think linguistic and cognitive differences might well have implied mere difference, not superiority or inferiority. Except possibly in the particular of evolutionary fitness in the situation where Neandertal died out and H.s. survived.

But we don't yet know why we are still here and Neandertal isn't, so it seems premature to me to attribute superiority or inferiority wrt evolutionary fitness in this case. And it is certainly not clear, to me at least, that the emic experience of language and thinking was intrinsically better for H.s. than for Neandertal.

So in either case, Lieberman's statement seems to me to be unwarranted interpretation of the available evidence. But I'd be happy to entertain new evidence.

Here is another account of what appears to be the same source.

"Neanderthals Had Language

Neanderthals had language comparable to that of Homo sapiens, Bordeaux-based archaeologist Francisco D'Errico told participants in the Evolang conference in Barcelona this morning (Saturday, March 15, 2008). This claim totally discards the older Big Bang theory that said language arose only very recently (40 to 75 thousand years ago), and also challenges the Out-of-Africa theory that proposes Homo sapiens emerged in Africa about 200 thousand years ago and spread over the

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rest of the world, carrying language and culture with them, beginning about 60 thousand years ago. A new history will have to be written.

D'Errico based his claim on what he called material "proxies" for symbolic communication, in essence pigments used for body painting and carved materials used for body ornamentation (beads and other decorative wear). His argument that these proxies can be taken as persuasive evidence of language on the basis that they are symbolic, i.e., used to represent something rather than merely be something. A tool like a hand axe is useful and shaped, but is what it is. A body marking redefines something about the body, changing the brute fact of the body to something else, if you share the understanding of the person who has marked her or his body.

their conventions and manufacture are transmitted, i.e., to understand the symbolism and make the materials, the society has to be able to instruct newcomers (children) into the meanings and methods of the artifacts.

He makes a further "uniformitarian" argument that similar symbolic abilities reflect similar communicative abilities. Thus, if we can find proxies that are symbolic and dependent upon transmission, we have evidence of the a language-using species.

D'Errico provided extensive evidence of very old use of pigments, going back perhaps almost 300 thousand years in Africa. Body ornaments came later, but still over 100 thousand years ago. Evidence from Israel, for example, may date as far back as 125 thousand years ago. Body ornaments like beads require more work than pigmentation, and an examination of them indicates the existence of tools for putting holes in the beads, strings for wearing the beads (insides of the bead holes show evidence of having been well eroded, suggesting long use), and the need for trade to get pigments used in coloring the beads (the bead material and the pigment material came from different locations). This abundant evidence has killed the idea that language began with some kind of explosive symbolic activity about 40,000 years ago, although the idea continues to be taken for granted in much of the popular press.

The evidence for Neanderthal language is based on their use of pigments and body ornaments. Some have argued that this usage may have reflected contact with Homo sapiens. D'Errico said that even if that were the case, the ability of Neanderthal to recognize and make use of an idea would be evidence of their symbolic capacity, but then he rendered the objection mute by reporting Neanderthal body ornaments dating to about 65 thousand years ago, well before any contact with Homo sapiens.

Neanderthal body pigment was black, unlike the most popular red ochre in the sapiens line. Mitochondrial evidence suggests Neanderthals were red headed with pale skin, and therefore had different ornamental

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needs than black-skinned red ochre users in Africa.

The existence of modern language capacities in Neanderthals implies that all the biological capacities required to support language production pre-date the split between the Neanderthal and sapiens lineages. D'Errico (and a number of other presenters at this conference) mentioned recent findings that the Neanderthal FoxP2 gene associated with language matched that of H sapiens. His claim was also supported by research indicating the human lineage at lost its air sacs at least 800 thousand years ago (see: Fossil Evidence of Speech?)

If the full biological package was that old, there is no cultural reason to stand with the Out-of-Africa theory. A hundred thousand years ago, pigments and orientation were scattered at sites outside of Africa, indicating the existence of a variety of symbolic traditions and biologically competent speakers.

The primary objection raised in discussing this matter with linguists at the conference was the doubt that the presence of one kind of symbolic activity necessarily implies the existence of another kind, language. The argument based on uniformitarianism was questioned as being outside of the spirit of evolution, as evolution is by its nature contrary to uniformitarianism over time.

-----Postscript-----

As the conference ended I spoke to social anthropologist Chris Knight to ask his response to the D'Errico presentation. In particular I wondered whether he believed that a society with symbolism advanced enough to produce pigmentation and body ornamentation had to have language, or, as some linguists had said to me, one could still be skeptical. He was of the opinion that it is absolutely established now that Neanderthals spoke."

I would like to point out that another of D'Errico's articles ...Related Articles 26 July 2004 COULD Neanderthals speak? The answer may depend on whether they painted their bodies. Archaeologist Francesco d'Errico of the University of Bordeaux, France, and colleagues recently recovered hundr <http://www.congoo.com/news/2008March26/Neanderthal-body-art-spoke-volumes>

It is hard to distinguish whether finding the "crayons" was simply a part of the examination of the site or objects sought.

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