

# A new understanding of neanderthals



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A New Understanding of Neanderthals The articles, " Hard Times Among the Neanderthals" by Erik Trinkaus, and " Rethinking Neanderthals" by Joe Alper offer some insight into the existence of the Neanderthals. The articles suggest that Neanderthals may not have been the " dumb brutes" they were originally assumed to be; instead, they illustrate the ways in which Neanderthals were similar to modern humans (Alper, 146). Since the discovery of the first Neanderthal fossil remains in the Neander Valley near Düssel, Germany in August of 1856 questions and controversies have been abound. Who were these " brutish" creatures, and where do they fit into the evolutionary scale? As time goes by and the research continues, there is increasingly more evidence that Neanderthals may not have been remarkably different from modern humans. With no conclusive evidence that Neanderthals were " inferior ... to modern humans" in " locomotor, manipulative, intellectual, or linguistic abilities," they have been included in the same species as modern humans, Homo sapiens (Trinkaus, 140). However, since there are marked anatomical differences between the Neanderthals and modern Homo sapiens they have also been given their very own subspecies called, Homo sapiens neanderthalensis. From the early skeletal analysis of the Neanderthals they were depicted as " bent-kneed and not a fully erect biped." However, we now know that Marcellin Boule, the French paleontologist who made the analysis, may have misinterpreted the specimen as having a hunched spinal posture, when it was really due to a condition called " osteoarthritis" (Jurmain, 257). This degenerative bone-disease is commonly seen in modern humans who suffer from a deficiency in calcium. It is easy to see the effects of this condition in the elderly who suffer from it. Although upright, their spines are curved downward and they are

severely hunched. In this light, it is easier to imagine that the Neanderthals were more like modern humans and less like the primitive beasts that they have been portrayed as in the past. Furthermore, the articles suggest that Neanderthals weren't primitive at all, but in fact, were "not only 'human' but also ... more 'modern' than scientists previously allowed" (Alper, 146). The Neanderthals were innovative in their tool-making capabilities and started a stone tool industry known as Mousterian around "200, 000 years ago" (Alper, 148). The "flaking process" of the Mousterian tradition showed forethought and ingenuity on the part of the Neanderthals, much like that of modern humans today (Alper, 148). In addition to making tools, the Neanderthals were progressive in that they maintained and used fire; however, whether they knew how to start a fire is unknown. Without a doubt, they were a very resilient species. They survived for "250, 000 years or more in the harshest climates" (Alper, 146). Part of their amazing longevity, "in contrast ... humans have only been around for 100, 000 years," can probably be attributed to their sense of community. With evidence that the Neanderthals "deliberately buried their dead," it seems that the Neanderthals had a sense of compassion, and that they cared for one another (Jurmain, 267). With new evidence coming forth about the existence of Neanderthals, it's easy to see that they were not just big brawny brutes. Instead, the evidence clearly shows that they were advanced for their time, and surprisingly similar to modern humans.