

Neandertal Living Space: the organisation of living space and the use of landscapes in Neanderthal society

Current research on the behaviour and cognition of Neandertals, those enigmatic extinct humans from the last two Ice Ages, has been highly influenced by models which result from ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological research among modern hunter-gatherers. As a result, research questions and interpretations largely boil down to a "they were behaviourally similar to us"/"they were behaviourally different from us" dichotomy. A perceived absence of elements from the "modern behavioural package" is usually taken to equal a deficit, a cognitive difference and a step back on the evolutionary ladder, compared to anatomically modern humans. Hence the existence of two paradigmatic "schools": one that regards Neandertals as behaviourally different from us and hence cognitively inferior; and one that regards Neandertals as behaviourally similar to us, and hence cognitively similar. Both try to squeeze the Neandertal archaeological record into their convictions: the one with a focus on the apparently "missing" behavioural elements (often downplaying implications from the archaeological record), the other with a focus on the behavioural similarities (often overemphasizing implications from the archaeological record). Both schools ignore that Neandertals might have had their own, unique and potentially very sophisticated ways of doing things, which are "invisible" if one uses models from modern ethnography only as 'templates' to understand the structure of the Neandertal archaeological record. It is for this reason that Neandertals are so difficult to force into the existing frameworks. Very complex Neandertal behaviour might be hidden in the archaeological record, because our current methodologies which are heavily leaning on ethnocentric frames of reference do not allow to detect such Neandertal idiosyncracies. This situation is remarkable, as it should be these behavioural idiosyncracies, rather than just their brow ridges and lack of chin or perceived inferiority or similarity, which actually make the Neandertal identity. Certainly from an archaeological perspective.

The NWO Veni-funded post-doc project "*Neanderthal Living Space: the organisation of living space and the use of landscapes in Neanderthal society*" which Dr Marco Langbroek has just started up at the IGBA, strongly focusses on detecting such idiosyncracies. This will be done through the construction of low level theory from the Neandertal archaeological record itself, with a focus on their use and structuring of space on various scales: from a few square meters in a rockshelter, to complete landscapes. Both variation and continuity with changing ecology, geomorphology and climate will be taken into view. This will yield fresh insights into the uniquely Neandertal ways to deal with the equally unique ecological and climatological conditions during the Pleistocene. Hopefully, this will steer Neandertal research away from the paradigmatic stalemate which holds the research field, interpretation-wise, in a paralyzing grip for decades now.