

**Review of: Finlayson, C. (2019). *The smart Neanderthal: bird catching, cave art and the cognitive revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. i-xi and 228pp, 21 Chapters, 13 Figures, and 8 Plates.**

*Clive Gamble*

Neanderthals are benefitting from a relentless stream of upbeat attention. In recent years we have had singing Neanderthals (MITHEN, 2005), Neanderthals who tell jokes (WYNN & COOLIDGE, 2012), compassionate Neanderthals (SPIKINS, 2015) and Neanderthals who mated with our ancestors, leaving us with a tranche of their genetic stamp: and, let's hope, it was their charm which led to such successful congress. They have come a long way from the marginal scavenger of the 1980s, the intellectually challenged troglodyte of the 1930s and the primitive, brute force that started everything in 1911 with J.-H. Rosny aîné's *La Guerre du Feu* (Quest for Fire). One taste from this best-selling novel will suffice when he portrayed a Neanderthal as follows, "*Nothing of his face was visible but a mouth bordered by raw flesh and a pair of murderous eyes. His squat stature exaggerated the length of his arms and the enormous width of his shoulders. His whole being expressed a brutal strength, tireless and without pity*" (ROSNY AÎNÉ, 1911 [1982], 16).

Now, in complete contrast, we have Clive Finlayson's smart Neanderthal. In this short, engaging book, Finlayson recounts his personal journey to find out about Neanderthals. In doing so, he effectively rattles the bars of the protective cage around our species uniqueness. The target in his sights is the idea that a cognitive revolution marked the recent arrival of our humanity in the form of the Linnaean species, *Homo sapiens*. This is the well-known human revolution of palaeoanthropologists that still forms the dominant model of our origins. It is dressed up in several guises that encompass claims for both behavioural and anatomical modernity fueling a creative explosion in symbols and lifestyles. It has been broadcast widely, most recently by the historian Yuval Harari (2014) in his blockbuster *Sapiens*. Despite warnings that are now twenty years old (MCBREARTY & BROOKS, 2000), palaeoanthropologists continue to feed the insatiable appetite for a human history that proceeds by a series of revolutions. And each successive revolution – Human, Neolithic, Urban and Industrial – succeeds by excluding parts of humanity – Neanderthals, Hunters and Gatherers, Peasants and the Urban poor – from the larger historical narrative (GAMBLE, 2007). As a result, humanity is described by who it shed as much as by what it acquired.

Such a view of human history is clearly wrong and in this book Finlayson brings birds to the rescue of the excluded Neanderthals. He previously argued (FINLAYSON, 2014) on palaeoecological evidence that Neanderthals kept *Sapiens* out of Europe for many millennia because they were better adapted to the conditions. Now he extends the argument to the cognitive differences that proponents of a recent human revolution, such as Paul Mellars and Richard Klein, cast in terms of a behavioural modernity (*Sapiens*) versus an archaic intelligence (Neanderthal). His challenge is driven by data recovered from the archaeological cornucopia of Gorham's and Vanguard Cave in Gibraltar. Teams have been excavating here since 1998, one hundred and fifty years after the discovery at Forbes' Quarry of the Gibraltar 1 skull, a Neanderthal female. Finlayson is supported by his own team. His wife Geraldine undertakes fundamental work on the ecology and habitats not only of Gibraltar but of southern Spain. Their son, Stewart, follows his father's passion for biology and ornithology and studied the birds from the Neanderthal levels in Gorham's for his PhD. As a result, the book is full of their close involvement with flora and avifauna, culminating in as-we-saw-it-encounters when watching eagles, vultures and many other species in Europe and around the world. Here is a taste from Chapter 15 when after a long day in a hide in Murcia he was rewarded: "*In that second I saw and felt the power of the eagle, I became one of countless generations of humans who over millennia had experienced the same feeling, and I was at one with them all. And I felt the Neanderthals closer than they had ever been*" (p. 139).

This is a family on a mission; using the archaeological data from Gibraltar to propel its Neanderthals from the periphery to centre stage in European prehistory. This flight is achieved not by stone tools or revised chronologies, or even new fossils. It literally takes wing on the hitherto neglected collections of bird bones found in the Neanderthal levels of Gibraltar's caves. These revealed two important facets. In the first place a significant number of the bird bones bore traces of cut marks. These birds had not simply roosted and died in the caves. Second the choice of species was highly selective. Vultures, corvids and eagles formed a special focus for Neanderthal birders, but they ate also roast pigeon, as did *Sapiens* in later levels. Demonstrating Neanderthal close involvement with selected birds led team Finlayson to question the Upper Palaeolithic broad-spectrum revolution whereby taxa that were small and fleet of foot and wing only became part of hominin

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diets with the appearance of Sapiens. The idea that Neanderthals liked their prey big, fat and occasionally dangerous, has been fatally nuanced. Behavioural modernity, as judged by the skill needed to pursue resources displaying the attributes of an 'r' as opposed to a 'K' evolutionary strategy, belongs to both Neanderthals and Sapiens.

These data lead Finlayson to the real target of his book, the cognitive revolution which supposedly separates Them from Us. Neanderthals show a particular interest in three types of vulture (beautifully illustrated by the authors own hide photos) and two eagle species, the white tailed and golden. Corvids are also a focus and the conclusion is that Neanderthals desired black plumage. Furthermore, cut marks on the wings shows that they were skinning many of these birds for their feathers. Neanderthals are now cloaked in feathers either black ones or from the most powerful avian raptors in their environment. Drawing on the ethnography of North America, Finlayson believes Neanderthals caught these eagles by patience, subterfuge and a good deal of courage. The activities of capturing and creating feathered artefacts confirms his view that Neanderthals possessed symbolic behaviour and that the human revolution is a misplaced model to describe deep hominin history.

His argument about Neanderthal skills and capabilities is convincing. These were big brained hominins and any differences they had with later Sapiens are due to history rather than biology. Here then was a form of ethnographic encounter, its status now confirmed by archaeo-genetics, and which no doubt resulted in as much cultural puzzlement for both parties as between the sailors of the Endeavour and the people of Tahiti and Botany Bay.

Finlayson concludes that any differences enshrined in the archaeological evidence are due to place and not the humans themselves (p. 176). This is an ecologist's summation. But if he has indeed demonstrated a symbolic basis to Neanderthal life, then the places they inhabited can no longer be simply ecological. Their habitats might have set constraints, but they did not determine what they thought or did. To deny this is to repeat the same mistake by once again leaving Neanderthals outside history. The same mistake that has been made repeatedly with other excluded peoples, the world's hunters and gatherers. Neanderthal place, in the sense understood by cultural geographers, invokes instead a symbolic environment as richly experienced as any theatre for the performance of social life such as Göbekli Tepe with its carved vultures (p. 163), or much later in

time the Rock of Gibraltar in the imaginary geographies of competing nation states.

The smart Neanderthal recounts one family's scientific journey. There is little room for the wider community of palaeoanthropologists and archaeologists who have worked also in Gibraltar. The book's index lacks, for example, Chris Stringer and Nick Barton. Neither are there entries for those such as Nicholas Conard and Ofer Bar-Yosef who have recalibrated the Neanderthal/Sapiens debate with new data and models. The book, however, is not intended to be exhaustive but rather a popular account to shift misunderstandings by engaging its readership in the path of discovery.

Reading the Smart Neanderthal, I appreciated the frustrations of working at the periphery where being softly spoken gets few listeners. Even so team Finlayson was pipped to the revelation of the Neanderthal feather-revolution by the finds at Riparo Fumane, Italy (PERESANI ET AL., 2011). Gibraltar is used, however, to such disappointments. The female skull found in Forbes' Quarry in 1848 could have been the type fossil for this hominin and would have been known as *Homo calpensis*. Instead it was the skull and partial skeleton from the Kleine Feldhofer Grotte in Neanderthal, found in 1856, that received that honour. And the rest is history. But who knows, with a different name the history of the Neanderthals might have got smarter a whole lot sooner.

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