



NEANDERTHALS OF THE WESTERN ENGLISH CHANNEL

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Lecture given to the Friends of Fishbourne Palace following the Annual General Meeting on 19 April 2019
Recorded by Richard New

Dr. Scott kindly agreed to present this talk after the conclusion of our AGM. She commenced by stating that “The Neanderthals were of their time, but are in many ways the same as us (ie: Homo Sapiens)”, and it is now proven that Homo Sapiens shares up to 2.7% of Neanderthal DNA. With regard to the relationship between Neanderthals and modern humans, Dr. Scott explained that she is interested not in their differences, or in how the former became extinct, but in how they interacted.

Most of the evidence of Neanderthal society and culture comes from their stone tools, and the choices made in producing these. In the Early/Middle Palaeolithic (Levallois) a complicated methodology of flint flaking provided flexible use, allowing Neanderthals to undertake preoccupations previously thought of as purely Homo Sapiens, such as selective and communal hunting. In the last five years even more examples of complicated behaviour have become apparent, such as the use of resin for setting flint flakes in weapons (complete with Neanderthal thumbprints in pitch !), and the re-examination of previously classified Homo Sapiens bone tools to reclassify them as Neanderthal.

In the Middle/Late Palaeolithic, Neanderthals began to manufacture their tools in many different ways, ie: more like Homo Sapiens, and examples of “social signalling” in Neanderthal culture have been identified, such as evidence of fire in stalagmites in caves at Bruniquel in SW France, and evidence of shell beads, use of raptor wing feathers (for decoration ?), and evidence of compassion and care in burials.

Why is the western English Channel an area of research for Neanderthal culture ? It must be remembered that the “Channel Valley” was then a lived landscape, not a barrier, and we must move away from a perception of a binary Britain at that time. We must look for much Neanderthal evidence underwater, as it takes only a small drop in current sea levels to “re-invent” the Channel Valley. The immediate locality of the Channel Islands and the French coastline are of igneous & metamorphic formation, thus the Neanderthals, in fact, would have had to trek some way from the area of the Channel Islands into, or beyond, the Channel Valley, to obtain flint for tool-making, an indication of the likely ‘trading’ connections in place even then.

Dr. Scott went on to detail her research at La Cotte de St. Brélade, on the SW coast of Jersey, where there is evidence of continuity of Neanderthal occupation from 240k to 27k years ago, which has been supported by marine surveys up to 5 kms from the present shoreline. In passing, Dr. Scott disabused us of the ‘myth’ of Neanderthal ‘mammoth drives’ from the tops of cliffs, as such terrain is unlikely to ever have been accessible by these creatures, whilst the submerged landscapes revealed by marine survey indicate a much more favourable hunting terrain of canyons and blind cut-offs.

Work was conducted in the 1980’s which reorganised and classified up to 95k of local Neanderthal artefacts, including reassigning them to stratigraphic locations, and refitting flaked cores, and helped to allow reconsideration of Neanderthal movements, and the difficulty of access to the nearest flint resources, in mid-Channel. Dr. Scott concluded by describing research by her, and her colleagues, in 2013 at Petit Portelet, on the south coast of Jersey, which indicated persistent reuse of flint artefacts over millennia, emphasising the growing remoteness of flint resources, with changes in local sea levels.

Dr. Scott took several questions from the floor, including the following two :

Q.1 Was the Neanderthal body more suited for a sprinting form of hunting ?

A.1 Dr. Scott replied that that certainly seemed to be the case, whereas Homo Sapiens hunting is more dependent on persistent pursuit, thus wearing the prey down. Neanderthal hunting, therefore, seems to have required more close-up work, emphasised by their flint tools/weapons, which are not suited for long-range attacks.

Q.2 What evidence is there for shared Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens DNA ?

A.2 Dr. Scott replied that there is evidence of Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens hybrids, of the second generation at least, proving that the offspring were therefore fertile. Both genomes show advantages and disadvantages, which are still in discussion.