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Major study shows that Neanderthals were distinctly human

In recent times the differences between the Neanderthals and ourselves have been narrowed. New studies have shown that Neanderthals behaved in similar ways to our ancestors, had a similar diet and planned their activities. Those defending the position that Neanderthals were cognitively inferior to our ancestors continue to remind us that there is no evidence of symbolic thinking in our cousins, citing the spectacular achievements of some of our own ancestors in the cave walls of western Europe in support.

Now, a study published in the journal PLoS One debunks this idea in an emphatic way. An international team of researchers that includes archaeologists, biologists and earth scientists provide evidence for the geographically widespread practice of Neanderthals which consisted in the removal of the large flight feathers from raptors and crows. The practice had been previously reported in isolated cases but the current study shows that Neanderthals had an association with particular types of birds across the width of the Eurasian continent. Strikingly, the association was strongest with birds that had dark flight feathers indicating that the Neanderthals showed particular preferences for the species that they went for.

The team then focused on Gorham's, Vanguard and Ibx Caves in Gibraltar. Of a database of 604 skeletal remains of 21 species of raptors and corvids, representing 124 individual birds, the researchers found that at least 18 individuals of 7 different species showed direct evidence of Neanderthal action on them – mainly cut-marks made by their tools but also tooth marks made by the Neanderthals themselves. The sample showed a clear bias towards wing bones –especially those which support the flight feathers and which have practically no meat or fat – showing that the Neanderthals were selecting these birds for their large flight feathers and not for food or any other purpose.

The Gibraltar finds came from different archaeological horizons spanning thousands of years, confirming that this was not an isolated practice. The earliest observations preceded the arrival of the first Modern Humans into the area by many thousands of years, removing any doubt about possible learning of the practice by Neanderthals from our own ancestors.

The authors conclude with the chilling remark that the absence of rock art in Neanderthal sites cannot be taken to mean that they had inferior cognitive capacities to our ancestors: “Our results put this long-standing contention in doubt, by providing strong evidence that Neanderthals simply used media, other than cave walls, to express themselves.”

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