The Neanderthal Debate

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The Neanderthal Debate: A Brief Statement of Positions

By Emeri Claire Eide

Summary

This article is a brief overview of the main points of the current debate on the relationship between the Homo sapiens and Homo neandertalensis that have so much appealed the imagination of the general public in recent times. It has been determined beyond contention that both human groups interacted during very many thousands of years in the Asian and European continents, but the contention is whether or not the two species interbred and created fully modern humans.

For many years, Paleoanthropologists have contemplated on whether or not Neanderthals interbred with Homo Sapiens, or if they became completely extinct over a period time. Anthropologist who agree with the theory of Neanderthals interbreeding, believe that, since Homo sapiens and Neanderthals were in the same area around ten to thirty thousands years ago, the two species probably interbred with each other. Paleoanthropologists who disagree with this theory, believe Neanderthals became extinct around thirty thousand years ago. So which theory is right? The use of genetics, fossils, and cultural artifact evidence may be the deciding tools to determine whether Neanderthals and Homo sapiens interbred at all.

Support for the theory of interbreeding was found in the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) of a Neanderthal specimen. The mtDNA extracted from the Neanderthal remains, showed that the Neanderthal shared many fully modern human genetic characteristics. Furthermore, the discovery of an infant with both Neanderthal and Modern Human characteristics also supports the theory of interbreeding. The infant possessed similar characteristics of a Neanderthal, but the was fully associated as a Homo Sapiens: was this the definite proof of interbreeding?

The evidence also mounts in favor of Anthropologists who disagree with the interbreeding theory. Genetics have shown that Homo Sapiens are direct descendants of a more ancient species, the Homo Erectus in Africa. There seems to be proof that the DNA and mtDNA of a Neanderthal is unlike any Homo sapiens’s. Even though, the two species could have interbred in Europe, and even if they were able to produce offspring there were too many other natural factors that would prevent them from totally becoming part of the Homo sapiens species. For interbreeding to take hold, it would have taken thousands of Neanderthals to interact with at the genetic level with the Homo Sapiens. The genetic traces of interbreeding are few and far fetched.

The fossil record is key evidence for both theories regarding. Neanderthal fossils and Homo sapiens fossils are very distinctive from one another. Neanderthals tend to be more robust, no
chin, short legs and long arms, and large brow ridges on their forehead. Homo sapiens on the other hand, tend to be less robust, small teeth, have a chin, long legs, and short arms. These characteristics are what distinguish Neanderthals from Homo sapiens. However, there have been findings of some Homo Sapiens with clear Neanderthals traits. For instance, there was a four year old child found in Portugal who possessed both Homo Sapien and Neanderthal bone structure elements. The case is controversial because Anthropologists are not certain of the actual weight of this specific case because the child was only four years of age and hence not fully developed. The fossil evidence is the strongest indicator that disproves the theory of interbreeding. Most of the fossils found around ten to thirty thousand years ago are of Neanderthals and Homo sapiens as being a separate species, and there are few fossils found that display a mixture of the two species. It is my belief that if an individual did express a mixture of traits it was because of gene variation.

Cultural artifact evidence is another way Paleoanthropologists decide on whether or not Neanderthals and Homo sapiens interbred with each other. Those agreeing with this theory say; that when the Neanderthals where living in the same area as the Homo sapiens the Neanderthals were specialists (particularly well adapted to a specific ecological context) and had a distinctive culture from that of the Homo Sapiens. Those disagreeing say that Homo sapiens adapted to the Neanderthals dying culture. Cultural artifacts like spears, cave art, bone kits, and purposely burying their dead, are many of the ways Neanderthals expressed their culture. However, many paleoanthropologists concur that Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens interbred and believe that these cultural artifacts are reminiscies of the two species and cultures mixing together. Homo sapiens did adapt to the Neanderthals culture, because of substantial evidence. For example, a child was found in a cave with cave art, small teeth, stone tools, burial pin, food offerings and a modern bone kit. These artifacts is evidence that groups of Homo sapiens took advantage of the Neanderthal’s culture. For example, Homo sapiens purposely buried their dead, but Neanderthals have much earlier evidence that they did also honoring their dead by painting and doing food offerings. This example clearly illustrates how the Homo sapiens adapted to the Neanderthal’s culture.

Over all, there seems to be convincing evidence that Neanderthals and Homo sapiens did not interbreed. It seems that the evidence that has been found over the years and more particularly the data applied and interpreted by geneticists supports the existing fossil, and cultural artifact evidence that clearly points to concluding a different evolutionary path, even when there was a moment in time in which two species of humans inhabited the planet earth.