6.9: Neandertals

For the hominids in the last section, paleoanthropology hasn't settled on a single name so it gets a little confusing. Some lumpers just call them all "humans", some splitters come up with taxonomies of dozens of species. There are different ways to group these hominids: by geological period, glacial period, tools (from broad lithic periods to the more specific archaeological industries), and names of paleospecies (mostly based on bone morphology), and they don't always fall in neat categories. This means that weather, tools, and osteology don't always go together.

The Pleistocene is defined by repeated events of glacial advance and retreat, which meant radical weather changes. Geologists have pushed the the boundary between the Pliocene and the Pleistocene back to 2.5 mya to account for new data on early glacial periods. This date happens to fit pretty well with the first stone tools found, and hence our definition of the genus Homo. Section 6.9 focuses on hominids in the Middle Pleistocene, especially the transition from Homo erectus to the very noncommittal term "Premodern Humans". The "human" part acknowledges that they were a lot like us. The "premodern" part recognizes that there are enough differences in their bone morphology and cultural attributes to question whether they had a mind different enough to think of ourselves as different from them. I'm not sure myself. A famous paleoanthropologist said that if a Homo erectus sat down next to you on a bus you might want to change seats, but if it were a Neandertal (also called a European Middle Pleistocene hominid) you just might stare a little. We'll continue this kind of "us" or "them" debate into the next section.

Some of the most fascinating recent research are the advances in decoding the Neandertal genome, especially that some were redheads and had an allele (FOXP2) involved with language . You will definitely hear more details about this in your lifetime.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

READ DENNIS O'NEIL'S INTRO TO NEANDERTALS
Figure 1 - Neandertal Range, Wikimedia Nilenbert, Nicolas Perrault III

* FOXP2 network, a neural network in modern *Homo sapiens* brains also found in Neandertals.
Figure \(\PageIndex{4}\) - FOXP2 Network associated with language

* A good introduction to Neandertals by Svante Pääbo, one of the scientists responsible for working out the Neandertal genome,

* Read the first 5 pages of this article on Bone tools made by Neandertals What is a *lissoir*? What was it used for? How do the archaeologists know that it is a tool and not just food remains?

* Article on Neandertals eating pigeons a good example of the range of foods that hominids were exploiting.

Neandertals in Popular Culture

Our fascination with Neandertals in popular culture is a reflection of the paleoanthropological debates of our relation to Neandertals. Are they us? Are we them?
Lesser known cave people:
Chatelperonian

Chatelperonian is a tool industry used by Neandertals.