

Kindred. Neanderthal Life, Love, Death, and Art

Rebecca Wragg Sykes

New York: Bloomsbury Sigma Science, 2020, 400 pp. (hardback), \$25.20.

ISBN-13: 9781472937490.

Reviewed by David W. Frayer

Department of Anthropology, 622 Fraser Hall, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd., University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-7556, USA; frayer@ku.edu

I considered numerous ways to start this review. One was: This book is one everybody should buy and read. Give it to your 'Neanderthal-disparaging colleagues.' Another was: There is nothing better than reading a book about Neandertals that does not treat them as hicks, yokels, bumlbers, and incompetents. For those of you who consider them that way or for those of you who consider them otherwise, this is the book for you. Or: Seldom can one find a book written by a paleoanthropologist that is such fun and illuminating to read. I wish I could write like Rebecca Wragg Sykes. But I settled with: On almost every page there is something new or a new twist on something you knew before. Indeed, this is the case.

There are 16 chapters, and each begins with a dream-like story or poem, foreshadowing the chapter's focus. For example, Chapter 10 begins,

"Murmuring rouses him. The sun has sunk, leaving only flint-dark shreds of cloud. Now twilight is all around, fire-glow quickly fading into the steppe. Blinking, and stretching on the eldermother's lap, he sits up ... Stomachs are long past groans, gone into empty holes. Then he hears it. 'oooOOO!' The hunt returning, singing of the meat and the FAT."

The chapter reviews, mainly for Western Europe, hunting practices and faunal diversity, evidence for mobility, varieties of site utilization, lithic collection and a discussion of social interactions. It ends by:

"Those bodies – once incandescently alive, now dry bone behind glass – weren't simply engines that needed refueling, or automata for making endless sharp flakes. Just as our days are suffused by social interaction, the kernel of Neanderthals' world was in their relationships. ... The things they collected, took apart, carried and brought back together were about more than survival. They also mark an amplification in communication, an inexhaustibly rich channel to express connections and meanings beyond the mundane."

One has to read the chapter to appreciate the evidence for this, but it is there.

Wragg Sykes covers a really exhaustive amount of paleoanthropological literature about Neandertals from lithics to teeth to paleogenetics. And on nearly every page there is a new assessment destroying some aspect of the timeworn and wearisome misconception of Neandertals as inferiors. As she aptly discusses, from their initial discov-

ery (and, for some paleoanthropologists, in the present), Neandertals have mostly been considered second-class, inept citizens in the human lineage. For example, some have argued moderns were more efficient hunters given their 'unique' success in capturing small game. This was postulated as one of the factors that led to Neandertals' denouement. But various studies have shown this was not a Neandertal shortcoming, once more systematic collection at archaeological sites was done. Hares, birds, and other small game are not that uncommon, often their bones were just not collected in the older excavations. There is also a myth that Neandertals had very restricted ranges, but as the Neandertal/Denisovian hybrid has shown (p. 322), this was not the case. A Neandertal woman (probably not alone) walked all the way to the Altai to meet a Denisovian male and produce a daughter. Even evidence for a more confined lithic network is no longer supported, given raw material distributions over wide spaces (e.g., p. 211 at Mezmaiskaya) and at sites elsewhere. There are many other myths of Neandertal inadequacies, corrected in the text, from evidence for fire making to art to intentional burials. As she concludes, Neandertals are not that much different from the people who followed them.

Wragg Sykes does not include in-text citations or a bibliography in the book. She justifies this by saving space and making the book more readable. There is a website rebec-cawraggsykes.com/biblio that contains 121 pages and 1,937 references. While I was reading the book, I had this open and often consulted her bibliography to see where she got her information. Sometimes, searching the reference file was unsuccessful. For example, I looked, but could not find an entry for the Mousterian finger tracings and other evidence of red ochre from Le Roche-Cotard (p. 252). I knew about the supposed mask found there, which she curiously does not discuss, but not the art. Thanks to *Google Scholar* I found the reference in *Paleo*. I could not find a reference for the engraved hyena bone from Les Pradelles (p. 254), but once again *Google Scholar* worked, and then I found it hidden in the bibliography, because hyena was not in the article's title. Overall, her 'non-reference decision' does make the text flow better, but only if you do not stop reading and look for the references(s) in the on-line bibliography or *Google Scholar*. Including the references in the text and at the end in a bibliography would have added hundreds of pages to her 400-page book. On a personal note, I always wanted to publish an article with no references, and she published a whole book. (To be accurate at the end, on p.

360 she cites Huxley's "On some fossil remains of man," on p. 381 Cameron's *The Last Neanderthal*, and on p. 384 Golding's *The Inheritors*.) But that is it. Parenthetically, John Speth wrote a reference-free article for *World Archaeology*, so I was beaten on two counts, by this book and an article.

There are a few problems in the book, which stood out to me because I am familiar with the particular topics. For example, Mladeč is dated at 31 kyr, not 36 kyr. She misidentifies Mladeč 1 as male, but based on comparisons with other individuals at the site, it is clearly a female. Also, it does not bear "three injuries." It is possible she meant to refer to Mladeč 5, but it only has two blunt force traumas (all quotes are on p. 77). For Krapina, she claims the white-tailed eagle talons were found in a "thick deposit" (they were not) and "above that containing fossils" (p. 257). The child's vault (Krapina 1) was found in the same level as well as a scattering of Mousterian tools and at least one hearth. And, despite her contention that "there is no proof that they were associated with each other" (p. 257), the talons show similar wear patterns suggesting they were part of an assemblage, as opposed to being used as single items. There are other small disputable points, and surely other readers will find things to disagree with, but these do not detract from her powerful argument that Neandertals are one of us.

There are two issues I wish she had covered in more

detail. (1) She spends numerous pages in various places in the book discussing Neandertal paleogenetics. She covers the (now false) implications of the initial mtDNA results, but never mentions the failed 'Eve hypothesis,' which relegated Neandertals to a non-contributing side branch of human evolution. The authors of this model rushed to judgment about the implications of mtDNA and were clearly thinking in the mode of 19th century ideas about Neandertals. Once a better understanding of mtDNA and the ancient DNA results came to light, the 'Eve hypothesis' sunk fast into the drawer of failed evolutionary hypotheses. A discussion of this would have fit well into her review of mtDNA in Chapter 14. (2) For me, the other shortcoming is her minimal discussion of language ability in Neandertals. After all the details about lithic procurement, complicated tool manufacture, varied settlement patterns and site utilization, hunting practices, art and notational systems, burials, and social behaviors, it is hard to imagine that Neandertals could have accomplished such things without language and a sophisticated one at that. There is some mention of FOXP2, but little on the anatomical evidence for a fully competent language apparatus in Neandertals. Like the 'Eve hypothesis,' a discussion of this would have fit well into her review of Neandertal catastrophism.

But, overall, this book clearly lays out why the Neandertals are kindred and not the other. It is must reading.