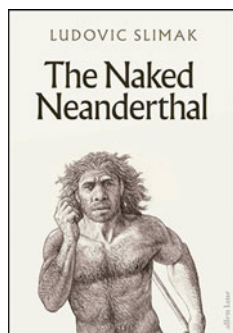




Book Reviews

LUDOVIC SLIMAK. 2023. *The naked Neanderthal*. Translated by David Watson. London: Allen Lane; 978-0-241-61766-3 hardback £20.



Despite its many flaws, which a future edition will need to correct, Ludovic Slimak's book provides a sharp wake-up call to everyone interested in humankind's deep past, including students and teachers of Palaeolithic archaeology and palaeoanthropology. For Slimak, much received wisdom about Neanderthals, from scholarly publications and popular presentations, boils down to academic 'Just So' conjectures unable to withstand sceptical criticism. Unwisely, he puts forward several examples himself, justifying them from a viewpoint of personal authority that often appears impervious to self-criticism. The book contains several contradictory assertions. Without doubt, Slimak is a meticulous excavator

of Neanderthal sites and he tries to re-think puzzling questions about extinct Neanderthal humanity in six chapters, namely: 1. Neanderthal in our heart and soul; 2. A boreal odyssey; 3. Cannibals in the forest; 4. Rituals and symbols; 5. Neanderthal aesthetics; 6. Understanding the human creature. These are followed by an Epilogue and suggestions for further reading; no index is provided.

Chapter 1 addresses modern perceptions of Neanderthals. Eschewing the hubristic interpretation of Neanderthals as unfinished evolutionary rough-outs of ourselves, Slimak simply regards them as an utterly different humanity that has vanished. But when did they vanish? Slimak's 'boreal odyssey' in Chapter 2 leads him to infer that Neanderthals produced Mousterian Palaeolithic artefacts at Byzovaya in Arctic Russia, where uncalibrated radiocarbon estimates of ~28 500 BP have a calibrated range of 34 000–31 000 BP. Alas, Slimak gives only the uncalibrated dates, and unless readers cross-reference with the (uncited) article on Byzovaya in the journal *Science* (Slimak *et al.* 2021), they might conclude that Neanderthals persisted somewhat later than seems probable to most palaeoanthropologists. Slimak's claim that Neanderthals lingered at Byzovaya until "unquestionably twenty-eight millennia" ago (p.55), contradicts his recognition that elsewhere the European evidence "seems increasingly shaky" for their survival after "the forty-second millennium" (p.54). Slimak's excavation of sediments at the Grotte Mandrin in the Rhône valley, France, laid down between 88 000 and 44 000 years ago, shows that *Homo sapiens* using Upper Palaeolithic-like tools frequented the rock-shelter *c.* 54 000 years ago, whereas Neanderthals using Middle Palaeolithic Mousterian tools were there both before and afterwards; however, readers will not find this chronology in the book. Instead, they will learn only that some findings from Mandrin might allow an inference of fleeting contemporaneity between the two human groups. Readers have to consult Slimak *et al.* (2022) for the full story. A future edition of Slimak's book needs to update

the chronological framework and the bibliographical references for Mandrin, Byzovaya and other significant sites.

Chapter 3 asks us to regard Neanderthals as humans who evolved a very different consciousness from our own but who have left behind enough material evidence for us to envisage them as a skilful, inventive, intelligent, ritualistic, cannibalistic, cold-adapted ('naked'), extinct branch of our genus. It is a big ask because awkward questions then could be raised by other palaeoanthropologists. Is it legitimate to label these hominins as *Homo neanderthalensis* or might they be better labelled *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*? Which of the many definitions of biological species best fits Neanderthals? What was the nature of their relationships with early Upper Palaeolithic peoples in western Eurasia? Because Neanderthals seem to have lacked some genes that are widespread in modern people whose genome often includes an inherited Neanderthal component, mating between early Upper Palaeolithic and Neanderthal folk may not have been based on reciprocal exchange. Did, Slimak wonders, male *H. sapiens* father children with Neanderthal women, while keeping their own women away from Neanderthal men? Is that what DNA identified in the 'soot' from the Mandrin cave tells us about their fleeting meeting? Maybe, or maybe not, because Slimak rightly admonishes prehistorians against a tendency to imagine exact contemporaneity where a critical sceptic could retort that, even were the 'soot' to indicate no more than a 12-month period, several months nevertheless could have separated a brief Neanderthal visit from a brief visit by modern-looking Upper Palaeolithic visitors, such that they never met. I agree wholeheartedly with Slimak when he warns prehistorians against collapsing time to support a fancied interpretation in a way that no historian would ever do in order to, as Slimak puts it, indulgently envisage the Carolingian Emperor, Charlemagne (AD 748–814), able to dine with the long-dead, would-be emperor of the Roman Empire, the general Julius Caesar (100–44 BC).

The bane of Pleistocene studies is the over-interpretation of human and associated animal remains, artefacts and other excavated findings and palaeoenvironmental data. Papering over the cracks to spin a good yarn, or sell a good story, has inevitable drawbacks that are revealed sooner or later. Slimak is keen to tell the story in a new way, though at times his selective use of examples looks a tad self-interested. In various chapters, Slimak reminds us of his involvement in field research in Europe and beyond. The blurb on the dust-jacket proclaims: "Neanderthal hunter and paleoanthropologist Ludovic Slimak understands these enigmatic creatures like no one else after studying them for three decades."

Like Slimak, I and my colleagues have been excavating in caves for three decades (with less self-regard and more Neanderthals). Since 1992, we have been excavating every summer at the Neanderthal site of Sima de las Palomas del Cabezo Gordo (in the southeastern Spanish region of Murcia) where mandibles correspond to 11 individuals (other remains imply MNI \geq 14). Many Neanderthal bones and teeth come from deep sediments that were filling up the karstic shaft between 130 000 and 40 000 years ago. Among the Neanderthal remains from *c.* 50 000 years ago there are several near-complete skeletons, with bones still in anatomical relationships, of a woman and child and part of another adult skeleton, as well as bones in anatomical relationships of two complete leopard paws, a few charred horse bones and many flint chips. All were uncovered beneath stones and overlying sediments. Eschewing Slimak's flight of fancy (p.103) that "I personally have no doubt that the

Neanderthals did in fact bury their dead and attempted to preserve their remains”, it is possible that the Neanderthal skeletal remains excavated by my team could have been covered with stones merely to deter scavenging leopards and hyaenas, though even such a prosaic conjecture is pure fancy. It is not even the most plausible interpretation, because other mundane processes of sediment-formation are also conceivable. Natural processes can lead to unpredictable results.

Thirty field seasons (and still counting) of painstaking labour have made me wary about over-interpreting what is uncovered. It may comfort us to imagine that our finds reflect underlying ancient human behaviour, whether we do so, inspired by actualist conjectures inferred, analogically from ethnography, by putting on a thinking-cap borrowed from social studies and structuralist argument, or, by arguing from the particular to the general, through a physiological inference about *The naked Neanderthal*—dreamt up from such very uncommon instances as the extreme athletic prowess of the Dutch ‘ice-man’ Wim Hof, who, Slimak reiterates (p.28), ran 21km on the Arctic Circle in the winter of 2007 wearing shorts only. But perhaps we are fooling ourselves. Worse still, we may fool others, and do a disservice to science if we permit such flights of fancy to grab news headlines. Of course, unlike readers with queasy stomachs, I have no qualms about accepting cannibalism as being compatible with generically human behaviour, whether performed by Neanderthals (e.g. at the Rhône Valley cave of Moula-Guercy, as Slimak tells readers in Chapter 3), or by those survivors of the aeroplane that crashed on an Andean glacier who are represented cinematically in *Society of the Snow*. Slimak also makes a good point by reminding us that, looked at individually, few Mousterian tools are exactly and precisely alike, and that their reflection thereby of human individuality is overlooked by those archaeologists who assert that—in contrast to those of the Upper Palaeolithic—Mousterian Palaeolithic artefacts are monotonous. After all, Neanderthals were skilful humans, albeit very different from us. On this point, at least, I agree with Slimak.

References

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MICHAEL WALKER
University of Murcia, Spain
✉ walker@um.es