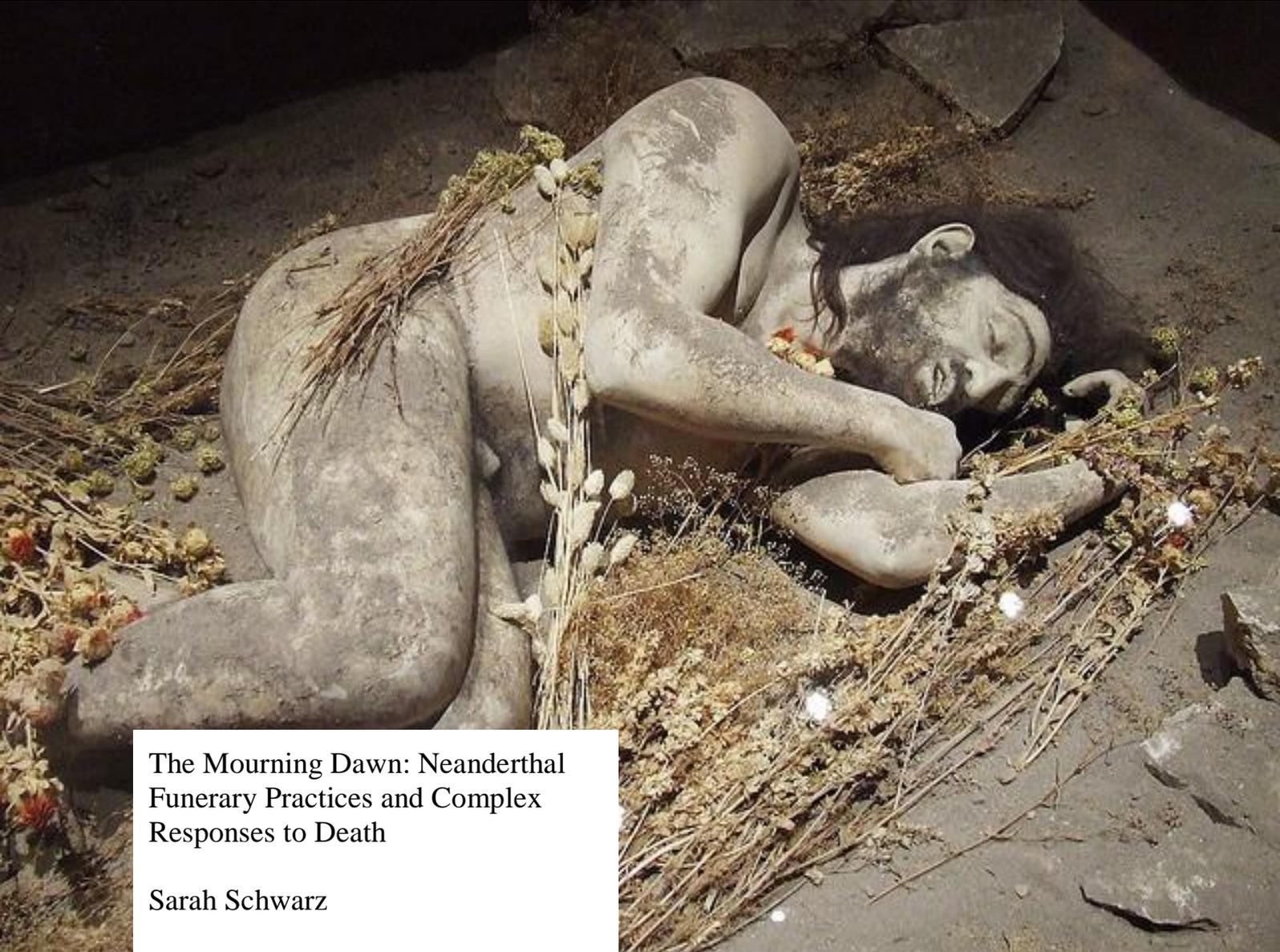


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THE MOURNING DAWN: NEANDERTHAL FUNERARY PRACTICES AND COMPLEX RESPONSES TO DEATH

Sarah M. Schwarz

Abstract

This paper addresses variability in a range of potential Neanderthal funerary practices from sites across Europe and Asia. A database of all known Neanderthal remains to date has been created using a range of published sources, and each individual examined for characteristics of a range of funerary practices to identify which, if any, were being used by Neanderthals. Although Neanderthal burials have been questioned in the past, the large number of indicating characteristics which identify the sites as deliberate funerary acts, strongly suggests that funerary practices were regularly employed by Neanderthals.

The individual remains were classified as either 'Early' Neanderthals, who lived from 200,000–115,000 years BP and exhibited only the most basic Neanderthal morphological features, or 'Classic' Neanderthals, who exhibited the full suite of typical Neanderthal morphological features and lived from approximately 115,000 years until their extinction approximately 30,000 years ago.

As funerary practice data thus far has not shown any statistically significant variability by geographical location or biological factors, such as sex or age at death, what caused Neanderthals to select these practices? In other words, regardless of whether you were a baby boy or an old woman, the living Neanderthal groups would treat every deceased individual the same. Can we therefore assume an 'ad hoc' approach was being used by Neanderthals? What other factors could determine how a deceased Neanderthal was treated by the living group? And how did funerary sites fit into the Neanderthal landscape?¹

Key Words: Neanderthal, funerary practices, mortuary studies, burial, cannibalism, mourning, death

To bury, or not to bury? Is this the question?

It is a philosophical question scholars have struggled to answer for centuries, and still blights us today: what makes us human? No single factor can be used to define what makes us human, but key factors for this discussion include our empathy, intelligence, and our social nature – all of which allow us to show care for the dead through burial and other funerary practices. Our own species has been employing funerary practices for thousands of years, but can we conclude this behaviour is unique to *Homo sapiens*?

The Palaeolithic period saw a number of different hominin species appear and then disappear into extinction with the exception of one – *Homo sapiens*. We have gone on to become the most successful species alive today, and therefore it will be of no surprise that we have many examples of burials from the earliest *Homo sapiens*. But another hominin species also left numerous remains in a plentiful archaeological record: the Neanderthals. They were once our closest relatives, and potentially our neighbours in Europe, who dominated the world during the Middle Palaeolithic (approximately 300,000–30,000 years before present or 'BP').² The remains of many Neanderthal individuals have been found across Europe and Western Asia (some of which are shown in figure 1) but were they also routinely burying their dead, or are these just chance preservation events?

The suggestion that another hominin species could be capable of burying their dead was not easily accepted by early archaeological scholars, and has fuelled debates in archaeology and anthropology to this day. *Homo sapiens* were considered to be superior to other extinct forms of hominid by the very fact that we are still here to ‘tell the tale’, but evidence of the use of symbols and other complex behaviour in Neanderthals is beginning to break down this assumption.³ Numerous modern scholars have proven through the archaeological record that Neanderthals also were capable of complex behaviours such as hunting, making stone tools, and symbolic activities such as making and wearing necklaces.⁴ If they were capable of such complex behaviours, does this mean that they were also capable of burying their dead and, if so, how do these behaviours lead to structured responses and rituals surrounding death?



Figure 1. Map of a sample of Neanderthal sites which exhibit evidence of funerary activity

There are hundreds of sites across the ‘Neanderthal World’ – defined as Western Europe through to Western Asia and parts of the Middle East – which have produced hominin skeletal remains, but in some cases it has taken decades to recognise the relevance of these sites. In the past, emphasis has been on sites which were considered evidence of cannibalism and inter-personal violence, but cannibalism was just one potential funerary practice in use during the Middle Palaeolithic. Neanderthal sites have in fact produced evidence of a number of types of funerary practice, including burying, and corpse processing. Although Western societies have a tendency to focus on burial, in order to examine the funerary practices of another culture (or, indeed, another human species) we must put these tendencies aside and view the archaeological record with an unbiased eye.

It has been suggested by Gargett that the Neanderthal remains found as burials are more likely to be accidental preservation events, merely the result of an individual dying in their sleep at the back of a dark cave and naturally being preserved by the environment.⁵ Although this could be used to explain the occasional site, it does not explain the large number of recorded Neanderthal remains which show evidence of deliberate funerary practices found to date (as discussed below). Others have suggested that the intention of the living group was not to show care for the dead, but instead to remove a tempting corpse from passing hungry scavengers who may also attack the living group. However, this still demonstrates some level

of care for the dead by ensuring they are not consumed by predators. Sites where remains are found within occupation layers – such as at Artenac, France, or Dederiyeh, Syria – suggest that the primary intention was not to reduce the risk to the living group but instead to focus on the deceased.⁶

However, Gargett's scepticism did force the archaeological community to stop and review the evidence, particularly at sites where elaborate rituals and stories of bloodthirsty Neanderthals had been concocted, and it is now generally accepted amongst the archaeological community that at least some Neanderthals were practicing some form of funerary practices. More recent research has concluded that there are indeed cases of intentional Neanderthal burials, such as at La Chapelle-aux-Saint, France (LCS1).⁷

Examining Neanderthal remains for evidence of funerary practices provides us with the opportunity to understand how the desire to honour and care for the dead arose in another species, and therefore how this need may have arisen in our own species. Such research also allows us to consider why we use specific funerary practices – as well as their origins and development – and how concepts regarding death spread across the Palaeolithic landscape.

What are funerary practices?

Before we can examine what type of funerary rituals Neanderthals may have been practising, we must understand exactly what funerary practices entail in order to properly understand the archaeological record. Funerary or mortuary practices are actions and rituals associated with the disposal of a corpse; in physical terms, it is the removal of the corpse before the decomposition process takes hold; and in cultural terms, adhering to the rules and beliefs of the society to which the individual belonged. Such practices encompass a variety of techniques and rituals intended to remember and honour the dead, and although the specific aspects (such as prayers, rites, etc.) vary greatly depending upon the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the community in question.

A wide variety of funerary practices are in use throughout the world today, although societies throughout the Western world are probably most familiar with the concepts of burial and cremation. However, there are a range of styles and rituals involved in each individual funeral, and we can categorise these into several broad types of physical techniques including, but not limited to: burial, structured abandonment, corpse processing, and curation.⁸ Burial, or inhumation, is probably one of the most common funerary practices used around the world today. A burial comprises of a cavity or hole in the ground, usually deliberately excavated, into which the corpse is placed and covered with backfill or other debris. Several Neanderthal individuals within Amud Cave, Israel, are likely candidates for burial.⁹

Structured abandonment involves the deliberate act of placing the corpse at a particular point within the landscape.¹⁰ This can extend into funerary caching, where parts of the decomposed body are placed in specific, special places within the landscape such as fissures in caves or rockshelters.

Corpse processing techniques, such as defleshing (also known as excarnation) and disarticulation, consist of the stripping of soft tissue from the bones and separating any articulating joints. Evidence of these techniques has been found on Neanderthal sites such as Ochtendung, Germany, and Scladina, Belgium.¹¹ Although these techniques are often interpreted as evidence of cannibalism, whether cannibalism is being practised on any particular site can be contentious. At sites where human skeletal remains exhibit signs of marrow extraction, particularly when coupled with faunal remains which exhibit similar styles of cut mark, we can assume that cannibalism was probably being practised. However, this does not mean that every case of corpse processing should be automatically associated with cannibalism, and therefore, for the purposes of the preliminary research, we have not assumed that cannibalism was the primary intention. Neanderthal sites with evidence of corpse

processing have often been sensationalised, but there are a variety of reasons for cannibalism and it is most likely that it had a ritual or spiritual meaning rather than out of hunger or aggression.¹²

Curation is one of the most simplistic types of funerary practices that can be employed, and is when a part of the deceased is removed and carried by a member of the living group. This may comprise a small body part, such as a single bone or tooth, or the entire body. Cases of curation have even been documented in chimpanzee groups, where mummified corpses of infants such as Veve and Jimato were relentlessly carried by their mothers for weeks after their deaths.¹³

Although this is by no means an exhaustive list of techniques, we can certainly assume that if another hominid species were once practicing funerary or mortuary techniques, they would have the potential to be as varied as they have been in *Homo sapiens* societies.

Cannibalism in context

The subject of cannibalism is often a difficult one to approach, whether it is discussed in an ancient or modern context. The word immediately conjures images of bloodthirsty savages salivating over the sight of human flesh, and this was indeed the image which came to people's minds when the first sensationalised stories of potential Neanderthal cannibalism were released. For some, such stories only provided further proof that they were different from our own species, and somehow not as 'human'.

In the modern Western world, the thought of consuming a fellow human being is an unnerving one to say the least, and is generally considered to be limited to either acts of extreme desperation and hunger (such as in the case of the survivors of the Andes flight disaster of 1972) or the deviant acts of a select few who are driven by an unnatural desire to consume human flesh, and as such are (at least in the media) labelled as mentally ill.¹⁴ This can make an unbiased and unprejudiced discussion of cannibalism difficult to attain, as the concept is unsettling to our modern ideals. However, cannibalism is still practiced in some remote communities, such as the Fore people of Papua New Guinea who have been extensively studied due to the transmission of kuru (a prion disease) transmitted through the ritual consumption of human flesh.¹⁵

Each culture has very clear boundaries regarding what is edible and what is inedible, despite all animal flesh being theoretically and biologically possible to consume. For example, the 2013 horse meat scandal in the United Kingdom caused outrage as the British culture classifies horsemeat as an inedible meat, despite the fact that it is either a staple meat or even a delicacy in other parts of the world. However, only a handful of cultures still allow human flesh to cross the cultural line and transform an inedible meat to an edible one.

But what causes this shift in attitudes towards human flesh from an inedible to an edible meat? In order to understand this, we must first unravel the intent of the individuals consuming the deceased. Before we continue, we need to differentiate between two types of cannibalism: firstly where the individual is actively killed by the consumer(s) for meat; and secondly where an individual has died naturally and is later consumed by others.¹⁶ It is important to differentiate between the two in order to evaluate the intention of the consuming group, and therefore the first shall be considered 'active cannibalism' and the latter shall be considered 'passive cannibalism'. For example, the survivors of the Andes flight disaster chose to only consume the other passengers after they had already died in the crash or under other natural circumstances, which would be classified as passive cannibalism. However, even under the most extreme circumstances it is a difficult choice to resort to, although given the threat of starvation it would be an understandable and comprehensible choice for most of us.

But how do we identify cannibalism, either active or passive, in the archaeological record? And how can we conclude that they are in fact consuming the flesh of the deceased, and not just removing the flesh in a case of secondary burial or structured abandonment?

In cases where there are signs of bone marrow extraction – characterised by post-mortem fractures on long bones with large diameters, percussion and chopping marks, and lack of breakage on phalanges and vertebrae – this strongly indicates that the group did actually consume at least some of the body. However, without clear signs of interpersonal violence it is difficult to conclude whether each specific site demonstrates a case of active or passive cannibalism. But even where the individuals only demonstrate cut marks, other characteristics such as a large area of concentrated bone fragments, as well evidence that faunal remains present have been treated in the same way, suggest that such cases are less likely to be a case for other funerary practices. Remains which have been treated to funerary caching exhibit a more ordered format, and where larger fragments of bone have been preserved with limited signs of cut marks. The intention of structured abandonment is that the carcass is left to decay naturally, and if no other action was taken these remains would not likely survive. Even if the remains were later treated to a secondary burial, we would be more likely to see significant gnaw marks and decay caused by exposure to the elements, which we do not see.

The topic of discussion really comes down to one key question: why would one hominid want to consume the flesh of another hominid anyway? If it is such a taboo subject in everyday modern life, does that mean other hominids had extreme reasons too, or did they not see it as such a taboo? The reasons that immediately spring to mind, and are most palatable for us today, are those of starvation and desperation. However, it is unlikely that a human body would have provided enough nutritional value to keep a hunter-gatherer group alive, as they have significantly less meat and therefore less nutritional value than other mammals and game available to them, such as deer or mammoth.¹⁷ In light of this, active cannibalism targeted against an individual who could contribute to the survival of your group seems unlikely. On the occasions it did occur, it is more likely to have been driven by other factors.

In addition to active and passive forms, the concept of ‘compassionate cannibalism’ has also been proposed for sites including the Neanderthal funerary site of Krapina, Croatia.¹⁸ This is where the body of the individual is exclusively consumed by the family of the deceased as an act of respect, with no aggression or violence associated with the action. Such a ritual was described by the Amazonian group called the Wari’ tribe, where the deceased individuals are exclusively consumed by relatives (however, in this case it is relatives by marriage only and therefore not close blood relatives). They strictly believe that at least some of the individual must be consumed, and to not do so is dishonourable, to the extent that they force themselves to consume the rotting body even if it makes them feel physically ill to do so.¹⁹

Other potential, yet slightly more disturbing reasons could include ritual, respect, violence or display of strength, and punishment. Cannibalism as an act of violence towards an enemy group has been documented even in more recent history, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that the same could have occurred in the Palaeolithic when accompanied in the archaeological record with characteristics such as inter-personal violence. It is a shocking thought for modern societies that such an act could be out of respect, but, for example, female relatives of the Fore people process and consume the remains of their dead relatives during a ritual as an act of respect.

It is important to remember that when we are considering evidence of cannibalism and corpse processing, it is not necessarily a negative or violent act. We must put aside our own prejudices and cultural ideas in order to properly assess what these individuals were doing, and to in turn understand how this type of funerary practice fits into the world of Neanderthal funerary practices.

The 'Mourning Checklist'

In order to understand which practices were being employed by Neanderthals, as well as confirming whether they would have been capable of exhibiting such behaviour, we must begin by examining the suite of characteristics required. It is proposed that we examine these characteristics through formulating a 'checklist' of features Neanderthals would require in order to be capable of performing funerary practices.

Firstly, the ability to grieve or mourn is the initial step to developing funerary practices. Grief is the most basic and natural response to the death of another individual, and the mourning process which follows allows us to express our grief in potentially lengthy and complex ways. A number of cases have been reported in chimpanzee groups where individuals have exhibited these behaviours as a result of a death within the group. In addition to these behaviours, evidence of others such as morbidity (curiosity over a deceased body), avoidance of the death site, and curation, have all been documented in wild chimpanzee groups.²⁰ It is therefore perfectly plausible that other hominid species, including the comparatively advanced Neanderthals, would have been capable of some basic level of mourning.

Secondly, an individual must understand the nature of death – in other words, that it is final, inevitable, and irreversible. As social creatures Neanderthals would have created close relationships within hunter-gatherer groups, which would result in a traumatic experience at the sudden loss of one of these individuals. Neanderthals have demonstrated this understanding in their attempts to delay the onset of death in elderly group members, such as the individual known as The Old Man of Shanidar (Shanidar 1, Shanidar Cave, Iraq).²¹ This elderly and wounded Neanderthal man would have required significant care from the group to survive on a daily basis with such significant injuries for such a lengthy period of time. This demonstrated that Neanderthals had recognised that death would result from a lack of support, so they empathised and concluded that this would be a negative result, and that the group may suffer as a result (either through a negative psychological, social, or physical impact).

In order to have empathy for another, we have to be able to place ourselves in the mind of the other individual. In the case of funerary practices, it is often said the deceased 'would have liked that' or 'would have appreciated such a gesture'. This demonstrates a basic level of what is described as 'levels [or orders] of intentionality', whereby we are able to follow a narrative, story or a set of instructions.²² In this case, the narrative is the process of death in the Neanderthal world and the relationship between the deceased, the mourners, and the mourners' understanding of ancestors and any potential afterlife or spiritual world. Understanding this process and levels of intentionality in the world of funerary practices is key to understanding any particular rites which may have been performed, whether the Neanderthals believed in an afterlife or any deities, and what they believed was happening to the deceased. This could also help us understand where funerary sites fit into the Neanderthal landscape – for example, understanding the connection that your relative's body is buried in an area of the landscape in the cave nearby the river is a cognitively complex set of instructions to understand and remember.

All of these factors would not be possible without one key physical feature – a large brain, and a suitably large cranium in which to house it. This was explored by Robin Dunbar in his 'social brain hypothesis', which demonstrates that the greater the brain of a creature (relative to body size), the larger the social group and number of relationships one can maintain.²³ Primates have particularly large brains in comparison to their body size, and hominids certainly adhere to that trend. Neanderthal brains were slightly larger than our own, suggesting that they could have lived in complex social groups and maintained numerous relationships simultaneously. As funerary practices are traditionally group activities and

would require numerous individuals to perform a technique (and in Palaeolithic times, reduce the amount of time spent away from tasks necessary for survival), it is reasonable to assume that the Neanderthals would have been able to develop such techniques through group activities and communication.

Neanderthals were very similar to *Homo sapien* hunter-gatherers of the Upper Palaeolithic – they were capable of using fire, language, and symbols, as well as making and using tools.²⁴ In fact, they would not look particularly out of place walking down the street today. Stereotypically they are considered bumbling, brutish cavemen who struggled to survive and merely worked towards their next meal, but the truth is far from it (as we shall discuss below). By examining funerary practices and grief we have the opportunity to examine another hominid at their most vulnerable and emotional, and perhaps begin to understand how a relative on the hominid ‘family tree’ really thought in a level of detail we could not even dream of in other species.

Funerary practices of the living, not of the dead

Examining the funerary practices used by a group or species allows us to understand more about the structure of the society, and studying Neanderthals specifically allows us to understand the origins of funerary practices in another species.

It is important to recognise that the archaeological record provides us with evidence of the practices preferred and employed by the living, not of the dead. Although we have remains from the deceased individual in front of us, it is the living who performed the actions we are examining. We must also remember that the archaeological record only preserves part of the narrative of their funeral – we have the evidence of the physical aspect, but not of the cultural aspect of the funeral. Did they say prayers, sing songs, tell tales of the deceased, or enjoy a ritual feast? These are aspects which can never be determined with any security or accuracy, and will for the most part remain purely speculative.

The majority of evidence for funerary practices employed by Neanderthals will be gathered from the remains themselves, but other traces in the archaeological record can provide additional clues. The few grave goods which have been found within Neanderthal burials provide only minimal information, and are still hotly

Table 1. Characteristics of funerary practices within the archaeological record, and indicators of deliberate and intended actions.²⁸

Funerary Practice	Characteristics
Burial or ‘interment’	Pit feature; articulation of remains; good level of ‘completeness’; body position; grave goods, absence of gnaw marks; multiple individuals in the same area
Corpse Processing (Disarticulation and defleshing or ‘excarnation’)	Cut marks on bones; cut mark formation similar to faunal patterns; disposal as per faunal remains; cut marks on bones at muscle or ligament attachments (disarticulation)
Funerary Cashing	Numerous individuals, usually mixed, in a restricted space; concentration of unburied bone masses; preference for specific body parts; lack of occupation layer; gnaw marks on bones
Curation	Small isolated elements of body; modification for transport; damage or cut marks indicating detachment from body
Structured abandonment	Naturally disarticulated remains; remains in a localised area; gnaw marks on bones

contested as to whether they are intentional inclusions or merely accidental debris. Even if we assume that they are all intentional additions to the burials, grave goods were clearly not a routine part of Neanderthal burials based on the few burials found to date which exhibit this characteristic. At present no evidence of funerary structures or physical traces of ritual directly resulting from funerary rituals have been found, as all remains have been found in pre-existing caves and rockshelters.²⁵ Although hearth structures have been found, they are within occupation layers (and not on non-occupation sites) and therefore it is assumed that they are connected to everyday activities and not specifically related to the funeral of the deceased.

Funerary practices cannot only tell us about the spiritual beliefs of the community, but can also provide an insight into the structure of the group and any potential hierarchy. For example, if men and women are subjected to different rituals or practices, this may indicate a social or cultural division in life which is being replicated in death.

The assumption today is that every individual has a basic right to be acknowledged and honoured through a funeral, regardless of whether they are elderly or young, male or female. However, this has not always been the case, particularly with the very young, and the age at which we begin to find deliberately honoured infants and children can provide an insight into ideas of personhood by the community. For example, in the Roman period young babies were often not buried as they were not considered 'people'. Evidence from preliminary research indicates that Neanderthals were burying neonates (very young infants, at under four weeks old), such as Amud 6 from Amud Cave, Israel.²⁶

So what were the Neanderthals doing with their dead?

In order to conduct preliminary research on Neanderthal funerary practices, a database was compiled of all known data on required assembly of Neanderthal remains across the world, beginning with Serangeli and Bolus' paper which lists sites that have produced Neanderthal remains and augmented to include sites from outside Europe.²⁷ In line with this paper, remains were categorised as either 'Early' or 'Classic' Neanderthals (spanning from ca. 200,000–115,000 years BP and demonstrating some Neanderthal features; and ca. 115,000 years BP onwards and demonstrating the full range of Neanderthal features, respectively), and examined for evidence of funerary practices as listed in a 'funerary characteristics' list (as seen in table 1). Approximately half of the data gathered was considered complete enough to use in the preliminary analysis. Preliminary findings indicate that there was no variability based on biological factors (such as age at death or sex) or geographical factors. For example, males were not subjected to one technique and females another. However, initial results suggested that funerary practices primarily used by 'Early' Neanderthals were corpse processing techniques, such as disarticulation and defleshing, and the 'Classic' Neanderthals later introduced burial alongside the continued use of corpse processing techniques through until the end of the Middle Palaeolithic and the eventual extinction of the species. The preliminary research focused on broad dates which placed the remains in either the category of 'Early' or 'Classic' Neanderthal, but due to problems with the reliability of dates and multiple dating methods making comparison difficult it was not possible at this stage in the research to ascertain a precise date for the introduction of either funerary practice. However, this is to be addressed in the next stage of the research.

This is a pattern seen across the entire Neanderthal world, from well known sites in France all the way across to those in Israel. Although young infants were buried frequently, this could be a preservation bias due to their fragile bones making them more likely to survive burial than any other type of funerary practices where they may be exposed, such as in funerary caching. However, it is worth noting that there are instances where young infants and children have been the subject of corpse processing techniques, just like their mature

associates. In addition, the practices of burial and corpse processing were by no means swift methods of removing a tempting corpse from predators, thereby suggesting that to Neanderthals funerary practices were about more than just the disposal of a corpse.

The preliminary data used included a reasonable cross section of Neanderthal society, with all ages represented in acceptable proportions – including babies and young children²³. Although this has not been the case in every *Homo sapiens* society due to differing opinions on when an individual is a ‘person’ in their own right and deserving of a burial, as suggested above, this suggests that Neanderthals may have seen others more as their equals.

The data also indicates that ideas regarding funerary practices are being communicated across the Neanderthal world in order for everyone to be conducting the same funerary practices at the same time. It is a reasonable assumption that Neanderthals were capable of communicating ideas, as advances in stone tools and knapping techniques could not have occurred without language.

And, finally, initial findings strongly suggest that the Neanderthals were routinely honouring and caring for their dead in a similar way to our own species. They were consistently using funerary practices across the Neanderthal world, therefore indicating that these are not anomalies and are instead occurrences of some of the first routine, intelligent mourners on the planet.

Grave Perspectives

It has become generally accepted by archaeologists today that Neanderthals did at least bury, even if other funerary sites are still under debate. However, we have now begun to break down the traditional stereotypical picture of a Neanderthal, and accept that Neanderthals were capable and did indeed use funerary practices to dispose of their dead.

However, current attitudes can make the subject of funerary or mortuary practices a somewhat difficult and illicit topic to discuss without comparing and judging other cultures, and specifically the Neanderthals, against our own Western ideals of what a funeral should be. In addition, cultural prejudices about the types of ‘acceptable’ funerary practices, particularly when it comes to corpse processing and cannibalism, can prevent us from viewing the Neanderthals in a neutral light. It had been assumed that hungry individuals preyed on the weaker members of the group when times were scarce, or consumed the flesh of their enemies in an openly aggressive act, but in fact the time and delicate approaches to corpse processing indicate that this may not be in the case. When coupled with research demonstrating that hominids would have minimal ‘nutritional value’ and that corpse processing techniques have been used on not just the weaker members of society, the suggestion that the primary cause of cannibalism was hunger or violence becomes doubtful.²⁹ Ongoing research will delve further into this question, but one can assume that cannibalism was purely a ritual or symbolic act, in a similar way that more recent hunter-gatherer groups have consumed the flesh of their deceased relatives as a mark of respect.³⁰

It may be surprising that corpse processing techniques were the first funerary practices in use by Neanderthals – after all, they are the practice of a very small minority in our world today. We prefer to preserve where possible, and create a permanent shrine to the deceased. But to ever-moving Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers, a permanent shrine may not have been so relevant, and instead may have focused on remembering and honouring the dead at the time of the event. Corpse processing techniques would not have been too dissimilar from those used to butcher animals – and to the Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer, it would have been a small step from butchering a mammoth to a fellow Neanderthal. Any form of corpse processing would have required group effort to ensure the most efficient use of an animal body, and there is no reason why this could not be applied to the corpse of a Neanderthal. Group activities would have been critical to hominids, as they are for all primates, to maintain relationships and a

clear social structure. Perhaps the group activity of defleshing and disarticulating a fellow group member would have not only allowed the group to bond, particularly after the loss of a relative or friend, but also allow them to honour and remember the dead together in the same way as a wake would today.

As there is no statistically significant variability by biological or social factors, such as age at death or sex, what factors are responsible for the Neanderthal's choice of funerary practices? They could have been employing an 'ad-hoc' response, merely doing what was necessary as the need arose without any deliberate intent. But if the body itself was not a factor for deciding which funerary practices to employ, what else could be? Ongoing research aims to examine the place of funerary practices within the Neanderthal landscape, and in turn determine how this species viewed the world and where the deceased fitted into the world of the living.

Future directions of funerary and mortuary studies

There are hundreds of examples of Neanderthal remains across the world today that require further investigation. The project will continue to revise and expand the database in order to create a comprehensive resource for additional research into Neanderthal remains. In addition, the position of funerary sites will be mapped within the landscape alongside other Neanderthal sites, such as those with evidence of occupation layers or knapping areas. This will enable us to examine the position of funerary sites in a literal sense, as well as in a cognitive or psychological sense – this is the difference between 'space' and 'place'. Changes in funerary practices will also be examined chronologically in more depth in order to understand how funerary practices were communicated and adopted across the Neanderthal world.

More research will also be conducted into the cognitive and psychological aspects of grieving, mourning, and use of funerary practices in order to understand the origins and development of funerary activities. Through the use of primary data on chimpanzee observations and cognitive studies, we will examine the roots of our psychological need to honour the dead. By using chimpanzees as a base line, we can examine which attributes of mourning may be common features of all hominid species (due to a common ancestor between chimpanzees and hominids). Studies that attempt to understand death and mourning in children will also allow us to discover what is required to comprehend and use funerary practices, and how an understanding of death developed over time.

Notes

¹ Image Credit: Thanks to John Connell at www.iamlearner.net for the use of his image of the reconstruction of a Neanderthal burial.

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Biography

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