

Neanderthals were compassionate and caring

New book suggests four stages for development of human compassion



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A Neanderthal and human face to face.

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Neanderthals are often depicted as brutish club wielders, but a new book suggests Neanderthals had a sensitive side, displaying "a deep seated sense of compassion."

The findings, also published in the journal *Time & Mind*, are part of a larger study charting how empathy and other related feelings evolved in early humans.

Researchers Penny Spikins, Andy Needham and Holly Rutherford from the University of York Archaeology Department examined archaeological evidence for the way emotions began to emerge in our ancestors six million years ago and then developed through more recent times.

Based on fossils, artifacts and other evidence, the scientists propose a four stage model for the development of human compassion:

The first stage began six million years ago, according to the scientists, when the common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees experienced the initial awakenings of an empathy for others and motivation to help them, perhaps with a gesture of comfort, or moving a branch to allow them to pass.

The second stage from 1.8 million years ago sees compassion in *Homo erectus* beginning to be regulated as an emotion integrated with rational thought. Care of sick individuals represented an extensive compassionate investment while the emergence of special treatment of the dead suggested grief at the loss of a loved one and a desire to soothe others feelings, the researchers conclude.

The third stage, based on findings from Europe between around 500,000 and 400,000 years ago, sees humans such as *Homo heidelbergensis* and Neanderthals developing deep-seated commitments to the welfare of others illustrated by a long adolescence and a dependence on hunting together. There is also archaeological evidence of the routine care of the injured or infirm over extended periods. These include the remains of a child with a congenital brain abnormality who was not abandoned, but lived until five or six years old. The researchers also note that there was a Neanderthal with a withered arm, deformed feet and blindness in one eye who must have been cared for, perhaps for as long as twenty years.

In **the fourth stage**, the scientists say modern humans starting 120,000 years ago extended compassion to strangers, animals, objects and abstract concepts.

Spikins, who led the research, said that new technologies, such as neuro-imaging, have enabled archaeologists such as herself to attempt a scientific explanation of what were once intangible feelings of ancient humans. She added that this research was only the first step in a much needed prehistoric archaeology of compassion.

"Compassion is perhaps the most fundamental human emotion. It binds us together and can inspire us but it is also fragile and elusive," she said. "This apparent fragility makes addressing the evidence for the development of compassion in our most ancient ancestors a unique challenge, yet the archaeological record has an important story to tell about the prehistory of compassion."

She added, "We have traditionally paid a lot of attention to how early humans thought about each other, but it may well be time to pay rather more attention to whether or not they 'cared.'"