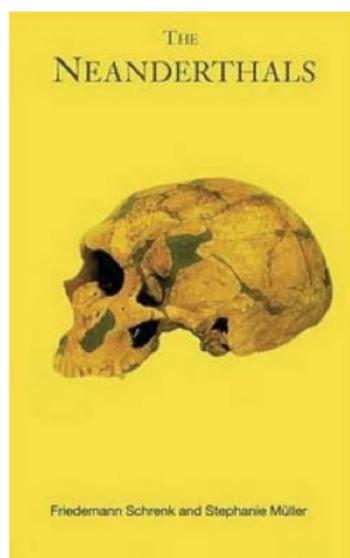




## BOOK REVIEWS

**Müller, S. & F. Schrenk. 2008.** *The Neanderthals.* – London & New York, Routledge

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We do not know whether Neanderthals would have blended in with modern humans, but we certainly do have a lot of real (and imagined) ideas about who they were. This point is well made by the book titled “The Neanderthals”, which under the writing of Müller & Schrenk fits well into the series “People of the Ancient World”.

Although this book has “nothing revolutionary to say”, it hardly lacks in meaning. Our knowledge of Neanderthals has, gradually, become so enriched over the past one and a half centuries that it is refreshing to hear a relatively unelaborated summary.

Schrenk writes at a level that permits the lay person to appreciate the historical and scientific relevance of the Neanderthals without

any prior knowledge of human palaeontology. However, this little book covers topics so broad, and is so dense with details, that it could easily be assigned as required reading in a course on palaeoanthropology.

This book, intended for the public, takes the reader on a time travelling trip in Germany, to Neander Valley, where in 1856 a fossil calotte was recognized by a school teacher, Johann Fülrott, to be an ancient type of human. So much detail is provided about German localities that the reader virtually feels oneself on board a two hour train ride sitting alongside Düsseldorf artists and poets to the green and hilly getaway of the Neander Valley. The book is colourful yet even-handed. Just as one senses the authors might begin to delve into their own imagina-

tion, they restore the reader to reality by pointing out the ambiguity of the data used to reconstruct ancient behaviors. For example, our romantic impressions of the 'Flower Power' Neanderthals at Shanidar are explained away as actually being the workings of voles (p. 69).

A broad range of morphology is discussed here, ranging from the position of the semicircular canals of the inner ear to more famous features such as brow ridges. Behavioral descriptions are equally thorough, and Müller & Schrenk credit the Neanderthals for their humanlike cognitive attributes such as caring for the weak and, potentially, the creation of Paleolithic art.

Somewhat surprisingly, in the final chapters Müller & Schrenk do seem to draw a hard line between Neanderthals and modern humans, in reference to genetic data which support that "Neanderthals are not our ancestors" (p. 91). In the last chapter, the reader is led to believe that Neanderthals died out without making a contribution to our species, but a close re-inspection of the text reveals more precisely that Müller & Schrenk believe only that "the *last* Neanderthals made no *decisive* contribution to the gene pool of humans alive today" (p. 100; emphasis added).

Concluding references to the work of German projects such as the Max Planck and TNT project remind us that despite the Neanderthals becoming a global phenomenon, Germany has held a grip on its famous fossil hominin. In particular, Svante Paabo's group in Leipzig has led the world in defining the Neanderthals on the basis of ancient DNA sequences. Since this book was published in 2008, the complete nuclear genome of Neanderthals has been released. Ironically, recent studies from Paabo's group have suggested that Neanderthals may have contributed 1-4% of the genomes of living Eurasian modern humans (Green *et al.*, 2010); and found that a separate, genetically-defined species, from 50-30 ka in Denisova cave, Russia may have contributed 4% of the genomes of living Melanesian modern humans (Reich *et al.*, 2010).

Germany had the first word on the Neanderthals, and all eyes are again on Germany for what is next to come. It would be interesting to see how these recent findings might be woven into a future work as meticulous and impartial as the book by Müller & Schrenk.

Müller, S. & F. Schrenk. 2008. The Neanderthals. – London & New York, Routledge. 188 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-42520-9. Price £ 19.99 (paperback).

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