

REVIEW

Kindred, Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art. by Rebecca Wragg Sykes. 2020. Published by Bloomsbury Sigma, London. 400 pp. Price £14.56 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-4729-3749-0

The week before I sat down to write this review, the President of the United States, Joe Biden, described advice from the Governor of Texas as “Neanderthal thinking.” He meant it as an insult. In this delightful book, Rebecca Wragg Sykes comprehensively explains why that simply isn’t the case.

I first met the author several years ago when the late Roger Jacobi recommended her as someone with the skills to analyse the Mousterian lithic assemblage from Picken’s Hole for the Society. That was at the beginning of her long love affair with our close relatives, the Neanderthals. This book is the culmination of years of deep and detailed research into their culture and biology.

The book is thematic in layout, with chapters describing aspects of her subjects’ life and culture, each building a picture of a people that were human like us but then also unlike us; cousins rather than siblings. It builds a detailed picture of how these people interacted with their environment and with each other; how they lived, went about their lives, made tools, hunted, clothed themselves and how they treated their dead. In doing so Wragg Sykes demonstrates comprehensive knowledge of the archaeological record, able to go into great detail in those areas where archaeology is strongest, such as in the study of lithics, and to extrapolate and fill in the gaps where material remains are less common or more enigmatic.

Her work has been helped by a fundamental change in the view of these people brought about by remarkable finds made in the last few years. Standout moments include the dating of the remarkable and still enigmatic structures constructed of broken stalagmite pillars in the cave of Bruniquel in the Tarn et Garonne region of south-western France, which caused a sensation when they were shown to be 176,500 years old, and the incredible work on ancient DNA which has demonstrated quite how closely related we are. It is not that long ago when it was almost heretical to claim that *H. sapiens* and Neanderthals might have met and crossbred. Now people want to know what percentage of Neanderthal DNA they have and quote the results with pride!

None of what is said in *Kindred*, then, is really new. What Wragg Sykes has done is produce a masterful synthesis of the evidence, giving a vivid view of a world radically different from our own yet subtly familiar in the way it was viewed by its inhabitants.

All this leads inevitably to the familiar question: if the Neanderthals were so successful and sophisticated, why did they die out? In my view, this is the wrong question. Evolution by its very definition means that species change, especially in such a climactically unstable environment as the Pleistocene. In that sense it would be surprising to find that there were still ‘pure’ Neanderthals around today. In another sense, they didn’t fail, they didn’t die out, as is shown by the fact that, at least in part, they live on inside so many of us today.

Graham Mullan