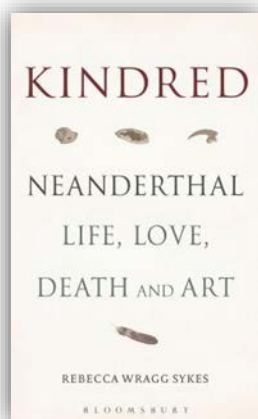


BOOK REVIEW

Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art

By Rebecca Wragg Sykes

Reviewed by Megan Stueve



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Author Rebecca Wragg Sykes truly is a talented paleoanthropologist and storyteller. Her gift for bringing scientific subject matter to the public in a way that is understandable and relatable to anyone is remarkable. Those seeking a full and comprehensive story of Neanderthals could do no better than this book. With such a breadth of knowledge, the author is yearning to share what she knows. At times the number of footnotes can be distracting, but most often she is filling in the blanks of the data I didn't know I wanted to know, in fact I didn't know I *could* know.

Scientific data is usually disseminated in 'cold, hard facts' leaving the reader to fill in the blanks and make connections between separate pieces of information. Wragg Sykes writes with a warmth that makes these connections for the reader. She takes the cold facts and weaves together a narrative that provides a fuller picture, complete with a series of color photographs set in the center of the book to illustrate her points. She is careful not to compare Neanderthals with contemporary *Homo sapiens* populations; instead, this book is about exploring the variability of Neanderthal life. It is a bit risky—some may say naïve—to avoid the notion that Neanderthals may have learned some of

these abilities from interactions with *Homo sapiens*. However, it is rather brilliant for someone to finally write a book allowing Neanderthals to stand on their own without such a constant comparison.

Every chapter begins with a delightful preamble that sets the scene for the reader to connect with the information presented, much in the same way as many other favored public science authors. The first chapter is used to quickly provide the background of the discovery of the first *Homo neanderthalensis* skull, the ensuing debate about its location in the chronology of time, and the nineteenth century realization that *Homo sapiens* were not the only people to have once populated our planet. Chapter two provides a brief understanding of the remainder of our evolutionary tree, spanning some six million years. Following are two chapters describing the fossils that have been unearthed and how they have changed the way we perceive of Neanderthals: no longer as hunched over and brooding cave men, but instead they look, speak and act very similarly to *Homo sapiens*.

Chapter five is where we see a dramatic shift in the author's writing style. Wragg Sykes begins by writing about the environment that Neanderthals lived in. She reconstructs the past environment as it shifts from glacial to interglacial and back again as if she were there to observe it herself and is providing her direct account of any century, year, season or day throughout the entire span of their time on earth. As we move through the book, she continues to write in this manner, describing lithic technology, wooden and bone tools, hunting and butchering skills, even the layout of the Neanderthal housing structure (chapters 6-9) as if she were a living witness millennia back in time. Subsequent chapters broach the subject of cognitive capacities by touching on the creation of artwork, planning future events, collection of pretty objects and vastness of mortuary practices (chapters 10-13) with the same personalized finesse.

The book ends with a few chapters on the more recent advancement in DNA genome sequencing and its implications for future research (chapters 14-16). While scientists can already trace Neanderthal lineages

and watch them as they migrated multiple times from Europe into Asia, with time, technology can only show us more. She humorously cautions about Frankensteinian scientists mixing Neanderthal/*Sapiens* hybrids in laboratories while simultaneously showing the reader real examples of hybrids from 60,000 years ago.

Her most successful feat with this book is limiting her use of nomenclature. The reader is free to imagine themselves as part of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle in harmony with nature, hunting based on taste preferences, leisurely crafting objects, and trading with other social groupings. You can see yourself eating mussels, roasting auroch stew, tending to young, and digging up roots—but it isn't you, it isn't even your species. It is that which you have separated yourself from by name alone, but which you inevitably realize as your kin, your kindred. It is only afterwards you are reminded that for nearly 150 years they were pit against you as subpar and subhuman, when in reality they were very much like you.

Wragg Sykes' reconstructions demonstrate that there was no apocalyptic event that wiped out the Neanderthals. There was no loss of food source, climatic conditions they couldn't adapt to, or major war with *Homo sapiens* that caused them to die out. They were a widespread species that were not all confined to bitter cold and starvation. They lived in all climates, enjoying beaches and sunshine as well as mountains and snow. There was as much cultural variation between them as we have today. Small pockets of them bred with our ancestors and their blood runs through our veins. She jokes that perhaps a paleolithic pandemic took care of the rest but as for current evidence we'll just have to keep digging.

I close as the book began, "The most glorious thing about the Neanderthals is that they belong to all of us, and they're no dead-end, past-tense phenomenon. They are right here, in my hands typing and your brain understanding my words. Read on, and meet your kindred."



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