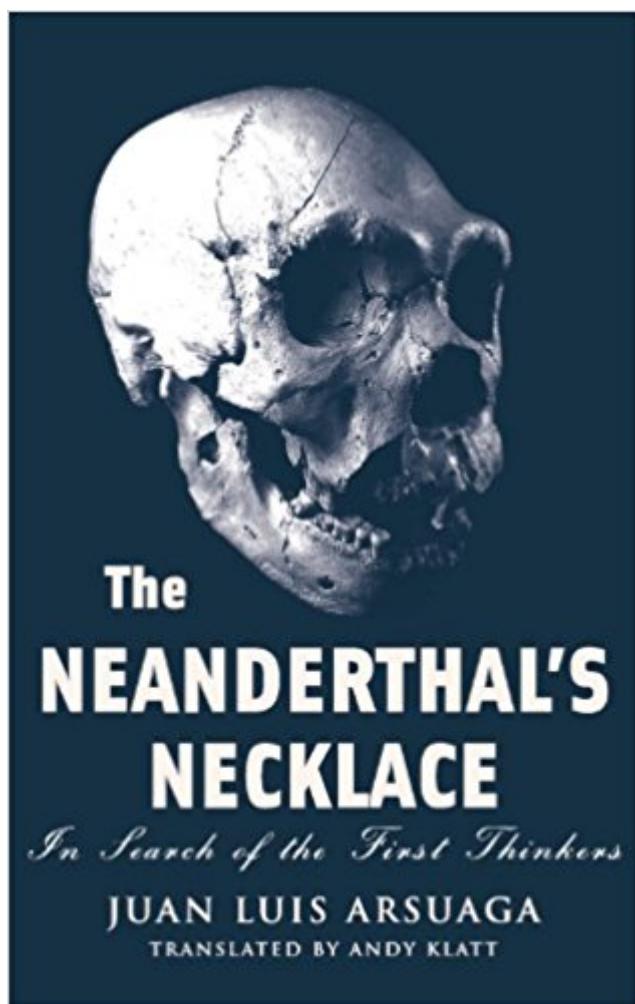


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The Neanderthal's Necklace: In Search Of The First Thinkers



Synopsis

The Neanderthals provide a surprising mirror for modern-day humanity. They belonged to our evolutionary group and lived like the Cro-Magnons, our ancestors, did – worshipping, socializing, and hunting. The struggle between Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons lasted thousands of years. The Cro-Magnons were not biologically fit for extreme cold weather, but their ingenuity allowed them to settle down, band together, and survive. In this tale of life, death, and the awakening of human awareness, Juan Luis Arsuaga, Spain's most celebrated paleoanthropologist, depicts the dramatic struggle between two clashing species, of which only one survives.

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Customer Reviews

In this meandering story, Spanish paleoanthropologist Arsuaga examines a plethora of scientific data in order to establish the place of the Neanderthals in our developmental lineage. Based on discoveries of skeletal remains on the Iberian peninsula, he argues that the Neanderthals possessed a larger skull-and hence a larger brain-than previous hominids of the apelike Australopithecines. In the author's view, the Neanderthals might well have used their cerebral capacities to solve problems, make tools and interact socially in their community; archeological evidence shows Neanderthals were very likely the first hominids to make two-sided tools for hunting and building. In addition, cave art indicates that Neanderthals understood, tentatively at least, the value of giving meaning to their world through symbols and stories. Eventually, the Cro-Magnons, with more highly developed brains and social systems, moved into Europe, competing with the

Neanderthals for food and shelter. The latter disappeared from the earth, and today we think of the Cro-Magnons as our direct hominid ancestors. Although Arsuaga's thesis is clear enough, his narrative rambles erratically. For example, he spends three chapters on the fauna and flora of the Ice Age without clearly connecting them to his main ideas. In addition, his account requires familiarity with scientific jargon ("Mode I technology," "cladistics," "biogeography"), that Arsuaga does not explain adequately. What could have been a fascinating story instead devolves into a hodgepodge of paleontological and anthropological theories. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The work of noted Spanish paleoanthropologist Arsuaga at excavations at Sierra de Atapuerca (where he is codirector) has influenced our understanding of human evolution. This ambitious work not only tracks the twisted course of human evolution but puts it in the context of ecosystems, colonization, and glaciations. According to the author, Neanderthals evolved independently in Europe; science knows when they disappeared but not why or how. Arsuaga speculates as to how Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons (our direct ancestors) interacted with one another and why the latter were able to survive while the former became extinct after hundreds of thousands of years of successful existence. Arsuaga contends that Neanderthals never developed the capacity for symbolic language, either oral or visual, favoring a natural type of intelligence instead. Conversely, Cro-Magnons developed symbolic language and thought, which led them to invent and develop new tool technology and thus quickly outdistance the Neanderthals. A provocative book for scholars and people with an interest in human origins; recommended for larger academic anthropology collections. [A major exhibit based on the author's work will open at New York's American Museum of Natural History in January 2003.-Ed.]-Gloria Maxwell, Penn Valley Community Coll. Lib., Kansas City, M.--Gloria Maxwell, Penn Valley Community Coll. Lib., Kansas City, MO Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Obviously this book isn't for everyone, but if you have any interest at all in our distant ancestors, this is the book to read! While the writing is a bit technical, it is well written and clear. The author is unquestionably well versed, and he tells a fascinating story of these ancient humans. No book of fiction could be more involving than this intriguing story of the Neanderthals.

Juan Luis Arsuaga has written an informative account of his own research on the earliest Europeans as represented by the copious skeletal deposits in the Sierra de Atapuerca and in

particular with respect to the remains discovered in one very special site of that region, Sima de los Huesos, the Pit of Bones. The study of hominid origins, in this case involving conspecifics of the genus *Homo*, is always an intriguing field filled with a variety of opinions, reasoned and otherwise, and Professor Arsuaga gives a balanced treatment to the problem of the origin of the first Europeans and to the role that Neanderthals had in this evolutionary play. He is also not reluctant to state where his own sympathies lie with regard to our specific ancestry and the fact that, while, in his opinion, Neanderthals are not our direct ancestors, they do represent an alternative humanity, sentient, creative, and technologically proficient in their own right, and an alternative humanity that we shared the greater part of Europe with for some ten thousand years. I do have some minor concerns with regard to this book. First, American readers may be put off by Arsuaga's repeated use of researcher's full names when giving credit for the work of others. This is, I believe, a cultural artifact, but it makes the reading laborious in more than one instance. I wish also that more time had been spent addressing the significance of the skeletal remains of the child found in Portugal, dated to twenty-four to twenty-six thousand years ago, and purported to represent a combination of both Cro-Magnon and Neanderthal characteristics. Finally, the book subtitle suggests that the cognitive piece of the Neanderthal puzzle will be addressed at some length, and the discussion of this topic did not completely meet my expectations. Putting aside these criticisms, this book is thoughtfully written and gives even the novice reader ample background in demography, paleoecology, biogeography, evolutionary biology, and anthropology so that both conceptually and empirically the aspects of archeology pertinent to Prof. Arsuaga's conclusions can be clearly understood. I recommend this book most strongly and suggest that the ideas shared here will provoke the reader to ponder just what life might have been like when two alternatives to the question, What does it mean to be human? existed side by side over no small period of time.

The book is very detailed and very interesting, but while it has lots of information about Neanderthals, and they are an important part of the book, much of it IS about the subtitle, In Search of the First Thinkers. When did we go from gestures to language? When did we stop making the same stone tool, again and again, and start making different tools for different needs? When did we stop thinking about how to hunt down an animal which was right in front of us and start planning out how to get food in the future? The author uses Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons to ask 'Why did one win over the other?' Was it language? What does art have to do with it? Maybe it had to do with the development of better tools? And what do bigger brains have to do with it if Neanderthals had the biggest ones? It is as much history as it is philosophy.

Nice but now dated information.

I ignored the negative publisher's weekly review, thinking to myself, "Nevermind, self, it's an interesting concept, and I can burrow my way through digressions." Alas, the publisher's weekly review describes a real, significant problem with this book. The text digresses, wanders, meanders, and then digresses some more. If it did this with some verve or charm, it might be forgivable--but the voice is monotonous, failing to distinguish between important and trivial information. I am not uninformed on the underlying subject, but I'm not an expert either. Perhaps to other physical anthropologists, this text is fascinating--or at least informative. Alas, it is neither for the layperson, even the informed one.

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