

Neanderthals kept an organized and neat cave

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Archaeologists are shown excavating Neanderthal levels at Riparo Bombrini in northwestern Italy. Fabio Negrino/University of Colorado, Denver

Until recently Neanderthals were considered quite uncivilized. It was believed that they lived like slobs, throwing their stuff everywhere with no sense of order. But now scientists have reason to believe that Neanderthals, like modern humans, may have organized their living spaces according to tasks.

Neanderthals are our closest extinct human relatives. They lived about 200,000 to 28,000 years ago in Europe and southwestern to central Asia. Neanderthals had bodies that were shorter and stockier than ours.

But, according to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, "their brains were just as large as ours and often larger - proportional to their brawnier bodies."

Researchers recently uncovered artifacts in Italy. Those artifacts make some researchers believe that Neanderthals butchered animals, sharpened tools and gathered around fires in separate areas of their living space.

The Organizational Neanderthal

The findings are based on an excavation at a collapsed rock shelter called Riparo Bombrini. The site is in northwestern Italy where Neanderthals lived for thousands of years.

Julien Riel-Salvatore, a professor at University of Colorado-Denver, was one of the researchers who worked at the dig site in Italy.

"There has been this idea that Neanderthals did not have an organized use of space, something that has always been attributed to humans," he said.

"We found that Neanderthals did not just throw their stuff everywhere but in fact were organized and purposeful when it came to domestic space," Riel-Salvatore said in a prepared statement.

The archaeological site used to be home to both Neanderthals and humans. Researchers focused on three levels of the cave that Neanderthals used roughly 45,000 years ago.

Riel-Salvatore and his fellow researchers published a report on the dig. It concluded that the cave was probably used at times as a permanent home. At other times it was used as a base camp for other activities. It's for this use that researchers noticed the greatest organization.

In An Ancient Cave

Specifically, researchers found evidence of fire building, or hearths, toward the rear wall of the cave. Stone tools and chips, as well as animal materials, were found outside the cave.

This may mean that Neanderthals wanted to keep certain activities separate from others. For instance, they may have wanted to keep activities that produced very unpleasant waste away from other parts of the cave that were more enclosed. Those enclosed areas may have been associated with sleeping and socializing next to hearths.

Researchers cautioned that their conclusions were made on a roughly 15-square-foot initial excavation. They added that further work was necessary to prove their observations.

Among other findings, the researchers noted the presence of shellfish remains throughout the cave dwelling. They also found large amounts of ochre, a clay-like substance found in the earth.

Researchers said they were unclear as to what the ochre was used for. But they speculated that it may have been used during animal butchering or in processing animal hides.

"Neanderthals could have used it for tanning hides, for gluing, as an antiseptic or even for symbolic purposes," Riel Salvatore said of the ochre. "We really can't tell at this point."