

## Gibraltar engravings may prove Neanderthals more culturally sophisticated than thought

One of the longest-running, most fervent debates in the history of [human evolution](#) research concerns the [cognitive abilities of the Neanderthals](#). Were they the slow-witted creatures of popular imagination or did an intellect like that of modern humans lurk behind that heavy brow?

I think it's safe to say that these days most paleoanthropologists have abandoned the idea that the Neanderthals were complete dolts, and the debate has shifted to the question of whether they were just fairly smart or whether they shared our special brand of genius. A new discovery lends support to the latter notion.

Researchers working in Gibraltar have found what they say is the first known example of an [abstract pattern engraved by a Neanderthal](#). The cross-hatched design was carved into the bedrock of a seaside shelter known as [Gorham's Cave](#). Analysis of the engraving, which covers an area of around 300 square centimeters, indicates that the artist made each of the 13 lines in the image by running a pointed stone tool over the weathered surface of the rock repeatedly in the same direction.

An estimated total of 188 to 317 strokes were required to complete the design—too many for it to be unintentional scratching. Neither did the marks resemble those produced experimentally when the researchers cut fresh pig skin with a stone blade on the same kind of rock surface.

Archaeologists consider art and other types of symbolic expression to be key elements of modern behavior, and good indicators that whoever made the symbols had language. Over the years, hints of Neanderthal symbolism in the form of [jewelry](#) and other decorative items have emerged at a number of sites across Europe. But some skeptics have credited them to early modern humans, arguing either that their belongings got mixed in with the Neanderthal remains or that Neanderthals copied or acquired symbolic stuff from moderns.

**Read the full, original story: [Ancient engraving strengthens case for sophisticated Neanderthals](#)**