

Neanderthals probably were not full time cave dwellers

Genetic, chemical and geological analysis tools help teams extract as much information as they can from the bones and tools our ancient ancestors left behind. Even then, there are still lots of questions left about how Neanderthals assembled shelters and carved out 200,000 years of existence across Europe.

“We usually relate Neanderthals with caves,” says Laura Sánchez-Romero, an archaeologist at the University of California, Berkeley, “but there are open-air sites that were also used for activities.” The association with cave dwellings make sense — a majority of known Neanderthal settlement sites are in these natural shelters, some of which might have had extra attributes that made the location more appealing than others. Proximity to water is always a plus, and a higher elevation could provide an ideal vantage point for assessing natural resources below, Sánchez-Romero says.

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But caves likely get lots of attention because they are also the living spaces best preserved over time. Grasslands are more exposed to weather and scavengers, so any evidence of habitation is more likely to disappear across the millennia. Caves are also easier for archaeologists to examine. One formerly open-field location Sánchez-Romero excavated was in Basque country, which today is “like a jungle,” she says. “You can’t see more than 10 meters ahead of you.” Having to excavate a Neanderthal occupation site under all that shrubbery might deter some researchers, even though the sites are worth investigating.

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