

Not only did humans exchange DNA with Neanderthals — we shared culture as well

Between ~45,000 to 40,000 years ago [humans and Neanderthals were] contemporaries and had ample time to meet and interact. New evidence I describe in my book [The World Before Us](#) suggests an even wider overlap, both in Europe and in other parts of Eurasia.

Given this co-existence and the genetic exchange that occurred, could there also have been cultural exchange between the two groups?

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Recent work on the Neanderthals and their world has shown that, far from the backward cave dwellers widely popularised in the 19-20th Century, they were a capable, often sophisticated group of hunter gatherers present for more than 250,000 years.

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Fascinating new evidence, for example, now suggests that Neanderthals might have been the first cave painters of Europe.

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Similarly, we are also beginning to recognise evidence for Neanderthals behaving in other ways that we often term 'behaviourally modern'; perhaps wearing ornaments made from eagle talons, decorating themselves with feathers, using mineral colourants and preparing skins probably for clothing using deliberately selected bone implements.

I wonder whether we ought to look at the overlap period evident in the archaeological record as one where there might have been an exchange of ideas, creativity and technology between the two groups as they met and interacted, rather than this being one way as previously thought.

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