

LUDOVIK SLIMAK. *THE NAKED NEANDERTHAL.* LONDON: PENGUIN
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Homo neanderthalensis evidence was first found in Germany in 1856, their name literally meaning ‘man from the Neander valley’. Since then, remains have been found across Europe and the Middle East, from the arctic tundra of Siberia to the coastal mountains of Israel. They have left behind more than bones: traces of their DNA subsist in *Homo sapiens*, and we have discovered tens of thousands of their flint objects, butchery marks and weapons. Palaeoanthropologist Ludovik Slimak navigates this miscellany with charm and ease, building a vivid history using his own archaeological work. Slimak takes us first through what he calls a ‘boreal odyssey’, an expedition into the polar latitudes where Neanderthals left collections of stone tools which he describes and interprets for us in detail. He deciphers the archaeological evidence so that every detail is made accessible.

Woven into this comprehensive exploration of the past is a philosophical story of self-consciousness. Whilst systematically dismantling almost every piece of Neanderthal art and culture the literature has provided, Slimak simultaneously builds a concept of Neanderthal aesthetics which transcends the *Sapiens* expression of ego. Even without evidence of intentional art or ritual practices, Slimak knits together a form of beauty in which the idea of self that haunts modern society sits on the periphery. It is this sort of interdisciplinary approach that makes a book so heavy on archaeological detail absorbing and engaging. Both scientific and political, Slimak tackles the extinction of *Homo neanderthalensis* as a singular event, caused not by climate change, disease, nor genetic or demographic weakness. He attributes their extinction instead to the emergence and dispersal of *Homo sapiens*, a claim which many other scholars question (Degioanni et al. 2019; Staubwasser et al. 2019; Houldcroft and Underdown 2016), pointing to ‘colonialist guilt’ as a reason why scientists tend to avoid this theory (chapter 6). However, this is a statement which has considerable implications. By drawing parallels with the colonisation of the American continent and the eradication of aboriginal societies, there is a danger of underplaying the severity of the atrocities committed against the native communities of the land in their systematic slaughtering and enslavement by European settlers. Whilst Neanderthals may indeed have been driven to extinction by the advance of *Homo sapiens*, this was by no means a political event in the terms we understand it now. Nevertheless, Slimak’s insights are thought-provoking and may be accurate in the sense that humans tend to exonerate themselves in history, something particularly pertinent to anthropology with a still-relevant history of racism and colonialism (Diogo et al. 2023).

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This book gives a voice to Neanderthals in a new way, not as the brusque troglodytes of modern media, nor the cave-painting prodigies that some scholars want to believe existed. This species is not akin to *Homo sapiens*: they had a distinct culture and undeniable intelligence. This is a book which is moulded by questions, and Slimak does not claim to have all the answers. The truth is that we have very little to give us the responses we want. Frustrating as it is exciting, the more we find, the more we realise we do not know. It therefore takes both incredible critical thinking and imagination to see beyond the fragments of rock and bone without projecting what we hope it will all mean. Slimak dissects evidence with enthusiasm, keener to find the truth and liberate Neanderthals from the prejudices which we have imposed than he is to embellish the evidence for the sake of popular science. It is for this reason that I recommend *The naked Neanderthal* to members of an academic community that strive to conduct anthropological research ethically and robustly, rather than with the Western-tinted glasses that have resulted in decades of othering, exploitation, and alienation in the name of 'science' (Parsons 2022). Whilst his prose may be opinionated and heavy on the archaeological side, it is nevertheless a fascinating account of the Neanderthal existence and an excellent introduction to the field for those who are interested. A further commendation should be noted for David Lawson, whose translation of this text from French to English reads effortlessly and at times even poetically.

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