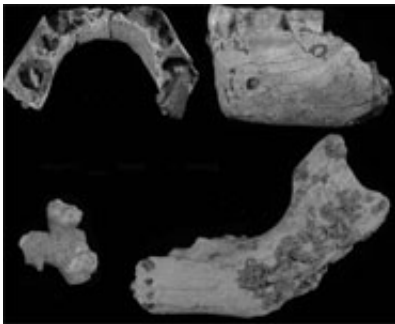


Late Neanderthals and modern human contact in southeastern Iberia

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Parts of four mandibles (lower jaw bones) found in the Sima de las Palomas region of Murcia, Spain. Photo by Walker et al (PNAS)

(PhysOrg.com) -- It is widely accepted that Upper Paleolithic early modern humans spread westward across Europe about 42,000 years ago, displacing and absorbing Neanderthal populations in the process. However, Middle Paleolithic assemblages persisted for another 8,000 years in Iberia, presumably made by Neanderthals. It has been unclear whether these late Middle Paleolithic Iberian assemblages were made by Neanderthals, and what the nature of those humans might have been.

New research, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, is now shedding some light on what were probably the last Neanderthals.

The research is based on a study of human fossils found during the past

decade at the Sima de la Palomas, Murcia, Spain by Michael Walker, professor at Universidad de Murcia, and colleagues, and published by Michael Walker, João Zilhão and Alistair Pike, from the University of Bristol, and colleagues.

The human fossils from the upper levels of the Sima de las Palomas are anatomically clearly Neanderthals, and they are now securely dated to 40,000 years ago. They therefore establish the late persistence of Neanderthals in this southwestern cul-de-sac of Europe. This reinforces the conclusion that the Neanderthals were not merely swept away by advancing modern humans. The behavioral differences between these human groups must have been more subtle than the Middle-to-Upper Paleolithic technological contrasts might imply.

In addition, the Palomas Neanderthals variably exhibit a series of modern human features rare or absent in earlier Neanderthals. Either they were evolving on their own towards the modern human pattern, or more likely, they had contact with early modern humans around the Pyrenees. If the latter, it implies that the persistence of the Middle Paleolithic in Iberia was a matter of choice, and not cultural retardation.

From the Sima de las Palomas, other late Neanderthal sites, and recent discoveries of the earliest modern humans across Europe, a complex picture is emerging of shifting contact between behaviorally similar, if culturally and biologically different, human populations. We are coming to see them all more as people, flexibly making a living through the changing human and natural landscapes of the Late Pleistocene.

Paper: Late Neanderthals in Southeastern Iberia: Sima de las Palomas del Cabezo Gordo, Murcia, Spain Michael J. Walker, Josep Gibert, Mariano V. López, A. Vincent Lombardi, Alejandro Pérez-Pérez, Josefina Zapata, Jon Ortega, Thomas Higham, Alistair Pike, Jean-Luc Schwenninger, João Zilhão, Erik Trinkaus *PNAS* (www.pnas.org/)

Provided by University of Bristol

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