

Neanderthals had feelings too, say researchers

October 5 2010

Pioneering new research by archaeologists at the University of York suggests that Neanderthals belied their primitive reputation and had a deep seated sense of compassion.

A team from the University's Department of Archaeology took on the 'unique challenge' of charting the development of compassion in early humans.

The researchers examined [archaeological evidence](#) for the way emotions began to emerge in our ancestors six million years ago and then developed from earliest times to more recent humans such as [Neanderthals](#) and modern people like ourselves. The research by Dr Penny Spikins, Andy Needham and Holly Rutherford is published in the journal *Time and Mind*.

The [archaeologists](#) studied archaeological evidence and used this to propose a four stage model for the development of human compassion. It begins six million years ago when the common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees experienced the first awakenings of an empathy for others and motivation to 'help' them, perhaps with a gesture of comfort or moving a branch to allow them to pass.

The second stage from 1.8 million years ago sees compassion in [Homo erectus](#) beginning to be regulated as an emotion integrated with rational thought. Care of sick individuals represented an extensive compassionate investment while the emergence of special treatment of the dead

suggested grief at the loss of a loved one and a desire to soothe others feelings.

In Europe between around 500,000 and 40,000 years ago, early humans such as Homo heidelbergensis and Neanderthals developed deep-seated commitments to the welfare of others illustrated by a long adolescence and a dependence on hunting together. There is also archaeological evidence of the routine care of the injured or infirm over extended periods. These include the remains of a child with a congenital brain abnormality who was not abandoned but lived until five or six years old and those of a Neanderthal with a withered arm, deformed feet and blindness in one eye who must have been cared for, perhaps for as long as twenty years..

In modern humans starting 120,000 years ago, compassion was extended to strangers, animals, objects and abstract concepts.

Dr Penny Spikins, who led the research, said that new research developments, such as neuro-imaging, have enabled archaeologists to attempt a scientific explanation of what were once intangible feelings of ancient humans. She added that this research was only the first step in a much needed prehistoric archaeology of compassion.

"Compassion is perhaps the most fundamental human emotion. It binds us together and can inspire us but it is also fragile and elusive. This apparent fragility makes addressing the evidence for the development of compassion in our most ancient ancestors a unique challenge, yet the archaeological record has an important story to tell about the prehistory of compassion," she said.

"We have traditionally paid a lot of attention to how [early humans](#) thought about each other, but it may well be time to pay rather more attention to whether or not they 'cared'."

More information: www.blurb.com/books/1628917

Provided by University of York

Citation: Neanderthals had feelings too, say researchers (2010, October 5) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-10-neanderthals.html>

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