



Book Reviews

KINDRED: NEANDERTHAL LIFE, LOVE, DEATH AND ART BY REBECCA WRAGG SYKES

Bloomsbury Sigma. 2020. 400pp, 18 illustrations, 26 plates, hb, ISBN 978-1-4729-3749-0, £20.00

The COVID-19 dominated world of 2020–2021 has undoubtedly been a very difficult year for all of us, and certainly for me, there have been few moments of genuine pleasure. However, being asked to review Rebecca Wragg Sykes's book *Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art* for *The Prehistoric Society* was certainly one of those rare moments. I had long wanted to carve out the time to read this book since it was published to great acclaim in 2020. Even more so, as, through the lens of social media, I had seen Rebecca's commentary during the production of the book, and had seen how much of herself she had put into the process of writing and publication. Writing this review gave me the perfect excuse to devote the time necessary to read *Kindred* properly, and reader, I have to tell you, it did not disappoint.

Kindred is a genuinely fantastic piece of scholarship and a master class in popular science communication. Right from the first page, the reader is cocooned in a writing style that is undeniably authoritative, yet engagingly accessible. You know you are reading the words of a writer who knows Neanderthals inside out, and you can trust the author to guide you along the many twists and turns that will challenge what you thought you knew about our evolutionary cousins. *Kindred* manages to effortlessly cater to the complete novice and the expert audience (and everyone in between), pulling out a wealth of fascinating information of how our understanding of Neanderthals has developed and changed over the last c.160 years since the first Neanderthal fossil was discovered.

Kindred has 16 chapters that slip effortlessly by as the reader seeks to absorb all that this book can impart. Chapter 1 details the fascinating context of the Victorian era discoveries of Neanderthal fossils, their significance at the time (and even more so today), and starts to introduce the key players and sites that the reader will continue to encounter, like old friends, throughout the course of the book. Chapter 2 is a short, but important chapter that sets the Neanderthals within the broader context of the deeper evolutionary hominin past. Chapter 3 starts to define what it means to be a Neanderthal from the fossil evidence, discussing some of the morphological similarities and differences to ourselves. This segways well into Chapter 4 which details what the differences in the skeletal anatomy of Neanderthals would have meant in the

practical senses of muscle movement, mobility demands, dietary and energy requirements, and life cycles. In Chapter 5, Wragg Sykes masterfully sets the Palaeo-climatic and Palaeo-environmental scenes of the myriad environments in which Neanderthals lived and flourished through time and space. Chapters 6 and 7 give a genuinely informative and accessible account of the range of material culture production that Neanderthals were capable of, from stone tools to wooden spears, and what the production of such artefacts mean in regards to the complexities of Neanderthal cognitive and social capabilities. Chapter 8 takes the reader through an astonishingly detailed account of the diverse range of the Neanderthals dietary exploits including marine and terrestrial environments including a range of plant foods, all explored through diverse tailored hunting and gathering strategies. This chapter for me, is one where you really feel the Neanderthal presence in the past come alive.

Chapter 9 focuses on how Neanderthals clearly structured and ordered the living spaces that they occupied. From the setting of specific hearths to the construction of temporary wind breaks using hides and wooden posts. Neanderthal camps would certainly be familiarly structured spaces to any outdoor enthusiast today. Chapter 10 sees Wragg Sykes zooming out and away from individual Neanderthal sites to consider their world from a broader landscape perspective, contextualising how modern-day archaeologists track and model Neanderthal movements across topography and ecological niche. Identifying material culture movements from raw material source to eventual discard locations many miles away help to identify the complex and diverse social and cultural structures that formed the core of Neanderthal life so long ago. Chapter 11, for me was one of the most enjoyable. This is the chapter where Wragg Sykes discusses the increasing body of evidence that demonstrates the symbolic capabilities of our Neanderthal cousins. Although Neanderthals are biologically and morphologically different to *Homo sapiens*, it would seem that cognitively and behaviourally we are extremely similar in the capabilities for grammatical language, art production, symbolic space construction and personal body adornment. Chapter 12 takes a more detailed look at the life history of Neanderthals and the seemingly complex social interactions that occurred within Neanderthal societies; whilst Chapter 13 details the fascinating variation in the treatment of the dead that Neanderthals engaged with. From deliberate burial to cannibalism, Wragg Sykes gently guides the reader through the weight of evidence and what that implies for Neanderthal social and cognitive complexity. Chapter 14 is all about DNA. Neanderthal, Denisovan and *H. sapiens*. Wragg Sykes effortlessly manages to explain the great complexities of aDNA and the presence of Neanderthal and Denisovan DNA, not only within various modern day *H. sapiens* populations, but within the past populations of Neanderthals and Denisovans themselves. Chapter 15 starts to draw all the strands of the previous chapters together as the fate of the Neanderthals is contemplated, why and when did they go extinct certainly remains one of the biggest questions Palaeolithic archaeologists often contemplate. Chapter 16 shows how our stereotypical perceptions of the Neanderthals were both

created, and how they should be dismantled given the wealth of knowledge and evidence that we now know should enrich our interpretations of one of the last human species with whom we shared the planet.

What shines through every page and sentence of *Kindred* is the impressive body of scientific research, incorporating over 160 years' worth of discovery about the Neanderthals, underpinning all of the knowledge treasures held within. It is easy to see how deserving this best-selling and award-winning book* is of all the accolades it has accrued since its publication in 2020. If you know nothing about the Neanderthals, but would like to know more – read this book. If you think you know a lot about the Neanderthals (I used to count myself in this number) – read this book, it is astonishing just how much more there is to know and discover. If you just want a fascinating read that will engage your attention and distract you from the current state of the world – read this book, I promise you won't regret investing your time or curiosity.

**Kindred* won the *Current Archaeology* Book of the Year 2021

James Cole
University of Brighton

Review submitted: April 2021

*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews
Editor*