

Neanderthals and the Issue of Masculinity

The Role of Gender in Popular Neanderthal Discourse

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Introduction

The image of Neanderthals is changing rapidly and drastically. Whereas in the recent past they were seen as sluggish brutes, significantly *different from us* (modern human beings), they are now increasingly regarded as basically human, as *people like us*. Nevertheless, the persistent quest for a minimal difference that separates them from us, and that defines us as favored “winners,” is still noticeable in Neanderthal research (Peeters and Zwart 2020).

Analyzing the nature of difference has always been central to paleoanthropology. It is a discipline that is fundamentally based on categories and typologies (Knapp 1998). Paleoanthropology claims to be about ancestors from a distant past but it is also concerned with the identity of our own species (of us, modern humans), defining and redefining what it means to be human (Cartmill 1990; Roebroeks 1995). However, “human” turns out to be a messy, contested category. The boundaries of the genus *Homo* are fuzzy and in flux (Collard and Wood 2015). The genus *Homo* was established by Carolus Linnaeus as part of the classification system he introduced in his *Systema Naturae* (1735). The first fossil species was assigned to *Homo* in 1864, after the discovery of the Neanderthal fossil in 1856 in Neander Valley, Germany. Although the English geologist William King introduced the term *Homo neanderthalensis*, he considered Neanderthals to be distinctly different from humans. The shape of the skull indicated that “the thoughts and desires [that] once dwelt within it never soared beyond those of the brute,” and that Neanderthal man was characterized by a

similar darkness such as experienced by the chimpanzee (King 1864: 96). The prevailing view of the Neanderthals during the first hundred years following the discovery of their existence was that they were “brutes,” a term used to refer to individuals or peoples who were considered savage, uncivilized, and unintelligent (Madison 2020, 2021).

The definition of the genus *Homo* is closely tied to the concept of being human, and the question “What is *Homo sapiens*?” easily becomes “What is human?” Deciding what is human is not a neutral scientific matter, for it includes normative assumptions about what is truly “sapiens.” And what is considered to be quintessentially human has never included the entire human species. Neanderthals are the subject of one of the hottest debates in paleoanthropology, and the controversy mostly revolves around the concepts of identity and equality (Graves 1991). Are they like us? Differences, even very small ones, tend to be emphasized in the expert literature (Peeters and Zwart 2020). The focus is not on what we have in common, but on what the Neanderthals as “other” lack. Although recent genetic evidence and archaeological data show that continuity rather than discontinuity appears to be the rule, and Neanderthals and their Modern Human contemporaries were very similar in biological and cultural capacities, the view that an alleged superiority of *Homo sapiens* led to the demise of Neanderthals is still a prominent one (Marean 2015a; Roebroeks and Soressi 2016).

The obsession with minimal but, allegedly, decisive differences is symptomatic of the tendency to define clear demarcations when it comes to upholding our identity. Identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted, reinforced, and defended against what is closest and represents the greatest threat (Blok 1998). It was Freud who first used the term “the narcissism of minor differences,” explaining that “it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them” (Freud [1917] 1991: 272). From this perspective, Neanderthals are boundary creatures that threaten the stability of human identity by blurring and challenging some firmly established categories.

In the face of the current global environmental crisis, the process of self-reflection and reconsideration of the narrative of humanity as an evolutionary success story is increasingly urgent. Neanderthals, our most proximate other, serve as a mirror to reconsider who we are. In light of current demands for action to challenge gender discrimination, we zoom in on the role of gender and masculinity in this complex matrix of power and difference. If Neanderthals are a medium to think about humans, how precisely is “human” defined? What assumptions about gender, masculinity, and nature underlie this definition? In gender studies, much

work has been done to deepen our understanding of stereotypes and biases. Does this affect our understanding of prehistory?

Theoretical and Methodological Frame, Logico-philosophical Therapy

Inspired by Donna Haraway's critical study of primatology, *Primate Visions* (1989), and Stine Jensen's subsequent study (2002) on the association between woman and apes in science and culture, we shift the focus from primatology to early humans, analyzing how Neanderthals have played a similar role as "other" in defining hierarchical categories of human and animal, female and male, Black and White, nature and culture. Neanderthals are our closest relatives and the longest known hominin species other than ourselves. Being a human species and very similar to us, but at the same time not us, makes them "familiar strangers" (Morton 2018), both same and different, close and distant. We use Neanderthal discourse as a vantage point from which we may recognize, and reconsider, the anthropocentric logic at work in the formation of different kinds of oppositions and hierarchies when it comes to understanding ourselves as humans.

Because of the rapidly growing evidence concerning their intelligence, tool-use, symbolic behavior, and culture—in short, their "humanness"—Neanderthals are now generally considered as basically human (Papagianni and Morse 2015). But merely expanding the scope of what counts as human, including Neanderthals, leaves the yardstick of inclusion (similarity to those deemed to be fully human) unchallenged. According to philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood, who is known for her critical assessment of anthropocentrism, a centric conceptual structure is normally erected on the foundation of a dualism, a division that creates a sharp ontological break between the privileged "center" and those subordinated (Plumwood 1996, 2002). In centric conceptions of otherness, the center is the source of value or meaning, and all others derive their value or disvalue ultimately from their relationship or lack of relationship to the center. The other is often pictured as a deficient version of the center, distinguished by its lacks. Dualisms have the logical characteristics of radical exclusion (the otherized group is both inferior and radically separate) and stereotyping (the other is not an individual but a member of a homogeneous group). The basis of radical exclusion lies in a concept of an authentic human being, and what is taken to be valuable in human character, society, and culture, as exclusive of what is taken to be natural. According to Plumwood, this hyper-separated

conception of the human, which emerged historically from a web of interconnected, mutually reinforcing dualisms, expresses a “master identity” in Western culture (Plumwood 1993a). Although Neanderthals are now generally included as “fundamentally human,” the challenge to radical exclusion, claiming a common humanity, is the beginning of the journey to liberation, not the end. We cannot move forward without some reconceptualization of the terms or parties to the division, and some logico-philosophical therapy is necessary to unravel the conceptional knots of otherness (Plumwood 2002, 1996).

What is at issue is not whether Neanderthals are “really” human, but the dualistic construction of human and nonhuman. We try to understand Neanderthals in terms of their humanity, and establish identity by the (ever smaller) differences between us and them.

The ambivalences running through Neanderthal discourse incite us to explore and contextualize the intersection of belonging to the genus *Homo*, being human in the biological sense (the life sciences), and of being human in the philosophical sense (humanities) (Corbey 2005), to expose implicit assumptions underlying our ideas and ideals of human and humanness.

Gender is a crucial part of the organization of equality or inequality, but it often lurks in the background in an unexamined and concealed form (Plumwood 1993b). From the start, dualism as a principle of organization has been inherently gendered. The category of the feminine is constructed in a hierarchical opposition to that of masculinity: the terms on the higher side of the binaries being associated with, and serving to define, masculinity, while those on the lower side are associated with, and serve to define, femininity (Mathews 2017). Our ideas and ideals of maleness and femaleness have been formed within these structures of dominance, in which maleness is equated with superiority, and the dominance of the masculine is naturalized and legitimized. Feminism has always been a struggle with dualism. As far back as 1789, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote how women “are only considered as females, and not as a part of the human species,” denying them rationality (Wollstonecraft 2008: 10). In 1949, in the major feminist text of the second wave of feminism, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states: “Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being... She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (de Beauvoir 2011: 26).

Discussions about who we are have always been linked to power and privilege. While the master identity is gendered, it is not exclusively

male, and particularly revolves around a conception of reason on the one hand and nature on the other. It is a dominator identity that has a pre-established fit with a certain class of men: historically, that is, the class of educated White males. It depends on the context, however; in a colonial context, White women might assume the master identity relative to colonized peoples, who will be constructed as irrational and closer to nature (Mathews 2017).

In other words, what is at stake is not only setting humans apart from Neanderthals, but also the gendered, and racialized, construction of the concept of humanity that underlies Western thought. What happens when *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals, both generally envisioned as male, meet? This chapter is part of an interdisciplinary research project entitled *Neanderthals and “us,”* which offers a rereading of Neanderthal discourse from an “oblique” perspective,¹ zooming in on what tends to remain unsaid or unquestioned in standard academic discourse (Peeters and Zwart 2020; Zwart 2017). In this project, to expose and address implicit presuppositions and illuminate biases, we revert to a strategy of “triangulation” (Zwart 2019), namely by comparing the technical, scientific literature on Neanderthals with the way Neanderthals are presented in popular accounts. When reading both scientific as well as literary documents, we focus on the ways in which the findings are presented rather than on the technical content as such: on the terminology that is used, the images that are projected, the metaphors that are employed, and the controversies and misunderstandings that are evoked.

In this chapter, although the expert Neanderthal discourse will serve as a backdrop and frame of reference, the focus will be on popular discourse, because it is here that the biases outlined above are more readily discernible and amplified. As paleoanthropology serves to provide answers to some of the most central questions in the sciences and humanities, “What are we, and how did we get here?”, paleoanthropological discoveries are often covered in popular media, and these popularizations affect the way in which the general public is exposed to recent findings in research on human evolution (Schroeder 2020). In other words, popularized versions of Neanderthal research function as *spotlights*. They more explicitly convey and amplify the stereotypes and ideologies that are also at work in scholarly discourse, as we have argued in a previous paper (Peeters and Zwart 2020), but often in a more obfuscated manner. In other words, although a comparative analysis of both popular and scientific discourse would be beyond the scope of this chapter, zooming in on popularized amplification may make it easier to recognize similar stereotypes in the scholarly debates as well (Zwart 2019).

How do scholarly and popular documents deal with the ambiguity of Neanderthals, being strange and familiar at the same time, human but not us? Which differences or similarities are highlighted, which characteristics are valued, what is silenced and repressed? Explicit attention will be given to how males and masculinity are presented and put in the spotlights. We will present and analyze concrete contemporary examples of what we consider to be the androcentric paleovision of humanity.

Invisible Women in the History of Mankind

The word “gender” is almost interchangeable with the word “women.” Until recently, women have occupied a low profile in the study of human origins, both as the object of research and as the researchers visibly involved in the research (Hager 1997). Paleoanthropologists hope to link the past to the present to better understand who we are, but half the human species had pretty much been left out. The increasing number of female students and scholars entering the field from the 1970s onward resulted in more attention to disclosing the role of women in the early history of humankind (ibid.). In her pioneering work *The Descent of Woman*, arguing for the equal role of women in human evolution, Elain Morgan criticizes androcentrism in human evolution, and describes how for man (the male of our species) it is just as hard “to break the habit of thinking of himself as central to the species as it was to break the habit of thinking of himself as central to the universe. He sees himself quite unconsciously as the main line of evolution, with a female satellite revolving around him as the moon revolves around the earth” (Morgan 1972: 9).

Gender research in archaeology arose during the 1980s and 1990s, when feminist critics demonstrated the sociopolitical underpinnings of the excessively androcentric “Man the Hunter” and “Man the Explorer” model. The explicit intent of archaeological research in the 1980s was to “find” women in the archaeological past and give them the credit they deserved. The 1980s, when molecular biology and genomics entered the field of paleoanthropology (Zwart 2009), also gave rise to “Mitochondrial Eve,” a hypothetical prehistoric female who gained fame as “our common mother.” Genetic studies suggested that this most recent common maternal ancestor of currently living humans lived in Africa some 200,000 years ago (Cann, Stoneking, and Wilson 1987; Wilson et al. 1987). Eve, however, became a target of misogyny (M’charek 2020; Oikkonen 2015). According to geneticist Rebecca Cann, one of the main architects of the “Eve” hypothesis, the femaleness of Eve was an important factor in the

negative reception of the model. Cann writes that “when the discussion of diversity gets too close to us, taking on a female face and black skin, the intensity increases dramatically” (Cann 1997: 78).

It was not until the mid-1990s that archaeologists began to confront the complex ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues involved in studying gender (Dobres 2004). Although women are now explicitly considered part of human evolution, they are still often portrayed as the handmaidens of male protagonists, while the latter are seen as the ones out there, innovating, and making hominid evolution happen (Gifford-Gonzalez 1993; Zihlman 1997). Examining pictorial reconstructions in *National Geographic* from 1888 to 2007 showed that ancient women depicted in the 1990s and 2000s were just as scarce, passive, and subordinate as they had been in the postwar backlash of the 1950s, and were often staged as assistants or spectators in what is basically a man’s world (Khorasani and Lee 2019; Solometo and Moss 2013). A more recent analysis of how the archaeological past is depicted in exhibitions and educational material in the Netherlands (van den Dries and Kerkhof 2018), and a survey of Google images depicting prehistoric humans (Khorasani and Lee 2019), showed a similar bias. Fifty years of feminist critique has changed archaeology in the sense that women are now more visible. But precisely this visibility reveals that they are still depicted in roles, attitudes, and relations that are stereotypical and problematic extensions of their traditional passive roles (Conkey 2008). Women as representatives of the species as a whole are still scarcely to be found.²

Otherness versus Us-ness

The fact that males are representing prehistoric society more or less in its entirety is not only because women are ignored. The most important factor is that men are not gendered, they are considered to represent the whole of humanity (De Leiuén 2018; Skogstrand 2011). The label “human” has, historically, never included the entire human species, and it used to refer exclusively to the White civilized adult male of Plato and Aristotle, the top of the chain of being, with a unique status based on possessing a rational soul. The higher status of men used to be very explicit. According to Aristotle, for example, “the female is, as it were, a mutilated male” (Mayhew 2004).

In the nineteenth century, evolution was framed as an imperialist doctrine of progress, with an interconnected hierarchy of sexes and races. In *The Descent of Man* (Darwin 1981), Darwin made disparaging comments

both on non-European peoples and on women. He claimed that, through sexual and natural selection, “man has ultimately become superior to woman” (ibid.: 328), and that “there can hardly be a doubt that we are descended from barbarians” (404). Darwin suggests that different human races can be identified in terms of “high” and “low,” and peoples identified as “low” are somehow emblematic of that from which White Europeans have descended, or in other words, *distanced* themselves (Deutscher 2004). He describes the male human as

The rival of other men; he delights in competition, and this leads to ambition which passes too easily into selfishness. These latter qualities seem to be his natural birthright. It is generally admitted that in women the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilisation. (Darwin 1981: 326)

Over the long run of history, equality and common humanity were far from self-evident, while the inferiority of the “other” was. The historian Siep Stuurman argues that while inequality was the standard, equality had to be invented, and became coupled with sameness in Europe during the Enlightenment. To become equal is to become like those who are already equal—that is, the White Europeans. The key question always remained: “Can others become like us?” Can they elevate themselves to the level we have already attained, resulting in a circular conception, with the white default setting functioning both as the origin and as the telos of humanity (Stuurman 2017). Because sameness has become the norm in the modern equality paradigm, similarities are taken for granted, while difference and deviance attract attention and dismay. However, becoming equal entails work and an ideology (M’charek 2022).

Archaeologists have traditionally been men, who have not recognized themselves as gendered and have not seen gender as relevant for interpretations of prehistory as long as it has not explicitly concerned women. Feminist scholars have attempted to treat masculinity as a problematic gender construct, not as the normative referent against which standards are assessed (Kimmel 1987). What is considered masculine is not something given or innate to males, but is determined by cultural ideas and ideals constructed through performative practices, today and in the past (Skogstrand 2016). Only a few researchers have explicitly problematized masculinity as a concept in prehistoric archaeology (see, for example, Alberti 2006; Athreya and Ackermann 2020; Caesar 1999; Fuentes 2021; Knapp 1998; Montón-Subías and Hernando 2018; Skogstrand 2011).

Two Case Studies

To add more detail to the argument developed above, we will now opt for a case study approach, zooming in on some concrete examples of Neanderthal imagery taken from popular discourse. Thus, we will discuss a recent publication by Curtis Marean in *Scientific American* entitled “The Most Invasive Species of All,” which tries to assemble Neanderthal research evidence into a comprehensive view about how “we” (*Homo sapiens*) became such a successful, world-conquering species. What is intriguing about this vision is that all the exceptional signature features used to explain how our history became such a success story are consistently depicted as male. Subsequently, we will analyze how the competitive “struggle for existence” between Neanderthals and humans is fleshed out in a “Neanderthal fight club” in the BBC documentary “Neanderthals: Meet Your Ancestors” (2018).

In his article, Curtis Marean (2015c) emphasizes how Neanderthals—notably Neanderthal males—were consistently perceived as a competitor and a threat for invading modern humans, who entered and colonized Europe, and eventually exterminated them. And this, exterminating competitors, is allegedly what they evolved to do.

How and why did modern humans accomplish these astonishing feats of domination and expansion, of colonization and extermination? Two innovations, unique to *Homo sapiens*, allegedly primed us for world domination: a genetically determined propensity for cooperation, and the ability to develop advanced projectile weapons. Unique proclivity for cooperation joined with advanced cognitive abilities enabled “us” to adapt to new environments and foster innovations, combining team effort (which requires high-level communication and intelligence) with advanced projectile weapons (arrows, spears). ‘Thus equipped, our ancestors set forth, out of Africa, ready to bend the whole world to their will’ (Marean 2015c: 33), allegedly fitter for survival than Neanderthals.

There had been attempts to leave Africa and colonize the world, but these earlier humans were “apparently unable to press forward, [as] they needed an edge they did not have yet” (Marean 2015c: 33). We humans, however, managed to push on, “envisioning and desiring new lands to explore and conquer” (ibid.). “We” broke barriers and swept into new continents, Europe first of all, but were destined to eventually take over the entire world. Modern humans had this unstoppable signature attribute, this decisive minimal difference, that Neanderthals and other extinct cousins did not; they had the last major addition to the suite of characteristics that constitutes “human uniqueness,” and that explains *Homo sapiens’* sudden rise to world domination (ibid.: 34).

Experts could never come to an agreement concerning the exact nature of this decisive difference that allegedly defined “human uniqueness.” Marean, however, lists a number of possibly unique features. Something must have made us different, so what was it? First of all, some 160,000 years ago, while Neanderthals continued to hunt mammoths, humans began to target coastal resources (dense and predictable). But this was merely a first step. Triggering territoriality, conflict over resources set the conditions that selected for hyperprosociality. While developing their ability to cooperate, humans were on their way to becoming “an unstoppable force, but [they] needed a new technology, projectile weaponry, to reach [their] full potential for conquest” (Marean 2015c: 36). With this “breakthrough innovation,” a “spectacular new kind of creature was born, an indomitable predator. The ability to master any environment was the key that finally opened the door out of Africa and into the rest of the world” (ibid.: 38). Archaic humans, less prone to advanced collaboration and unable to hurl weapons, allegedly did not stand a chance. “Neanderthals were perceived as a competitor and threat, and invading modern humans exterminated them. It is what they evolved to do” (ibid.).

Marean imagines how this encounter between species played out. He envisions Neanderthals telling stories around campfires about battling cave bears and mammoths when, one day, these boasting tales are replaced by fearful stories about new people, fast and clever, coming in large groups, hurling their spears with dreadful accuracy, slaughtering men and children, and taking the women. This, according to Curtis Marean, is the “sad story of the first victims of modern human ingenuity and cooperation, and helps to explain why horrific acts of genocide and xenocide crop up in the world today” (Marean 2015c: 39).

This narrative takes the form of a hero tale, a common narrative in human evolution (Landau 1993). What is most striking about this story is that, first of all, history allegedly depends on competition, innovation, and extermination, and, secondly, that this is exclusively considered the work of males. In his response to a reader’s objection to the male-centric theme, Marean emphasizes that the “killing and butchery that ensue (invasion) is the product of weapons and men” (Marean 2015b). Needless to point out, this story is far from evidence based. Paleoanthropological finds rather point in the opposite direction, suggesting that, during extensive periods (stretching out thousands of years), Neanderthals and humans must have existed side by side, albeit in a world so sparsely inhabited that encounters were probably rare. In other words, what makes Marean’s version of history interesting is the implicit biases it conveys, rather than the historical credibility it can claim. In short, the early human masculine exterminator, the bloodthirsty and innovative

destroyer, is consistently depicted as male (Bederman 1995). The deadly combination of teamwork, violence, and innovative technology is seen as synonymous with masculinity, while the rival image of a female warrior is considered a “contradiction in terms” (Moen 2019; Price et al. 2019).

A perhaps even more telling exemplification is a scene from the 2018 BBC documentary “Neanderthals: Meet Your Ancestors,” staging a Neanderthal who allegedly had to fight a human for survival. The documentary starts by explaining that Neanderthals are not the brutish ape-men of popular imagination, but much more sophisticated, and “surprisingly” like us. Neanderthals were stronger, faster, and also smart, but around 40,000 years ago, humans nonetheless won out and Neanderthals died out. How did this happen? In an imaginary fight club, we meet once again. Yes, in a purely physical combat “they” would have beaten “us.” They may have been shorter, but they were brawnier, more powerful, and faster. Something must have given us the advantage. Perhaps it was the ability to be creative and imaginative, giving us an intellectual advantage (e.g., picking up and throwing sand into their eyes), and a speed of thinking that would give us an edge, allowing us to deliver the knockout blow. Maybe that was what drove the Neanderthals to their demise. Again, for us, the most striking feature is not the plethora of open questions. Rather, what strikes us is that which seems to be taken for granted from the very outset, namely the irradicable (Darwinian?) conviction that the Neanderthal–human encounters must have given rise to combat, and that this “struggle for existence” was a combat between males.

Basically, what is interesting about the fight club episode is, first of all, that the Neanderthal–modern human combat is envisioned as being between brawns (“them”) and brains (“us”); and secondly, that both brawns and brains are seen as decidedly masculine characteristics. This tension between brains and brawns continues to define representation of masculinity in the twenty-first century. We tend to conceive Neanderthals and ourselves as representing different stages between savage and civilized. And in the context of civilization, although masculinity continues to encompass both brawns and brains, emphasis is shifting increasingly to the latter. This is why human males, in comparisons with their Neanderthal counterparts, are depicted as smart innovators, collaborators, and explorers. Muscularity is viewed as masculine, but life-and-death combat is considered a primitive version of a masculinity test. What defined “us,” compared to Neanderthal males, was definitely on the brainy side of the spectrum.

Race and gender have been tightly interwoven in discourses of the civilized and primitive. When in 1910, Jack Johnson became the first African American heavyweight boxing champion by defeating the popular, and

undefeated, White former champion Jim Jeffries, riots broke out and rampaging White men attacked Black men. From the beginning, the Johnson–Jeffries fight was framed as a contest to see which race had produced the most powerful man. White men were confident that Jeffries would win because of the assumption that the Black man fights emotionally, whereas the White man uses his brain (Bederman 1995). The Neanderthal–*Homo sapiens* fight is a contest to see which species is superior in the struggle for existence; a struggle between two understandings of masculinity, achieving humanity by the victory of civilization over nature.

In his survey of masculinity in the West, Christopher Forth (2008) describes fight clubs, emerging in real-life after the release of the very successful 1999 movie *Fight Club*, as exploring the tension between manhood and modernity, and as clear examples of how the gendered discourse of civilization shapes the popular perceptions of masculinity. By acting out warrior fantasies, the complex interplay between masculinity and civilization is played out, which is interconnected with male ambivalence about women, who are both celebrated and resented for helping to raise men from savagery to civility. As the term “civilization” is used to describe both the process of history as well as the end result of that process, it establishes an antithesis between civilization and a hypothetical primordial stage. Civilized man progresses with the wild man at his heels, so that the latter is both deplored (as evolutionary loser) and envied (as being closer to nature). Nostalgia for a lost, primitive, warrior world is a recurring theme in the history of Western masculinity, as violence and risk-taking are considered to be unfairly repressed by civilization (Forth 2008). Combatting Neanderthals is therefore envisioned as a primordial stage in the history of anthropogenesis, or rather androgenesis.

Masculinity and Universality

What lessons can be drawn from these examples against the backdrop of the scholarly Neanderthal debate? A striking feature in these efforts to distinguish “them” from “us” is the role of masculinity. Decisive differences between modern humans and Neanderthals (allegedly the winners and losers, respectively, in a struggle for survival), such as innovation, exploration, competition, aggression, expansion, and use of weapons, are framed as characteristics of combatting male explorers.

What these examples emphasize, we argue, is that ignoring masculinity as an inherent element in visions of early humans will leave the idea of an undifferentiated universal “man” in place. Men are perceived as being more representative of the unique features of humanity than

women, and stereotypical masculine traits define humanity, and are valued more. Allegedly masculine activities (like innovation, expansion, competition, aggression) are also considered as the norm for how we understand and conceptualize prehistory (Caesar 1999). Male gender stereotypes shape our understanding of prehistoric humans. By generalizing from the manly to the humanly, masculinity becomes invisible and the prehistoric man becomes a never-ending reproduction of male archetypes such as the warrior, the chief, and the hunter (Skogstrand 2011). As long as, in narratives about early humans, males are everywhere and doing everything, it is impossible to see what they were really doing, as they are not situated or located anywhere in particular (*ibid.*). According to Donna Haraway (1988), this “god trick” of seeing everything from nowhere is an illusion. It is the standpoint of the masculine master, which claims universality while being particular. Once “maleness” as a natural foundation for gender is challenged, it becomes increasingly problematic to think of the category “masculinity” as universally applicable, because the male–female binary is no longer a given.

Moreover, as long as deadly physical combat is regarded as the decisive factor in early human history, the broader spectrum of human activity remains obfuscated. The focus on extermination (of Neanderthals as “others”) through physical combat, moreover, is closely linked with a view of early human history in terms of evolutionary “winners” (“us”) and “losers” (“them”). Archaeological knowledge tends to reproduce an image of contemporary dominant forms of masculinity, and as long as men remain the undifferentiated dominant group, masculinity becomes virtually synonymous with male domination (Alberti 2006).

Discourses about the past have been mostly an expression of the male perspectives on reality, and have therefore reinforced values, attitudes, and capacities associated with dominant Western male identity. Change, individuality, and reason, and with them power, self-control, violence, technical progress, and economic growth, became generalized as a way to construct male identities ever since the Enlightenment and the colonial expansion (e.g., man as the male innovator and entrepreneur). This implies that the idea of history as progress is androcentric in itself, as mainstream archaeology and paleoanthropology have neglected activities that were not the expression of innovative (= masculine) change, like maintenance activities such as feeding, clothing, and caregiving. Stability or a slower pace of change is interpreted as a lack of progress, equated with backwardness (Montón-Subías and Hernando 2018).

Ideological ideas concerning the ascent of the White male, who heads the evolution from nature (woman) to culture (man), are baked into the narratives emerging from human origins research (Bünz 2012). Although

it has been widely recognized that human evolutionary history is complicated, and more a muddy river delta, with a band of streams weaving into and out of each other, than a branching tree (Hawks 2016), the ordering of superior and inferior remained more or less unchanged throughout the history of the discipline. Even when gene flow is recognized in this model, the questions are still being framed in terms of purity and impurity, evolutionary superior versus inferior, and stagnation versus expansion (Athreya and Ackermann 2020). Evolutionary human biology is still rooted in eugenic interpretations of variation and diversity, as Banu Subramaniam convincingly argued in *Ghost Stories for Darwin* (2014).

Androcentric narratives not only reflect androcentrism, they also reproduce it, and sustain and reinforce the unequal status quo. By disguising male advantage of men's greater societal power as simply the gender-neutral (human) standard, others consistently tend to fall short if assessed on the basis of this standard, which allegedly indicates what it is to be considered truly and normally human. By projecting known gender constructs onto the past, other possibilities are ignored. This leaves the master model of humanity, that sees history in terms of conquest and control, intact, presenting human evolution as a narrative of the superior *Homo sapiens*, with male domination at its core (Athreya and Ackermann 2020). It is only by superseding this competitive bias that a more inclusive spectrum of human activities, desires, and vicissitudes can come into view.

Alternative Visions of the Past

As Tomášková (2011) phrases it, twenty years after the initial calls to “engender” prehistory, we still seem to be filling the gaps in the linear traditional story of how the modern “us” came to be, rather than really interrogating the categories of men and women themselves, or broadening the scope of our imagination about how people may have lived differently in times past (ibid.: 125). Interpretive narratives concerning males and females in the past tend to present themselves as factual, but imagination always plays a role. These narratives depict gender roles as inherently “natural.” At the same time, notions of a supposedly “knowable” past are often used to explain and justify present-day gender differences (Hager 1997).

Allow us to add one final example. On the Calpe Conference in Gibraltar (September 2018), paleo-artist Maurico Antón gave an interesting presentation about the “evolving iconography” in how we represent

Neanderthals, based on changes in the archaeological evidence, but also on the way we look at it. He pointed out that, in making the vanished visible, there are cultural preconceptions that create a veil that renders us incapable of seeing the evidence—for example, preconceptions about people’s relationship with predators. In one of his reconstructions, he showed hyenas not as aggressive competitors of Neanderthals, the conventional view, but as coexisting creatures in a relationship of mutual curiosity with the Neanderthals. However, when discussing the relationship between male and female Neanderthals, he felt there was no good reason to challenge or reconsider gender stereotypes at work in such reconstructions. He was concerned that, by focusing on gender, we are projecting contemporary views about gender roles onto the past. Portraying women as hunters is today’s political correctness that is creeping into our reconstructions, according to Antón. Meanwhile, scientific evidence is accumulating that women played a much more important role in early human hunting practices than is often thought. In current research, the discovery of ancient female big-game hunters highlights uncritical assumptions about past gender roles (Haas et al. 2020). Another recent example from a stereotyped group in prehistory is the genomic confirmation that the individual buried in an “archetypal” high-status Viking-age warrior grave was not biologically male—as had been assumed since its excavation in 1878—but female (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017; Price et al. 2019).

Exploring alternative views is not “politically correct” archaeology, but rather an inevitable exercise that helps us expose the beliefs and biases at work in efforts to come to terms with the early human past, both in the academic and the popular debate (Conkey 1997). The gap between what our evidence says and what we say about our evidence is considerable. The (intrinsically incomplete) factual findings themselves will not produce a coherent picture of prehistory; interpretation plays a decisive role. Researchers will continue to use their (evidence-based) expectations and imaginations to fill in the gaps. There is little fossil or archaeological evidence of gender roles in the deep past, and it does not necessarily correspond to contemporary gender patterns (Coltofean-Arizancu, Gaydarska, and Matić 2021; Fuentes 2021; Nowell and Chang 2014). We should be open to the ambiguity of the material, notably to assumptions concerning a male–female binary, which is still straitjacketing research practices by enforcing forms of dualism that are not reflected in the material as such (Alberti 2006).

In conclusion, notions of superiority and inferiority have affected our understanding of Neanderthals, and they are often deeply entangled with cultural assumptions about gender and race. There is a continuous

interaction between findings and interpretations, between facts and conceptualizations. We do not envision a research field that is free from biases, but one in which these implicit biases are more readily acknowledged, considered, and addressed.

By contextualizing science, discussing its ideas in a cultural context, and vice versa, it becomes clear that discussions about the past reflect discussions about masculinity and the role of gender in contemporary society (Jensen 2002). Neanderthal research is interesting in itself but it also reveals what we apparently consider as “us,” a self-narrative that not only aims to explain, but also to justify, who we are. The growing public interest related to human evolution calls for a responsibility from researchers to untangle, challenge, and, where necessary, refute narratives that can be exploited to reinforce, naturalize, or legitimize contemporary injustices and power asymmetries. We should not be filling the gaps in the linear traditional story, but question the narrative, and challenge the anthropocentric and androcentric framework of the dominant story.

Thus, also in the realm of masculinity, the Neanderthal question mirrors contemporary debates and concerns, and confirms the importance of superseding binary interpretations of gender, masculinity, and femininity. Our understanding of both early and contemporary human history can be deepened if we become more aware of this continuous interaction between past and present. We should be open to alternative and more inclusive visions of the past, and what it means to be human.

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Notes

1. <https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/40621fhr011> (last accessed 15 October 2025).
2. Two recent examples can be found in the exhibition catalogue *Neanderthal – In the Land of the Mammoth Hunters* (Bjarnø and Kellberg Nielsen 2020) and in an article on Neanderthal anatomy (Ocobock, Lacy, and Niclou 2021), although the caption explicitly mentions that these are females.

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