

Were Neanderthals architects?

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14 June 2016

A newly discovered archaeological site suggests that Neanderthals were capable of and practiced rudimentary architecture. The site lies in Bruniquel, a cave located in southwest France, and is dated to 176,500 years ago. If the early results are confirmed, they will further narrow the cultural gap between Neanderthals and physically modern humans.

The site consists of six features, of varying dimensions. The two largest are roughly oval to circular, with four smaller ones of varying shape. The features are composed of fragments of stalagmites broken from the cave floor, nearly 400 in all. Most of the pieces are stacked horizontally, with some vertical elements acting as “stays,” plus smaller pieces placed as “chinking.” The tallest walls are nearly half a meter high. The largest structure measures nearly 7 by 4 meters and the second largest about 2 meters across.

The purpose of these structures is unknown. However, the method of repeated, systematic construction and complex design indicate determined, patterned behavior demonstrating sophisticated cognitive abilities and coordinated labor. The placement of the walls over 300 meters inside the cave is also significant, as they are located in an area without natural light. Construction and use would have required continuous artificial light. Evidence of fire and pieces of burnt bone were found among the structures.

There is a gap of 150,000 years between these structures and when modern humans, during the Upper Paleolithic, ventured into European caves to create works of art. The researchers at Bruniquel Cave suggest that both the cave art of 30,000 years ago and the structures of 176,000 years ago had an ideological/ritual significance, indicating that representational thought in humans has a much deeper past than previously thought.

While their use as ordinary residences cannot be ruled out, the motivation for continuous habitation so far

underground is difficult to explain. Apart from the structures and evidence of fire, there were no tools or other cultural materials found. Nor does the report indicate any evidence of overarching superstructures—though, if made of organic materials, these may not have survived. The attribution of these structures to Neanderthals is based on their apparent age and the current understanding that modern humans did not arrive in Europe until sometime after 50,000 years ago.

Regardless of who the builders were, these are among the oldest human-built structures known anywhere in the world. It is also the only known, if confirmed, use of deep cave settings by Neanderthals.

The evolutionary split between the ancestors of Neanderthals and the line that led to modern humans is currently placed at some time before 200,000 years ago, diverging from a common ancestral species, possibly *Homo heidelbergensis*, which is currently known to have existed in parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa from about 700,000 to 200,000 years ago.

It was long thought that Neanderthals and modern humans were significantly different, probably constituting separate species within the genus *Homo*, with the former having markedly less developed intellectual capacities, inferred from their supposedly “brutish” appearance and less sophisticated cultural inventory. Recent genetic research, however, has revealed that when modern humans, who evolved in Africa, moved into Europe and the Middle East where Neanderthals evolved, the two groups interbred, demonstrating that they were, in fact, not separate species, and that their differences may have been exaggerated. Other research may also indicate that Neanderthals may have created some forms of cave art independently of *Homo sapiens*.

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If the attribution of these newly discovered structures to Neanderthals is confirmed, it would not only further shrink the perceived intellectual differences between them and modern humans, but would significantly push back the origins of such complex behavior, possibly indicating that it was a legacy derived from a common ancestor. This would reinforce the understanding that reliance on culture and the capacity for abstract thought had a powerful influence on the course of human evolution.



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