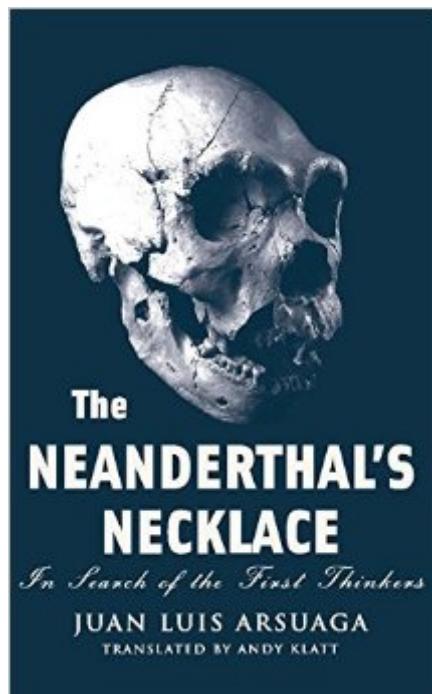


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The Neanderthal's Necklace: In Search Of The First Thinkers



Synopsis

The Neanderthals provide a surprising mirror for modern-day humanity. They belonged to our evolutionary group and lived like the Cro-Magnons, our ancestors, did; worshipping, socializing, and hunting. The struggle between Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons lasted thousands of years. The Cro-Magnons were not biologically fit for extreme cold weather, but their ingenuity allowed them to settle down, band together, and survive. In this tale of life, death, and the awakening of human awareness, Juan Luis Arsuaga, Spain's most celebrated paleoanthropologist, depicts the dramatic struggle between two clashing species, of which only one survives.

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Customer Reviews

This is a fine book that sheds further light on what the Neanderthals were like and what happened to them. Written in an engaging, clear and almost poetic style (the translation by Andy Klatt is first rate, his surprising use of "irregardless" on page 182 notwithstanding), this book gives us a sense of the latest understanding with an emphasis on evidence from the Sierra de Atapuerca excavation site in Spain where paleoanthropologist Professor Arsuaga is co-director. The black, white and gray illustrations by Juan Carlos Sastre nicely augment the text. Arsuaga begins with the observation that

today we exist almost alone in the sense that there are no very similar species extant, the last one being the Neanderthal in Europe. Arsuaga then traces our descent until he arrives at "Domesticated Man" in the Epilogue. His detours and asides are very interesting. I was especially pleased to learn that there are well-preserved wooden lances (or spears) used by archaic humans fully 400,000 years ago. (p. 182-183) I also found interesting his digression on what caused the extinction of the megafauna of America some 10,000 years ago (in Chapter Six, "The Great Extinction"). Primarily, though, this book is about the cultural, behavioral and conceptional abilities (as derived from the archaeological evidence) that separate humans from other living creatures, especially the Neanderthals. Arsuaga reveals his purpose on page 280: "I have been trying to summarize the evidence available concerning the thorniest problem of human evolution, the development of consciousness, which is the defining characteristic of humankind.

The Neanderthal's Necklace: In Search of the First Thinkers It's a rare book that delivers more than it promises, but Juan Luis Arsuaga's *The Neanderthal's Necklace* does just that. The book jacket presents it as a story of the 10,000-year-long encounter between the Neanderthals and our own Cro-Magnon ancestors, a story that ends with the disappearance of the Neanderthals some 27,000 years ago. Arsuaga discusses that epochal culture clash at length and with many fresh insights. However, he weaves that narrative into a much grander story--his expert take on the evolution not just of the Neanderthals and our own very young species, but of all the other walking primates that preceded us back to whatever great-grandparent species we shared with orangutans, gorillas and chimpanzees some 6 million years ago. For good measure, Arsuaga throws in his original and highly readable takes on many key evolutionary issues, on the nature of consciousness, and--really the theme of the book--on when, where and how our own "hypersymbolic" human consciousness emerged. Arsuaga, a leading Spanish paleoanthropologist, has strong views on many topics. He's convinced that modern humans are unique. "Anatomically, we are but erect primates . . ." he argues. "At the same time, we humans are radically different from all other animals due to the astonishing phenomena of our intelligence, our capacity for reflection, and a broad self-consciousness of all aspects of our behavior." Accordingly, he denies consciousness, at least as he defines it, not only to non-human animals, but even to many of the upright, tool-using species that preceded us. ". . . animals lack both self-awareness and perceptive awareness, or consciousness. They are no more than biological machines.

Juan Luis Arsuaga has written an informative account of his own research on the earliest

Europeans as represented by the copious skeletal deposits in the Sierra de Atapuerca and in particular with respect to the remains discovered in one very special site of that region, Sima de los Huesos, the Pit of Bones. The study of hominid origins, in this case involving conspecifics of the genus *Homo*, is always an intriguing field filled with a variety of opinions, reasoned and otherwise, and Professor Arsuaga gives a balanced treatment to the problem of the origin of the first Europeans and to the role that Neanderthals had in this evolutionary play. He is also not reluctant to state where his own sympathies lie with regard to our specific ancestry and the fact that, while, in his opinion, Neanderthals are not our direct ancestors, they do represent an alternative humanity, sentient, creative, and technologically proficient in their own right, and an alternative humanity that we shared the greater part of Europe with for some ten thousand years. I do have some minor concerns with regard to this book. First, American readers may be put off by Arsuaga's repeated use of researcher's full names when giving credit for the work of others. This is, I believe, a cultural artifact, but it makes the reading laborious in more than one instance. I wish also that more time had been spent addressing the significance of the skeletal remains of the child found in Portugal, dated to twenty-four to twenty-six thousand years ago, and purported to represent a combination of both Cro-Magnon and Neanderthal characteristics. Finally, the book subtitle suggests that the cognitive piece of the Neanderthal puzzle will be addressed at some length, and the discussion of this topic did not completely meet my expectations.

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