

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Paul Mellars.** *The Neanderthal Legacy: An Archaeological Perspective from Western Europe.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. xix + 471 pp. \$69.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03493-5.

**Reviewed by** Peter S. Allen (Rhode Island College)

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Several words come to mind to describe Paul Mellars' new book, *The Neanderthal Legacy: An Archaeological Perspective from Western Europe*: thorough, encyclopaedic, comprehensive, exhaustive. This is truly a *magnum opus*, a definitive work that will stand as a benchmark in Neanderthal studies for years to come. Ultimately, Mellars' aim, as he frequently reiterates, is to address the fundamental question of whether or not Neanderthals were the direct ancestors of Cro-Magnons and other modern *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* in Europe or whether they were a deadend offshoot of the human line who were displaced by more modern creatures coming from outside Europe at the end of the Middle Paleolithic.

This controversy is one with which most anthropologists are at least vaguely familiar, but there are dozens of lesser issues that are the subject of great controversy among the relatively small group of specialists who have made the understanding of Neanderthals part of their life's work. Many slightly less cosmic, but equally controversial questions and problems surrounding the Neanderthals are also addressed here. Each one is thoroughly explored, often with evidence for several points of view presented and assessed. One example is the question about whether large bovids and equids were systematically hunted by Neanderthals or merely scavenged. Mellars tirelessly explores the various dimensions of this and many many other issues, sparing few details along the way.

Concerning the basic controversy over the Neanderthal legacy, Mellars is judicious, clearly favoring one side, but without being polemic or strident. Unfortunately, a definitive answer to this burning question cannot be provided at this time, but Mellars makes it clear that the vast majority of the evidence he has reviewed would suggest that Neanderthals were *not* the progenitors of Cro-Magnons and most likely died out after a relatively brief period of co-existence with more modern humans with whom ultimately they could not compete.

His endorsement of this position is based on his extensive familiarity with an enormous body of evidence and his interpretation of it. But there is no grandstanding, no putting down of opposing views—just a kind of relentless amassing of evidence and a constant appeal to logic.

An important feature of this book is the extent to which the author integrates various Neanderthal studies to give the reader a much fuller picture. For example, data on faunal remains from myriad Middle Paleolithic sites are related to data on stone tool industries from an equally diverse and numerous collection of sites. This approach is used repeatedly, giving the reader a comprehensive and coherent view of Neanderthal culture and society.

Throughout, Mellars reaffirms the central role of F. Bordes in the excavation and interpretation of European Neanderthal remains, and he frequently acknowledges the contributions of L. Binford, especially in the theoretical arena, although he rarely seems to agree with Binford's interpretations. Many others are given their due, and Mellars is generally extremely fair in his judgments of others' work, careful not to be too critical while, at the same time, even more careful not to accept uncritically *any* ideas and positions that are not fully backed by irrefutable evidence.

This is an extremely ambitious book, which largely succeeds in achieving the author's immodest goal of reviewing and assessing finds from *all* the Neanderthal sites in Europe, particularly those in the southwestern part. Mellars examines not only the skeletal evidence, but also aspects of the environment, tools and other material remains, behavioral aspects, language, and so forth, and, as noted above, elegantly integrates all of it. In each chapter he amasses all the evidence that has been published as well as a great deal that has yet to see print. His assessment is judicious and measured, and he takes great pains to look at all the material before hazarding a cautious conclusion. Taken as a whole, Mellars' definitive and comprehensive picture of Middle Paleolithic life

reveals a far more sophisticated and sympathetic Neanderthal than has hitherto been the case for this woefully misunderstood creature.

In some instances Mellars is perhaps too judicious, in that he goes to great lengths to consider virtually all of the possible implications of some bit of evidence without, in the end, always endorsing one interpretation over the other(s). This can be a bit frustrating, especially for anyone looking for closure on some of the hard-fought issues. One example will suffice. In a chapter on Middle Paleolithic subsistence he takes up the question of specialization in the exploitation of animal resources. Using data on faunal remains from the site of Combe Grenal in the Dordogne, he demonstrates how they have been interpreted by some to indicate changing ecological conditions alone and by others as an indication of deliberate selection by Neanderthal hunters for particular species at various times *despite* changing ecological conditions. Mellars then proceeds to point out some weaknesses in the argument for the second interpretation, stressing that the argument is plausible, but hard evidence for it is lacking. In the end, he does not really endorse the ecological change position over the deliberate selection hypothesis; rather, he chronicles the strengths and weaknesses of both, noting that both are credible, but one lacks hard evidence.

Although some might prefer closure on these questions or more definitiveness on some of the issues, in the end it is better to have Mellars' cautious equivocation. Too often in the past statements have been made that have been misleading or proved to be hopelessly wrong-headed. Mellars is not about to leave himself open to the scorn of future generations of archaeologists. He is all too aware of the dangers of making assumptions without definitive evidence. For some questions, like the language issue, the evidence that will provide conclusive an-

swers may never be forthcoming, but Mellars makes it clear that that is no excuse for endorsing a position that cannot be supported by hard evidence.

This book is written in a way that makes it fully accessible to any student of the human sciences; however, it is definitely a work for specialists and there is no stinting on the evidence. Primary sources are cited throughout and some of the case material is extremely detailed. However, it contains an important message for non-specialists who are nevertheless concerned with major developments in the study of human evolution and physical anthropology. Mellars also shows how careful, even cautious, the discipline has become, reluctant as he is to make conclusive statements, demanding an ever higher standard of proof for any hypothesis. He maintains a very high standard of demonstrating that a conclusion is "unambiguous"—a high standard indeed for any archaeological undertaking or interpretation based on the necessarily fragmentary product of the archaeological enterprise.

*The Neanderthal Legacy* is a first-rate compendium of data on European Neanderthals and the various interpretations that have been advanced from these data. Almost 250 graphs, charts, maps, and photographs enrich this text and enhance its accessibility and lucidity. It suffers from a bit of repetition and, some might argue, equivocation, but if Mellars himself errs on the side of caution, he does not prohibit the reader from taking sides and, indeed, he provides all the material one needs to do so. This is a superb book and will stand as the definitive work on the subject for a long time to come.

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