
The Living Structures of Neanderthals: a True Enigma

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Abstract

Now it increasingly becomes clear that Neanderthals' environmental tolerance was large and flexible, enabling habitation under semiarid (Mediterranean), wet (marine) and cold (subarctic) conditions, it must be assumed that Neanderthals must have developed effective and sustainable strategies for finding and organising shelter. However, this does not necessarily mean that Neanderthals performed comparable forms of architecture as recent and present-day hunter-gatherers and fisher communities living under similar conditions. From an ethnographical and historical perspective, recurrently used and roof-covered dwelling structures with a clear ordering of internal and external space, either transportable or spatially fixed, provide the generally accepted model for archaeological inference and explanation. Many Neanderthal sites indeed contain patterned, circular or semi-circular structures that remind of this model. Several of these have long taphonomic histories that may indicate (partial) post-depositional origins. Others, like at Arcy-sur-Cure, Les Canalettes and Bruniquel, reflect convincing examples of structured use of space that are nonetheless enigmatic from a conventional perspective on human architecture and dwelling.

Apart from the fact that the ethnographic dwelling model should be convincingly supported empirically in the case of Neanderthals, it should be realized that dwelling in recent and present-day societies relates to complex spatial, social and cultural notions, as well as cognitive schemata that may not have been shared by Neanderthals. Therefore, in this paper, we explore alternative frameworks for understanding patterned structures at Middle Palaeolithic sites, emphasizing idiosyncracies in Neanderthals' uses of landscape, space and place. The question will be raised when in human history the first roof-covered dwelling constructions may have appeared and why, and what characterised human architecture before that time. Our contribution builds further upon a paper that was published earlier by one of us (Kolen 1999) by discussing recent discoveries, adding new theoretical insights and exploring the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic transition from the perspective outlined.

Literature: Kolen, J., 1999: Hominids without Homes. On the nature of Middle Palaeolithic settlement in Europe, in: W. Roebroeks & C. Gamble (eds.), *The Middle Palaeolithic Occupation of Europe*, Leiden University Press, Leiden, pp. 139-175.

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