

Paige Madison: Sociology & Anthropology

Mentor: Michael Reidy -- History & Philosophy

How Neandertal Conceptions were Built by Nineteenth-century European Scientists

Scientific knowledge is not created in a vacuum separate from ideology and bias; people generate scientific knowledge, and those people are products of a specific time period and a specific location. An examination of that time and place helps to provide a better understanding of the forces at work in knowledge creation. A good example of this is illustrated in the early discoveries of Neandertal fossils. Neandertal fossils were the first ancient, human looking fossils to be uncovered, and it is significant that they began to appear in a time of great change in Europe; a time when people were reeling from the French Revolution, a time of British imperialism, and a time when beliefs about the authority of the Bible were questioned and evolution was discussed. The narrative of the Neandertal species was created in that complex and tumultuous environment, and a history of Neandertal fossils must situate the fossil discoveries in the broader context that affected the fossils' analysis. This project aims to illustrate a few of the ways that broader social, political, and ideological factors influenced the study of Neandertal fossils, and provide a discussion of how that affects the science being done on Neandertal fossils today.