CAVEMAN SEX

Interspecies dalliances seem to be common in the deep history of human evolution. Previously unthinkable in the corridors of academe, humans are now scientifically recognized as mutts resulting from various primates and hominids interbreeding for millions of years. As Scientific American put it in January 2000, this "picture of hominid evolution ... is a far cry from the 'Australopithecus africanus begat Homo erectus begat Homo Sapiens' scenario that prevailed 40 years ago ... Yet the dead hand of linear thinking still lies heavily on paleoanthropology." Luckily, several lively finds in genetics have uncovered some dirty little secrets that should banish the dead hand of linear thinking once and for all. For instance, the common ancestors of humans and chimps kept mating and re-interbreeding even after beginning to evolve apart. Genetic research has discovered that all of us contain genes from Neanderthals and other non-human relatives. There is even conclusive genetic evidence that pubic lice jumped from gorillas to humans millions of years ago, and it wasn't just a case of sharing underwear.

All this was still basically unthinkable only a few short years ago. The view of the dominant paradigm was that humans would have no interest in mating with sub-human or non-human relatives, and if they did, no fertile offspring could occur, and if they did occur, there was little or no effect on our species. All that is now crap.

It has been shown to be crap by a ton of data, but really, it's pretty obvious that it's crap even without the data, which shows how easily science can be led astray by ideological blinders. So, let's see, a dog will hump my leg, a shepherd will hump a sheep, a guy from Superior, Wisconsin will hump a dead deer, but there's no way a human would hump a Neanderthal? Isn't it rather more obvious that humans will hump anything that moves and a few things that don't? With regards to the argument that no fertile offspring could occur, haven't we all heard future mothers say "I can't get pregnant" before? The argument does not survive the discovery of Neanderthal genes in the human gene pool. They didn't get there by any means except one: caveman sex that produced fertile offspring.

HUMANS AND NEANDERTHALS LIVING TOGETHER: IT'S ANARCHY

It was once thought, again until very recently, that humans displaced Neanderthals with quickness, from outcompeting, killing, or both. But now we know that humans and Neanderthals co-existed for thousands of years at least in at least two different parts of the world. Also, a recent surprise is that several species in various degrees of part-ape, part human ("hominids") have lived in close proximity throughout the course of human evolution. As Scientific American said in January 2000, even before a lot of the new exciting genetic work had come out – paleoanthropologists tend to "downplay the number of species and to group together distinctively different fossils under single, uninformative epithets ... [losing] sight of the fact that many kinds of hominids had regularly contrived to coexist." You don't have to be a genius to figure out that there must have been mad hanky-panky going on. Some three million year old Australopithecus finds (the earliest hominid ancestor and most famous fossil is named "Lucy") are suggested to actually be a mix of bones of separate hominid species that lived at the same time. A million-and-a-half years later, at least four distinct kinds of hominids shared the region around Lake Turkana in Kenya. "Modern body form" humans overlapped 100,000 years ago with Neanderthals in the Middle East, and "they somehow contrived to share" the environment (Scientific American Jan 2000). Humans also cohabited with at least two different species of ape-man 30,000-40,000 years ago: Neanderthals in Europe and Homo erectus (tee hee) in Java. "Some Neanderthals in Europe seem to have picked up new ways of doing things" from the humans (Scientific American Jan 2000). We'll bet they did. Those who want to say interspecies sex must have been rare are not taking into account the scope of the situation. We are talking about many, many generations worth of individuals, and many, many encounters under a huge variety of circumstances in deep time. You're trying to tell us no caveman hick ever did the wild thing with the forbidden fruit-eater?

Let's not forget the common human war crimes of mass rape and sex slavery which extend from the modern day back into prehistory. Are we to believe this never happened in conflicts between the various hominid groups of our family tree? More likely it was common to encounter "war babies"

of mixed parentage, and not-quite human sex slaves captured by war parties. All it takes is a realistic appraisal of human and near-human nature -- something scientists have been slow to wake to.

YOU GOT YOUR PHENOTYPES IN MY GENOME

Neanderthal genes have been found in our gene pool with evidence that they were deposited steadily over the time humans and Neanderthals cohabited the earth. They're not without their detractors, but fossils of Human-Neanderthal hybrids have been found (New Scientist 03 March 2007). Since a 2001 Oxford study, some people have argued that left-handedness, red hair, and freckles are examples of Neanderthal traits that made their way into humanity via crossbreeding. In reconstructions of Neanderthal appearance, they don't look that different from us (they are certainly a little homely but they had culture, tools, fire, burial of the dead, clothes, etc etc). Neanderthal skulls have been found with characteristic signs (ossified ear canals) found only in lifelong divers (New Scientist 25 Nov 2000). So they seem to have been very interesting at least, who's to say they didn't have their own je ne sais quoi?

Humans and Neanderthals getting it on is the least of it. Recent studies in population genetics indicate that humans and chimps could barely stop breeding long enough to diverge into different species (New Scientist 17 May 2006). There were millions of years going by where it looked like we were diverging into different species, but then enough breeding would occur that we collapsed back into the same species again. This apparently happened more than once over several million years, until finally the two lineages diverged long enough to stop seeing each other. But you can bet we kept their number: "Hey, I'm drunk, I know I shouldn't be calling you..."

Not to mention the recent eye-popping genetic analysis of pubic lice (crabs), which shows our species got crabs from gorillas (New Scientist 07 March 2007). Humans and gorillas last shared a common ancestor around eight million years ago, but we were catching crabs from them just three million years ago. What we're really talking about is the ancestors of humans getting the ancestors of crabs from the ancestors of gorillas. But still. Anyway the writeup of the interview with this researcher in New Scientist is precious: "...this suggests that early humans and gorillas made close contact, though [David Reed] 'seriously doubts' that pubic lice transferred between the two during sex. Instead, he suspects that early humans might have picked up pubic lice from scavenging on gorilla corpses or sleeping in the abandoned sleeping nests of gorillas ... But he acknowledges: 'I don't know if we'll ever be able to know for certain which hypothesis is correct.'" Mm-hmm. Guess this guy's never been to Superior.

THE APE GIRL NEXT DOOR

The archeology of chimpanzee tool use is now officially a thing (New Scientist 17 Feb 2007). Modern chimps are now recognized as being in their own "Stone Age." They crudely develop hammer-stone tools for opening nuts, and teach this technological culture to the younger generations. Chimp nut bashing tools have now been excavated from 4,000 years ago. Chimps were also recently discovered hunting with wooden spears in at least one population. All this (unsettling) tool use among chimps has given rise to speculation that the common human-chimp ancestor was itself a tool user. That way it ain't like both humans and chimps independently discovered tool use, but rather, tool use was pioneered by a common ancestor and we both inherited it. It makes us feel closer to the chimps – not inappropriately close mind you, but familial. It must have been a weird scene back when early protohumans, at various points along the spectrum from ape to human, shared the world. They were apparently all using tools to varying degrees, developing Stone Age cultures, and experimenting with language. Somewhere in there, in addition to the caveman rednecks, war babies, and sex slaves, there must have been some Romeo and Juliet stories going on too.

SIDEBAR: HOW EVOLUTION WORKS

It is somewhat incorrect to say that humans evolved from apes. Rather, humans and apes share a common ancestor. Populations of these common ancestors became geographically separated enough to evolve in different ways. For instance, say a mountain range develops in between two groups of human chimps over the course of deep time. One group evolves into chimps, and one group evolves into humans. Both are equally as evolved from a common ancestor, equally "perfectly adapted" to their niche, which in humans' case includes the entire surface of the world and is not so perfect. Like our faulty sense of just who or what to mate with for instance. Think about this next time you know someone dating someone bad for them. Evolution doesn't even care if they're the same species of hominid. Evolution's basic plan seems to be, "Anything goes."