INTERBREEDING NEANDERTHALS?



Great story in the Washington Post a couple of days ago – Caveful of Clues About Early Humans.

Archaeologists have been exploring an almost inaccessible cave in Romania, diving through icy underground sumps and making dizzying vertical climbs for the sake of a collection of fossil human remains washed into the cave 35,000 years ago.



Part of a skull found in the Pestera cu Oase cave in Romania: Erik Trinkaus And Ricardo Rodrigo

What makes these remains interesting is that they seem to be hybrids – between

Neanderthals and modern humans. It is part of that fascinating speculation about our closest relatives – were they reclusive and autistic, or happy family members.

Trinkaus said the Oase fossils show features of modern humans: projecting chin, no brow ridge, a high and rounded brain case. But they also have clear archaic features that place them outside the range of variation for modern humans: a huge face, a large crest of bone behind the ear and enormous teeth that get even larger toward the back.

Trinkaus made a CT scan of the face to measure the unerupted teeth. “To find wisdom teeth that big,” he said, “you have to go back 500,000 years.”

The team considered whether early humans might have interbred with other hominids with Neanderthal-like features, but “in this time period,” said Trinkaus, “the only archaic humans those modern humans could have interbred with were Neanderthals.” The mosaic of Neanderthal and modern traits remind Trinkaus and Zilhao of similar traits they found in a 25,000-year-old fossil of a child in Portugal.

The team in Romania wants their finds shed light on whether the Neanderthals were such an inferior species to modern humans or whether they were serious competitors – serious enough for interbreeding.

But Neanderthals never made the cultural switch to what we understand as modern human life (about 50,000 years ago), even if we do find them in some limited kinds of symbolic behavior like personal ornamentation and displaying consciousness of death (things we associate with modern humanity). The evidence is too rare to support any idea that Neanderthals were seriously modern. The question is simply whether they were wholly replaced or swamped by modern humans (with their assimilated distinctiveness contributing Borg-like to the success of modern humanity).