

EXTINCTION

A new species of recently extinct humans was discovered in a cave just south of the Congo River. A team of spelunkers found some human remains, together with some stone axes, near the mouth of the cave. On the walls of the cave they found elaborate drawings together with symbols indicating that this species of humans had already developed a written language. Carbon dating of the human remains yielded a surprise: they were about ten thousand years old, about five thousand years older than the earliest written language we knew about until now. Analysis of DNA samples taken from these remains yielded another surprise: their genetic makeup indicates that their nearest non-human ancestors were not chimpanzees, like ours, but rather bonobos.

Bonobos inhabit only one location, which is just south of the Congo River, where there are no gorillas to force them to spend most of their time in the trees. They differ from chimpanzees in that they are not as good at making tools, but they are better at social communication. This could explain why their descendants developed a written language before Homo Sapiens did, and why they still used stone axes when Homo Sapiens had already invented bows and arrows. Also, whereas chimpanzees often kill each other, bonobos never do. They do have disputes and sometimes even fights, but they have several methods of resolving disputes before they result in death or even serious injury: instead of the loser having to groom the winner to appease him, the winner grooms the loser to console him, and they often have sex, both homosexual and heterosexual. Further examination of the bones of these humans yielded another surprise: all the torsos that were found had small round holes in them, indicating a violent death, an unlikely fate for descendants of such peaceful apes.

To solve this apparent paradox, a team of archaeologists voyaged to the cave and began digging for more human remains. One of them dug up a number of pieces of tree bark on which were drawn symbols resembling the ones that covered the walls of the cave. They took pictures of all the drawings and symbols on the walls of the cave and gave the pictures and the pieces of tree bark to a team of philologists, who succeeded in translating the symbols on the bark. They're the last entries of a diary written by an adolescent boy who belonged to a tribe of these humans. From the following translation it is evident that certain words were missing from the vocabulary of these people – words for different kinds of apes, but also words for things with which they had no experience.

This morning our teacher, Clara Vine, said to us, "Jean Welles just returned from across the river, where she went to study the apes that live there. She needs to rest for a while from her harrowing experience there; so she won't be able to tell us about her discoveries until this afternoon." Miss Vine then began her lesson on the history of our tribe. Occasionally she would ask us questions to see how well we understood her lessons. One of her questions was, "Who was the leader of our tribe before Amy Zonta?"

"Dick Strong," answered Max.

"No, Max," said Miss Vine. "Either you haven't been paying attention to the lessons or you've been indulging in wishful thinking that this tribe has ever been led by a man. Does anyone know the answer?"

"Sally Walker," I said.

"Very good, Bob!" said Miss Vine. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Max glowering at me.

Now the lesson is over and it's time for free play.

Max, who is much stronger than I am, punched me in the stomach! "That's what you get for showing me up in front of the whole class!" he yelled at me.

"I wasn't trying to show you up," I said as soon as I could breathe again. "I was only showing off."

"Liar!" he yelled, punching me in the face.

I screamed, and three girls ran over to us. Mary and Sue grabbed him while Lisa yelled, "Leave Bob alone, you big bully!" And then she had sex with me right in front of him. After that they took turns, each of them having sex with me while the other two held onto him. Finally Lisa sneered, "Did you enjoy watching that, Max? Would you like some too? Well, you'll never get any unless you apologize to Bob and never bully anyone again!"

'Sorry, Bob," said Max.

When the girls left, I was afraid that he'd show me that he wasn't at all sorry, but instead he said, "Yeah, I guess I did act like a jerk. Tell you what: let's make a deal. I'll pick the parasites off your back and you help me with my schoolwork. Okay?"

"Sure, Max," I said, and then I prepared him for the next lesson.

This lesson is about the behaviour of the local apes.

In the middle of the lesson, Miss Vine asked us, "What do two groups of apes do when they meet?"

Max immediately answered, "They greet each other by having sex!"

"Very good, Max!" said Miss Vine.

After the lesson, Max said to me, "Thanks for helping me out."

Now it's time for lunch. Lunch is the usual fare – some fruits and berries and a few small animals that our hunters managed to kill with their stone axes.

After lunch, Miss Vine said to us, "Jean Welles is now sufficiently rested that she can share her experiences with us. Here she is. Give her a warm welcome!".

Miss Welles looks much the worse for wear – she has bruises all over her body. She began: "There are apes across the river that look much like the apes on this side – just a little stockier and more muscular – but their behaviour is much different. They spend most of their time in trees to escape from much bigger apes that live on the ground; so food gathering is such a hasty affair that the females aren't able to bond with each other like the females over here. The males do bond with each other, but they also fight each other for dominance, and these fights often lead to serious injuries and sometimes even to death. Each of the dominant males keeps – and dominates – one or more females, and the more dominant a male is, the more females he keeps. These apes often kill members of other groups of apes instead of greeting them like the apes that live here."

"Did one of the apes beat you up?" I asked her.

"No," she replied. "I kept far enough away from them that they didn't consider me an intruder. Instead, I was found and captured by four very muscular men. They dragged me into a clearing where there were a lot of other muscular men and a lot of grass structures that they must have built. Then they dragged me into one of those structures, where there was an even more muscular man and several women. They dropped me at the man's feet, bowed to him and went outside. He immediately tried to force sex on me! I resisted as best I could, but he beat me into submission. After a while he went outside. I motioned to the other women that they could now escape, but to my great surprise they stayed put – to continue living with a brute no woman here would tolerate! I ran to the river bank, with my four captors in hot pursuit. Fortunately the raft and the paddle I had built were still there; so I was able to..."

Suddenly she stopped talking and motioned to us to be silent. She cupped her hands behind her ears and then she said to us in a terrified voice, "It's them! They must have followed me across the river! They now know that there is another hunting ground and they'll want to eliminate all competition for the big animals they kill. Run into the cave and stack boulders in the mouth of the cave!" We all did that.

Now we too can hear four male voices shouting. Suddenly one of the boulders started to move deeper into the cave! The eight men inside the cave are all pushing back on it. Surely the four men outside won't be able to ... They did! How did they get so strong?

And now they're shooting long, thin, sharp-pointed things at us out of curved sticks, each with a vine stretched between the two ends of the stick!

We tried throwing our axes at them, but they simply retreated out of the range of our axes and they're still shooting those sharp things at us, killing us off one at a time! I'm going to bury these pieces of tree bark before they kill me too. I don't want them to be found by people who kill other people.