Abstract:
Huxley’s 1863 book showed a remarkable foresight in its arrangement of the great apes, which only recently has been updated by genetic studies. Based on our affinity with the great apes, Darwin surmised correctly that Homo must have originated in Africa. Our understanding here has been greatly deepened by the analysis of ancient DNA, which reveals mating between our ancestors and other Homo species after exodus from Africa, notably with Denisovans & Neanderthals.

While fossil evidence for Denisovans is scarce, materials they left behind indicate they had a modicum of culture. Neanderthals have left many fossils which show they were physically more robust than modern humans, with a brain slightly larger than ours. It is clear their cognition is closer to ours than any other species. However we are very far from being able to answer the question, if ever, as to whether they had language before they became extinct.

Language developed at the confluence of a diversity of inter-related forces: biological, cognitive, societal. Assuming ancient DNA can one day in the distant future provide full information on the Neanderthal brain, it will still fall short on the societal forces that shaped the brains that developed language across its several phase transitions.