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Wild Men or Homo Neanderthalensis? What does the Chinese Paleo-Mythology tell Us about Their Interaction with Homo Sapiens

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Abstract

Paleo-mythology - a term coined by the author - to describe the study of ancient myths and legends that date back to prehistoric times, often reflecting the interpretations of early human communities about their environment (nature), origins, and interactions with other human-like species as well as animals. This paper explores how paleo-mythology intersects with paleo-anthropology, particularly in understanding the relationship between Homo sapiens and the archaic Homo neanderthalensis (Neanderthals). This paper hypothesizes that certain Chinese mythological beings, like wild men (e.g., Almas, Guai Ren, Kui, Shan Gui, Yeren) and ape-man hybrid, may be symbolic echoes of these early human encounters, preserved in folklore and oral traditions. By integrating cultural narratives with archaeological and genetic evidence, this paper aims to enrich current understanding of ancient human behavior, cognition, and interactions between modern humans and Neanderthals. It also discusses the role of paleo-mythology in shedding light on the cultural memory of ancient populations, particularly those of East Asia, and its potential to inform both the cognitive and genetic histories of modern humans.

Keywords: Ancient myths, Cultural memory, Homo sapiens, Interbreeding, Neanderthals

What is Paleo-mythology?

The idea of *paleo-mythology* is a term coined by the author of this paper, blending *paleo-* (ancient) with *mythology* to signify the scholarly study or collection of very ancient myths. In other words, paleo-mythology refers to ancient myths and legends since the

times of antiquity, potentially dating back to prehistoric times, are often tied to the earliest stories and cultural memories of humanity. This specialized field of interest, which overlaps with archaeology, anthropology, and comparative mythology, explores how ancient

peoples from different parts of the world interpreted their immediate environments (Farrelly, 2019), natural phenomena (Sarakool & Hongsuwan, 2024), as well as their origins (Stoczkowski, 2012) through mythological narratives. In short, paleo-mythology is defined as the study of ancient myths since time immemorial and/or stories from prehistoric cultures, that offers to complement our current knowledge and understanding of the intersection of prehistoric humans, such as Neanderthals and Denisovans, with later mythological traditions. However, Neanderthals nor Denisovans themselves do not explicitly appear in mythology but has entered into our urban legends, perhaps, as wild men. That said, some myths and legends could be best interpreted and understood as distant echoes of encounters with archaic humans, including *Homo neanderthalensis* (Neanderthals) or *Homo denisova* (Denisovans), who interbred with early *Homo sapiens* (modern human) in Europe as well as Asia.

What is interesting to take note is that these prehistoric humans include the Wildman roaming inside and outside Europe (Forth, 2007), the mysterious Yeti (also commonly known as the Abominable Snowman in the Western popular culture), purportedly inhabits the Himalayan mountain range in Asia, and the elusive Sasquatch (a huge hairy, human-like creature that is commonly called Bigfoot in urban legends) believed to exist in the northwestern United States and western Canada (Augustyn, 2024). The name ‘Sasquatch’ comes from the Salish word *se’sxac*, meaning ‘wild men.’ In fact, according to Boris Porshnev (b.1905-d.1972), a Soviet historian known for his deep interest in cryptozoology, he suggested “that Sasquatch and his Siberian counterpart, the Almas, could be a remnant of Neanderthals, but most scientists do not recognize the creature’s existence. Instead, it is thought to be a hoax or an animal, possibly a bear” (Augustyn, 2024, para. 3; also see Porshnev, 2021). The Almas as well as Almastis are reportedly smaller cousins to the Yeti known in the Russian folklore (Regal, 2011). Porshnev, who also studies and researched on psychology, prehistory, and neurolinguistics as relating to the origins of man, himself had “led several Soviet expeditions to the Pamir Mountains and north-western Himalayas to search for the Mongolian ‘Almas’ (wild man)” (Loxton & Prothero, 2013, pp. 103-104). Porshnev strongly believed that the Almas were a relict population of the Neanderthals that managed to survived the Ice Age of the Pleistocene epoch (Loxton & Prothero, 2013; also see Roeder & Afinogenov, 2019, for detail). However, Regal (2011) has argued that the Russian scientists as well as other cryptozoologists (including Porshnev) “claiming to have evidence of the Yeti will never be taken seriously without a more academic approach” (para. 1).

More recently, Forth (2022) published his book - *Between Ape and Human* (Pegasus Books, 2022) - on an extinct species of small archaic humans, named *H. floresiensis* (see Aiello, 2010, and Dennell et al., 2014, for detail), believed to have inhabited the island of Flores, Indonesia, as early as 12,000 years ago, until the arrival of modern humans, and possibly coexisting with *H. sapiens*. While conducting fieldwork on the island of Flores, Gregory Forth,

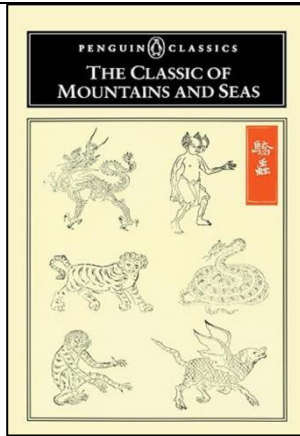
a retired Canadian professor of anthropology at the University of Alberta, reported his encounter with the natives who told him stories of creatures that were half-ape, half-human, said to have once inhabited a cave on the slopes of a nearby volcano. Over the years, while believing the possibility that these ape-human hybrids were merely symbolic representations of the wild or other cultural constructs, Forth continued to gather information from the locals about these mysterious hominoids. Then in 2003, came the discovery of the several skeletons of a small-statured early human species (i.e., *H. floresiensis*), along with stone tools and animal remains, were unearthed in a cave in western Flores (see Forth, 2022, for detail). Books such as *Between Ape and Human* (Forth, 2022) and reports about new archaeological discoveries of archaic hominids, like the newfound species like *Paranthropus capensis* (Choi, 2025; Sankaran, 2025), and *H. juluensis* (Radley, 2024), and also how *Paranthropus boisei* and *H. erectus* came to interact with each other (Georgious, 2024), continue to fire the imaginations of the general public worldwide.

According to Dorey (2021), the first Neanderthal fossil was discovered in 1829. However, it was yet to be identified as a potential human ancestor until more fossils were found in the latter half of the 19th century. In 1958, a partial skull of a pre-modern hominin was discovered in caves near the town called Maba, near the city of Shaoguan city in the northern part of Guangdong province, China (see Woo & Peng, 1959, for detail). It was later named as Maba Man or *Mǎbà Rén* [马坝人], dated to about 120,000-140,000 years old. Interestingly, the skull shows remarkable similarities to European Neanderthals and “its discovery in southern China suggests the possibility that Neanderthals travelled further east than once thought” (Dorey, 2021, para. 8). Dorey (2021) has argued for “[M]ore fossil evidence from Asia is needed to understand the significance of this specimen” (para. 8).

Moving away from the archaeological finding of Maba Man, and returning to paleo-mythology, there might also be possible traces of Neanderthal-like (or even Denisovan-like) beings in the Chinese Mythology, which is the focus of this paper. According to Dorey (2021), Neanderthals “lived between 28,000 and 300,000 years ago: (i) The early *Homo neanderthalensis* from about 300,000 years ago; (ii) the classic *Homo neanderthalensis* from about 130,000 years ago; and (iii) the late *Homo neanderthalensis* from about 45,000 years ago” (para. 2), but “eventually becoming extinct about 28,000 years ago” (Dorey, 2021, para. 1). The author hypothesized that *H. sapiens* and *H. neanderthalensis* and/or *H. denisova* did interact 45,000-50,000 years ago and later interbred. Much, much later, this forgotten encounter continues to remain imbedded in our subconscious mind. It became mythological and could also become symbolically reflect deep genetic memory of interbreeding between *H. sapiens* and *H. neanderthalensis* or *H. denisova* (also see Mainieri, 2021, for detail). From past records, the author has explored some of these Chinese stories as follows (see Table 1 below):

Table 1. Myths and Legends of Wild Men

Chinese Literary Records	Brief Description
1. ‘The Classic of Mountains and Seas’ (<i>Shan Hai Jing</i>) [山海经] (Chen et al., 2019; Yanshina, 1977) and Wild Men (Smith, 2021)	‘The Classic of Mountains and Seas’ (<i>Shan Hai Jing</i>) (Chen et al., 2019; Yanshina, 1977) is a compilation of ancient myths and geography from ancient China from pre-Qin era. It describes many humanoid (but non-human) creatures. However, some of them



resemble the archaic hominins - hairy, strong, and living in the remote mountains. Example: The *Shan Gui* [山鬼], i.e., the so-called ‘Mountain Spirits’ (Alimov, 2006) that some scholars have associated them to ancient beliefs about primitive or wild humans.

2. The Legend of the ‘Wild Man’ or *Yeren* [野人] in China (Smith, 2021)



Even until the present time, myths about the *Yeren* [野人] (‘Wild Man’) continues to persist in the modern China (Smith, 2021), particularly in the Shennongjia region (McGrath, 2022; Zhang, 2019). Some researchers (e.g., Caddy, 2019; Meldrum, 2012; Wesemann, 2024) speculate that these legends could stem from ancient encounters with relict hominins, which may include *H. neanderthalensis* or *H. denisova*, who might have co-existed with early *H. sapiens* in the region.

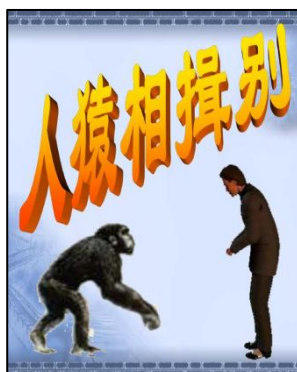
3. *Guai Ren* [怪人] and Early Human Encounters (Hsieh, 2016; Liu, 2015)



The Chinese folklore contains tales of *Guai Ren* [怪人] (Hsieh, 2016; Liu, 2015), which means ‘strange men’, i.e., creatures that resemble humans but are not quite human. These might be distant memories of encounters between early *H. sapiens* and *H. neanderthalensis* or *H. denisova*, much like how European myths and legends of trolls or ogres (Attebery, 1996; Lindow, 2014) could have also echoed prehistoric interactions.

The image on the right is a poster from the Chinese science fiction movie, showing the perspective from the eye of a *Guai Ren* - a strange homini. The film was released to the public in theaters on January 3, 2025.

4. The Monkey-Human or Ape-Human Hybrid Myth or *Rényuán* *Hùnzá* [人猿相混] (Alter, 2007; Sun, 2018)



Some ancient Chinese myths and legends have suggested that humans and ape-like beings interbred [人猿相混] (Alter, 2007; Sun, 2018; also see Shelton, 2021). While this is mythological, it could also symbolically reflect deep genetic memory of interbreeding between *H. sapiens* and *H. denisova* or *H. neanderthalensis*.

5. The Kui [夔] and other one-legged beings



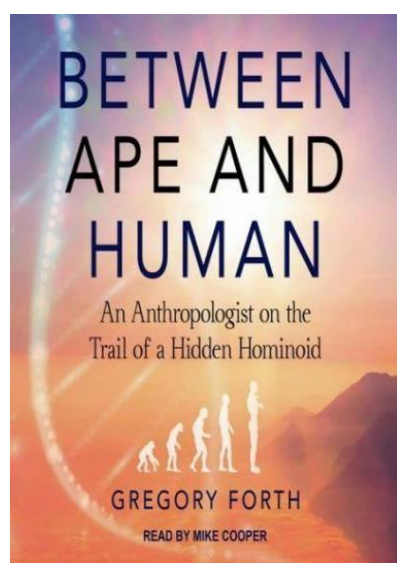
According to Schuessler (2007), the *Kui* [夔] is an ancient word referring to a large mythical one-legged being - strong as an ox and large as a buffalo - that has been depicted as a primitive or ancient creature. The myths of one-legged or misshapen beings might reflect memories of archaic humans with genetic differences (Schweik, 2009).

The picture on the left shows *Kui* (taken from Baidu Baike [百度百科] (transl. Baidu Encyclopedia; Baidu Inc., 2006)). The legendary creature from the Chinese mythology is said to be an imperial musician during the Yao and Shun dynasties. By the time of the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties, *Kui* was portrayed as a dragon-like being without horns, with a single leg, an open mouth, and a curled tail.

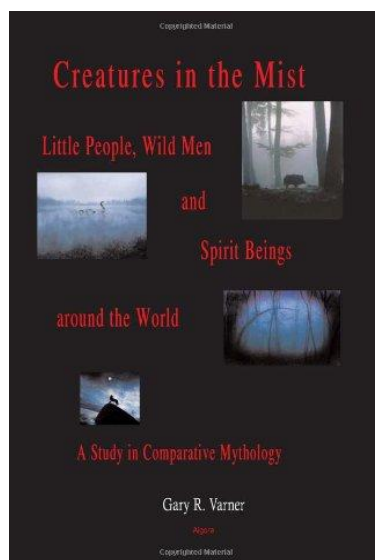
Since modern East Asians, including Chinese populations, carry a mix of Neanderthal and Denisovan DNA, it is possible that faint memories of these inter-species encounters survived in folklore (Marsh, 2021; Skyes, 2020). While there is no direct mention of Neanderthals or Denisovans, Chinese myths and legends of wild men (Yeren), mountain spirits (Shan Gui), monsters (Kui), and hairy humanoids might be cultural echoes of real prehistoric interactions. In this paper, the author has chosen to focus on Neanderthals and their contact with *H. sapiens*, and decided that it is best to leave out Denisovans for another paper.

From Paleo-mythology to Paleo-anthropology

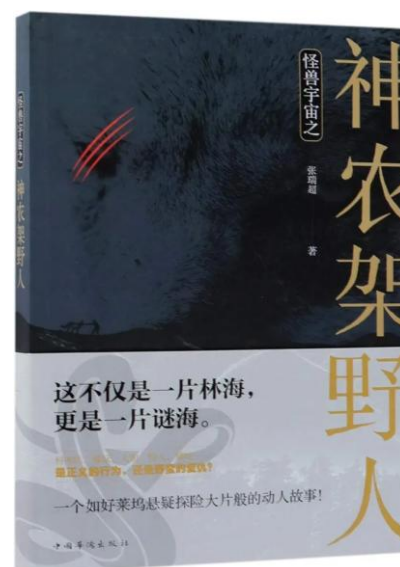
From various mythologies around the world (Forth, 2022; Varner, 2007; Zhang, 2019), intriguing stories told about wild men, ape-men or ape-like men have been passed down from generation to generation. Even today, gigantic ape-men (e.g., Bigfoot, Sasquatch and Yeti) have become part of our urban legends.



Forth, 2022



Varner, 2007



Zhang, 2019

Stories from paleo-mythology have informed and shaped our knowledge and understanding of hominoid, characterized by larger brains, complex social behaviors and an absence of a tail. The hominoids include the following: (1) all the great apes (e.g., gorillas, chimpanzees, orangutans); (2) humans or *H. sapiens*; (3) immediate ancestors and relatives of *H. sapiens* (e.g., *Australopithecus* - genus of early hominins); and this author has also included (4) crypto-hominoids or other alleged 'cryptids' (e.g., Almas, Bigfoot, Sasquatch, Yeti) that some people believe to be undiscovered, elusive relatives of modern great apes or early humans.

The paleo-mythology is also linked to paleo-anthropology - the study of ancient humans and their ancestors through fossils, artifacts, and other evidences such as hand prints and cave paintings. Both specialized fields of interest are, in turn, linked through the exploration of early human history and the interpretation of ancient cultures. On the one hand, paleo-mythology encompasses the myths and stories passed down by early societies. It offers insights into the symbolic understanding of early human life, survival, and interaction with the environment. These narratives can help to inform paleo-anthropology by shedding light on the social structures, belief systems, and psychological aspects of ancient populations. Paleo-anthropology, on the other hand, combines aspects of anthropology, archaeology, and paleontology to understand human

evolution, including physical traits, behaviors, and environments of early hominins. Professionals in this field analyze fossilized bones, stone tools, and even ancient DNA to trace the origins and development of *Homo sapiens* and related species.

In fact, the author firmly believes that by studying myths alongside physical remains and artifacts, paleo-anthropologists can also gain a deeper understanding of how early humans perceived their world. This can help to enrich the current interpretation of archaeological evidence and human evolution.

According to Piore (2025), early *H. sapiens* and *H. neanderthalensis* came into contact with each other outside the continent of Africa, which includes Europe, from about 50,000 to 43,000 years ago. Besides, “[T]hey mated in the Middle East as far back as 100,000 years ago” (Piore, 2025, para. 4). Recent studies (e.g., Dannemann & Kelso, 2017; Deng & Xu, 2018; McArthur, Rinker, & Capra, 2021) show that Neanderthal genes related to skin color, metabolism, and also immune function (Quach et al., 2016) seemed to be the most common across the sample of early *H. sapiens*.

(1) Cultural and Cognitive Insights

Paleo-mythology can provide insights into the symbolic thinking and cognitive abilities of early human societies, which could offer context for understanding how Neanderthals and early *H. sapiens* interacted. “Neanderthals lived in Europe and western Asia for hundreds of thousands of years before their disappearance around 40 thousand years ago” (Sumer et al., 2024, p. 1; also see Higham et al., 2014). Vidal-Cordasco et al. (2023) have proposed that “climate change and the arrival of modern humans in Europe affected the disappearance of Neanderthals due to their impact on trophic resources” (p. 1) as a result of scarcity of natural resources available to support their growth, survival, and reproduction within an ecosystemic food chain. It is, therefore, no surprising, if myths or oral traditions from later human cultures contain references to beings that resemble Neanderthals or early *H. sapiens*. They constitute a shared cultural memory of these populations and their physical traits. This could also support and enhance our current understanding of the paleo-phenotype – physical appearance and behavior – of Neanderthals and *H. sapiens*.

(2) Mitochondrial and Genetic Stories

By comparing cultural narratives about shared human ancestry or interactions with other extinct human species, we might gain indirect clues about inter-species relationships. These myths could correspond with genetic evidence found in ancient DNA, such as Neanderthal and Denisovan DNAs present in modern *H. sapiens* (Hawks, 2013), suggesting how early humans may have perceived and mythologized their interactions with Neanderthals and Denisovans. For instance, “[S]ingle nucleotide variations found in the genome of the Tibetan people are associated with greater acclimatization to high-altitude conditions. These originated in the Denisovan genome” (Hruska, 2019, para. 3). Mylopotamitaki et al. (2024) also found that *H. sapiens* had reached the higher latitudes of Europe by 45,000 years ago. In two other recent studies done by Sümer et al. (2024) and Leonardo et al. (2024), the former found that “[M]odern humans arrived in Europe more than 45,000 years ago, overlapping at least 5,000 years with Neanderthals” (Sümer et al., 2024, p. 1), and the findings from the latter (Leonardo et al., 2024) reveal how Neanderthals had helped keep some modern human ancestors warm. “Both studies offer further evidence of how Neanderthal DNA helped those ancestors survive” (Piore, 2025, para. 4).

(3) Symbolism in Art and Tools

Many ancient cultures developed symbolic art forms that could reveal early human perceptions of physical traits and behaviors. For example, Neanderthal and early *H. sapiens* left behind many artifacts, hand or palm prints or cave paintings (Capin, 2025; García-Diez, 2022; Zilhão, 2012) that may offer visual cues on how these groups viewed each other’s phenotypic traits (such as robust physiques or distinct facial features). Paleo-mythology can help interpret these symbols in the context of shared mythological traditions, offering a unique perspective on the early human understanding of themselves and their environment (also see Kirk, 1973; Witzel, 2012).

(4) Health and Adaptation

Paleo-mythology can also inform us about the relationship between humans and their environment or nature (Farrelly, 2019; Sarakool & Hongsuwan, 2024). In myths, gods or beings representing natural forces could be seen as metaphors for the types of challenges faced by early humans, such as surviving harsh environments or competing with other hominids like Neanderthals (Stoczkowski, 2002). By analyzing these mythologies, we may understand how early humans adapted to their surroundings and the biological or cultural significance they placed on those adaptations, enriching our knowledge of the paleo-phenotype.

In sum, while paleo-mythology is not a direct scientific tool like genetics, it can still offer valuable contextual, symbolic, and cognitive frameworks that deepen our understanding of the physical and genetic characteristics of early humans, including *H. neanderthalensis* and *H. sapiens*, and more so to understand the interaction between Neanderthals and *H. sapiens* (the ancient Chinese) (see Mainieri, 2021).

The Neanderthal-Homo Sapien Connection

Many studies (e.g., Bermúdez de Castro & Martínón-Torres, 2022; Li et al., 2024; Prüfer et al., 2017) have been done on the relationship between Neanderthals and *H. sapiens*, especially in terms of their shared genotypes through genomic analysis. In other words, according to Bermúdez de Castro and Martínón-Torres (2022), modern humans and *H. neanderthalensis* share the last common ancestor (LCA), and their genomes have found to exhibit similarities as well as differences, resulting from evolutionary processes such as gene flow, interbreeding, and adaptation to different environments.

Firstly, research (e.g., Ko, 2016; Meneganzin & Bernardi, 2023; Stringer & Crété, 2022) has shown that *H. sapiens* and *H. neanderthalensis* interbred at various points in prehistory, particularly after *H. sapiens* migrated out of Africa. Evidence from ancient DNA recovered from

Neanderthal fossils and modern human genomes indicates that between 1-2% of the genome of non-African populations (e.g., Europeans, Asians) is inherited from Neanderthals. This suggests gene flow between the two species, with interbreeding likely occurring around 60,000 years ago in Eurasia (Green et al., 2010; Prüfer et al., 2017).

Secondly, despite limited interbreeding, it contributed a number of genetic variants to modern human populations, particularly those that are associated with immune response, skin and hair pigmentation, and even neurological traits. These genetic contributions suggest that some Neanderthal variants were beneficial for survival in Eurasian environments (Reilly et al., 2022).

Thirdly, the contribution of the Neanderthal DNA is uneven across the *H. sapien* populations. For instance, modern African populations have little or no Neanderthal DNA, as the two hominini species are believed to have diverged from each other before *H. sapiens* migrated out of African continent. However, populations outside Africa (such as those in Europe and Asia) retain notable amounts of Neanderthal DNA. This suggests that the interbreeding events happened after *H. sapiens* left Africa, as a result of interactions with Neanderthal populations in Eurasia (Sankararaman et al., 2014).

Fourthly, not all the genetic traits that *H. sapiens* have inherited from *H. neanderthalensis* DNA are advantageous. Some Neanderthal variants are linked to modern health conditions, such as autoimmune diseases, depression, and an increased risk of certain conditions like Diabetes Type 2 or severe reactions to diseases like COVID-19 (Simonti et al., 2016; Toncheva et al., 2023) are found in modern humans. In fact, the Neanderthal DNA found in *H. sapiens* has provided the manifestations of paleo-phenotype and paleo-genotype linking to neurological and behavioral traits typically observed in those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that can be traced to the prehistoric times (Pickard, Pickard, & Bonsall, 2011). Table 2 for more Neanderthal genetic traits found in *H. sapiens* below).

Table 2. Neanderthal Genetic Traits found in *H. Sapiens*

Genetic Factors	Genes	Additional Information
1. Neuroligins and synaptic function	Neuroligins (e.g., NLGN family genes) are involved in synaptic signaling and the formation of neural circuits.	Studies suggest that inherited Neanderthal genetic variants in regions associated with synaptic plasticity may influence traits related to autism (e.g., hyperfocus or differences in social behavior).
2. Microcephaly and Brain Development	MCPH1 (Microcephalin 1) is a gene that is involved in brain size and development.	Neanderthal versions of MCPH1 have been hypothesized to influence brain structure and cognitive traits, possibly related to sensory sensitivities or unique information processing observed in autism.
3. Immune System Genes and Neuroinflammation	HLA Class I Genes are immune-related genes that influence the neuroinflammatory processes. Variants of HLA inherited from Neanderthals may contribute to heightened immune responses, which have been implicated in autism as a result of prenatal or early life immune challenges. In terms of the Toll-like Receptors (TLRs), Neanderthal contributions to TLR genes (e.g., TLR1, TLR6, TLR10) enhance pathogen recognition, but may also impact neurodevelopment by altering inflammatory pathways.	Neanderthal DNA has been associated with immunity-related genes, especially those involved in the body's response to pathogens.
4. Excitatory-Inhibitory Balance in the Brain	CACNA1C is the gene that regulates calcium channels in the brain. It is linked to neurodevelopmental disorders (e.g., autism spectrum disorder). Some of the Neanderthal-derived alleles may affect neuronal excitability and sensory integration.	
5. FOXP2 and Language Processing	The FOXP2 gene is crucial for speech and language. Although <i>Homo sapiens</i> and Neanderthals share FOXP2, slight differences in regulatory regions may influence traits like hyperlexia or unique language acquisition patterns, often observed in some autistic individuals.	Hyperlexia, which is associated with comprehension deficits in listening and reading, is a subtype of ASD (see EDM AU-5.00; Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007).
6. Genetic Variants Associated with Social Behavior	Some variants inherited from <i>H. neanderthalensis</i> are believed to have helped <i>H. sapiens</i> in their adaptation to colder climates or different diets in Eurasia (Fu et al., 2015). In addition, Neanderthal-derived variants in regions, e.g., the AUTS2 gene	Findings from the study done by Pauly et al. (2024) suggest that the Neanderthal single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNP) may be linked to autism.

	(associated to neurological development), may have contributed to differences in social behavior, attention, or interests. While not directly linked to or result in autism, these variants may impact susceptibility or related traits.	
7. Sensory Processing and Environmental Interaction	<p>Variants in SLC genes (solute carrier families) are linked to neurotransmitter transport, e.g., SLC6A4 (serotonin transporter), that are believed to modulate sensory responses, a characteristic feature of autism, and could trace back to Neanderthal genetic contributions.</p>	
8. Pigmentation associated with red hair and pale skin, are found in modern European	<p>MC1R, SLC24A5, and SLC45A2 are genetic contributions from Neanderthal DNA that play key roles in pigmentation. They are believed to provide some adaptive advantages in regions with lower sunlight, such as northern Europe.</p> <p>The Neanderthal variants of the MC1R gene, associated with red hair and pale skin, are found in modern European populations (Fu et al., 2015).</p> <p>The SLC24A5 gene influences lighter skin color and it also has a Neanderthal origin, contributing to the depigmentation seen in some populations (Noonan, 2010; Wielgus, Danielewski, & Walkowiak, 2022).</p> <p>Moreover, SLC45A2, involved in skin pigmentation, is found to affect lighter skin tones. The gene has Neanderthal-derived variants present in modern humans (Dannemann et al., 2017).</p>	<p>Albino individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have mutations in SLC24A5 associated with Oculocutaneous Albinism Type 6 (OCA6) - a form of albinism that results in lighter skin, hair, and eye color due to the lack of melanin production, as well as visual impairments due to increase in photosensitivity.</p> <p>SLC45A2 is linked to Type 4 of Albinism (OCA4) with lighter pigmentation and it also has visual impairments related to insufficient melanin.</p>

Sequencing of Neanderthal genomes from fossilized remains has provided insight into the genomic diversity of Neanderthals and their relationship to *H. sapiens* (Esteller-Cucala et al., 2020; Toncheva et al., 2023). The most complete Neanderthal genome sequence, published by the Max Planck Institute in 2017, offers a detailed comparison of Neanderthal DNA with modern human genomes, revealing both similarities and distinctive differences in regions linked to immunity and neurological development (Prüfer et al., 2017). The above selected examples as listed in Table 2 above highlight the significant contribution of Neanderthal genomes to modern human genetic diversity and the various ways this ancient DNA has influenced traits and health in contemporary human populations.

Conclusion

Paleo-mythology, a specialized literary domain blending the study of ancient myths and human prehistory, offers valuable insights into how ancient humans and their environments, including interactions with hominins such as Neanderthals and Denisovans, are reflected in mythological traditions. This conceptual paper explores how ancient narratives, passed down through generations, may contain echoes of real encounters between *H. sapiens* and archaic human species like Neanderthals. While no direct mentions of Neanderthals appear in these myths, stories of wild men, ape-like creatures, and mysterious humanoid beings - such as Almas, Bigfoot, Guairen, Yeren, and Yeti - could symbolically preserve genetic and cultural memories of interbreeding and encounters with these ancient populations. These myths are not mere fiction. In fact, they have provided indirect clues (e.g., cave paintings, palm prints, tools and other artifacts as well as burial sites) about early

human life, survival strategies, and cultural exchanges with other extinct hominin species, particularly through the cognitive and symbolic lenses of paleo-mythology.

The inevitable overlap between paleo-mythology and paleo-anthropology is also essential in current understanding early human evolution. By studying the myths, scholars and researchers today can gain better cultural and psychological insights that enrich their interpretation of physical and genetic evidence, e.g., fossil remains and ancient DNA found in the genome of *H. sapiens*. As modern humans continue to carry traces of Neanderthal (and also Denisovan) DNA, paleo-mythology offers a unique perspective on how our ancestors may have understood these inter-species interactions, potentially preserving a collective memory in mythological forms.

In conclusion, paleo-mythology is not only a study of ancient stories passed down through generations, but also a vital tool for understanding human evolution. It complements disciplines like paleo-anthropology and paleo-genetics by providing symbolic frameworks to interpret early human history and the physical traits and behaviors of ancient human populations. Myths, as crucial cultural artifacts, continue to offer a window to peer into how early humans conceptualized themselves, their interactions with the environment (or nature), and their place in the broader evolutionary story.

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