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Editor's Note

Advances on our genealogy

A new exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History in New York contains some remarkable artifacts that indicate humanity’s Phillips’ Homo sapiens. Among the most remarkable is a 1.9 million-year-old cranium from a child known as archaic Homo, found in the Afikpo area of Nigeria. Based on its structure, the cranium is clearly Homo sapiens, but it differs in important ways from other Homo sapiens fossils found in Africa and in Europe. It has a well-developed braincase, a large face, and a robust body form resembling that of modern humans.

We Homo sapiens share a common ancestor with the Neanderthals, but we are not direct descendants of Neanderthals. Instead, we diverged from the Neanderthal lineage about 500,000 years ago, and our species evolved separately until we met again in the southern continents.

There are two species of Homo sapiens. Homo sapiens sapiens is the modern human species, with a global distribution, while Homo sapiens neanderthalensis is the Neanderthal species, which was confined to Europe and Asia until 40,000 years ago. The two species never interbreed, and their genetic differences are now so pronounced that they are considered to belong to different species.

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