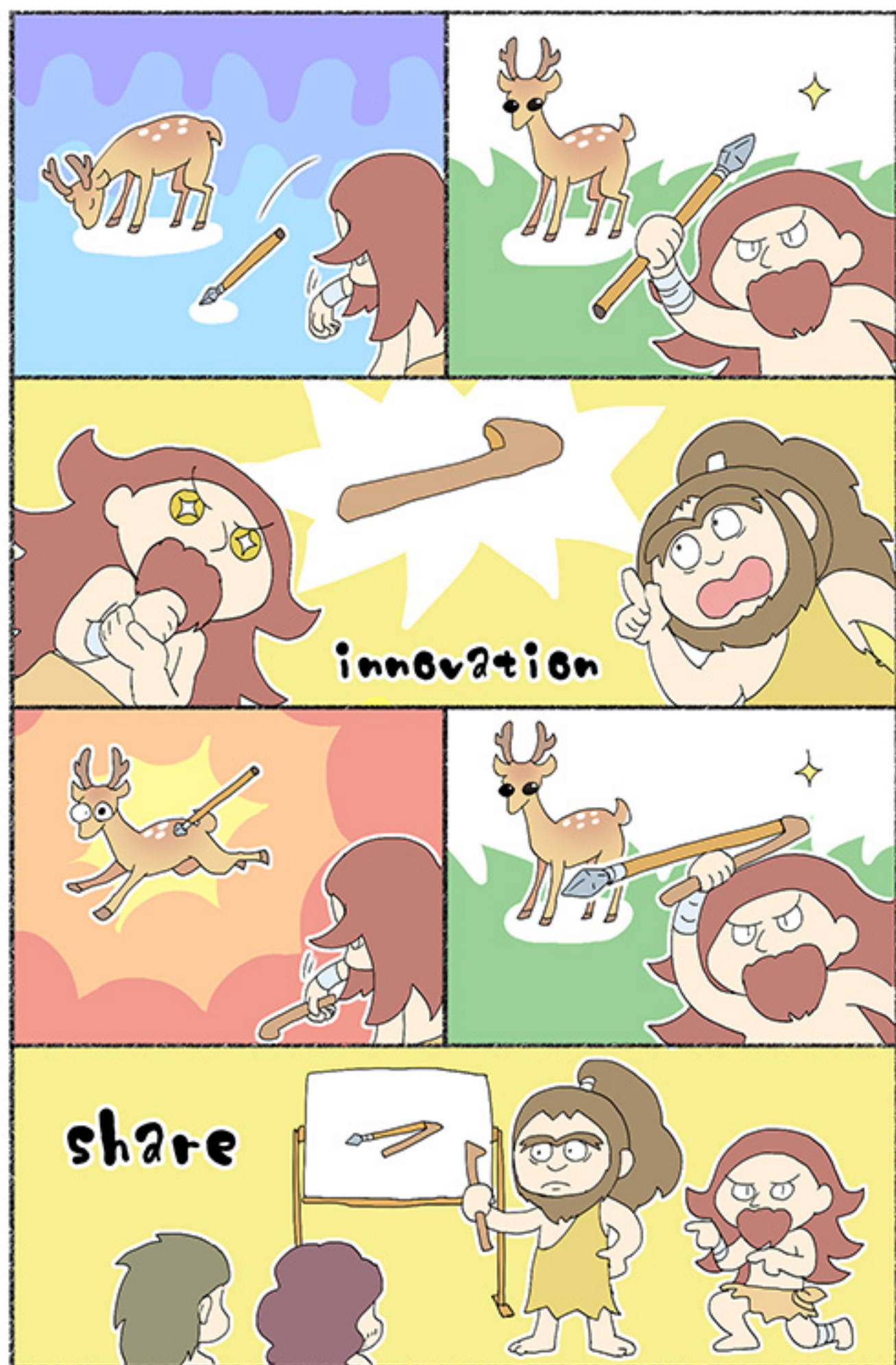


What happened to the Neanderthals?

Hideaki Okabayashi



What happened to the Neanderthals?

Why did Neanderthals vanish after a period of prosperity while *Homo sapiens*, the human race of the modern world, survived?

Neanderthals were a type of human that appeared about 400,000 years ago and went extinct a few dozen millennia ago. Unlike in the past, the group is no longer referred to as “prehistoric man” because modern research has shown that Neanderthals were not a direct ancestor of *Homo sapiens*.

As a species, the highly evolved Neanderthals were intelligent, muscular, and agile. Appearing roughly 300,000 years ago, the newcomer *Homo sapiens* were inferior to the Neanderthals in several ways. Although they had approximately the same level of intelligence as the Neanderthals, their bodies were feebler and less athletic; it seemed quite unlikely that they could survive any substantial changes in their environment.

But the reality is that *Homo sapiens* survived and Neanderthals did not.

The reason for this was revealed as part of the latest research from anthropology presented on the May 13, 2018, broadcast of *NHK Supesharu Jinrui Tanjō* on NHK General TV.

It’s not the strong that survive—it’s those that can adapt

The key is communal living. While Neanderthals lived in family units consisting of a dozen or so members at most, *Homo sapiens* formed groups of dozens or even hundreds. A community containing a hundred members is essentially a village. Even with just that many people, communal living facilitates the development of language for communication. Every time there was a new discovery or improvement, that information was codified in language and shared among the group.

For example, while Neanderthals also used stone tools, they failed to improve upon them for 300,000 years, whereas *Homo sapiens* continuously added refinements and polished their tools to improve precision. Improvements discovered by an individual were transmitted through language to the rest of the group, establishing those changes as part of the “culture”. That culture was then passed down through the generations to become the group’s strength.

This “breadth of culture” is what divided the fates of *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals. Even if the individual ability of a specimen is high, there is a limit. Neanderthals only had themselves or their families to cope with environmental changes, whereas *Homo sapiens* dealt with them using culture (an accumulation of experience and wisdom from ancestors and other group members).

The words of Darwin echo loudly: “It is not the strong or the smart that survive. It is the ones who can adapt.”

Importance of recording speech and converting it to text

We can learn a lot from the Neanderthal story. We can also help our companies, organizations, and communities survive by taking the knowledge, experience, and ingenuities of individuals—information that was previously just *tacit knowledge*—and transforming it into culture that can be spoken, read, or seen and thus shared with everyone else.

This is a good opportunity to consider the importance of recording speech and converting it to text.