

Where Did White People Come From?

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February 7, 2014 by [Gary Leupp](#)

Last month the Guardian reported that a team of scientists studying early homo sapiens in Europe had extracted DNA from the tooth of a male hunter-gatherer who lived in what is now the Asturias region of northern Spain around 7000 years ago. They drew some surprising conclusions from the analysis. The man was dark-skinned but blue-eyed. His nearest DNA matches with contemporary ethnicities are with Swedes and Finns, among the palest of peoples.

Scholars had earlier argued that blue eyes had appeared as the result of a genetic mutation somewhere between 10,000 and 6000 years ago. (Before that all humans had brown eyes.) But until a few years ago most supposed that the appearance of white skin had occurred much earlier. The European gene pool with its light complexion was supposed to have decisively “split off” from the (also light-skinned) East Asian gene pool by around 50,000 years ago, after which homo sapiens first appeared in Europe, then in China.

But this timeline may need to be adjusted. It now looks like European whiteness may have appeared much more recently. Maybe there were no “white people” in Europe as recently as 7000 years ago, during the lifetime of the blue-eyed hunter-gatherer, whom the Guardian article calls “swarthy.”

The new research supports the theory that the spread of agriculture in Europe beginning (only) around 6,000 years ago favored the survival of people with a genetic mutation producing fair skin. The new grain-based diet lacked Vitamin D, vital to teeth, bone health, and to the immune system. Meanwhile humans inhabiting northern climates received less sun exposure than people in most parts of Africa. Light skin absorbs Vitamin D from the sun much more rapidly than dark skin and so becomes a real advantage from certain latitude, according to the theory.

The recent report particularly interests me, since my own DNA test, supported by family records, shows me to be of 61% Scandinavian and 3% Finnish ancestry. My mother was half-Norwegian, half-Swedish and my father’s mother half-Norwegian too. (I’m not sure where the Finnish comes in, but looking at the map and thinking about Scandinavian history it does make sense.) My DNA probably pretty closely matches that of the blue-eyed people living around the Bay of Biscay 7000 years ago.

It’s somehow stimulating to think of distant forefathers having eyes like mine but very different skin. Also stimulating to think that my blue eyes are more deeply rooted in my genetic history than my white skin. I would have thought the opposite.

7000 years ago is of course a very long time back—over 2000 years before the construction of Stonehenge or the first Egyptian pyramids. It's before class division, the state, written language. Agriculture was just beginning in the Nile River Valley and Yellow River Valley of China, as these proto-Scandinavians in the cultural backwater of Europe went about their hunting and gathering lifestyle. It's millennia before historical European peoples such as the Greeks, Italians, Celts, Germans, and Slavs appeared even in the archeological record. But again, it's much later than had been supposed.

By around 4000 BCE what is now Sweden was linked to Spain by the agrarian Funnelbeaker culture thought to have arrived from the south. This culture may have been overrun by an Indo-European language-speaking people sometime before 2000 BCE. Anyway there are indications that the inhabitants of the Scandinavian Peninsula for the most part descend from people who have been there for a long, long time. If they in turn, along with the Celts, Germans etc., descend from the blue-eyed hunter-gatherers of Asturias—still dark as of 7000 years ago—we have to rethink the origins of whiteness, do we not?

To state the obvious: Europeans (“Caucasians”) are not the only light-skinned people on the planet. My Japanese wife places her forearm next to mine and says, “See? They’re the same.” And our arms are, in fact, similar, at least color-wise. Europeans, from their first contacts with Japanese in the 1540s to at least the early 1800s, routinely described Japanese as well as Chinese as “white.” Marco Polo in the late 1200s had described the Chinese as “white.” (This category, based on mere empirical observation, gradually gave way by ca. 1800 to a category of “tawny” or “yellow”—understood to be intermediate, ranked just under white, in a racial hierarchy with white at the top and black on the bottom. This concept associated with “Social Darwinism” was a prime ideological underpinning of colonialism and slavery and remains an underpinning of racism and imperialism.)

East Asians like Europeans possess a genetic mutation that gives them light skin. Did they have theirs thousands of years before my Nordic ancestors?

I understand from my ancestry.com saliva test that I am 99% European. My geographic results are: 61% Scandinavia, 3% Finland/Northwest Russia, 13% “Great Britain” (much of which I know to be Scots-Irish), 3% Irish, 9% “Europe West,” 9% “Iberian Peninsula,” 1% “Italy/Greece” and another 1% “West Asia.” I’m not sure that the ancestors of any of these peoples in the listed regions were “white” 7000 years ago.

But maybe my wife’s ancestors were. The homo sapiens who lived in the Yellow River Valley in northern China 7000 years ago, members of this Yangshao culture just beginning to invent agriculture, are thought to have been “anatomically Chinese.” Their perhaps not-so-distant cousins in Japan, the Jomon people, in Japan from ca. 14,000 years ago, and the Yayoi people who supplied the greater proportion of the Japanese gene pool, are thought to have been light-skinned.

If these people were indeed light-skinned, they may have been the first “whites” on the planet. Far from the imagined centers of whiteness, such as the Caucasus, Scandinavia or Germany, light-skinned people in East Asia may have been proliferating—and repeatedly wandering into Europe across the vast Russian steppes. Stanford University geneticist Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza suggests that two-thirds of European genes come from Asia, one-third from Africa.

When and where did people first become white? It’s not clear. But it happened fairly recently, and not necessarily in Europe. Why does it matter? Because color-based notions of racial hierarchy continue to plague us, or at least haunt our sub-consciousnesses. They reside in the North American mind, there available to exploit whenever the regime decides it’s time to bomb another Asian or African country, bring “our” white-based civilization to the natives and depict any subsequent unpleasantness as a version of the “White Man’s Burden.” (Listen to Congressmen whine about how Afghans and Iraqis have been so little appreciative of the massive U.S. sacrifices required for their conquest!) Understanding and demystifying the real origins of whiteness can only help us get over it.

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