Bojs, Karin. "Sami?." *My European Family: The FIRST 54,000 years*. London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2017. 124–133. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472941480.0017>>.

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Am I a Sami?

My first reaction when I get to see my result is: ‘Really? Do I have Sami ancestry?’ It’s a big surprise. Nothing I’ve heard so far about my family history has given any indication of such a link. My oldest known female relative in the direct maternal line lived in the western province of Värmland. No one has ever mentioned that she may have been a Sami.

But the mitochondrial group U5b1b1 is particularly common among Sami people. Nearly half of all the Sami whose DNA has been tested belong to this group. Their particular genetic variant of mitochondria is even known as ‘the Sami motif’, and it is rare among other Europeans.

It would be cool to be able to prove some Sami roots, I think to myself. Not that it would have any practical or legal implications, of course – any family connections would be much too far back in time.

The Sami are classed as Europe’s only indigenous people. That means they have special rights laid down in international conventions. All adult Sami are entitled to vote for the Sami Parliament (*Sámediggi*, or *Sametinget* in Swedish). Those who belong to Sami villages also have certain privileges as regards hunting and fishing.

To enjoy rights like these, I can’t just come along with a DNA sample that proves there were family links several centuries ago. I would have to demonstrate some Sami traditions in my immediate family. At least one of my parents or grandparents would have had to speak a Sami language at home. Being adopted – without any genetic links at all – is also accepted for purposes of recognition.

Tens of thousands of Scandinavians with Sami roots have the Sami motif. Their common foremother probably lived in northern Spain or southern France 18,000 years ago, when

the Ice Age was at its coldest. When it grew warmer, her descendants followed the reindeer northwards, but their route seems to have included a diversion along the way.

In 2004, the Estonian researcher Kristiina Tambets published her doctoral thesis and an article in a scientific journal, entitled 'The western and eastern roots of the Saami'. One of the people with whom Tambets collaborated was the late geneticist Lars Beckman, from Umeå, who worked on genetics in northern Sweden for several decades, beginning in the late 1950s. While he focused mainly on the genetics of disease, he was also interested in the question of how Norrland (the northern part of Sweden) was first populated. Today's DNA technology was not available to Beckman. He worked mainly on individual markers, such as blood groups.

However, he did manage to publish a number of DNA studies in cooperation with other researchers before his death in 2005. With the help of DNA from samples collected by Beckman, Tambets and other researchers were able to map the route taken by some of the female ancestors of today's Sami people. They probably left northern Spain and southern France when the climate grew warmer after the Ice Age and migrated northwards. But then they changed direction. They took a turning and continued eastwards – straight through central Europe towards Poland, Belarus and Russia. From there, they gradually migrated further north, via Finland.

This is why there is considerable variation in haplogroup U5b1b1 in Spain and France, while it is also dispersed through countries such as Slovakia, Poland, Russia and Belarus. It is also to be found even in countries such as Morocco and Senegal, where the descendants of people who migrated south rather than north live today. In much of Europe, haplogroup U5b1b1 is very rare – under 1 per cent. Other haplogroups have become far more common thanks to subsequent waves of immigration. It is only in the very far north that the rare DNA variants are still to be found on a larger scale. An even rarer haplogroup known as V, which

also occurs among Sami people, seems to have a similar history, originating in south-west Europe and moving into the eastern and northern regions of the continent.

We should bear in mind that the Sami motif U5b1b1 and haplogroup V only tell us a limited part of the story about Sami origins. Like most other ethnic groups, the Sami are a mix of people from different places.

The Uppsala-based geneticist Ulf Gyllensten published a study in 2006 in which he showed that haplogroup Z, which also occurs among Sami people, is most likely to have originated near the Urals and the Volga, in Russia. While U5b1b1 seems to have existed in Finland and Scandinavia for at least 6,000 years, Z apparently arrived at a later stage. That suggests that there was a new wave of immigration from the east only a few thousand years ago.

To find out more about the earliest history of the Sami, I take the night train up to Jokkmokk, in the province of Lapland, and meet Kjell-Åke Aronsson, the director of the Sami Museum, Ájtte. A trained archaeologist, he wrote his doctoral thesis on how reindeer were domesticated for human benefit. He and others conclude that domestication took place in comparatively recent times, perhaps some 1,500 years ago during the Iron Age. There were wild reindeer in northern Scandinavia before that time, but they were not a dominant factor in people's lives. Fishing and hunting elk were far more important means of subsistence.

The natural environment in northern Sweden was not ideal for reindeer until large spruce forests began to expand there. This happened only a few thousand years ago as the climate became somewhat colder. Reindeer like to winter in spruce forests because they can graze throughout the season on the lichens that grow on spruce pines. Deciduous forests, by contrast, offer little for reindeer to live on, especially when the temperature oscillates around zero degrees Celsius (32 degrees Fahrenheit). A hard ice crust forms at such temperatures, denying the reindeer access to lichen on the ground. Intense cold is less of a problem, as snow is soft and fluffy under such conditions, making it easier to scrape off.

Aronsson's work on his doctoral thesis was based mainly on analyses of pollen. These showed how vegetation had changed as domesticated reindeer became common. This was because reindeer droppings acted as a fertiliser, while their grazing habits also affected the vegetation. More recently, Aronsson has begun to examine reindeer DNA in collaboration with Norwegian researchers. However, they have not yet succeeded in identifying any wild reindeer with DNA matching that of domestic animals, which would reveal the latter's origins. They are pinning their hopes on bones and teeth from the ancient wild reindeer that are emerging from glaciers as the climate grows warmer.

The Sami languages, too, are a comparatively recent phenomenon. They are Uralic languages related to Finnish, Hungarian and a number of minor languages spoken in northern Russia, especially in parts of the Urals. Linguists have found indications that the Sami languages developed near areas where Baltic languages were spoken – that is, further east than the areas where Sami languages are spoken today.

Aronsson has his own ideas about how the Sami languages came to northern Scandinavia. His theory is slightly controversial – 'like swearing in church', he says. After a little persuasion, he agrees to tell me it anyway. He sees a link between the Sami languages and the early use of iron. These two phenomena appear to have reached northern Scandinavia at around the same time, about 2,000 years ago. If a small group of immigrants were able to transfer a whole new language to an existing population, they must have had something very special to offer, Aronsson thinks. In his view, domesticated reindeer are not a sufficient explanation. Conversely, the art of using fire to transform stone and sand into gleaming metal would be a good reason.

He also believes that aspects of the traditional Sami religion accompanied the language and the art of metalworking. The Sami shamans, known as *nåjder*, often decorated their drums with metallic objects. Pewter and silver are important components of traditional Sami jewellery and costumes.

Aronsson's theory is based in part on recent archaeological excavations, including some carried out before the building of the railway line between Boden and Haparanda. In the course of the dig, archaeologists found objects several thousand years old that bear witness to a new type of settlement where iron was produced.

My own view is that the Sami languages, metalworking and a number of people may have arrived from the east around 1,500 to 2,000 years ago. This pattern would agree with Ulf Gyllensten's findings that mitochondria belonging to haplogroup Z also appeared at around that time. Moreover, a large proportion of Sami men's Y chromosomes reveal kinship with groups living further east. Nearly half of all the Sami men whose DNA has been analysed belong to group N3, which is common in Siberia and in groups speaking Finno-Ugric languages. In western Europe, by contrast, this haplogroup is a rarity.

When I look into the issue more deeply, it turns out that my mitochondria lack the specific mutations known as the Sami motif. These mutations form a special subgroup of U5b1b1 called U5b1b1a. I, on the other hand, belong to another, far more unusual little group.

Initially, the administrators at FTDNA manage to identify just five people in the whole world who belong to the same small group as myself. Two of them are Americans with Norwegian roots, which makes sense, given that my oldest known female ancestor came from western Värmland, just a few dozen kilometres from the Norwegian border. The two Americans appear to be closely related, even though they have not found any written sources with supporting evidence. But their lineage and mine separated several thousand years ago.

Three of my matches come from Spain and Portugal, no less. That seems a little puzzling, but can be explained by the fact that haplogroup U5b1b1 originated in that region during the Ice Age. Many of us migrated to the north, but there were others who stayed put.

A few months later I get another bite. There turns out to be a woman in Stockholm whose mitochondrial DNA is

closer to mine than that of the Spaniard and the two Americans. There are a few steps between us, which may also correspond to a few millennia. Her husband, an active family history researcher, sent the sample to FTDNA. On hearing that we are related, he takes a look in some church records and manages to trace his wife's oldest relative in the maternal line, one Margareta Nilsson, who died in 1687 in Burträsk. Burträsk is a small place in Västerbotten, one of whose claims to fame is that the world's oldest skis were found nearby – the 'Kalvträsk skis', which go back 5,200 years.

Burträsk! So there may be some Sami roots here after all, I think again. However, nothing in the church records suggests that Margareta Nilsson might have been a Sami.

My particular branch and the lineage of everyone with the same variant went their separate ways several millennia ago – perhaps 10,000 years ago, although there is a considerable margin of error. The female forebears of the Sami and my own foremothers seem to have lived near the Nordic region for many thousands of years, possibly even since the ice sheet melted. This is fascinating for a family history researcher, but it is important to remind yourself that these issues are of historical interest only. Who went in one direction or another several thousand years ago has no bearing on today's Sami identity or on the issue of the Sami's status as an indigenous people. 'Being Sami is not a genetic thing,' Kjell-Åke Aronsson emphasises.

The fact that the Sami are classed as an indigenous people by a UN convention springs from events over the last few centuries. It was during this period that the Swedish state occupied the regions that Sami groups regarded as theirs. They resorted to brutal methods at times, causing great and enduring bitterness.

In the seventeenth century, the main problem – from the perspective of the Swedish state and the Protestant church – was that the Sami were not Christians, explains Aronsson. They were regarded as heathens. The Swedish state sent them missionaries, priests and other representatives, who confiscated the shamans' most vital piece of equipment, their magic

drums, and destroyed many votive sites. One shaman was executed for witchcraft.

In the eighteenth century, relations between the Swedish state and the Sami improved somewhat. Linnaeus writes enthusiastically about his encounter with the Sami in his book *Lachesis Lapponica: A Tour in Lapland*. In particular, he notes how healthy and vigorous elderly Sami people were in comparison with the Swedish-speaking farming population.

But taxes were burdensome and the lives of Sami people were subject to numerous restrictions. They were supposed to stick to what was seen as their traditional way of life. They were supposed to herd their reindeer and live in mountainous areas, where they were not in competition with Swedish-speaking farmers. There were periods when they were not permitted to live in rectangular houses, but only in round Sami huts, and they were not allowed to own more than five goats.

Naturally there was constant interchange between Swedish-speaking and Sami-speaking groups. People inter-married and had children together. Many Sami began to increase their reliance on farming as a means of subsistence. But at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Swedish colonialism took on a new form. Ore, forest products and hydroelectric power became more important to the economy. It was in that context that 'racial biology' flared up.

'Racial biology' and 'racial hygiene' (eugenics) constitute a long, dark chapter of the history of ideas in the West. Their worst consequence was the Holocaust during the Second World War, the systematic execution of millions of people – in most cases because they belonged to groups such as Jews and Roma. Another tragic consequence was forced sterilisation, which, in Sweden, affected mainly the people known as travellers – or 'vagrants', as they were called at the time.

One of the fundamental tenets of 'racial biology' was that people belonged to different races, rather as dogs or horses could be of different breeds, and that the intermingling of these races could be disastrous. Miscegenation (racial mixing)

would cause the 'racial stock' to deteriorate. One of the sources of inspiration of these murky ideas was genetics, coupled with the new biology, which developed rapidly in the early twentieth century.

The patterns governing heredity that Gregor Mendel discovered in the 1860s had no impact outside Brno in his lifetime, and after his death they were forgotten until the turn of the century. Charles Darwin, on the other hand – Mendel's contemporary – had an immediate breakthrough in the 1860s with his theory of the origin of species. When Mendel's findings were rediscovered, the biologists of the early twentieth century sought to fit the two systems of thought together. And a great deal went wrong in the century's first few decades.

Mendel's genetic laws quickly became an indispensable tool for plant and animal breeding. Crops and animals cross-bred thanks to this new discipline gave better yields, which was important in a society where many people went hungry. In that context, ideas about how genetics should also be used as an instrument of social engineering became increasingly influential – not just to prevent hereditary diseases, but also to overcome poverty and crime and to improve 'the race' in general. It was thought that the people as a whole were becoming increasingly enfeebled, as more and more of them abandoned farming and settled in towns.

These currents of thought were very widely shared across virtually the whole political spectrum: social democrats, conservatives, members of the Farmers' Party (*Bondeförbundet*) and liberals, all of whom had their reasons for taking a positive view of 'racial hygiene'. However, these ambitions for improving 'the race' were increasingly combined with much older ideas about the 'Germanic race', which many in Germany – and Scandinavia too – regarded as culturally superior. This Germanic nationalism had been developing little by little ever since the seventeenth century.

In Sweden, an Institute for Racial Biology was established in Uppsala in 1922. It was one of the world's first completely state-run institutes of 'racial biology', though others were to

follow. One of them was the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology in Berlin, a driving force behind the Holocaust that collaborated with Josef Mengele, a German SS officer and physician at Auschwitz concentration camp.

The instigator and first director of Sweden's State Institute for Racial Biology, the medical doctor Herman Lundborg, had an almost manic interest in classifying the people of Sweden – especially the Sami. He worked principally in the contemporary discipline known as 'physical anthropology'. Much of his time was spent measuring crania and comparing family trees from church records. He collected data from over 100,000 individuals, most of them national servicemen, whom he attempted to classify by assigning labels such as 'Germanic type', 'Sami type', 'gypsy' and 'vagrant'. For long periods, he left the institute in Uppsala to its own devices in order to travel around northern Sweden measuring Sami people. He visited villages and markets, measuring people wherever he possibly could. He was accompanied by a photographer who took frontal, rear and side views of his research subjects.

Lundborg's thesis was that the Sami belonged to the so-called 'short-skulled type', while people of Germanic stock supposedly had elongated skulls. However, no matter how many measurements he took, he found no statistical evidence for any such pattern.

He was pensioned off as director in the mid-1930s. A new director was appointed at the State Institute for Racial Biology, and it took a completely new direction, focusing on hereditary conditions and widespread diseases such as tuberculosis. In the 1950s it underwent a change of name, becoming the Institute for Human Genetics, and it later became known as the Institute for Medical Genetics. In other words, the change of name came many years after its actual research had ceased to include cranial measurement and 'racial biology'.

But Lundborg continued to classify people. In 1938 he was awarded an honorary doctorate in Heidelberg, Germany, at the behest of the foremost Nazi race ideologue, Hans F. Günther. He became increasingly anti-Semitic; one of the

beliefs he held was that the State Institute for Racial Biology was being undermined through Jewish influence on the press. He became an open supporter of Nazism.

And Lundborg was by no means alone in his racist views on the Sami people. As late as 1947, the Swedish Tourist Board published a book called *De svenska fjällapparna* ('The Mountain Lapps of Sweden'). The author was Ernst Manker, director of the Nordic Museum's 'Lapp Department'. One of the first few chapters is entitled 'Race and Temperament'. Kjell-Åke Aronsson of the Sami Museum, Åjtte, considers its wording so offensive that he refuses to quote from it. But I want to know what sort of language was used.

I seek out the book myself in the Nordic Museum's library and read, among other things, that the Sami appear to be 'the last vestiges of a distinct tribe descended from a white-yellow aboriginal race' and how they 'are not really very good-looking by Indo-European standards'. It is possible to use 'coaxing and indirect manoeuvres' to 'get these reindeer-herders where you want them, at least to some extent', notes Manker. While Lapps are notably quick-witted and very animated, according to Manker, they are also 'unstable and Bohemian', and they are of a 'protean and malleable' disposition.

Perhaps the most offensive form of words by today's standards is Manker's opinion of the Sami's business sense. He describes their 'limitless cunning and stinginess' and quotes an acquaintance as saying, 'I'd rather make a deal with 10 Jews.'

This book, it is worth remembering, was published two years after the end of the Second World War, at a time when no one, but no one, could deny what had happened during the Holocaust.

There are reasons why relations between some of Sweden's Sami and the Swedish Tourist Board may still be tense. And this background explains why some Sami are suspicious of geneticists with ideas about their early history.