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The Ice Age Ends

A little over 11,600 years ago, the Ice Age came to a clear and definite end. The climate became nearly as warm as it is today. This shift was probably very rapid, with temperature rises of several degrees within just a few decades. Ice cores from Greenland suggest this may even have happened within the space of a few years.

The change was followed in due course by two dramatic events: a gigantic waterfall appeared from nowhere, and, just as suddenly, a strait ran completely dry. It was not until after these two events that people began to move in larger numbers into the territory we now know as Sweden, and to settle there.

Let us exercise a little imagination and picture a few nomadic reindeer hunters travelling in northern Västergötland at that time. Having climbed the mountain we now know as Mount Billingen, they were keeping watch for reindeer herds. It was a warm day in late summer. None of the hunters had ever experienced such a heatwave.

Probably they were puzzled that the reindeer were no longer behaving in the usual way. They must surely have suspected a link with the higher temperatures they were experiencing. However, there was little they could do but stay on the lookout, keep their hopes up, and live on hares and other small animals. Fortunately, there were plenty of fish in lakes and streams, as well as in the salty North Sea. The vast, ice-cold lake to the east, on the other hand, was devoid of life.

By late afternoon, the people on Mount Billingen had still not sighted any reindeer. But they were enjoying themselves anyway. They had enough food for several days, and the streams provided fresh drinking water. Since it was so warm, they no longer needed to muffle themselves up in their usual

thick anoraks and fur-trimmed hoods. A single layer – a thin tunic of animal hide – was quite sufficient. It was a great relief to be lightly dressed when making their way up the mountainside; they avoided sweating as profusely as usual.

They had a magnificent view from the summit. No doubt their beliefs imbued the whole landscape with spiritual significance. On this beautiful spot, where they could see the meeting of mountain, ice, lake and sea, they must have experienced a particular closeness to deities and spiritual beings. Bluish ice sheets stretched northwards for as far as the eye could see. To the east, the dark blue waters of the cold ice lake extended to the horizon. To the west was the shimmering sea, with a reddening sun sinking towards the water.

They decided to set up camp for the night and began the task of lighting a fire. We can picture them sitting in silence, contemplating in awe the grandeur of the landscape at dusk, while the fire gradually burned higher.

Then came the first almighty crash. They started, and tried to speak to each other. But such was the noise that it was impossible to make out a word anyone said. The thundering became more intense. It grew worse and worse; this was no thunderstorm, but the manifestation of other forces that were far more powerful.

Their eyes widened in terror, they saw immense blocks of ice calve off the edge of the glacier and plunge into the sea. In the same instant, a thunderous torrent surged forth, a new waterfall that had not been there previously. The water gushed out of the cold eastern lake into the North Sea, bearing gigantic blocks of ice and boulders so vast that the combined muscle power of many strong men would not have been able to lift them.

Frozen with fear, they watched all this while the sun dipped into the sea and darkness fell. Soon all was black. But the din continued. They lay down as near as possible to the fire, and no one moved from the spot all night.

At first light they rose and looked northward to see what had happened. The new waterfall was even more powerful and thunderous than the evening before. Great blocks of ice

and boulders were still being swept down to the sea. In the plains to the south-west, a great river had appeared that had not been there the day before.

Getting to their feet, they peered cautiously towards the south. Fortunately, the plains they had come from were still there. As soon as it was light enough, they hurried down the mountainside to tell their kinsfolk about the new waterfall and the new river.

Shortly after that, in the area where the Danish city of Helsingør now lies, another small group of people experienced an entirely different kind of miracle.

None of them dared paddle their boats over the narrowest part of the strait. That was far too dangerous, teeming with rapids and waterfalls. To cross to the other side, you had to start your voyage much further north, where the river widened on its way down to the sea and the water was calmer. Yet the most turbulent part of the torrent was still worth visiting around now, in late summer. There were fish to be caught. Above all, with a little luck they might find flints of exactly the right size and the best possible quality.

It was late afternoon on a warm summer's day, the warmest that any of them had ever known. In the morning, the strait looked just as always. As usual, they clambered around gingerly among the stones in their efforts to spear salmon. The least careless movement, and they could be swept away by the cold water, turned upside down and drown.

But that evening, just before sundown, the sound of the rapids ceased abruptly. The rough torrent dwindled into a puny little stream. They sat on the brink, gaping dumbfounded as the water level sank before their very eyes.

By the following day, the water had sunk still further. Within less than one lunar month it had disappeared. The bed of the channel lay exposed. Where lately a torrent had surged through, there was now only fine white sand and pale grey rocks, polished clean. Until lately, even adventurous

young people had balked at paddling a boat across the strait. Now anyone, from the tiniest children to the weariest old people, could make their way across on foot. And that was not all. There, on the bed of the channel, lay a treasure trove: endless quantities of the best flint anyone had ever seen. All they had to do was go and gather whatever they needed.

The land we now know as Sweden has been inhabited since before the huge new waterfall appeared and the strait ran dry. Though there are no DNA analyses from the first millennium, we can tell a good deal about the first post-Ice Age pioneers from the DNA of people in neighbouring regions and people from Sweden and Norway who lived 1,500 years later.

As the Ice Age drew to a close, people in northern Europe began to change their way of life. Many migrated to the coasts. Reindeer hunters turned to seal hunting.

No doubt the sea had already had a place in our lives at a much earlier stage. The very oldest traces of a culture reflecting modern humans have been found in Blombos cave, on the coast of South Africa. Worked sea shells and leftovers from fish-based meals that are at least 80,000 years old have been found there. As we have already seen, more than 30,000 years ago Europeans were already adorning themselves with shells brought hundreds of kilometres from the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Fishing in lakes and rivers, and perhaps on the coast as well, provided a significant complement to the hunting of reindeer, mammoths and wild horses during the Ice Age. One of the very oldest works of art at the French site of Les Eyzies-de-Tayac is a metre-long (3¼-foot) relief of a salmon, chiselled into a rock wall. It is at least 30,000 years old.

But at some point, just as the Ice Age was coming to an end, people in Scandinavia learned how to hunt marine mammals. Initially, they combined the hunting of reindeer inland with seal hunting along the coasts, just as many Inuit

people in Greenland and Canada have done for much of history. Some began to make the transition to living on the coast all year round.

Ice Age reindeer hunters probably began to adapt and become seal hunters in Bohuslän (a province on the western seaboard of Sweden, immediately south of the Norwegian border), where the low-lying landscape of the south gives way to the mountains and fjords typical of the Norwegian coast. Unlike the coast of the flatlands, the fjord landscape offers numerous sheltered inlets, which are handy for canoeists who want to land and set up camp.

Some archaeologists refer to the Bohuslän coast of that era as 'the gateway to paradise'. When the Ice Age loosened its grip and the glaciers began to melt, cold, mineral-rich water gushed out into the North Sea, meeting warm saltwater currents. This made the coastal region an El Dorado for shellfish, fish, seabirds and seals – and for people who knew how to exploit this fauna. The Norwegian archaeologist Hein Bjartmann Bjerck believes the transition from reindeer hunting to seal hunting took place in Bohuslän approximately 11,500 years ago, and thinks it was very rapid, taking only a few generations.

At this time, people sharing what appears to be a common culture were migrating across a vast region of northern Europe that stretched from Britain and Belgium in the west, across Doggerland, and as far east as Poland. The arrow points typical of these people are usually assigned to the Ahrensburg culture in Germany, and to the Swiderian culture in Poland. Nearly identical artefacts from the west coast of Sweden are classed as Hensbacka, and as soon as we cross the border into today's Norway they are ascribed to the Fosna culture. The fact that such similar cultures have such different names says more about the narrow purview of twentieth-century archaeologists than about the way people actually lived 11,500 years ago. The hunter-gatherers of the time had no national borders of the kind we know. Rather, they had very extensive networks and travelled over long distances to hunt, meet friends and kinsfolk, hold feasts,

exchange gifts and find a partner with whom they could have children.

Doubtless they could walk a few dozen kilometres a day in the open landscape of the tundra. There were as yet no dense forests to stand in their way. The only trees were puny dwarf birches and willows.

The way of life of the Ahrensburgian people initially involved following reindeer on their migrations. When opportunity arose, they also hunted wild horses, elk and bison, as well as fur-bearing animals like wolves and foxes. However, some of them gradually began to see the great advantages of living on the coast for part of the year. It seems likely that they trekked southwards in late summer to engage in reindeer hunting around places like Ahrensburg in north Germany, the area that gave the culture its name. During the rest of the year, their dietary staples were seals, seabirds, fish and shellfish.

To travel along the coast, you needed a boat. Doubtless some kind of relatively simple boats had already existed for a long time. There is evidence that people colonised Australia at least 50,000 years ago, and they must have come by boat. The very first visitors to Sweden, the reindeer hunters of the Hamburg culture who lived 14,000 years ago, are also likely to have had boats; they must have had some means of crossing the Öresund Strait, which was open water at the time. However, it seems likely that the art of boatbuilding in Europe made great advances in Bohuslän, at the very end of the Ice Age.

These craft were probably hide-covered boats similar to those used by the Inuit well into the twentieth century. The tundra that predominated around the end of the Ice Age would not have featured tall trees with thick trunks that could be hollowed out to make boats. But a hide-covered kayak is an equally effective craft that can cover several dozen kilometres a day if paddled by a fit, skilled canoeist. Hein Bjartmann Bjerck believes these boats resembled the Inuit's umiak, an open, relatively large canoe made of sealskin stretched over a framework of laths, which can carry a whole

family. There may also have been enclosed kayaks that were smaller and faster, for use in seal hunting.

Once these people had acquired mastery of the maritime environment, they were able to spread northwards along the whole of the Norwegian coast. It seems likely that they simply followed the seals.

The skilled reindeer hunters of the Ahrensburg culture must have found their first seal hunt almost unbelievably easy, trouble-free and productive. These were large animals that lay still along the shoreline to rest, so all you had to do was club them to death. That meant very little effort for copious amounts of fat and nutritious meat. Seals also had a thick layer of fatty tissue that was ideal as fuel, providing warmth and light in the hide-covered tents.

It was almost too good to be true – and sure enough, there was a catch. Seals are smart creatures. They learned to avoid beaches where their kin had been killed by humans, and moved on to new locations. But the people learned how to follow them in increasingly sophisticated boats. While searching for seals, they discovered splendid new dwelling places in sheltered fjords all the way up the Norwegian coast. And everywhere they found the same profusion of fish, shellfish, seabirds and seals.

In the course of a few centuries, Norway's first settlers peopled the Norwegian coastline as far up as the Barents Sea and today's border with Russia. But some people from the new culture of coastal hunters had the privilege of staying on in Bohuslän.

During a summer job at *Dagens Nyheter's* Gothenburg office in the early 1990s, I got to experience the announcement of an archaeological breakthrough. I was one of a group of journalists from western Sweden called to a press conference on the island of Orust, at a place called Huseby Klev. National and local newspapers, radio and television were there. Today, Huseby Klev is surrounded by the wooded farming landscape

typical of Bohuslän. But 10,000 years ago, we learned, it was an island far out in the archipelago.

With lively gestures, an enthusiastic archaeologist explained what he and his colleagues had discovered – traces of dolphin hunters who had chewed the world's oldest chewing gum! These finds had been excavated in the course of a survey to prepare for the building of a new road. They had lain deep down and well protected in the clay sediment and were exceptionally well preserved. It had not previously been known that people in Scandinavia 10,000 years ago hunted dolphins. Nor had anyone discovered any 'chewing gum' of comparable antiquity.

Twenty years on I talk to the archaeologist again. His name is Bengt Nordqvist and he recalls that summer day in Huseby Klev as the biggest media event of his life. It was the journalists, he says, who pounced on the phrase 'the world's oldest chewing gum', recognising its potential as a striking headline. Thanks to the chewing gum, Huseby Klev became world news, and Bengt Nordqvist later wrote a short popular science book of the same name.

The archaeologists had found about 10 pieces of resin that had been extracted somehow from birch bark. The tooth marks on these bits of resin show that they were chewed just like modern chewing gum. You can clearly see that it was mostly children and teenagers who did the chewing. In one or two cases an adult finished off the task.

For chewing this prehistoric gum was a task, not just a pleasure. These pieces of resin were put to a practical use. The microscope reveals traces of aspen wood and twisted cords. These fibres, together with the shape of the pieces of resin, show the resin was used for caulking boats. There are good reasons why Scandinavia's first wooden boats were built of aspen wood, aspens being among the first tall, thick trees to appear when the climate began to warm up.

There is a type of traditional boat in the Nordic region made from the hollowed-out trunks of aspens, the Swedish name for which (*esping* or *äsping*) reflects the type of wood used. Bengt Nordqvist believes that the people of Huseby

Klev paddled out to sea in early versions of such craft – long, slender boats carved with great precision out of tree trunks. These boats were low and must have been quite narrow, but they had outriggers to improve their stability. Aspen, a porous wood, was easy to work. However, it split from time to time, and then resin was used to caulk the boats.

Bone remains from the very oldest layers at Huseby Klev show that these people hunted white-beaked dolphins in considerable numbers. These creatures came to the coast in large schools at certain times of the year. The island-dwellers also hunted grey seals, wild boar, red deer and the great auk, which is now extinct. Evidence of cod and ling was found among the fish bones; there were also large quantities of mussel shells.

By the time of the oldest finds at Huseby Klev, the Ice Age was over and conditions were much warmer. Traces of pollen and wood in the excavated layers show how vegetation changed little by little. The first trees were birch, aspen, alder, willow, sallow, rowan and pine. Then came hazel in increasingly abundant quantities. People may have given hazel a little help in establishing itself by pressing nuts down into the soil at favourable spots and felling larger trees that cast too much shadow. After a few thousand years, the environment was dominated by hardwood deciduous trees such as oak, elm and lime.

Once the climate and the seawater had warmed up somewhat, oyster shells were added to the deposits found at Huseby Klev. Similar accumulations of oyster and mussel shells have been found in numerous Stone Age settlements from this time, especially in Denmark. They are known as shell middens or kitchen middens (*køkkenmøddinger* in Danish). Some are huge – hundreds of metres long and several metres high. We should not be misled by these gigantic waste heaps. While oysters have large shells, they are not exactly filling. A deer provides far more calories than a few handfuls of oysters, but the remains – the bones – take up less space.

The well-preserved finds also show that the people who lived at Huseby Klev ate a good deal of plant-based food. Remains of wild apples, rosehips and sloes have been found.

In particular, there are quantities of shells from hazelnuts roasted in fires. These nutritious nuts seem to have been a staple food; roasting made them taste better and keep longer into the bargain.

A piece of canine excrement has also been preserved in the sediment – a 10,000-year-old lump of dog dirt! The dog itself, however, has not been found. But near Lake Hornborga, in the province of Västergötland, archaeologists have discovered the remains of several dogs from about the same time. The most complete skeleton, which is on display in Falköping Museum, looks as if it belonged to a powerfully built spitz. Several human bones have also been found in the layers excavated at Huseby Klev. Isotopic analysis shows that the bulk of their food came from the sea. It is unusual for people living today to have such an overwhelmingly maritime diet; indeed, it applies only to some of the Inuit of Greenland who retain their traditional way of life.

At the time of writing, the human bones from Huseby Klev are undergoing DNA analysis, but it is unclear whether this undertaking will be successful.

To judge from their bones and the good condition of their tooth enamel, the people who lived at Huseby Klev 10,000 years ago were healthy and well nourished. They seem to have had enough to eat and to have had a balanced diet throughout their lives. 'It must have been the best of all worlds,' says Bengt Nordqvist, summing up.

The 'Österöd woman' provides further evidence that people could live well in Bohuslän 10,000 years ago. She was found a few dozen kilometres north of Huseby Klev, next to a croft in the parish of Bro, which is today part of the municipality of Lysekil. At the end of the Ice Age, however, this spot was a small island far out at sea – just a few hours' by canoe from Huseby Klev.

There are some fascinating stories about this skeleton: discovered in 1903 by a quarryman, it attracted the attention

of an archaeologist in the 1930s and was described in the light of contemporary knowledge, but then completely forgotten. It was not until 2007 that it was rediscovered by Torbjörn Ahlström, an archaeologist and osteologist, at a museum in Lund. Even more fascinating is what the bones can tell us about the Österöd woman and the kind of life she led.

She was probably about 1.7 metres ($5\frac{3}{4}$ feet) tall and lived to about 85. Just before she died she was still essentially in good health, free of caries and the osteoporosis that plagues so many elderly women today. The ailments visible from her skeleton include some minor age-related changes in her vertebrae and joints. Her teeth were also rather worn. Such wear and tear is observable in nearly all Stone Age people, who constantly used their teeth as tools when working. There is no evidence that the Österöd woman had suffered from starvation or been seriously ill earlier on in her life.

There are, however, several signs that she engaged in strenuous activities. She appears to have had periostitis, an ailment that can afflict modern-day people who go in for too much jogging or running. She also has a damaged pubic bone, sometimes a sign of having given birth with complications many times, but which can also be caused by playing football and other strenuous sports. Hunting in Bohuslän 10,000 years ago was no doubt at least as dramatic and violent as a modern game of football.

Isotopic analyses of the woman's teeth show she must have eaten a great deal of venison and elk meat from mainland forests, in her childhood at any rate. In this she differs from the people who lived at Huseby Klev, who lived almost exclusively on fish and marine animals throughout their lives.

The Österöd woman may have belonged to a group that migrated from season to season between the hinterland and the outer archipelago. She may also conceivably have spent her childhood in the forests of the mainland, but moved to the coast as an adult and adopted a more maritime way of life.

Torbjörn Ahlström shares the conclusion that life in Bohuslän just after the end of the Ice Age must have been a

very special time – ‘a real bonanza’, as he says. I am ready to agree with him. Obviously we should avoid romanticising life during the Stone Age. But at that time Bohuslän was a virgin territory with an abundance of food, and there were so far very few people to compete for resources.

Even today, the west coast of Sweden can be a harsh place when it is at its rainiest and windiest in autumn and winter. The hide tents of the dolphin hunters probably afforded rather inadequate shelter in such weather. On calmer days, however, Bohuslän can be like paradise. Ten thousand years ago, just like today, there must have been still mornings at the height of summer when the sea was as smooth as a mirror; and autumn days when the hazel bushes had turned yellow and the leaves of the aspens red, when the warmth lingered on, with the tang of seaweed and the cries of seabirds in the air. It must have been pleasant then to lie on a slab of smooth pink granite listening to the lapping of the waves, while eating shellfish and nibbling freshly roasted nuts.

Huseby Klev and Österöd compete for the title of Sweden’s oldest human remains. There is no consensus among archaeologists, partly because a marine diet makes radiocarbon dating more unreliable than usual. By way of a compromise, let’s just say that both sites are about 10,000 years old, with a few centuries’ margin of error.

Researchers have attempted to analyse DNA from the Österöd woman, but unfortunately they have not managed to extract enough of it. Analyses of a number of skeletons from southern Norway that are a few hundred years younger have proven more successful.

It has been suggested more than once that a few daring seafarers may have taken a shortcut straight across the sea from Doggerland to the coast of Norway. However, Bohuslän is generally viewed as the most likely point of departure of Norway’s first settlers.

A number of archaeological finds point to another migratory route, thought to have started in the east, in Russia – in fact, even as far away as Siberia. Most of these finds are a kind of stone arrow point made using a particular technique that involved the toolmaker pressing down on the stone, rather than knapping it. Arrows of this type were made early on in Siberia and have also been found in Russia and Finland. Finds of such arrowheads indicate that people migrated towards the Arctic and possibly also along the southern shores of the Baltic Sea. Bone fish-hooks fashioned in a specific way tell the same story.

The question is: what can DNA analyses tell us? The oldest and best-researched representative of Ice Age Siberians lived 24,000 years ago at a place called Mal'ta near Lake Baikal. He was about four years old when he died, and to judge from DNA analyses he probably had brown hair, brown eyes and a pale, freckled face (though the DNA analyses are somewhat inconclusive on these points).

When this information about the Mal'ta boy's DNA appeared in *Nature* in 2013, it caused a big stir. This was because he turned out to belong to a group of people who were midway, genetically speaking, between western Europe's early population of hunters and the indigenous people of the Americas. In other words, the 'ancient Siberians' formed a kind of missing link between Ice Age Europe and the Americas of the same period. There is no extant group of people with an identical DNA set. However, many of us, both in the Americas and in Europe, have inherited some of the ancient Siberians' genetic material. These sequences of our DNA can provide insights into prehistoric migrations.

The indigenous people of the Americas are descended from groups that lived in Beringia, a region that, like Doggerland, no longer exists. It now lies on the seabed around the body of water known as the Bering Strait. Beringia covered a very large area, far larger than Doggerland, and new DNA research indicates that the indigenous people of the Americas left it in waves, starting over 14,000 years ago.

Now researchers are looking for a similar DNA signal from the east in the oldest individuals in Scandinavia to have been subjected to DNA analysis. They are about 9,500 years old and were found at a place called Hummerviken, in the municipality of Søgne on the western side of the Oslo Fjord, Norway.

In the 1990s, the owner of a cottage on a plot of land running down to the shore was planning to carry out dredging work in preparation for installing a new landing stage. In the clay on the shoreline, a human bone was found – the oldest ever discovered in Norway. It was suspected that the individual was a woman, and the mass media began to call her ‘Sol’ (Sun). Later, more bones from a few other individuals were found. They appear to have died at the same time, a reasonable assumption being that they all drowned together when a boat foundered.

The DNA of two of these individuals has been analysed by Swedish researchers; the others are being studied by a rival team whose leadership is based in Copenhagen. The results available so far show that the people from Hummerviken had mitochondria from haplogroups U5a1, U5a1d and U4d. The same haplogroups have also been identified in individuals found in Sweden who lived just a few hundred years after the Hummerviken people.

Boats crossed the Baltic as well. On the island of Stora Karlsö just off Gotland, Sweden, archaeologists have found traces of humans in a cave known as Stora Förvar. These finds reveal that people were already coming to the cave some 9,400 years ago, after which they continued to visit it for thousands of years.

The main reason for their presence was probably to hunt grey seals. The layers in the cave contain large numbers of seal bones, almost exclusively from cubs. Presumably they would have begun hunting seals towards the end of winter, sometime in March, and continued for a few months. Later

in the season they would have focused on other prey, such as hares and seabirds, as well as on fishing and picking hazelnuts.

Archaeologists have found bones and skulls from about 10 individuals in the Stora Förvar cave. One of the skeletons is that of a baby who died at about four months of age. There is a theory that the child was poisoned by overdoses of vitamin A, a possible consequence of its mother consuming too much seal meat – especially liver – while breastfeeding. Such meat is very rich in vitamin A, which is vital in small quantities but toxic in excessive amounts, especially to young children.

Hunting peoples heavily reliant on marine mammals in modern times – such as the people living along the west coast of North America – have learned that pregnant women and nursing mothers have to eat other kinds of food. But archaeologists suspect that the people on the island of Stora Karlsö were beginners. They had only recently made the transition to maritime hunting, having previously hunted mainly deer and elk in the forests on the mainland.

The dead in the Stora Förvar cave also include a few children aged about 10, at least one of whom was probably a girl. Two or three individuals were adolescents, while the rest were in their twenties and thirties.

There are various theories about how these human remains found their way to the cave. Perhaps they were people who just happened to have died while the group was on the island of Stora Karlsö. Or they may have died during the year and been brought to Stora Förvar for burial because the cave was believed to have a special significance.

Among the remains of seal bones, hares, seabirds and fish bones, there are also traces of a type of prey that could hardly have been used as food. The people on Stora Karlsö were eagle hunters. We can only speculate about the exact use to which they put their prey. However, it seems natural to assume that these great, powerful birds would have had a symbolic significance, and that their plumage was used to decorate people's clothing.

I have in mind a number of pictures of people from North America's indigenous population taken by the photographer Edward Curtis in the first decades of the twentieth century. Several of them are wearing traditional headdresses made of large feathers. The seal hunters of Stora Karlsö may have had a similar appearance. They may have worn sealskin and deerskin garments adorned with animal teeth and shells, with long eagle feathers in their hair.

A Swedish research team has analysed the DNA of several of the individuals from Stora Förfar. The oldest lived about 9,200 years ago and, at the time of writing, was the oldest individual in Sweden to have been subjected to DNA analysis. This person belonged to haplogroup U4, the same found in Hummerviken.

The people of Hummerviken and the inhabitants of Stora Karlsö probably belonged to the same related group of hunters. To judge by their mitochondria, they may actually have been descended from people further east. Their foremothers may have spent the coldest period of the Ice Age in the southern part of Ukraine or Russia, or even in western Siberia – at least according to analyses of people alive today carried out by Russian researchers and others.

It is to be hoped that more detailed analyses of nuclear DNA will soon give us more information. Maybe they will provide some clues about where these early Scandinavians came from and what they may have looked like.