

New research refutes myth of pure Scandinavian race

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A team of forensic scientists at the University of Copenhagen has studied human remains found in two ancient Danish burial grounds dating back to the iron age, and discovered a man who appears to be of arabian origin. The findings suggest that human beings were as genetically diverse 2000 years ago as they are today and indicate greater mobility among iron age populations than was previously thought. The findings also suggest that people in the Danish iron age did not live and die in small, isolated villages but, on the contrary, were in constant contact with the wider world.

On the southern part of the island of Zealand in Denmark, lie two burial grounds known as Bøgebjerggård and Skovgaarde, which date back to the Danish iron age (c. 0-400 BC). Linea Melchior and forensic scientists from the University of Copenhagen analysed the mitochondrial DNA of 18 individuals buried on the sites and found that there was as much genetic variation in their remains as one would expect to find in individuals of the present day. The research team also found DNA from a man, whose genetic characteristics indicate a man of Arabian origin.

The ancestors of the Danes were in contact with the wider world

Archeologists and anthropologists know today that the concept of a single scandinavian genetic type, a scandinavian race that wandered to Denmark, settled there, and otherwise lived in complete isolation from

the rest of the world, is a fallacy.

"If you look at the geographic position of Denmark, "then it becomes clear that the Danes must have been in contact with other peoples," says scientist, Linea Melchior. "We know from other archeological excavations that there was a good deal of trade and exchange of goods between Denmark and other parts of Scandinavia and Europe. These lines of communication must have extended further south as one of the Danish burial grounds, which dates back to the iron age also contained the remains of a man, who appears to have been of arabian origin.

People from distant lands were absorbed in Danish iron age communities

At the beginning of the Danish iron age, the roman legions were based as far north as the river Elbe (on the border of northern Germany) and it is thought that the man of arabian descent found in the burial grounds in Southern Zealand would have either been a slave or a soldier in the roman army. It is probable that he possessed skills or special knowledge, which the people in Bøgebjerggård or Skovgaard settlements could make use of, or he could have been the descendant of a female of arabian origin, who for reasons unknown, had crossed the river Elbe and settled down with the inhabitants of Zealand.

"This discovery is comparable to the findings of a colleague of mine, who found a person of siberian origin on the Kongemarke site," continues scientist, Linea Melchior. He was buried on consecrated ground, just as the circumstances of the arab man's burial was identical to that of the locals. The discovery of the arab man indicates that people from distant parts of the world could be and were absorbed in Danish communities.

The iron age peoples moved away from their place of birth

"All of our ancestors, no matter when they arrived have contributed to our history and the development of our lifestyle," explains Linea Melchior. "Indeed, Danish identity is more a definition of where one is physically located and lives today than a question of our past history - since we're all originally african in origin. That we ended up in Europe was accidental, which is in itself remarkable".

"Another interesting feature of the approximately 50 graves assessed so far on the two sites and also from other burial sites and time periods in Danish history is that none of the individuals seem to be maternally related to one another", explains Linea Melchior. "We couldn't see any large families buried in the same location. This suggests that in the Danish iron age, people didn't live and die in the villages of their birth, as we had previously imagined".

Source: University of Copenhagen

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