

Jon Kyllingstad:

The geography and history of Sami genes

Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza (1994) and the study of ethnic groups and boundaries in North-Scandinavian prehistory

Jon Kyllingstad, historian and associate professor at MUV: Department of university history at Cultural history museum University of Oslo

The History and Geography of Human Genes (1994) by Luigi Cavalli-Sforza' et al. is a highly influential work of reference on human genetic variation. It explored the history of culturally/linguistically defined humans groups and their migrations during the last 100 000 years, by mapping the relative distribution of genetic markers between contemporary populations, and placing them into a bifurcating phylogenetic tree based on an analysis of their genetic similarities and differences.

One of the studied populations were the Sami. By focusing on the Sami case, my paper discuss the assumptions about nature/culture interactions that underpinned delineation of population groups, the analysis of their population history and their placement into the human evolutionary tree. Cavalli-Sforza et al. put forward an interpretation of Sami prehistory that was strongly at odds with dominating views among contemporary Norwegian experts on Sami history and prehistory. I will argue that this was not due to the nature of the genetic evidence upon which the study was based, but a product of conflicting theoretical assumptions. The Norwegian archaeologists and historians were strongly inspired by Fredrik Barth's approach to ethnicity as a dynamic process of boundary work. Cavalli-Sforza based his research on notions about 'tribes' and socio-culturally-linguistically defined populations that was out of touch with ongoing international anthropological and sociological discussions and research on "ethnicity" and that seem to resemble a "Herderian" view on 'folk', nationhood and cultural evolution, typical of the 19th century.

Keywords: population genetics, ethnicity, Sami prehistory, archaeology, human evolution