

Gene Mapping again

I return to the subject of my blog entry of a week or so ago – the books by Sykes and Oppenheimer on gene mapping of the population of the British Isles, and am now, thanks to Amazon, in a position to comment sensibly, rather than simply relying on press reports and publishers blurb. These books are indeed similar in many ways, although there are striking differences. “Blood of the Isles” by Sykes, concentrates to a great extent on telling the story of a large research project to map the genetic background of what he refers to as “the Isles”. He does use historical and archaeological material, but only to a limited extent. Oppenheimer by contrast is much more wide ranging in his book “The Origins of the British; A Genetic Detective Story”, looking at genetic, historical and linguistic material and his book is substantially thicker (and heavier) than that of Sykes. He does not have Sykes qualms about referring to Britain and Ireland and the British Isles. I will discuss the content of these books in a little more detail below. However the striking thing to me is that neither of them seems to refer to the other, even though they both work for the same institution. I find this quite remarkable, and again it raises questions in my mind about whether or not we have an outworking of an academic feud here. Of the style of the writing I found that of Sykes more humane than the rather abrasive tone found in some passages from Oppenheimer.

So let us consider first the work of Sykes. What was not really apparent from the material I had looked at earlier was that he systematically looks at both the maternal and paternal DNA evidence. The tribes mentioned in my earlier blog are the founding ancestors of the various genetic clans, and use a terminology he developed in earlier works (which I still have not read). I fear in my earlier summary, these names tended to distract from what I now seems the main themes of his work. In summary he concludes that the maternal genetic evidence points to the large majority of the ancestors of the present population having come from Iberia in the Mesolithic / Neolithic and that most of the maternal lines in the current population in all parts of the Isles were in place by about 6000 years ago. These have been supplemented in historic times by maternal lines from Scandinavia in the Northern Isles (where about 60% of the maternal lines have a Scandinavian origin) and in England above the boundary of the Danelaw (where around 5 to 10% of lines have Scandinavian / Germanic origin), which seem consistent with the Viking incursions of the 8th and 9th centuries. In paternal genetic terms he sees a roughly similar pattern, with most of the paternal lines having an early Neolithic Iberian origin. He detects some evidence of paternal ancestors from an early migration from the east, and again some evidence in the east of Scandinavian / Germanic incursions (about 5% in the south of England, rising to 15% in the Danelaw and 20% in East Anglia). There is surprisingly little variation in the paternal genetic material across the Islands, which leads Sykes to conclude that there has been a significant “Ghengis effect” with only a few successful male lines surviving into modern times. Overwhelmingly he sees the population of the Isles as having a very old genetic origin that he refers to as Celtic, with only minorities of other maternal or paternal genetic lines. Interestingly he is unable to detect significant evidence of Celtic migration from the East, casting doubt on the accepted orthodoxy that the Celtic origins are in central Europe, and there is a similar lack of evidence for the impact of the Romans on the population make up.

Oppenheimer's work covers similar ground but comes up with rather different conclusions. He argues that the basic genetic stock of the British Isles arrived 15000 to 13000 years ago, and still account for somewhere around 70 to 90% of the genetic lines, with the largest figures being in the west of the Islands. These dates are of course much earlier than those suggested by Sykes. Oppenheimer does not use the Celtic label for these migrants however, arguing on genetic and linguistic ground that the Celtic people and language arrived in the Neolithic from the Mediterranean via Spain – presumably somewhere around 3000 to 4000 years ago. In the process he rejects the central European hypothesis for the homeland of the British Celts. This again echoes the work of Sykes, but the timing of the migrations is different. In genetic terms these migrations have resulted in only a few of the modern gene lines – between 4 and 30% with the lowest figures, paradoxically, being in Ireland. For about the same time period he identifies a similar migration (in terms of number of genetic lines) coming into the east of the Islands from Germany and Scandinavia. From there he goes on to argue that it is quite likely that in parts of Britain the pre-Roman indigenous language was more likely to be Germanic than Celtic and that this persisted throughout the Roman era, and into the “pre-invasion” Anglo-Saxon period. Again like Sykes he identifies a small genetic contribution in the East and North of England from the Anglo-Saxon and Viking incursions – but only amounting to a few percent of the gene lines (around 5%), except in parts of the east of England where the figure rises to 10 to 20%.

Thus the two approaches are consistent in that they both argue for a very old basic gene stock in the British Isles, with most of the gene lines having established themselves in the Mesolithic period, probably from Iberia. However they seem to differ in the age of the first migrations, and in those groups which they call Celtic. For Sykes the Celts are the basic genetic stock of the Islands, whilst for Oppenheimer they are a later, minority, set of gene lines in the western parts of the islands. Both seem to agree however that there is a minority Scandinavian / Anglo-Saxon contribution to the genetic make up in the east of England and Scotland, although these are very much in a minority compared to the basic genetic stock.

I guess that the differences between these works actually reflect the difficulties in interpretation of genetic evidence, and no doubt both the authors, and others, will have more to say on the subject in the future. But the broad agreement that the basic genetic stock of the Islands is very old, and that there is an essentially east / west division based on very early migrations is of considerable importance in defining the identity of the modern British and Irish nations. Oppenheimer's language hypotheses have enormous implication for the Anglo-Saxon invasion period, and, if true leave a great deal of re-interpretation of the historical and archaeological data to be done. For example, where was the linguistic boundary in pre- and post-Roman England – at the Welsh border or somewhere in the English Midlands? This has major implications for the study of early Mercia for example. Also the conventional tale of the christianising of England tells of the Augustinian mission in the south and the Irish / Ioanan mission in the north. The role of the continuing British church established in Roman times is only just beginning to be

acknowledged in the literature. Should this church be considered to be Celtic / British speaking? Of did it have a Germanic speaking component? Interesting questions indeed.

But finally, my throw away remark at the end of my last entry has been vindicated – Brutus of Troy and the old Irish Myths of Spanish ancestry both get an honorable mention in both books, as perhaps reflecting some old, true tradition of ancestry. Geoffrey of Monmouth, we salute you!