

Book of Life could reveal stray genes

By J B Leftwich

One of the big news stories in recent weeks hails the mapping of the human genome, an opening of "The Book of Life" which promises to revolutionize medicine, ethics and even life itself.

But not soon.

Two teams have spent untold tedious hours in arriving at this stage, and a spokesman describes what they have accomplished as a "race to the starting line." Nevertheless, the work thus far is a landmark achievement, which begins to draw the blueprint for spectacular medical advances.

Ah, technology.

Then there is a look back, as in *Time* magazine's story last month on the Vikings, their exploits, and how it was possible for a handful of Norsemen to sail to England, raid a castle and ravish its females, and, with little loss of life, escape the wrath of their victims.

'Twas technology.

The Vikings could strike and flee unscathed because their boats were more maneuverable and more durable than the craft of other countries. Each Norse boat could carry 40 to 50 men plus their wooden chests, which served also as seats. The men could either row or sail the boats. They were so light they could be carried overland.

The Norse were not only daring on their own continent, they sailed as far away as Baghdad. Their products, far advanced beyond the goods of contemporary and competing nations, gave them an edge in commercial competition.

They were venturesome on the seas. Eric the Red colonized Greenland. His son, Leif Erickson, was prowling around the American continent's east coast about five centuries before Columbus's voyage to India wound up in the Caribbean Islands. History records for the Norse no navigational error as monumental.

One wonders why the Norse did not colonize this continent, especially in view of their venture in the hostile climate of Greenland. Perhaps, it was because the land that was to become known as North America had no castles or monasteries to raid. Also, the Norse weapons were more sophisticated but probably only marginally superior to the bows and arrows of the natives of Newfoundland. The Vikings' style was to strike and flee, not engage in prolonged battles with natives.

As *Time* pointed out, all Vikings were Norse but not all Norse were Vikings. Indeed, the Vikings were a small segment of the Norse population. The Norse spread their culture throughout the world, and Vikings spread their genes where there were females.

Norse words entered languages of other peoples. For instance, the names of Norse gods, Odin, Thor and Freya, are popular answers to crossword puzzle clues. Odin evolved into Wednesday and Thor into Thursday. Want to guess which weekday Freya became?

The Norse established Normandy, now a part of France, and a name American GIs who served in Europe during World War II vividly remember.

Historians in my family have established that my ancestors were part of the Norman invasion of England in 1066, Hence, people bearing my name are descendants of the Normans and of the Norse and likely of the Vikings. In my genome map, I likely have a stray gene or two inherited from the Vikings.

Which explains why I occasionally have an urge to raid a castle.

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