Geneticist uncovers history with human DNA

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis.

As a boy growing up in Denmark, Eske Willerslev could not wait to leave Gentofte, his suburban hometown. As soon as he was old enough, he would strike out for the Arctic wilderness.

His twin brother, Rane, shared his obsession. On vacations, they retreated to the woods to teach themselves survival skills. Their first journey would be to Siberia, the Willerslev twins decided. They would make contact with a mysterious group of people called the Yukaghir, who supposedly lived on nothing but elk and moose.

When the Willerslev twins reached 18, they made good on their promise. They were soon paddling a canoe up remote Siberian rivers.

Dr. Willerslev spent much of the next four years in Siberia. The experience left him wondering about the history of ethnic groups, about how people spread across the planet.

As the director of the Center for GeoGenetics at the University of Copenhagen, Dr. Willerslev uses ancient DNA to reconstruct the past 50,000 years of human history. The findings have enriched our understanding of prehistory, shedding light on human development with evidence that can't be found in pottery shards or studies of living cultures.

Dr. Willerslev led the first successful sequencing of an ancient human genome, that of a 4,000-year-old Greenlander. His research on a 24,000-year-old Siberian skeleton revealed an unexpected connection between Europeans and Native Americans.

Read full, original post: Eske Willerslev Is Rewriting History With DNA