

HISTORY NOW

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Superiority complex

Herman Lundborg, photographed in the early 1920s. The work of the Swedish 'eugenicist' has been linked with the appropriation of the indigenous population's land



The father of eugenics' affair with a 'racially inferior' woman

Newly discovered letters show that a leading eugenicist's ideas about racial purity didn't extend to his own private life.

Emma Hartley reports

One of the leading voices in eugenics actively contradicted the movement's rules in his own personal life, a new study reveals.

Herman Lundborg, born in 1868, was a Swedish eugenicist and the head of the world's first state institute dedicated to 'racial biology', which opened in the city of Uppsala in eastern Sweden in 1922. A large cache of personal letters discovered in a library in the city suggests that he had a series of sexual relationships with women

from the supposedly 'inferior races' that he studied. In particular, the letters reveal for the first time that Lundborg had a lengthy relationship with Maria Isaksson, a woman who he regarded as being of mixed Finnish and Sami, or indigenous, origin. The couple later married and had a child.

The research features in a new biography of Lundborg by award-winning writer Maja Hagerman, set to be published in Sweden this spring. It details how Lundborg and Isaksson met on a field trip, and that she



Uniformity of thought Nazi minister Heinrich Himmler addresses a group of female Hitler Youth in 1937. The Nazis' ideas of 'racial hygiene' were, in part, based on the work of Herman Lundborg, a key proponent of eugenics in the 1920s and 1930s

became his assistant. Her role involved helping Lundborg with his research, aimed at discovering where the population was at its most 'racially pure'.

The biography charts how, months after they met, Isaksson joined Lundborg at Uppsala, where she lived in his apartment at the institute and was paid a salary as a cleaner. When she became pregnant she was sent miles away to give birth to their child, Allan, from whom she was briefly separated. But after Lundborg retired from academia in 1935 and his first wife had died, he moved to be with Isaksson and their son, and they spent their remaining years away from the public gaze.

At the time that Lundborg's research began, many of Sweden's political parties showed at least some interest in the study of eugenics, the widely discredited theory that people can be sorted into a hierarchy of 'racial' groups. In fact, by the 1920s, sorting people into imagined racial hierarchies had become politically and academically fashionable. Lundborg's work has been linked to a

"Eugenicists were real people, living in the real world, and it is vital to know this rather than exoticising them"

contemporary colonial attitude towards Sweden's indigenous people, which experts suggest made it possible to appropriate their land with impunity.

Lundborg was also influential outside of Sweden. He was given an honorary doctorate by Heidelberg University in Germany in 1936 for his contribution to the 'science' of race biology, and was sympathetic to the aims of the Nazis. He made a speech at a population conference in Berlin in 1935, praising the regime for its approach and stressing his belief that Jews had no place in Europe because he considered them a 'non-European' people. Indeed, the cache of papers contains a letter from SS commander Heinrich Himmler detailing his plans for the SS to be made "racially hygienic", based in part on Lundborg's work.

His apparent hypocrisy is also interesting because of the impact he may have had on Sweden's attitude to race – with ramifications that are still being played out today.

Marius Turda, a historian at Oxford Brookes University, said: "I hope this book will be translated into English: eugenicists were real people, living in the real world with real problems. It is vital to know this rather than exoticising them."

Kåraste Herman: rasbiologen Herman Lundborgs gåta by Maja Hagerman is published in Swedish by Nordstedts

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED THIS MONTH

An ancient wheel is the oldest UK find of its kind

A fully intact Bronze Age wheel found at Must Farm in Cambridgeshire is the earliest and largest example yet unearthed in the UK. The 3,000-year-old wheel, which measures a metre in diameter and still features its hub, was discovered at a site at which a series of finds have been made in recent months, including beads, pots and circular wooden houses.

Can't quit smoking? Blame the Neanderthals

Some instances of modern medical phenomena – including a tendency towards tobacco addiction – may be influenced by DNA inherited from our Neanderthal ancestors, experts suggest. The research, published in *Science*, found the associations when searching for people with the same genetic variations as the ancient species. Scientists stress, however, that there is no direct causal link to the medical conditions.

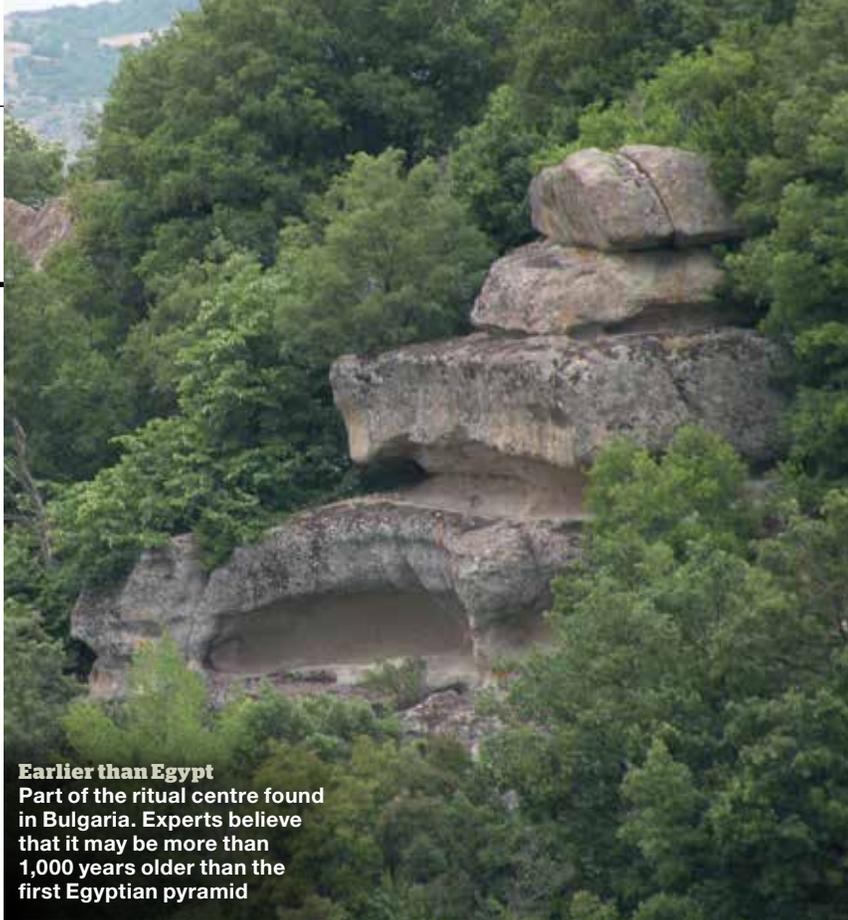
Henry VIII may have suffered brain damage

Repeated head injuries – including those sustained in jousting – may have contributed to Henry VIII's volatile temper and poor self-control, US researchers have suggested. The study, published by Yale Memory Clinic, argues that "traumatic brain injury could have caused diffuse axonal injury [which leads the wires linking cells in the brain to become damaged] which led to a change in the psychological makeup of Henry". However, Tudor expert Tracy Borman urged caution, pointing to the pain of a leg injury as a more likely cause.



Might Henry VIII have experienced head trauma?

GETTY/ALAMY



Earlier than Egypt
Part of the ritual centre found in Bulgaria. Experts believe that it may be more than 1,000 years older than the first Egyptian pyramid

ARCHAEOLOGY

Scientists uncover the world's oldest pyramid... in Bulgaria

For millennia, the pyramids of Egypt have inspired awe among those lucky enough to witness them. But, in at least one respect, it seems that a series of massive rock steps recently discovered deep in the mountains of Bulgaria may put the pharaohs' celebrated resting places in the shade.

This natural pyramid-shaped rock formation was, experts believe, fashioned into an important ritual centre at some point between 4,500 and 4,000 BC – meaning that it was used at least 1,350 years before pyramidal structures were built in Egypt, and 1,100 before those of the Mesopotamian civilisation.

Located near the Bulgarian village of Kovil in the Rhodope mountains, the 15-metre-high edifice features five natural rock steps. On the lowest and largest of these, is a rock-cut altar that is illuminated by the sun's rays at sunrise

“Experts have found an altar that is illuminated by the sun on the vernal and autumnal equinox”

on the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. This has led archaeologists to suggest that the site functioned as a solar temple.

The upper steps of the pyramid also feature rock-cut altars, while a series of mysterious channels are carved into the rock.

It seems that the rock-cut altar was quite a late addition to the site. In fact, the team of archaeologists investigating the find – led by Bulgarian academic Vassil Markov – believe that it was made in around 2,500 BC, centuries after the area was first used as a cult centre.

And, far from standing in isolation, the pyramid is part of a larger prehistoric ritual complex of up to a square mile.

This latest find follows the discovery of two smaller, pyramid-shaped rock outcrops also used for cult practices. Yet it is the sheer scale of the new discovery that makes it stand out. “I was stunned when I stood in front of it,” said Markov, head of the University Research Centre for Ancient European and Eastern Mediterranean cultures at Bulgaria's South-West University. “I am unable to offer an explanation as to why it had been missed by scientists.” *David Keys*

POLL

Which historical figures are *you* talking about?

This summer sees the return of our annual History Hot 100 list – and we want to know which historical figures are grabbing your attention at the moment.

Whether they are featured in a book that you are reading, portrayed in a recent television or radio drama, or are simply a character that you find particularly fascinating, we want you to tell us about them. You can choose up to three people from any historical period, as long as they died more than 30 years ago (before 1 January 1986). You will have up to 100 words to tell us the reasons behind your nominations.

We will also be disclosing the biggest winners and losers compared to last year's inaugural list, which was topped by Plantagenet king Richard III.

Which historical figure has experienced a sudden surge of popularity? Who has slipped from public attention in the past 12 months? And why? We'll reveal all...

Voting opens on 24 March and closes at midnight on 18 April. We will then count the votes and publish the full Hot 100 list in an issue of *BBC History Magazine* later this year.

To take part, visit historyextra.com/bbchistorymagazine/hot100, where you can also read the full terms and conditions – and get voting! *Matt Elton*



Richard III and Marie Antoinette both featured in last year's top 100