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## Meaningless genetic code helped form human hands

**G**enetic code once written off as meaningless is today shown to have played a potential role in the evolution of the human ability to hold tools and walk upright.

The study is the latest in a long line of evidence to show that the genetics textbooks will have to be rewritten.

It underlines how, even though the human genetic code was read letter by letter for the first time in 2000, geneticists are still struggling to figure out what it means almost a decade later.

When scientists refer to genes, they mean stretches of DNA code that contain the instructions to make the proteins that build and operate the body.

When the genome was first unveiled, it was thought all human genes resided in only around 1.5 per cent of the cell's DNA, prompting some scientists to dismiss the other 98.5 per cent as "junk".

Today, in the journal *Science*, Dr James Noonan of Yale University and colleagues report that one of these supposed non coding "junk" regions may have played a starring role in the evolutionary changes in human limbs that enabled us to manipulate tools and to walk upright.

The comparison of the human, chimpanzee, rhesus macaque and other genetic codes provided evidence that changes in junk areas of the genome helped to separate us from our ape ancestors, notably by "humanising" our hands and feet.

Working with the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California, the Genome Institute of Singapore, and the Medical Research Council's Human Genetics Unit in Edinburgh, Dr Noonan searched vast regions of the human genome for DNA sequences whose function may have changed during the evolution of humans from our ape-like ancestors.

The most rapidly evolving sequence they identified, termed HACNS1, is highly conserved among vertebrate species - that is, it hardly varies - but has accumulated variations in 16 letters since the divergence of humans and chimpanzees from a common ancestor six million years ago.

This was especially surprising, as the human and chimpanzee genomes are extremely similar overall, Dr Noonan said.

The importance of the changes in HACNS1 was confirmed by studies that showed the same stretch of code could turn on a "reporter gene" in developing mouse limbs, in contrast to the equivalent chimpanzee and rhesus sequences.

Most intriguing for human evolution, the human sequence influenced the use of genes at the base of the primordial thumb in the forelimb and the great toe in the hind limb.

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The statue of our Lady of Matara

by M. Felix V. Cooray

**T**he Shrine of Our Lady of Matara is located on the Southern tip of Sri Lanka. The original Shrine was the Church of Our Lady of Mahature as Matara was once known. The church, which was reportedly one of the most beautiful in the island, has long since vanished. For the past one hundred years the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady of Matara has rested at St. Mary's Church, Matara.

The statue is eighteen inches in height and is of the Madonna and Child. Mary is standing with the child Jesus upon a pedestal, featuring three ocean waves. Three times the Statue of Our Lady has been taken by the sea and each time She has returned to Matara. The last time was as a result of the three waves of the tsunami. The statue was found three days later.

"She came again, over the waves. Back to her people in Matara" unchaperoned.

### OUR LADY COMES OVER THE WAVES - THE FIRST TIME

The statue belongs to the Portuguese type of sculpture of the early seventeenth century. It is a mystery as to who brought the statue to Sri Lanka, but we are aware that it was in Sri Lanka when the Portuguese occupied the area almost 400 years ago.

According to the story that has been passed down through generations, a huge wooden

crate was pulled up by fishermen off the coast of Weligama, near Matara, early in the

seventeenth century. When the crate was opened, the statue was found inside untouched by the sea water. The fishermen handed over the statue to the Parish Priest and was then placed in the original church of Matara. This was the first time that the Statue returned from the sea. Some time after, the statue had to be hidden due to the religious

sanctions imposed by the Dutch, but again it returned to Matara.

### CHOLERA EPIDEMIC

Later a cholera epidemic swept through the entire southern district and claimed hundreds of lives. The people of Matara rallied around the statue and prayed for an end to the epidemic. The statue was taken in a solemn procession through the streets of Matara. People of all religions participated. After a few days the area was declared safe by the health authorities.

There were no fresh cases and no further deaths.

### OUR LADY COMES OVER THE WAVES - THE SECOND TIME

Since then the people have viewed the state as miraculous. In the early 1900's, the First Bishop of Galle, Rt. Rev. Dr. Joseph Van Reith, a Belgian, had the statue sent to Europe to be restored by a famous sculptor, Zeus of Gehent. After restoration, the sculptor placed the statue on the ship 'Beachy' to be sent to Matara. The ship

traced to a man in Middlesborough, who demanded money in exchange for the sculpture. When the sum was refused, he damaged the face of the statue and threw it away. The figure was recovered and was returned once again to Zeus for repair. The sculptor spent a great amount of energy and time restoring it to its original beauty.

The Bishop of Galle who was visiting Belgium, undertook to return the statue to Matara. He departed to Europe aboard the "Princess Alice" along with the

the Eucharist. On this fateful day the congregation was less than usual, perhaps due to the Christmas holidays.

At this moment, the church and its environment and the whole area went under water suddenly. Rev. Fr. Charles Hewawasam, the administrator and celebrant of Holy Mass, noticed the gushing waters and shouted at the people to run for safety. It was the stubborn waves of tsunami. At this moment even Fr. Charles had to run for safety. Then he realized (he had the presence of mind) that he should remove the Blessed Sacrament and the Miraculous Statue of Our Lady Mother. By this time, everything was taken by the stubborn, cruel waters.

He also noticed that another stubborn and disastrous wave, which was most destructive, was fast approaching, causing damage to the church, St. Servatius' College, and the entire area. He promptly took refuge in the new building and he was able to see even vehicles being carried by the cruel, gushing waters. The brake between the first wave and the second wave was about 20 minutes.

In this connection, even the valuable jewellery presented in 1918, to the Blessed Mother, was missing. However, the water receded. Fr. Charles, with a few parishioners and relations, went towards the main road. There he noticed that a man was carrying a bucket and recognized that it was the bucket used for church collections. They insisted that the man show them what he was carrying and to their surprise the jewellery was found.

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## The 101th feast on September 13 and 14 Church of our Lady of Matara celebrations on grand scale

sculpture. On reaching Colombo the Bishop went to take possession of the statue only to find it wasn't there. Three days later, the statue arrived aboard another vessel. FOR THE SECOND TIME OUR LADY OF MATARA RETURNED FROM THE SEA.

### OUR LADY COMES OVER THE WAVES - THE THIRD TIME

This is the story of the sea voyage on the 26th of December - Holy Family Sunday, 2004, at 9: 10 am. It was communion rite in



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