Molecular biology to infer phenotypes of forensic and ancient remains in bioarchaeology – Review

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Abstract

The phenotype is the result of the interaction of the genotype with epigenetic factors and the environment. It has been considered that genetics is responsible for >70% of facial phenotype. Interestingly, besides sequencing nucleic acids, it is possible to generate DNA methylation maps of ancient remains, to determine phenotypes. Other application areas are medicine, forensics and law-enforcement. Thus, breakthroughs in nucleic-acid analyses are allowing to determine the phenotype from genotypic data. That is also being facilitated by developments in software (including parallel processing) and hardware, including neural engines (neural-network hardware). New strategies involving artificial intelligence and machine learning have been also deployed to reach such a goal. Phenotyping is a challenging task, on the edge of current technology. Promising results have already been obtained, including prediction of Neanderthal (*Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*) and Denisovan (*Homo sapiens denisova*) faces. The future is promising in this research area, in which ethical and legal implications should also be considered.

Key words: mutations, DNA, RNA, genome-wide association studies, single-nucleotide polymorphisms, quantitative-trait loci, molecular photofitting, physical appearance, biogeographic ancestry, paleogenomics, paleotranscriptomics.

Resumen

El fenotipo es el resultado de la interacción del genotipo con factores epigenéticos y el medio ambiente. Se ha considerado que la genética es responsable de >70% del fenotipo facial. Curiosamente, además de secuenciar ácidos nucleicos, es posible generar mapas de metilación de ADN de restos antiguos, para determinar fenotipos. Otras áreas de aplicación son la medicina, ciencia forense y control del cumplimiento de la ley. Así, los avances en el estudio de ácidos nucleicos están permitiendo determinar el fenotipo a partir de datos genotípicos. Ello también se ve facilitado por los desarrollos en software (incluido el procesamiento paralelo) y hardware, incluidos los motores neuronales (hardware de redes neuronales). También se han implementado nuevas estrategias, involucrando inteligencia artificial y aprendizaje automático, para alcanzar dicho objetivo. El fenotipado es una tarea desafiante, a la vanguardia de la tecnología actual. Ya se han obtenido resultados prometedores, incluida la predicción de caras de neandertales (*Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*) y denisovanos (*Homo sapiens denisova*). El futuro es prometedor en esta área de investigación, en la que también se deben considerar las implicaciones éticas y legales.

Palabras clave: mutaciones, ADN, ARN, estudios de asociación del genoma completo, polimorfismos de un solo nucleótido, loci de rasgos cuantitativos, fototipificación molecular, apariencia física, ascendencia biogeográfica, paleogenómica, paleotranscriptómica.

Introduction

The genotype is the genomic composition of biological entities like virusoids, viroids, viruses and cells. It includes: i) main genome; ii) plasmids (mostly in eubacteria prokaryotes, but sometimes also in archaea prokaryotes and eukaryotes); iii) organelle (mitochondria and chloroplasts) genomes in eukaryotes; and iv) plasmids of organelles. The word genotype was coined in 1903 by the Danish botanist Wilhelm Johannsen (Johannsen, 1903). Genes within the genome are unique for haploid cells, but may exhibit the same (homozygous) or different (heterozygous) alleles if two (diploid) or more (polyploid) sets are present within the same cell, or across the species population. August Weismann (1834-1914) noticed that pluricellular organisms may contain somatic cells (that build the body), as well as germ cells (carrying heredity) (Winther, 2001).

On the other hand, observable features of biological entities are called phenotype. The genotype-phenotype duality was proposed by Wilhelm Johannsen (Johannsen, 1911). Yet, the phenotype may not be determined by the genotype alone. Other involved elements may be the environment (which is not inherited) and epigenetic factors, which may be inherited. Therefore, organisms with the same genotype may look or behave differently. On the other hand, organisms with different genotypes may look alike. It has been considered that genetics is

responsible for >70% of facial phenotype (Djordjevic et al, 2016). Phenotypes are visible for current biological entities, but may not be available for forensic or ancient samples. Thus, it may be useful to infer phenotypes from the genotypes in such scenarios. This topic is currently in the frontier of knowledge, being actively investigated. There is a wide interest in this area. That includes basic knowledge for studies of both modern and ancient samples, as well as applications in medicine, besides forensics and law-enforcement areas. Indeed, interesting research results have recently been published in this fascinating topic, as described below.

Phenotyping modern intact DNA

Phenotype prediction from genetic information is called phenotyping. That can be accomplished using genotyping data generated with molecular markers, including nucleic-acid sequencing (Scudder et al, 2018), which actually is the ultimate genotyping technology, as we have reviewed (Dorado et al, 2021). Indeed, the First-Generation Sequencing (FGS) represented a revolution, to which we have contributed (Lario et al, 1997), since it allowed to read genetic information for the first time, including the Human Genome Project. The Second-Generation Sequencing (SGS) further improved throughput and reduced cost, allowing to sequence ancient genomes for the first time, as we have reviewed (Dorado et al, 2015). Finally, the Third-Generation Sequencing (TGS) allowed to directly sequence nucleic acids, without previous retrotranscription or amplification. That makes possible to directly sequence ancient RNA (aRNA), as we have reviewed (Dorado et al, 2016; 2020). Phenotyping is also know as molecular photofitting in forensic science, when applied to infer the physical appearance and biogeographic ancestry. But phenotyping is not an easy task. The rationale is that we do not fully understand how genes work and interact with the environment, to produce phenotypes.

To gain knowledge on this research area, significant genetic variants associated with a particular trait can be discovered, using Genome-Wide Association Studies (GWAS). Thus, molecular markers associated to traits of interest can be identified (Fagertun et al, 2015; Kayser, 2015; Marcinska et al, 2015; Wolinsky, 2015; Adhikari et al, 2016; Cole et al, 2016; Roosenboom et al, 2016, 2018; Shaffer et al, 2016; Lee et al, 2017; Tsagkrasoulis et al, 2017; Cha et al, 2018; Claes et al, 2018; Indencleef et al, 2018; Qiao et al, 2018; Richmond et al, 2018; Rolfe et al, 2018; Wang, 2018; Weinberg et al, 2018; Bohringer and DeJong, 2019; Hebbring, 2019; Li et al, 2019; Long et al, 2019; Sero et al, 2019; Wu et al, 2019; Xiong et al, 2019; Balanovska et al, 2020; Pospiech et al, 2020; White et al, 2020; Bonfante et al, 2021; Liu et al, 2021; Naqvi et al, 2021). Among them, Single-Nucleotide Polymorphisms (SNP) can be particularly relevant, since they are usually abundant across genomes. Likewise, Quantitative Trait Loci (QTL) can be useful. Thus, they allow to link molecular markers with quantitative traits in phenotypes. Additionally, mathematical models can be designed to predict phenotypes, from genotypic data.

Recent developments in computing, in general, and bioinformatics, in particular, can be also useful in phenotyping research (DeJong et al, 2018). Among them are multivariate statistical approaches, like Principal-Components Analysis (PCA) (Shui et al, 2017; Crouch et al, 2018), multilevel PCA (mPCA) (Farnell et al, 2020) and toolboxes for integrative analyses (White et al, 2019; Li et al, 2020). Additionally, the term Artificial Intelligence (AI) was coined by John McCarthy in 1956. Thus, AI tries to analyze data and generate results to achieve a particular goal (Legg and Hutter, 2007). Therefore, it mimics human cognitive functions, like learning and problem solving (Russell and Norvig, 2020). On the other hand, the term Machine Learning (ML) was coined by Arthur Samuel in 1959. ML is the part of AI that develops algorithms that can be empirically and automatically improved. This way, the machine is trained with data, gaining new experience to optimize results. Thus, predictions can be made for new scenarios, that may not have been specifically programmed in advance. That differentiates ML from traditional computing, that only works with pre-programmed algorithms (Alpaydin, 2020; Hu et al, 2020).

Such developments in computing software have been facilitated thanks to hardware improvements, in general, and microprocessors, in particular. Among them are: i) increasing microprocessor clock frequency to generate pulses (clock rate); ii) reducing microprocessor lithographic node; and iii) incrementing the number of cores in multicore (a few) and manycore (high number) of Central-Processing Units (CPU) and Graphics-Processing Units (GPU), allowing parallel processing. Dedicated neural-network hardware is another interesting development. That includes the Neural Engine from manufacturers like Apple <https://www.apple.com>. For instance, the one of the ARM-based Apple Silicon M1 microprocessor is capable of executing 11,000 milliard operations per second, being used for machine learning tasks. Indeed, phenotyping is a multidisciplinary science, including biology, bioinformatics, ethics and law (Claes and Shriver, 2014) (Fig. 1).

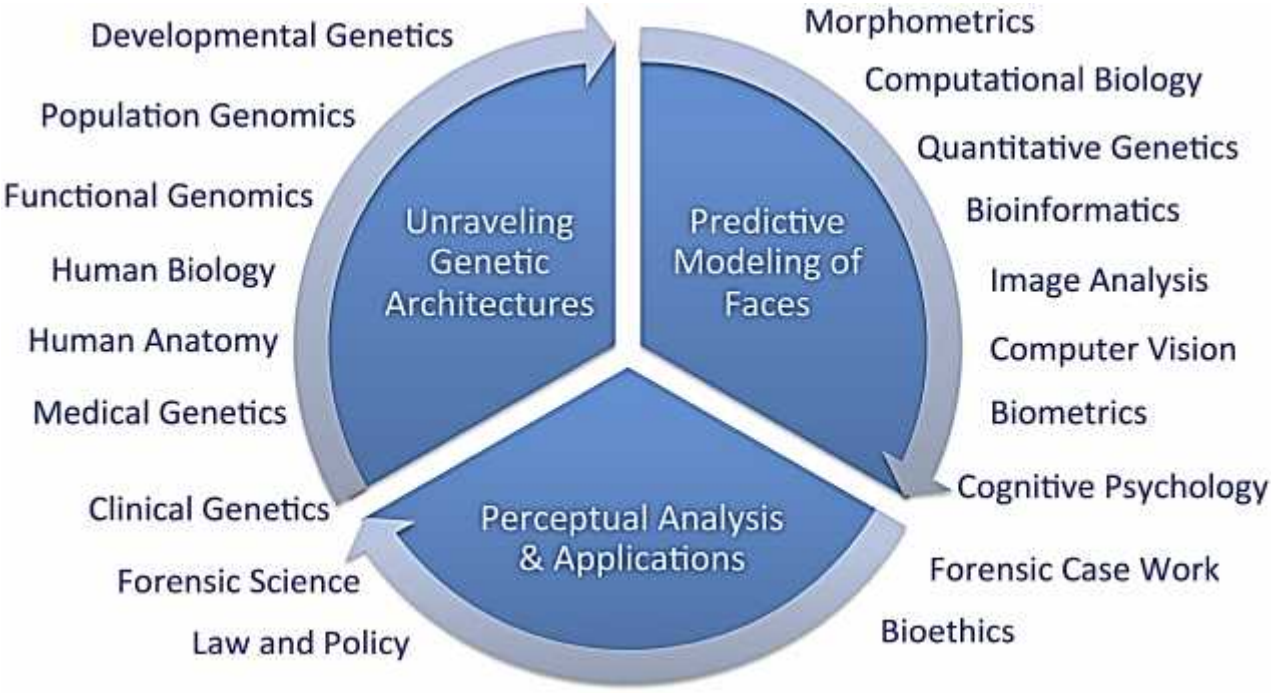

Figure 1.- Phenotyping framework. Predicting facial features from DNA data is a multidisciplinary science, involving many knowledge areas. © Public Library of Science (PLoS; Claes and Shriver, 2014).

Some interesting examples of phenotyping have been already published, exploiting such technologies. For instance, just 24 SNP associated to facial variation were used for the first time to infer human faces. They used Bootstrapped Response-based Imputation Modeling (BRIM). As the authors acknowledged, facial prediction using genotyping data is challenging, but results are promising (Claes et al, 2014a-b). A further step in DNA phenotyping was carried out sequencing whole human genomes, involving the prestigious Craig Venter Institute (Lippert et al, 2017).

Phenotyping forensic and ancient DNA

It is known that the melanocortin 1 receptor (MC1R) is related to pigmentation. Thus, a fragment of the *MC1R* gen from Neanderthal bone remains was amplified, by Polymerase Chain-Reaction (PCR). Interestingly, amplicon sequencing revealed that they contained a mutation producing pale skin and red hair (redhead). It was concluded that at least 1% of homozygous Neanderthals may have had such phenotype (Lalueza-Fox et al, 2007). Since phenotyping modern intact DNA is challenging, much more can be using forensic and ancient

DNA (aDNA), which is typically damaged, both physically (short fragments) and chemically (modified nucleotide bases).

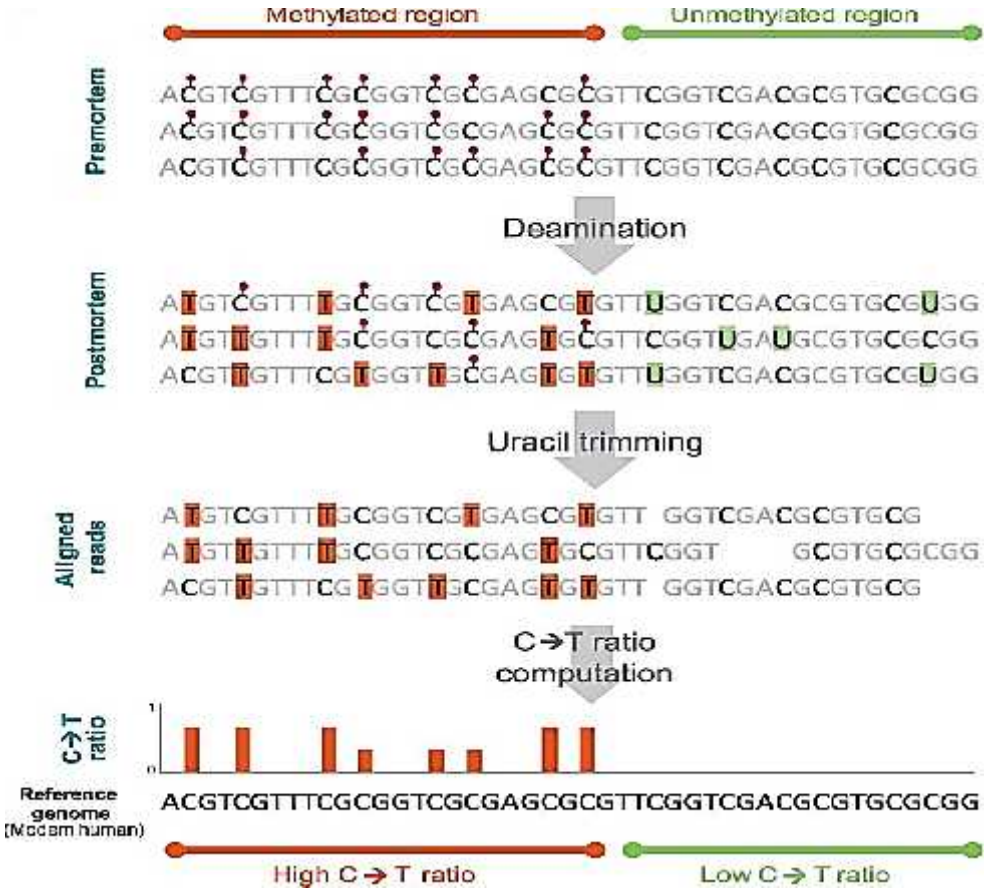

Figure 2.- Identification of aDNA methylation. Premortem DNA may contain methylated and unmethylated cytosines. Postmortem taphonomic scenarios may cause cytosine deamination. Uracil trimming allows to remove such bases in aligned sequencing reads. Finally, C → T transition ratios are used as proxies for reconstructing ancient methylation, aligning to modern reference genomes. © American Association for the Advancement of Science (Gokhman et al, 2014).

A first step to overcome such problems was carried out generating DNA methylation maps of Neanderthal (*Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*) and Denisovan (*Homo sapiens denisova*) remains. Yet, such a goal may not be directly reached, as can be accomplished with modern DNA. Indeed, as said, aDNA may be chemically damaged. Thus, cytosine deamination generates either uracils or thymines (from unmethylated or methylated cytosines, respectively). Uracils can be trimmed, but higher thymine reads are expected in positions with premortem methylated cytosines, as compared to unmethylated positions. Therefore, CpG → TpG transitions are a useful proxy for aDNA methylation in ancient DNA (Gokhman et al, 2014, 2016; Hernando-Herraez et al, 2015; Orlando et al, 2015; Seguin-Orlando et al, 2015; Smith et al, 2015; Hanghoj et al, 2016, 2019) (Fig. 2).

This methodology was further used to infer the skeletal and facial anatomy of Neanderthals and Denisovans. Thus, methylation changes in archaic humans, chimpanzees and modern humans were identified. Gene expression was scored, considering that promoter hypermethylation represses genes. Such downregulation is associated to known mutations causing loss-of-function. Three unidirectional filters allow to predict morphological changes. Skeletal profiles of Neanderthals and chimpanzees were reconstructed, taking into account known morphologies. Furthermore, the accuracy, precision and sensitivity of the method were evaluated (Gokhman et al, 2019) (Fig. 3).

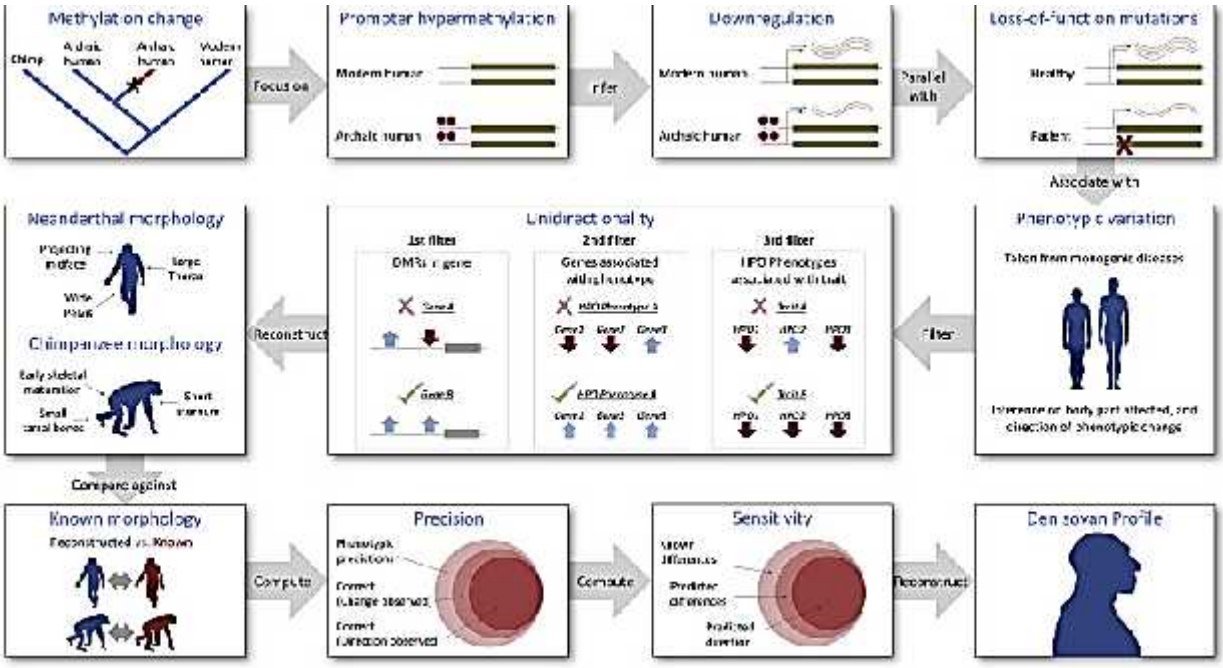

Figure 3.- Workflow to infer Denisovan anatomy from DNA methylation changes. Boxes: 1 to 5) methylation changes were linked to phenotypes; 6) three unidirectionality filters were applied; 7 to 10) accuracy was computed; and 11) Denisovan profile was predicted. © Elsevier (Gokhman et al, 2019).

Interestingly, differential hypermethylation of voice- and face-related genes have also been found between modern humans, when compared to ancient hominids (Neanderthals and Denisovans), as well as modern great apes (chimpanzees). Therefore, it has been proposed that they played a key role in human evolution, shaping our vocal tract and face (Gokhman et al, 2020). DNA methylation patters can also be used to predict age (Zbiec-Piekarska et al, 2015) and diseases like schizophrenia (Banerjee et al, 2018, 2019), as well as gene expression of ancient samples (Batyrev et al, 2019; Hahn et al, 2020; Liu et al, 2020; Mathov et al 2020; Rubi et al, 2020). That has implications for ancient environments and life styles (Gokhman et al 2017). Likewise, gene regulation in

modern and archaic samples can be inferred using indirect approaches (Yan and McCoy, 2020) and trained statistical models (Colbran et al, 2019).

On the other hand, self-domestication is defined as a behavioral process involving reduced aggression and increased collaboration, as shown by hominids like bonobos and humans (Wrangham, 2003). Interestingly, molecular biology applied to archaic and modern humans have shown that the Bromodomain Adjacent to Zinc-finger domain 1B (*BAZ1B*) gene was involved in self-domestication, being a master regulator of modern human face (Zanella et al, 2019). Therefore, methodologies involving both archaeology and molecular biology, including paleogenomics, paleotranscriptomics and paleoproteomics, as we have reviewed (Dorado et al, 2007-2014, 2017, 2018, 2019), have allowed to infer faces of archaic hominids, like Neanderthals and Denisovans (Fig 4).

Figure 4.- Prediction of Neanderthal and Denisovan faces. From left to right: artist's reconstruction of adolescent and adult females of such subspecies, respectively. © 2019 Royal Pavilion & Museums; Brighton & Hove (left) and Maayan Harel (right).

Concluding remarks and future prospects

Recent developments in archaeology, molecular biology, software and hardware are allowing to carry out scientific projects that were not previously possible. One of them is to infer faces of modern or archaic humans, from their genomes. This genotypic-based phenotypic prediction is challenging, being in the limit of what is currently possible. Yet, some interesting accomplishments in this area have already been published, with promising results. A more accurate

phenotypic prediction should be possible with the optimization of current technologies and development of new ones. Among them are: i) structural genomics, including non-coding DNA and identification of all genes present in genomes; ii) functional genomics, including implications of spurious or generalized transcription, as we have reviewed (Dorado et al, 2020); and iii) epigenetics, including genomic-methylation maps. Finally, the ethical and legal implications of genomic research should be taken into account (Berkman et al, 2016).

Acknowledgements. Supported by "Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad" (MINECO grant BIO2015-64737-R) and "Instituto Nacional de Investigación y Tecnología Agraria y Alimentaria" (MINECO and INIA RF2012-00002-C02-02); "Consejería de Agricultura y Pesca" (041/C/2007, 75/C/2009 and 56/C/2010), "Consejería de Economía, Innovación y Ciencia" (P11-AGR-7322) and "Grupo PAI" (AGR-248) of "Junta de Andalucía"; and "Universidad de Córdoba" ("Ayuda a Grupos"), Spain.

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