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Syria

My preference would be to travel to Syria, the location of some of the world's most ancient known farming settlements. But there is a war raging there, and travelling to Syria to write is out of the question. Two Swedish journalist colleagues who entered the country were kidnapped and escaped by the skin of their teeth. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed. Most of the population are on the run. Those taking refuge in neighbouring countries are numbered in the millions. Many Syrians are coming to Sweden too. This is an exodus whose like has rarely been seen at any time in world history.

In the midst of such human catastrophe, it seems odd to be talking about archaeology. Yet the victims of war also include parts of humanity's most important cultural heritage. News flashes reveal how valuable finds are being smashed to pieces or sold online for huge sums, with the revenue going straight into funding the armed conflict.

Just when I have given up all hope of finding any DNA results from Syria's first farmers, a study actually appears, published in the summer of 2014 by a Spanish research team. The Spaniards have been carrying out excavations in the region for many years, together with their Syrian counterparts. The 2010 season was the last one; since then, the excavations have lain untouched owing to the war. However, some samples of bones and teeth turn out to have reached a laboratory in Barcelona, where researchers have been analysing them for several years.

The excavation sites are called Tell Halula and Tell Ramad. One is on the River Euphrates, near the border with Turkey, while the other is close to the capital, Damascus. Both represent the very earliest stages of agriculture, before people began to use ceramic vessels in this part of the world. The

oldest samples come from individuals who lived over 10,000 years ago. Researchers have attempted to analyse the DNA of 63 skeletons, but only 15 of the analyses have borne fruit.

Of the 15 individuals concerned, two have mitochondria belonging to haplogroup H – the same main group common to my paternal grandmother, Hilda, and the farmers from Gökhem in Västergötland. The most common haplogroup among these early Syrian farmers is K. Some have N and HV or one of a few haplogroups that, though extensively represented today on the Arabian Peninsula and in Africa, do not seem to have been spread by the early farmers who migrated to Europe.

Haplogroup H may, of course, have been present in the hunting population of the European Ice Age, particularly in eastern Europe. There are a number of DNA analyses pointing in that direction. However, agriculture is the only way to account for the fact that H is now Europe's most common mitochondrial group. Nearly half of Europe's population have mitochondria belonging to haplogroup H. Most of these people – like my maternal grandmother Hilda – can very probably trace their origins in the maternal line back to the world's first farmers, who lived in parts of Syria.