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Am I a Viking?

In reading up on the Viking era, I am struck by a palpable contrast. Books by Scandinavian authors emphasise the attractive aspects: trade, wood carving, iron-working, the art of boat-building, poetry, feasts, mead, costume, jewellery and, in more recent times, women of high status who wielded a good deal of power. Books by British authors have a different angle, tending to focus more on terror, raids, blackmail, abduction and slave trading.

This gives me pause for thought. During my years as a science journalist, most of my reporting has focused on research in the natural sciences. Results in these disciplines rarely differ according to scientists' country of origin. I am reminded that history and archaeology have developed in close connection with ideological and national interests. The link between nationalism and historical research was much stronger in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. In some parts of the world, archaeologists and historians still face political pressure to purvey conclusions favourable to the interests of the powerful. But even researchers who are fortunate enough to be able to work freely and independently of political authorities assess information in different ways, depending on their own point of view.

All the books I read on the Viking era and the exhibitions I visit are of a very high standard. Authors and curators alike take a scholarly approach and reference their sources. It's just that they have a slightly different angle and focus. Such differences, though small, are enough to convey radically different views of the Viking Age, one being the aggressors' view of events, the other the victims'.

What I want to know is this – which side were my own ancestors on?

The dual perspective begins with the word 'Viking' itself, which can mean several different things. Initially, it referred to a phenomenon, not a person. The Old Norse expression '*fara í viking*' ('to go on a Viking voyage') meant to engage in piracy – to take ship, sail to a place some distance away, together with a number of companions, and grab whatever you could, be it valuables or the human spoils of war.

The word is also used, including by professional historians, in the expression 'the Viking Age', which refers to the last part of the Iron Age. A common definition is that the Viking Age began with the raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne (Holy Island) in AD 793, and ended by about 1100, by which time Christianity had become the dominant religion in Scandinavia.

To confuse matters further, the word 'Viking' is often used in a very general sense to describe a person of Scandinavian origin living at the time of the Vikings. The stereotype is a red-haired, bearded strongman quaffing mead from a large cow horn and sporting a horned helmet. This cliché is common in popular culture; it often turns up in advertising and among supporters at international matches.

Professional historians have a somewhat different view of the Vikings. The notion that they had horned helmets is a complete misconception. Most of the population of Scandinavia at the time of the Vikings lived on farming, hunting and fishing, not from piracy.

The attack on the Lindisfarne monastery has come to mark the beginning of the Viking Age, mainly because it is described in such detail in writing. The ecclesiastic Alcuin described the raid in a poem and several letters. He tells of how 'the pagans' desecrated God's sanctuary, how blood ran around the altar and how the bodies of saints were 'trampled [...] like dung in the street'. In all probability, there had been violent raids from Scandinavian shores in earlier times, but they were not documented in any written sources preserved for posterity.

There have been trade and exchanges between the British Isles, the Atlantic coast of Europe and the Scandinavian lands

at least since the Bronze Age. Such encounters could be violent. The Danish Hjortspring boat from about 350 BC was quite clearly built for war, given its symmetric design and the various weapons and shields found nearby. There have been sophisticated rowing vessels ever since the Bronze Age. It was nothing new for dozens of athletic men to be able to row long distances, but the Vikings were also able to sail. They learned the art late by comparison with Mediterranean seafarers. However, once the Scandinavians started to combine their well-crafted clinker-built vessels with their oarsmanship and woollen or linen sails, they had the upper hand for a while. Their tactic was to strike from the water, and they were smart enough to choose victims who were unable to put up any armed resistance.

Moreover, the Vikings were not inhibited by a taboo that placed restrictions on other European warlords. Not being Christians – at least not to begin with – they had no qualms about raiding monasteries and churches.

Swedish-born Anders Winroth of Yale University claims in a new book that the Vikings were not really any more brutal than other contemporary European warlords, such as Charlemagne in France. The difference was that Vikings often raided monasteries and churches, inhabited by priests and monks who had mastered the art of writing. This means their depredations are unusually well documented, at least as regards western Europe. Consequently, we know a good deal about the brutality of bands of Scandinavian pirates who attacked monasteries, churches, farms and towns in the British Isles, along the Atlantic coast of Europe and on the major rivers of France.

Conversely, historians are less well informed about the voyages to the east, to regions where literate people were more of a rarity. The best-documented encounters are those with Arab writers. Findings from historical and archaeological sources show that there was extensive trade in the east as well. The Scandinavians traded mainly in furs and slaves. They purchased – and plundered – all sorts of luxury goods, including silver and silk. Their networks extended as far as central Asia.

Early on in the Viking era, Scandinavians also began to stay on and settle down in new places. Sometimes local rulers encouraged them, a settlement of armed Scandinavians being viewed as a good defence against raids by other Vikings. Scandinavians colonised Iceland and, for a while, even Greenland, where walruses with valuable ivory tusks were plentiful. From Greenland, they undertook expeditions to Canada to fetch timber. It is very likely that they also took women.

Voyages to regions that the Icelanders called Helluland, Markland and Vinland are described in mediaeval sagas. Archaeologists have confirmed that these places may have been in North America. The remains of a Viking-style settlement have been found at L'Anse aux Meadows on Newfoundland. Geneticists, too, are now helping to discover what happened when Scandinavians visited America – several hundred years before Christopher Columbus strode ashore.

A number of today's Icelanders bear in their DNA the evidence of a voyage to America. These people have mitochondria belonging to haplogroup C1 and are descended from the same woman. Calculations show that she came to Iceland around AD 1000, very probably from America. Haplogroup C1 occurs almost exclusively among the indigenous population of America. The woman's living descendants in Iceland belong to a subgroup that has not been found in modern-day America. Either the researchers have missed it in their analyses, or the whole group has died out everywhere except Iceland. Admittedly, one might come up with other, more tortuous interpretations, such as that haplogroup C exists in Siberia – and could thus have occurred in individual Scandinavian settlers. But the most reasonable explanation is that the woman sailed to Iceland from Canada, via Greenland.

Most male settlers came to Iceland from Scandinavia – mainly Norway – in the early ninth century. This is clear from written sources, linguistic research and modern Icelandic men's Y-chromosome DNA. About 80 per cent of modern Icelandic men's Y chromosomes indicate Scandinavian origins. But it seems likely that the remaining 20 per cent

come from Ireland. Icelandic researchers see a link between this part of genetic make-up and mediaeval sagas that tell how Icelanders took Gaelic slaves from the lands that are now Scotland and Ireland.

Many such slaves were women, according to the written sources. This is supported by genetic evidence. The Gaelic input in modern Icelanders' maternal lineage is even greater than that in their paternal lineage. More than half of today's Icelanders are descended from women with roots in Scotland and Ireland. That is clear from their mitochondrial DNA.

Of course, Viking Age Scandinavian colonies across Europe also included some women who themselves came from Scandinavia. Some feature in the mediaeval sagas, and some of them were both rich and powerful. New DNA studies reveal a pattern. The nearer to Scandinavia the colonies were, the higher the proportion of Scandinavian women. In the case of the Shetland and Orkney Islands, entire families seem to have sailed from Norway, with their domestic animals, in order to settle and start a life as farmers. We can tell this because both Y-chromosomal and mitochondrial DNA show a large proportion of Norse ancestry.

However, the further away the Vikings moved from Scandinavia, the fewer women there were from their native land. The share of mitochondrial DNA of Scandinavian origin declines with increasing distance. Nearly half the people living on the Shetlands today have Scandinavian ancestry, and the proportion is roughly equal in the maternal and the paternal lines. Among the inhabitants of the Orkney Islands, about one third of forefathers and foremothers alike are from Scandinavia. On the Hebrides, however, Scandinavian forebears account for a smaller proportion of people's ancestry, and can be seen only in the paternal line. This means that most of the incoming Scandinavians were male Vikings.

The Vikings left a relatively small genetic footprint elsewhere in Britain, according to analyses of nuclear DNA. But there are some traces. The Y chromosomes of some modern-day British men show where the Vikings arrived and sowed their seed.

Some DNA research companies in Britain have been criticised for making too much out of people today being ‘Vikings’, just because they have some DNA from Scandinavia. Such ‘Viking’ claims are misleading, of course. The British men concerned are a mix of ancestors from different places, just like the rest of us. However, they are descended from Scandinavians in the paternal line – which may be interesting to know. When private individuals like these have their DNA tested, they help the rest of us to find out more about the voyages and the dealings of the Vikings.

One circumstance that complicates this research is the fact that there had already been a major wave of immigration to the British Isles from Denmark and Germany during the time of the Great Migrations, around AD 500. Some of these Anglo-Saxons came from roughly the same Germanic groups as some of the Vikings a few centuries later. This means very detailed DNA analyses are needed to enable researchers to distinguish the patterns of movement specific to the Viking Age. Earlier analyses, conducted by both academic researchers and firms providing services to family history researchers, were not sufficiently high resolution. But today the more sophisticated tests sold to private individuals have become sufficiently detailed.

As a result, amateur genealogy researchers are now constructing ever more detailed genealogical trees showing the travels of the Vikings. It can be clearly seen how men from Norway had sons in Scotland and northern England. The colonists in south-east England more often came from Denmark and southern Sweden – which is in line with what archaeological finds and documentary sources can tell us.

Private individuals researching their family history are also working on mapping the Vikings’ travels in the east. One example is a special project involving men who believe they are descended from Rurik – the man who, according to written sources, was brought from Scandinavia in the ninth century to found the east Slavic state of Kievan Rus’. Research suggests that Rurik’s Y chromosomes belonged to

a particular subgroup of N3 that is particularly common in Finland.

Peter Sjölund, who uses DNA to research genealogy, has worked together with some of his Russian counterparts, identifying about 10 men in Russia and Ukraine who belong to a particular subgroup of I1a and have a paternal lineage that appears to originate with Scandinavians living in eleventh-century Kiev.

These findings support historical theories that Scandinavian Vikings – Rus or Varangians, as they were also known – played a key role in founding the first Russian realm.

Two haplogroups of Y-chromosome DNA are generally regarded as clear markers of Viking ancestry. One of them is I1a. The other is R1a – the very haplogroup I know my paternal grandfather Eric belonged to, thanks to Uncle Anders's DNA test. Might my forefathers have been Vikings who sailed eastward and westward, capturing slaves, trading in furs and bringing home treasures of silver? Might I, in fact, be a Viking of sorts?

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My paternal grandfather, Eric Bojs, was a kindly, humorous man. Trained as a primary school teacher, he eventually went on to teach at a teacher training college in Kalmar. Alongside his work, he devoted himself to two absorbing interests in his free time.

One of them was radio. With a wind-up tape recorder on the back of his bike, he cycled around recording reports for the radio. For many years he single-handedly ran what was later to become Swedish Radio's Kalmar department. He interviewed Olof Palme as a newly appointed minister and the last soldier recruited under the Swedish 'allotment' system, and every year, on Christmas Eve, he reported on the weather in Kalmar for national radio. On a number of occasions he also took on the role of a reporter for Swedish Television. His items included an interview with the brother of a suspected pyromaniac on the neighbouring island of Öland.

But my grandfather's favourite pastime of all was drawing. During his military service he discovered his ability as a quick, deft draughtsman, and he was trained as a military artist. Eric illustrated the first two books by Vilhelm Moberg, the author of a classic series about Swedish emigrants to the United States. He later travelled around to community halls and other venues to entertain the public.

Eric also used his talent as a draughtsman to create maps, games and puzzles, and he pioneered visual pedagogy in Sweden. He also painted watercolours and, on occasion, large murals for public spaces. Most of his murals are to be found in Börjes, a low-cost department store in Tingsryd, a small town in the southern province of Småland. Eric lived there for a few years as a young, newly married primary teacher, and my father Göran was born there.

One summer's day I gather together my paternal uncle, a few cousins, my brother and one of his sons for a family reunion. We begin with coffee and a look at my grandfather's murals in the cafeteria in Börjes. The owner, one of the sons of the original Börjes, shows us around. Having Bojs as a surname is a particular advantage here in the Tingsryd area, as my grandfather was clearly a local celebrity and very popular. The style of the pictures on the walls of the department store can be described as rural romanticism. They represent scenes from rural life, from my grandfather's childhood and earlier centuries. Horses are the most frequent motif. Börjes started off by selling low-cost equipment for horses, and although it has now diversified, horses still have a central place.

During my childhood Tingsryd was best known for its brewery and its beer, and today one of the major employers is a boat factory. Beer, horses and boats – I can't help thinking that these form a particularly fitting combination for a family reunion taking us back to our roots. These, after all, were the three factors that drove agriculture and the Bronze Age, and which were instrumental in bringing our shared lineage to Småland.

Eric was born on a medium-sized farm in Väckelsång, about 10 kilometres (6¼ miles) north of Tingsryd. According to family lore, his grandfather – my great-great-grandfather – began working life as a poor railway worker. But he met a girl whose father was a lay judge, who helped the young couple to buy the farm.

In front of the church in Väckelsång stands a large model of a cow. It is an enlarged copy of a wooden toy that my grandfather made in his youth, during the short period when he and his brothers ran a toy factory together. According to family history, this cow came to be a symbol of the local dairy, which was eventually taken over by the dairy company Arla. So it is basically this cow that features on Arla's milk packaging today. To see the original, you need to go to Väckelsång.

From Väckelsång, we go on to Urshult, a few kilometres to the east. I have been helped by some family history researchers who were quick to discover that our paternal line actually came from that area – something we had no idea of.

Urshult has no obvious signs of Eric Bojs, such as statues of cows or mural paintings. What it does have, however, is a very active local history society that has been helpful in putting me in touch with a local family historian. This man, Klas Samuelsson, turns out to be related to my family in various ways, though not through the paternal line, which is what we are looking into on this occasion.

Klas Samuelsson leads us to a red farmhouse, Froaryd Södergård, which stands next to Lake Åsnen. A few cows belonging to the present owner are grazing along the shoreline. The grass is the intense green that comes only from many centuries of regular grazing. With the help of old court records, Klas Samuelsson has managed to find some information about our ancestor Måns Månsson, who was born here in the mid-seventeenth century. The family were originally tenant farmers who leased the farm from the Crown. In the eighteenth century Måns Månsson's descendants were able to buy the farmhouse and its land.

After some calculation, I work out that the youngest person in our group – my brother's son – represents the eleventh generation in the direct line after Måns Månsson.

In Måns Månsson's time the farmhouse was presumably grey rather than red, and the roof would have been covered in turf or thatched in reed, rather than tiled. In other respects it probably looked much the same. Apple trees in the meadows sloping down towards the lake would have been covered in blossom in spring. Today, the area around the south side of Lake Åsnen remains famous for its apples, grown in meadowlands in the traditional way. Some growers actually receive EU grants for maintaining this old-fashioned type of cultivation, which is not particularly productive in terms of the apples' economic value. But the meadows enable biodiversity to thrive – with a wealth of flowers, including many orchids – and they are viewed as very valuable in terms of cultural history.

Unfortunately, things went downhill for our ancestors a few generations after Måns Månsson. His son's son, Per Johansson, moved to a farm a few kilometres to the north, whose location is not at all as attractive or close to the water. The farmyard is messy, and a few hostile dogs bark at us. We have been warned that the current tenants have a criminal background.

Per Johansson's son, Johan Persson, also seems to have let things slide when he lived here in the late eighteenth century. Hard liquor may have had a hand in that. According to the notes taken by the pastor after his *husförhör*, a yearly visit to the farm to check on the inhabitants' literacy and knowledge of the Bible and the Lutheran catechism, Johan Persson had 'completely forgotten his Christianity'. The archives record a spell in the fortress at Karlshamn. Johan and his family were forced to leave the farm, after which they moved around from farm to farm within the area. Johan's son, Nils, ended his days at the age of 59 in the poorhouse at Tävelsås. But it was that same Nils who fathered Peter Nilsson – the railway worker whose father-in-law helped him to buy the farm in Väckelsång where my grandfather Eric Bojs was born.

My relatives and I had no idea there had been such ups and downs – deep downs – in our forebears' history. We are a little overwhelmed when we take a seat in the yard outside Urshult's open-air museum to digest what we have just heard. There have been turbulent swings in the family's fortunes, with social mobility in both directions. But the location has remained more or less the same. Apart from a few minor moves, the family clearly remained within a radius of a few dozen kilometres – at any rate between the birth of Måns Månsson in Urshult in the 1640s and that of my father, Göran, in Tingsryd in 1931.

And when I consult Peter Sjölund, the genealogy researcher who drew up the extensive genealogical tree showing the descendants of 'Ragnar', it turns out that our ancestors scarcely moved in the course of 4,000 years. They stayed at home when they had sons, in any event.

The genealogical tree of men belonging to haplogroup R1a-Z284 has several branches, three of which are particularly prominent. One of these seems to have diverged early on from the west coast of Sweden towards Norway. This branch includes many of the men who became Vikings along the Atlantic coastline of Europe. The second branch shifted to the Mälaren Valley. But the third of these main branches went towards southern Sweden. Many of its offshoots remained on the southern side of the high plain of Småland for thousands of years.

Even the expert DNA genealogist Peter Sjölund thinks that sounds odd, bearing in mind how people have travelled around in the course of history. But I get to thinking about a family reunion in Väckelsång's community hall that I attended when my paternal grandfather and grandmother were still alive. All of my grandfather's siblings were there. And it struck me that my grandfather was the only one in a big family to have left the region around Lake Åsnen. He was the most adventurous of them, moving away as far as Kalmar. A generation later, his children moved outside the confines of Småland to study in the university cities of Lund, Stockholm and Uppsala. And later on they ended up in Lund, Gothenburg and Kristianstad.

The vast majority of my forebears and relatives stayed in the area where they were born. That, after all, is a fairly ordinary pattern. However, things look different on my paternal grandmother's side.

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I explained earlier how the first farmers in Europe migrated from Syria, via Greece and the Balkans, to central and northern Europe. And I showed how the distribution of people with the same mutations in their mitochondrial DNA as my paternal grandmother reflects those migrations almost perfectly.

When the DNA of some Stone Age farmers from Västergötland was published in *Science*, putting them in the global limelight, I experienced a small personal thrill. These farmers were exhumed only a few dozen kilometres away from the place near Falköping where my paternal grandmother's foremothers lived in the eighteenth century. It felt almost as if the researchers had exhumed members of my family and carried out DNA tests on them.

In my memories of my childhood and youth, there is a very special aura surrounding my paternal grandmother, Hilda. In appearance, at least, she might well have been one of Europe's earliest farmers. She had dark hair and brown eyes, and with her fine features, she was strikingly beautiful. She also had a fine singing voice; she would recount with pride how she used to sing solos in church as a child. Her father was a cantor at the church in Öjaby near Växjö. He was strict, with numerous children and a low income. One day a wealthy couple from Stockholm came by to ask whether they could take the pretty little girl home with them for a consideration. But the cantor was furious; poor though he might be, he had absolutely no intention of selling his children. I never really established whether my grandmother was happy to be able to stay with her family and her strict cantor of a father, or whether she fantasised about the turn life might have taken in a well-to-do Stockholm family.

The children of Öjaby were only able to attend school for half days, as the schoolteacher also had to cycle over to the neighbouring parish of Härlöv to teach there. But little Hilda was allowed to ride on the back of the teacher's bike and go to school in Härlöv too. After an excruciating year as a downtrodden nursemaid in an officer's family in Stockholm, she managed to train as an elementary teacher at the teacher training college in Växjö, where she met my grandfather. As the mother of two children she proposed to my grandfather that she provide for the whole family through her work as a teacher. That would have enabled him to throw himself fully into training as an artist. He had taken a preparatory course, and several of the participants had subsequently become well-known artists. But my grandfather turned down my grandmother's offer to take over as the breadwinner. He never became a famous oil painter, but continued his long career as a teacher and amateur artist. Grandmother Hilda stopped working a few years later and remained a housewife for the rest of her life.

When I was six years old and about to start school, she travelled over from Kalmar to Gothenburg for my first day. My little brother was a baby at the time, and my mother needed help. I also recall some magical Christmases in Kalmar and a number of Easter weekends. The blue anemones made a particularly big impression on me, and so did the sago pudding in my grandmother's kitchen. There were no blue anemones and no sago pudding at home in Gothenburg. When I was 12 or so she taught me how to darn socks. We repaired the runs in my nylons together. Thrift was deeply imprinted in her. When you peeled potatoes, the peel should be as thin as you could possibly manage, she taught me.

After the age of 12, it was many years until I saw my paternal grandparents again. My grandmother never forgot to send Christmas and birthday presents – mostly clothes, sometimes simple jewellery. Her choice of gifts always showed perfect taste and great thoughtfulness.

As soon as I was on my way to adulthood, I got in touch with my paternal grandparents again of my own accord, after

which I visited them in Kalmar several times. My grandmother continued to live a frugal, thrifty life well into her eighties. She would go on long walks, pick mushrooms and cycle over the new bridge all the way to Öland to look at the blue anemones there.

Now I do not imagine for a moment that the genetic material which determined my grandmother's appearance remained unadulterated all the way from Syria to Småland. It is quite clear to me that she was a mix of Stone Age farmers and hunters just like all of us, and that a great deal has happened since the first farmers left Syria nearly 10,000 years ago. One need only go back two generations to see that my grandmother was descended from four different people. A few generations further back, and her forebears can be reckoned in the thousands. What traits are passed on is the result of chance.

But all this has to do with feelings as well. For me, there is a particular symbolism in the fact that mothers and daughters followed each other in a long, unbroken line for thousands of years and that it is now possible, thanks to DNA technology and mitochondria, to see what paths they took.

There are about 400 generations between me and the women farmers in the ancient Syrian graves – those who also belonged to haplogroup H, whom, for simplicity's sake, we can call 'Helena's clan'. Eight generations separate me from the oldest documented female ancestor on my paternal grandmother's side. She was called Katarina Eriksdotter and was married to a shoemaker called Petter Andersson. They and their children lived in the little village of Storskogen in the parish of Dala, about 10 kilometres (6¼ miles) north of Falköping.

I take advantage of my trip to Falköping – to interview the archaeologist who excavated the Gökhem farmers – to fit in a visit to Dala. The house in Storskogen where Katarina Eriksdotter once lived no longer exists. The old village of Storskogen is now a dense fir plantation. However, the rolling green landscape that surrounds it looks as it must have done in the eighteenth century, with plenty of old oaks and other deciduous trees, and cows grazing in the fields.

Unlike the old village, the manor house to which the shoemaker's home belonged has survived. It still stands right next to the church, with which it is linked by a private passageway. 'A good illustration of the proximity of temporal power and Church,' observes my local informant, a family history researcher and a former member of the local council for the liberal agrarian Centre Party.

The owner of the Stora Dala estate in Katarina Eriksdotter's day was one Peter Tham, whose family had become wealthy thanks to the East India Company. The estate is supposed to have been one of the largest and richest in the whole of Västergötland, which is saying something, as this is a particularly fertile farming area.

The shoemaker's small homestead in Storskogen also seems to have been relatively prosperous. According to the list of personal effects drawn up on Katarina's death, she owned two gowns of grogram, one black, the other blue; a brown satin jacket; a cloth jacket lined with leather; striped stays; a mohair cap; a silken cap; and several other garments. The farm included four red cows, a brown mare, and several sheep and pigs. The house contained looking glasses, a wall clock, brandy pans, liquor glasses and silver goblets; moreover, Katarina and Petter owned assets amounting to around 100 Swedish *riksdaler*.

According to the earliest traces of Katarina Eriksdotter in the church records, she moved to the parish of Dala to work as a maid on Häggestorp farm in 1766. She was apparently 26 years old at the time. The shoemaker Petter Andersson moved to Häggestorp in the same year, and the two married the year after. The marriage book states that Katarina was born in Odensåker, over 40 kilometres (25 miles) north of Dala. For me, 40 kilometres, or 25 miles, sounds like a long way for a young woman to move in the eighteenth century. I imagine that the Tham family's large farm provided employment opportunities that were lacking at home in Odensåker.

According to Dala's church records, Katarina was born around 1739, possibly in 1740 or 1741. Her father was apparently called Erik Jonsson. But no such birth seems to

have been recorded in Odensåker. All traces of Katarina end there.

The person who helped me to research Katarina's background is a fellow student from my journalism course, Håkan Skogsjö. These days he is a writer, publisher and local historian in the Finland–Swedish archipelago of Åland. He has been researching family history since his teens and is one of the foremost researchers in the field throughout the Swedish-speaking area. If Håkan Skogsjö cannot identify Katarina's childhood home, that means it must be extremely hard to find her, and maybe just impossible. I also write to the local family history association in Mariestad, the municipality Odensåker belongs to, but there is no information to be had there either.

My only clue for the time before 1766 is DNA – and that proves baffling as well. Not a single person with absolutely identical mitochondrial DNA is registered in the databases where family historians record their results.

If you go back thousands of years, on the other hand, my paternal grandmother and I have huge numbers of relatives. Parts of their mitochondria have the same DNA set. Many people have put on record that they belong to the particular branch of the genealogical tree beginning with 'Helena' (a woman from the group of early farmers) known as haplogroup H1g1. They can trace their historical origins back to Greece, Albania, Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, Germany and Belgium, and, on the other side of the English Channel, to England and Scotland.

Many other family history researchers find hundreds of people whose mitochondria have identical DNA sets. There is a perfect match, with no differences arising from mutations. But when I search for perfect matches with my paternal grandmother's DNA set, I cannot find a single one: not in Västergötland, not in Sweden, not in Europe – in fact, nowhere in the world. It looks as if my paternal grandmother's forebears differed from those of my paternal grandfather in *not* living and working within a small, confined area for thousands of years.

However, once I've toned down my requirements and started looking not for a perfect match, but for people with a DNA set that differs by a single mutation, some matches turn up. I find 20 test subjects with a partial match. Their earliest known foremothers are not from Sweden; nearly all are from Scotland.

If I lower my requirements still further to a difference of two mutations from a perfect match, I find more partial matches. But still none of them are from Västergötland or anywhere else in Sweden. Most of my relatives are clustered in Scotland and northern England.

Mutations occur entirely at random. On average, they become a permanent feature of a lineage once in a thousand years at most. So the DNA results suggest that my paternal grandmother and the Scottish matches had a common foremother who lived about a thousand years ago. She seems to have lived in Scotland. If this is so, my foremother appears to have been on her own in leaving Scotland and settling in Scandinavia.

I realise I am in speculative territory now, but I have a theory about how that could have come about. It's not an agreeable theory. In fact, it saddens me. But I suspect that my grandmother's foremother travelled from Scotland to southern Scandinavia on board a Viking ship. She may conceivably have come as the lawful spouse of a successful Viking. But she may also have been a slave woman – a victim of the human trafficking of the day. It is common knowledge that the Vikings engaged in slave trading. Along with furs, slaves were probably their main export product.

The Arab writer Ahmad Ibn Fadlan tells of a tenth-century burial among a group of traders on the Volga, whom he refers to as 'Rūs' or 'Rūsiyyah'. This group probably consisted at least partly of people from the eastern part of Sweden. In any event, Ibn Fadlan's text is frequently cited as one of the oldest written descriptions of Vikings. He describes their 'perfect physique', for instance; they are tall and stately like date palms, fair-haired and ruddy, and extensively tattooed. Their personal hygiene, however, leaves a great deal to be desired by Arab standards.

In the same text, Ibn Fadlan also describes how a slave girl is burned on a pyre together with her dead master. First the Rūsiyyah pour large quantities of alcohol down her throat. Several of the men have intercourse with her, one after the other, and just before the fire is lit she is subjected to gang rape. All the while, the onlooking men beat their shields hard, making a din to prevent other slave girls from hearing her screams. She is killed when an older woman, known as 'the Angel of Death', plunges a dagger into her breast, while two of the men pull a noose tight around her neck. When the girl is dead and everything is finished, they light the funeral pyre.

Should we be sceptical of Ibn Fadlan's account, in the name of source criticism? Some historians are, pointing out that it might have been in his interest to depict the Vikings as brutal and sexually degenerate. But there is also support for his account from various quarters. In Viking times it was common for the dead – particularly the wealthy and prominent – to be burned on ships. They were accompanied by rich grave gifts, including dogs, horses and, very probably, human sacrifices. In a number of cases, archaeologists have interpreted human remains on burnt ships as thralls (slaves) who had been killed. There are some particularly clear examples in graves on the Isle of Man, but Scandinavia, too, has a number of sites which suggest that thralls – together with dogs, horses and other animals – were put to death when their master died.

A Norwegian study of a number of double and triple burials where only one of the corpses in the grave still had its head was published recently. The other individuals appear to have been beheaded. Archaeologists already suspected that the beheaded individuals were thralls. Now, new DNA analyses confirm that they were of different genetic origin from the individuals who were interred with their heads. In addition, the individuals thought to be thralls had a different diet. Isotopes in bones and teeth indicate that the people who were buried intact had a more varied diet, including a good deal of meat from land animals. The thralls, on the other hand, ate mostly fish.

Dublin, now the capital of the Republic of Ireland, was originally built by Vikings, and was a major slave-trading market. In the Annals of Ulster, an unknown writer reported for the year AD 821 that 'Étar was plundered by the heathens, and they carried off a great number of women into captivity.' For the year AD 871, the Annals of Ulster tell how 'Amlaíb and Ímar returned to Áth Cliath from Alba with two hundred ships, bringing away with them in captivity to Ireland a great prey of Angles and Britons and Picts' (the Picts were a people who lived in Scotland and subsequently disappeared, without their language being preserved).

I shall never know for sure how my paternal grandmother's maternal lineage came to Sweden. However, the suspicions aroused in me when I saw the DNA results have dispelled any romantic notions I might once have harboured about the Viking Age.