Bojs, Karin. "The Tree and the Spring." *My European Family: The FIRST 54,000 years*. London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2017. 349–351. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472941480.0043>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 08:28 UTC.

Copyright © Karin Bojs 2017. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

The Tree and the Spring

Half a year after my mother's funeral, we hold the urn placement ceremony in Botkyrka Church. It is a relaxed, low-key occasion by comparison with the funeral in Gothenburg.

It was early summer then, the lilacs were in bloom and old friends appeared unexpectedly. We sang hymns about the blossom time, about the ages to come and the generations to follow. It was a solemn, but also slightly stilted ceremony.

Only my brother and myself, with our respective partners, attend the ceremony in Botkyrka. The grandchildren are allowed to stay in school. The November weather is at its worst. Slushy sleet covers the ground. A hard wind blows out the matches when I attempt to light a candle.

Botkyrka Church is where my mother was confirmed. She told me how she used to ski over the fields from Tullinge to get to classes. Having only known her as an adult, I am surprised she could ski such a long distance; it must have been almost 10 kilometres (6¼ miles). Today, the church and churchyard are squeezed in between a broad motorway and the heavily built-up suburb of Hallunda, with its blocks of flats from the housing programme of the sixties and seventies. Nearly 80 per cent of people living in Hallunda are immigrants, and I have to ask several people at the metro station before someone can tell me the way to the church.

Yet the church has been there since 1129, the time when a local peasant lad named Botvid is said to have introduced Christianity to the area after a journey to England. The story goes that Botvid was killed by a thrall whom, in accordance with his new convictions, he was just about to set free. At the place where the pall-bearers put down Botvid's coffin, a spring burst forth, and when sick people touched the coffin they were made whole, according to the legend.

Fifty years later, the wooden church built in 1129 was replaced by a stone church. Parts of it remain, and that is where we begin the ceremony. We sit for a long while contemplating the urn, which is placed on a small table before the altar. A kindly caretaker plays a mix of classical music through the loudspeakers. Finding some of the music rather too light and bland, I request Bach instead.

Botkyrka Church is a few kilometres from the spring named after the same saint. But Sweden's first churches were often built on

ancient cult sites from pre-Christian times, at sacred springs and near sacred trees. People simply continued to visit the same sacred groves as in earlier times; they merely changed the content of their rites. In the new churches they worshipped God, Christ and the Virgin Mary, whereas at the ancient cult sites they had prayed and made offerings to other gods and supernatural beings.

When, together with the historian Peter Olausson, I visited the outdoor museum in Glava, the Värmland parish where my foremothers lived for many generations, we viewed an old drawing made when the first church at Glava was demolished. That church had been built in the twelfth century, at about the same time as Botkyrka Church. 'Tree stump' was written on the drawing, in front of the altar. The fact that the old church in Glava was built over a tree stump was news even to Peter Olausson, an expert in local history. But he told me about other examples of early churches in Sweden where the altar was placed on top of old trees that had been felled. The stump was built into the new shrine as a precaution. Altars were also sometimes built over an ancient spring. The new religion was superimposed on the old one.

It is common to depict your ancestry in the form of a family tree. I have simplified matters still further in this book by focusing on three straight lines of descent. My mitochondrial DNA shows I am descended from a woman who came to Europe during the Ice Age, about 40,000 years ago, a woman we can choose to call Ursula. I am also descended from a woman we can call Helena, one of the group of people that brought farming to Europe 10,000 years ago. And in all probability my forefathers, whom, for simplicity's sake, we can call Ragnar's descendants, came to Jutland together with a new, expansive pastoral culture, and later to Sweden in connection with the Bronze Age.

But these three lines are only a very limited part of my ancestry. I also had a maternal grandfather, for instance, although he is not included in this book. For one thing, I did not have the same emotional bonds with him, and for another I have not had the same opportunity to investigate his Y-chromosomal DNA. Yet he, too, is part of my family. The family grave in Botkyrka, where my mother's ashes now rest, belongs to his mother's side of the family.

Going back two generations, I have four ancestors: my maternal grandparents on the one side and my paternal grandparents on the other. Each had two parents, so if I go back a further generation I can count eight ancestors. After that, the numbers are 16, 32, 64,

128, 256, and so on. In many cases, my forebears had children together, which complicates the mathematics. Which individuals, out of all these forefathers and foremothers, passed on their genes and their traits to me is a matter of chance.

That is why the tree gives an incomplete picture of our history. It can only show a single individual's ancestry over a few generations; after that, there are not enough branches and roots on the tree.

As for the history of the population as a whole, the tree image is also too simple and inaccurate. People have migrated in all sorts of directions in the course of history. Europe, for example, received at least three major waves of immigration in prehistoric times, as well as many other smaller ones. The migrants came on foot from the south and the east, they paddled along rivers and the coastline, and they travelled by ox-drawn wagon and on horseback.

The genealogical tree also gives an incomplete picture when it comes to a biologist's description of evolution. Species do not evolve as directly or as neatly as the branches of a tree would suggest. There are floods of genes that complicate the picture – such as when anatomically modern people in the Middle East had children with Neanderthals 54,000 years ago. This injected a small lateral dose of DNA and genes into the genetic material of modern humans, and the traces can be seen in our DNA to this day.

To describe our origins in a biologically accurate fashion, the image of the tree needs to be complemented by that of the spring. Water flows out of the spring, an amorphous stream running in different directions. Our DNA and our genes disperse in an analogous way. One of 'Ursula's daughters' was my foremother, belonging to haplogroup U5b1b1, the woman who lived some 15,000 years ago at the end of the Ice Age, probably in part of Spain. Some of this woman's modern-day descendants live among the Sami of northern Scandinavia, while others are to be found among the Berbers of the Atlas Mountains, in North Africa.

Everyone in the world is descended from a woman we can call Eve. This woman lived in Africa about 200,000 years ago. As descendants of Eve, we bear largely identical DNA. We are differentiated only by tiny variations. These tiny variations tell the story of how our forebears once went forth to people the earth. The mutations show how we migrated in all directions from Africa. My family – like everyone's – can be compared to a great tree with many branches. But we are like water too. Our heredity both diverges and converges – as in the wellspring of life and humanity.