

The Mighty Oak of Kville

Stefan Foconi

Folkungagatan 132, Stockholm, Sweden

email: sgoconi@hotmail.com

photos by Eric Foconi

After an excessive traditional dinner on various forms of eel, down on the southeastern coast of Skåne, and a long breakfast the following morning, my brother and I enter the car that will bring us back towards the north and the area around Vimmerby, a region in the province of Småland that is today well known for two things: Astrid Lindgren, the author of children's books, and the mighty Oak of Kville -- The Rumskulla Oak, as it is also called.

The pressure is high and the sky clear, and my brother, who's behind the wheel, insists on driving all the way with the top down, even though nobody else does so in mid October. At least we're suitably dressed and certainly wearing woolen caps.

I go through my questions again. When we arrive at a junction, just before the oak, the expert on forestry Thorsten Ungaäter, in his capacity as local connoisseur has had the kindness to meet us and answer some of my questions. I have never before seen the oak, only through the years imagined what it would be like. I am now referring to the oldest organism of Sweden -- the oak with perhaps the widest girth in the whole of Europe, measuring at chest height not less than 14.11 meters!

The experts estimate the age of this oak to be roughly one thousand years. There are older ones abroad, according to various sources, but if there are oaks outside of Europe with an even wider circumference than the giant I am just about to meet I do not know. Anyhow, in Europe it is exceptional, and for more than one reason, as I will soon try to explain.

Thanks to the Gulf Stream there are no oaks worldwide growing further north than in Scandinavia. There are two indigenous species in Sweden, *Quercus robur* and *Q. petraea* respectively, as well as hybrids between the two. Approximately one percent of the wooded area is covered by oak, a high figure for a country that by European standards is fairly large and 55 percent covered by forest. *Q. robur* grows in fertile clay soil with good access to water, while *Q. petraea* prefers drier and more stony ground. The northern border of *Q. robur* is traditionally put at the river Dalälven, situated on the 60th latitude (today it even goes further north), but in Norway it reaches all the way along the coast up to Trondheim. In a plantation there is a mature *Q. robur* thriving up in Haparanda, almost on the 66th latitude, proof of an extreme adaptability for a genus that has tropic origin. During the warmest period after the last Glacial Epoch, about 6000 years ago, the oak (like all other broad-leaved trees) penetrated much further towards the north.

The Oak of Kville is a *Q. robur*, though its appearance today is as far away from the pollarded, emblematic "bank oak" as you might possibly get, a lot more original and certainly more marked by age; in one word, unique.

When we reach the settled meeting point, after a rather airy drive, I change to Thorsten Ungaäter's car, so that I can use the slow final route on dirt roads for immediate interrogation.



From a dendrological point of view, the area around Vimmerby is rather amazing, since within the radius of 10 kilometers you could spot not only the mightiest oak of Europe, but also the thickest birch, apple tree, maple and hazel of Sweden, plus the second thickest lime (linden). The rural district of Rumsquilla is further brim full of interesting natural phenomena like faults, erratic rock blocks, and giant kettles.

The Oak of Kvill got its name after the pasture where it happens to grow, called Northern Kvill, an ex-lieutenant's house; or, the Oak of Rumsquilla, since the parish is Rumsquilla, situated in the county of Kalmar. The name Rumsquilla is derived from the older form Romfarakulla (meaning literally: Rome + travel + hill), that is this district was a stopover and a resting place for pilgrims that were off for Rome. The prefix "kvill" is connected to the verb "kvillra", onomatopoeia for the gentle sound of water in motion; hardly surprising, given the vicinity of the small river Stångån. According to local oral tradition the tree is called The Oak of Christ, because it was said to have sprouted from an acorn that fell at the time of the birth of Christ. The oak has been placed under protection since 1928, but was regarded as preservable already in 1905, by the placing out of six stones surrounding the trunk. Detailed accounts from the 18th Century tell us that the trunk was already then hollow at the base; apart from caused by the obligatory invasive fungi, perhaps further aggravated by the farmers' habit of building fires of branches and miscellaneous rubbish at the foot of oaks. This is information I've picked up from reading and listening to Thorsten, but now its time to get out of the cars and finally have a look at the tree in real life!

From the parking lot a narrow trail leads to the giant. We are not alone. Some German tourists – the area is rather popular with Danish, German, and Dutch cabin owners – have also found their way over here. Approximately 50,000 persons a year visit this place. The first impression is the present shortness of the oak. We estimate its height to 12 or 13 meters. The oak of Kvill has obviously once been much more statuesque, but during the severe winter of 1708-09 the crown was

reported to have withered away, and since that time the oak has crouched down considerably more. It is also lacking leaves.

Deciduous oaks are no doubt renowned for holding on to their leaves well into the winter (*Q. petraea* even until the emergence of the following season's leaves), but the Oak of Kvill is now the only oak in the domain that has already shed its leaves, as well as the acorns that it still emits in large quantities during masts. This, although it's only the 18th of October today, and the autumn has been mild.

We approach closer. The next thing that is striking about the Oak of Kvill is the furrowed and ridged trunk; or I should rather talk about its enormously crusty and coarsely cracked, rugged bark. It looks almost as if lava had suddenly erupted from a volcano, but since long ago stiffened into ash-grey tuffa. Due to the hollowing out of the centre, the rest of the trunk is more like a thick skin. Before protection, this cavity was used by the farmers as a toolshed. The opening of the trunk goes straight in a northern-southern direction.

How could it live for so long? Why wasn't it cut down for timber? How can a protected tree be allowed to wear two sharp and non-elastic bands of metal around it? These are some of my most haunting questions, along with the following one: how could the Oak of Kvill grow that big when it stands in such poor soil?

The ground surrounding us is pastoral, with plenty of browsing cows, and typical for the province of Småland, full of boulders and with a shallow layer of mould. The most characteristic tree in this biotope is the juniper (*Juniperus communis*). It completely dominates the landscape no matter in what direction you're looking. For the time being the Oak of Kvill receives undeserved competition for nutrition, and more importantly light, from a mere 60-70 year old offspring that has been allowed to grow up only some ten meters towards the northwest. Thorsten and I agree that this "suckling" should be removed immediately, in order not to further put stress on the giant. Oaks as old as the Kvill one not only need a maximum amount of light, but also free entry for the wind, so that fungi specializing in attacking rotten wood are not activated in the extreme.

I step over the iron chain that surrounds the tree at ground level and place myself in the midst of what was once the very centre of the trunk. Green moss is plentiful, like some kind of belt made of velvet, reaching from my waist up to about three meters high. The same part of the interior wood is in many places full of circular holes, drilled by insects, with a diameter of one millimeter. It is the abundant quantity of bitter tannins in the wood, as well as in the leaves, that in the shorter perspective makes both less than tasty for many vermin. In combination with the deep roots, these are the factors making the longevity of oaks possible. But this doesn't hinder older trees from attracting hoards of parasites, not the least being fungi that thrive on decomposing wood (particularly the oldest parts in the centre). The brownish-black mass that is formed, the mulm, is the home of innumerable insects that live off the fungi. Many birds in their turn eat the insects that are specially adapted to oaks. It is in various cavities in the tree that the mulm is created, consisting of sawdust like residuum of gnawing, manure, dead animals, bird nests, etc.

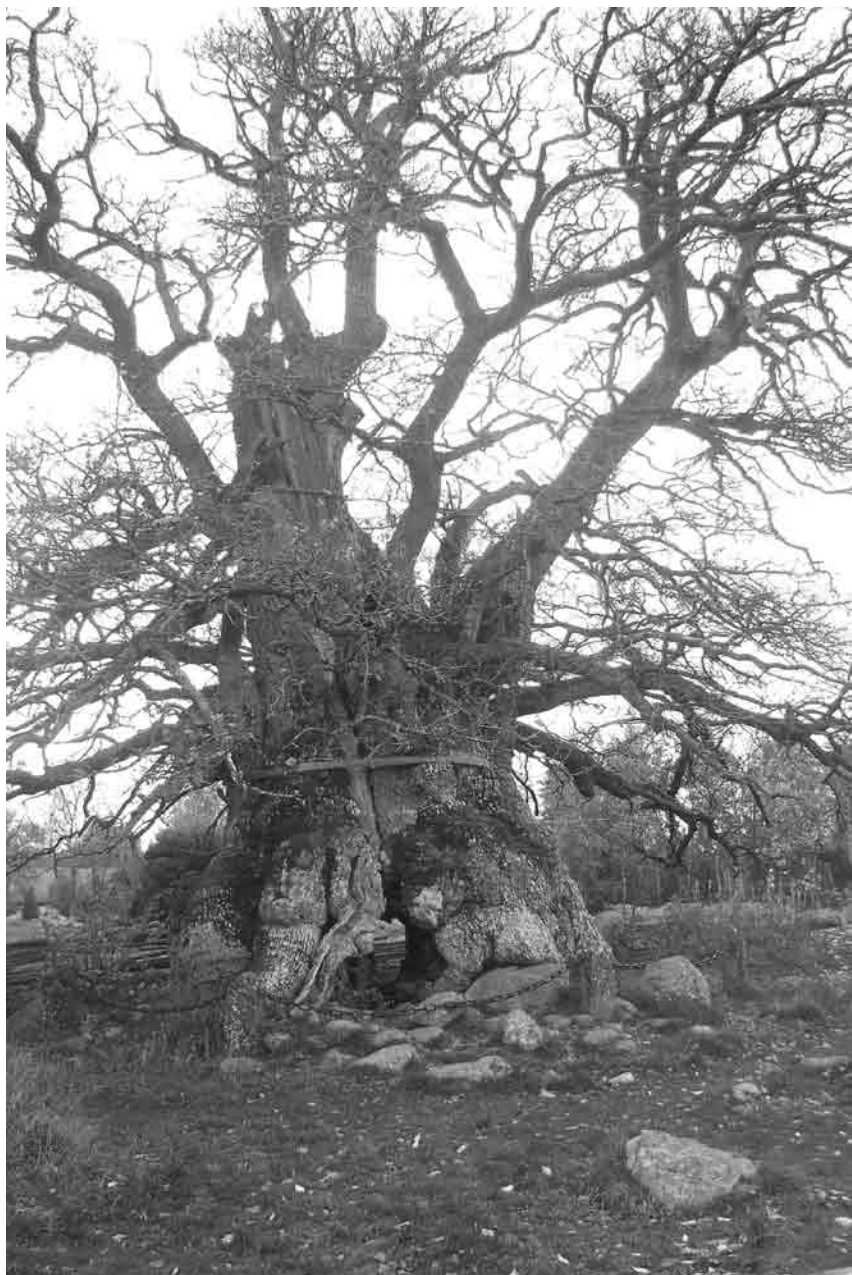
When I step out from the interior my head is full of thoughts about what the oak might have experienced in terms of changes during its enormous life span. Not that trees are able to think, but in its late capacity as tree champion, this oak must have been exposed to a whole lot of extra attention from humans. It has, for example, appeared in many documentaries on television, as well as being featured

in a movie that was quite famous in the late 1960s (not the least because of its sex scenes) called “I Am Curious Yellow/Blue,” respectively, both by Vilgot Sjöman. The reason behind the choice of the Oak of Kville for erotic exercises might stem from the fact that the director happened to have been raised in the area. Whatever one thinks of film director Sjöman’s taste when it comes to connecting explicit scenes with the famous oak, it is nevertheless fairly innocent in comparison with all the human sacrifices and hangings that mankind has so often willingly used thick branches of oak for.

The number of species that directly or indirectly depend on old oaks for their existence is mind-boggling. It’s one thing that tropical trees in a rain forest are the hosts of very large numbers of individual species, not yet even labeled by the scientists, but here – from the perspective of biodiversity – in a rather poor corner of northern Europe, *Q. robur*, being regarded as a biotope, is completely in a class of its own. Fifty years ago scientists thought that 500 species of insects, fungi, moss, and lichen might be living off the oak, and later this figure was upgraded to something like one thousand. Nowadays, many experts regard the figure of 1500 as more likely, with most of these not existing anywhere else and birds and bats not counted. One should keep in mind that the complete flora and fauna of a country like Sweden contains not more than circa 50,000 species all in all. From an ecological point of view it is important that the distance between old oaks is not too far, since the parasitical species existing on these long-lived and hence relatively stable creatures for that very reason are not themselves adapted to a life of motion. It is the sheer volume and age of mature and aging oaks that create the multiplicity of micro-environments. We are now talking about dead wood in various phases of decomposition, the living wood, the roots, the crown with its leaves and acorns, the sunny side of the trunk with its innumerable crannies and cracks as well as the shady side, with a considerably cooler climate, plus dry fallen branches that should be allowed to remain on the ground, withering away. Each of these niches are homes of separate species.

When it comes to the iron bands around the Oak of Kville, the first was put on as early as 60 years ago by a blacksmith called Fransson, on request from local authorities. A generation later, in 1992 to be precise, this was supplemented with another band, higher up on the trunk, this one added by the son and grandson of the first smith. Standing by the oak today, it is easy to observe that the bands are cutting into a still growing tree. Back in 1913, for example, the circumference was “only” 12.75, as opposed to today’s 14.11 meters. The Oak of Kville thus continues to expand at an average pace of more than 1.3 centimeters each year, obviously only from the exterior, which is identical with the layer that is affected by the iron bands. These bands are already in the process of being walled over by the oak. In fact they were removed in an attack in 2002 by a person who thought he was doing the tree a service, only to be put back again immediately. However, as my cicerone puts it, today it is already too late to remove the bands without installing better cabling and bracing first, since especially the lower one, with an iron wire attached to it, is what – strangling or not strangling – holds the oak together. Without support, the Kville Oak would hardly be able to stand on its own any more, since the part of the trunk facing south would then fall out and possibly drag the rest of the tree along with itself in the fall. As long as this is not happening, the oak should be able to get by for another century, especially given the fact that it looks considerably healthier today than it did after the severe drought in 1959, when it was about to give in.





The hurricane Gudrun, which in January 2005 turned over hundreds of millions of trees all over northwestern Europe (in the southern part of Sweden alone 75 million square meters of wood, the same quantity as the total take out of three years of ordinary industrial activity), didn't affect the giant at all, even though mature oaks are somewhat vulnerable to wind.

How could the Oak of Kvill grow so large, granted that the hunger after boards of oak for the use of the navy was immense, and for centuries? First of all, the Oak of Kvill happened to start growing on a less than optimal spot. This was not where people were looking for large oaks. Secondly, it has had good access to water, even though it has in all likelihood been browsed by cattle. But, on the other hand, for the same reason probably during its entire life it has been protected from the woods growing too close. It is surrounded by big stones, which might mean that it sprouted on a spot that was difficult to get at for the animals, on top of it being surrounded by junipers, something that should have increased the possibilities for the tree in its youth to be spared the axe and the muzzle.

The oaks of Sweden were the propriety of the State, and because of this loathed by the peasants, who didn't have much to gain themselves from having oaks on their land. Consequently, in all secrecy, they tried to get rid of small oaks as soon as they appeared, in marked contrast to the aristocracy's contrary need to adorn their parks with as many mighty oaks as possible. For the peasants, oaks were simply associated with nobility and the authoritarian repression of the State. An edict concerning the preservation of oaks was put forward already in 1347, included in the national law of King Magnus Eriksson. These restrictions were further enhanced by King Gustav Vasa in 1558, only to be accentuated even further during the era of Sweden as a great power, when it was directly called for to actively plant oaks. From 1746 the oaks were owned by the State, even if they grew on the private land of individual farmers, and since the farmers needed boards of oak themselves for larger constructions, most probably a lot of trees were chopped down outside the villages. This was a crime that was severely punished, making the oak even more hated, especially since the ones that grew out in the pastures and on the meadows diminished the output of crops by casting shadows and absorbing nutrition; not to mention that they also embittered the soil with leaves that take their time to decompose. It wasn't until 1830 that peasants could buy the oaks growing on their own grounds. The requirement of the State didn't end until 1875, with the exception of the land owned by the church. The authorities kept control well into the 20th century. For the majority of the population, the advantages of growing oaks were – at least legally – solely the use of acorns as food for pigs (and during famines for the humans too, for sure), the tannins in the bark for the preparation of leather, the production of various medicinal treatments, and for the making of ink.

Oaks have more often than other trees been in demand for the construction of warships. In order to build a large flagship in the 17th Century, about 2000 mature oaks were utilized. On top of this, the erection of castles and churches swallowed enormous amounts of larger oaks, preferably cut down when they had reached the age of 150 years, with a diameter of 75 centimeters. It might be a bit difficult for somebody living today to fully understand the number of large oaks that were used. According to the Ministry of Forestry there are even today approximately 14,000 oaks, only in Sweden, with a circumference above four meters, especially in the provinces along the Baltic Sea. This is a low figure – and one that is going

to diminish even further – as opposed to in the old days. During the 18th Century the navy counted that within one single parish there would be 38,500 oaks to be eventually cut down, and the oaks belonging to the church and aristocracy, as being excluded from the state monopoly, were not counted. As soon as the monopoly on oaks was terminated, the amount of larger oaks was increasingly dwindling away, since the individual peasant gladly got rid of the trees that were standing on his fields and competing with the crop for light and water. This tendency is continuing today. The elderly giants have fewer and fewer successors.

The Oak of Kvill is pretty much the same age as Christianity in Sweden. It is difficult not to mention that the oak in the pre-Christian era was looked upon as holy – as the tree directly associated with Thor, god of lightning (a Scandinavian version of the olympic Zeus or Jupiter). After the breakthrough of Christianity, elderly oaks were no longer protected, in fact rather being regarded with suspicion, as symbols of heathen superstition, still clearly visible in the landscape itself.

In order to understand how extremely rare an oak like the one in Kvill truly is, I might perhaps conclusively put forward the fact that the second largest oak in the country, in terms of girth, measures "only" 11.08 meters.

As we all know, some of the oldest trees in the world are growing in places a lot warmer than Scandinavia. But if I may speculate a bit, one could perhaps add a few lines about the influence of climate on wood as well on the surrounding flora and fauna. It's not by coincidence that the oldest wooden buildings in the world are standing in Scandinavia, namely the more than one thousand year old Norwegian stave churches, built exclusively of oak boards. In tropical areas, on the other hand, to go to the other extreme, there are hardly any examples of wooden buildings older than a century. Well before that age, they usually are already being destroyed, and even eaten by termites and other thermophile vermin. Dead wood and living are certainly different things, but are there any oaks in tropical or subtropical zones as old as the Oak of Kvill? Is it by chance that the perpetual battle between the powers of decomposition and reconstruction that we call by the name of nature, precisely at the very outskirts of the oaks area of geographic extensiveness, has manifested itself in a Methuselah like the Kvill Oak?

Stefan Foconi is a writer of fiction and an amateur oak collector with some 30 species of *Quercus* in his Norwegian garden, situated on the 61st latitude. He is interested in trying various hardy species of oaks and would like to have contact with members who share his interest and would be willing to exchange acorns or experiences. Please contact him via email: sfoconi@hotmail.com