

## **Travelling plants**

Last summer, I came across a story about some vines from Madeira that some 150 years ago had been planted at Holmen, a military area in the Copenhagen harbor.

It was Poul who first told me about the existence of the vines. Poul had been working as a submarine builder on the shipyard back in the 1950s: “The story goes that the vines in the yard were collected at the Portuguese island Madeira around the 1850s. At that time, Denmark had colonies at the West Indies and the navy’s ships often stopped to take in supplies at Madeira before crossing the Atlantic. On such a trip some cuttings of some Madeira vines were collected. Back home in Copenhagen they were planted at the naval territory at Holmen. When, in the 1870s, a wine plague killed all Madeira vines, someone somehow figured out that there was a cutting of a Madeira plant in Copenhagen. A cutting of this plant was sent to Madeira, and it is now the mother of all the new plants used for the production of Madeira wine”.

I went to the Danish navy’s material command where the vines grow. Here I met Erik, a former ship’s officer now working in the historical archives of the navy. He said: “It is true that when Danish warships visited Madeira in the 17th century some sailors stole some cuttings of a Madeira vine and brought them home where they were planted at the navy’s territory. And it is true that Denmark sent vine cuttings to Madeira after the wine plague, but they were sent from the Botanical Garden in Copenhagen. The cuttings sent from Denmark were planted at a botanical garden on Madeira, but were never used to rescue the Madeira production. During the plague, help came from elsewhere. Rumor has it that similar stories are told at the Norwegian training school Harald Hårfager and at naval bases in Portsmouth and South Hampton. I don’t know if any of these stories are true”.

In the Botanical Garden I met Folmer, who is called “The Oracle” by his colleagues. He did not know the story about the Madeira vine. The only way to figure out if the respective plants were of the same origin would be to do a DNA analysis, he said.

Finally I looked up “Madeira wine” in the encyclopedia. It said: “Madeira wine is a fortified wine from the Portuguese island of Madeira in the Atlantic. Because the island was a customary port-of-call on the trade routes between Europe and the New World, this durable wine was very popular in colonial America...” It did not mention anything about the wine plague or the heroic Danish mother vine.

It makes me think about the story of the giant hogweed. It was brought to Europe from Caucasus in the 1800s by Victorian explorers who appreciated its ornamental beauty, but it started to spread quickly. It is now seen as a danger to so-called indigenous plants and is sought exterminated. The webpage of the Danish Ministry of the Environment advises to combat the giant hogweed because: “In Denmark the giant hogweed is the most feared landscape weed since it supersedes all native vegetation in the invaded areas”.