



THE IMPORTANCE AND MEANING OF SAGAS IN THE IDEAS OF THE ESTONIAN GERMANIST REIN SEPP

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INTRODUCTION

Rein Sepp, the great Germanist of the 20th century Estonia, was born on April 23, 1921. His studies at the University of Tartu were interrupted by World War II, in which he participated in the ranks of the German army. After a Soviet prison camp in Siberia he committed himself to translating various writings, mainly from the Old Icelandic, German and English languages – *Poetic-Edda* (1970), *Nibelungenlied* (1977), *Parzival* (1989), *Beowulf* (1990), *Snorra-Edda* (1990), *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and Early English Poems* (1992). This is a list of epic translations that even some great nations have failed to produce. Apart from these, he has translated Shakespeare's play "Love's Labour's Lost", German and English poetry, German and Dutch prose. In addition, he made a name for himself as an author of science fiction. He was the laureate of several translation and literary prizes of Estonia. In the last decades of his life, Rein Sepp lived and worked in his country home in Ipiki Village, North Latvia, which became a favourite destination for Estonian cultural figures. As a member of the students' corps "Sakala", he mentored several generations of students, who visited him often. Rein Sepp died on January 25, 1995.

Rein Sepp's personality was strongly influenced in its formative stages by the atmosphere in his home (one of his uncles was Hendrik Sepp, an Estonian historian), his travel years and hard experiences, his good knowledge of human nature, his outstanding linguistic talent and, naturally, his extensive knowledge both of medieval history and culture and of natural and exact sciences. He was characterized by original thinking and the capability of generating extraordinary ideas. Modest in putting his ideas down on paper, he was all the keener to present and argue for them in private conversations. The following is an analysis of Rein Sepp's ideas about the origins and meaning of *Poetic-Edda*.



IDEAS

For Rein Sepp, the central issue was man's identity, and the main concern was loss of that identity everywhere within the reach of modern European culture. He deemed such degeneration to have been caused by increasing superficiality, recklessness and irresponsibility. "The ice age draws on when people working the land grow tired for some reason, resulting in the neglected nature slacking off and cooling down in its turn," wrote R. Sepp, and continued, "Since the deathly silence of the ice age is caused by people's tiredness, thoughtlessness or slackness, we need to maintain alertness and ability to perform in order to avoid spiritual extinction in the first place, and to strive for the integrity of man and nature."¹ To this end, a text interpreting for man the world as well as man's place and purpose in it might, in R. Sepp's opinion, serve as the order-generating foundation. For him, such a text was first and foremost *Poetic-Edda* - "a text that is mentally alive and dynamic" - which raises questions at a very high level and contains millennia of experience.

R. Sepp was of the opinion that during the post-ice age millennia, there emerged in Scandinavia and the Eastern Baltic region a way of life that he named "ancient Nordic culture". He identified it with the archeologically established proto-European Kunda culture in the Eastern Baltic region, which apparently had a strong impact on the neighbouring lands and ethnic groups. He considered its centre to be the surroundings of Lake Võrtsjärv in Estonia. He deemed the lake's name, *Võrtsjärv*, to contain the genitive of *Vyrd (Urdr)*, an Old Scandinavian name for a goddess.² In the subsequent millennia, which saw the immigration to the Baltic region of proto-Indo-European tribes, the ancient Nordic people were assimilated into them and passed on to them their worldview and experience. The ideology of the ancient Nordic people led to the separation of the Estonian and Livonian peoples from the rest of the Balto-Finnic peoples as well as that of North Germanic peoples and proto-Baltic peoples from the rest of the Indo-European peoples. This would also mean that many words in Estonian that have been considered loans from the Uralic language, the early stratum of the Indo-European language or the Old Germanic language, are actually ancient Nordic (that is, of the people of the so-called Kunda culture) loans to both the Balto-Finnic and the Germanic languages.³ Rein Sepp was convinced that *Poetic-Edda* was not an original North Germanic work but a phenomenon of ancient Nordic culture, which later germanised. While there is undoubtedly a very strong stratum of North Germanic culture, which is of Indo-European origin, in *Poetic-*



Edda, it dates from a much later time than the ancient Nordic stratum. For instance, he thought that among the 18 most important Old Scandinavian deities, 16 were of ancient Nordic origin. Further, the text and the development of *Poetic-Edda* show in their turn that the substratum of ancient Nordic culture survived the longest in Iceland, one of the latest regions in Europe to be influenced by Christianity, where the influence, moreover, was one of the weakest. Thus, ancient Nordic culture did not disappear but was preserved as a somewhat hidden foundation of Old Scandinavian culture endowing the latter with creativity and order.

Rein Sepp supposed that on Estonian territory the traces of ancient Nordic culture could most likely be observed in West and South West Estonia: in the use of numerals, in the toponyms and in the behavioural logic. The traces manifest themselves in the conduct and communication of people, the placement of buildings and roads in nature and in place names and their logical relationship to the landscape and other names. Even today, the placement of buildings on the landscape would often betray a high degree of resemblance to that described in some passage of *Poetic-Edda*, and one may come across the psychological and physical types of humans described in the *Eddas* and see them behave according to the same logic as recorded in the ancient sagas.⁴

Thus, Rein Sepp maintained that what is North Germanic in the “Eddas” is only its outward shell whereas the deeper layers reflect the original ancient Nordic culture (or, archeologically, the Kunda culture and its contemporaries - the archaeological cultures of Baltoscandia) instead. However, he made one step further still, presuming that the development of the oldest passages of primarily *Poetic-Edda*, in particular “Völuspá” and “Hāvamāl”, is associated with the ancient Nordic original and goes back to a very distant past. Even though “Older Edda” was written down in Iceland in the 13th century. R. Sepp supposed that the text might also become close to the Estonians, even closer than the artificial epos of Estonia written in the 19th century by F.R. Kreutzwald. An attentive Estonian reader would find from the *Eddas* a deeper tradition, which would not necessarily be familiar to a folklorist through formal-mythological means; rather, as R. Sepp put it, it might have to do with “self-definition and the discovery of an ancient source in oneself”⁵ - the recovery of an ancient attitude towards life and an ancient ethos.



PARALLELS

Rein Sepp supposed that the oldest strata of the beginnings and development of *Poetic-Edda* may originate from the Mesolithic proto-European Kunda culture in the Eastern Baltic region, one of the common sources for Balto-Finnic, Baltic and Old German (particularly, of course, Old Scandinavian) cultures, ways of life and mindsets. This standpoint was unexpectedly supported by recent studies conducted by the Finnish linguist Kalevi Wiik and the Estonian linguist Ago Künnap, which suggest that the vestiges of substrate tribes in the languages and cultures of the Nordic peoples are much better observable than tribes, which later immigrated from the east. Without ruling out waves of immigration and other subsequent influences, this original ancient Nordic home has covered an extensive area in North Europe. Hard on the heels of the receding glacier, representatives of the proto-European race reached the north in the late Palaeolithic period. There, they maintained their ethnic characteristics until the arrival of the Indo-Europeans. Their heritage has been preserved to date as a substratum in any nook and cranny around the Baltic Sea.⁶ In the Eastern Baltic region as well as, to a great extent, in Scandinavia, that substratum is the very proto-European Kunda culture, along with its archaeologically established neighbouring cultures. This would mean that the deepest roots of *Poetic-Edda*, which was written down in Iceland in the 13th century, reach back in time for at least seven thousand years, to the ancient Nordic period, which was the oldest common prehistoric period for the entire Nordic region. “We do not know what was accomplished or initiated in these spiritual, natural and historical developments and beginnings here on these strips of land to the east of the Baltic sea, for instance. We can only guess that the further back into the past, the more uniform the ancient Nordic prose of existence. As the nature grew more varied, however, it became more diversified, and increasingly so with the passage of time.”⁷

With certain reservations, we can therefore view the peoples living around the Baltic sea as nothing less than the prehistoric inhabitants of Europe, since there is a genetic and anthropological as well as a cultural link with the founders of the proto-European Megalithic culture. This is to a great degree reflected in the notion of Baltoscandia.

The notion “Baltoscandia” was introduced to scientific literature in the 1920’s. It stands for a unity that is historical and geographical in its form and cultural in its essence. It was postulated, among others, by Edgar Kant, Professor of Geography at the University of Tartu. Underlying that unity are, of course, tectonic, geographical and climatic characteristics, first



and foremost; on it, however, rest ethnoses with their material, economical and spiritual worlds. The space of Baltoscandia encompasses Estonia, Latvia, East Prussia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Karelia. Culturally, Baltoscandia is also linked with Iceland.⁸ Thus, the notion encompasses, in principle, the same lands and peoples with which we share an intertwined history and a similar view of the world - the lands and the peoples that Rein Sepp bears in mind, too.

Baltoscandia was once a common home - the ancient Nordic home - of the ancestors of the Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, Livonians, Kureans, Estonians, Finns and other tribes. The region has had a common history - a common era, the physical remains of which can literally be fingered by archaeologists and the vestiges of which can still be recognized in one way or another in folk tradition and spiritual heritage.

EXAMPLES

For illustration purposes, let us examine just two facets of culture.

The first facet is the development of pre-Christian religion in the ancient Nordic world. The main characteristic of the Estonian and Balto-Finnic tribes was worship of natural powers, with a growing tendency since the establishment of early agriculture and cattle rearing towards the personification of these powers, thus towards the emergence of deities and their pantheon. The ancient Scandinavian family of gods in its established form - the form presented to us by the *Eddas* written in Iceland - was composed of the *vanir* and the *aesir*. Older gods - the *vanir* - were the fertility gods of farmers whereas the younger ones - the *aesir* - were warlike gods of heaven endowed with magic wisdom. Thus, in broad lines, Freyr and Freya on the one hand and Odin and Thor on the other. The French Indo-Europeanist Georges Dumézil has devised the so-called three-function theory, according to which the gods of the Indo-European pantheons may be divided, like the main strata of society, into ecclesiastics, warriors and farmers. Rein Sepp was of the opinion that the *vanir* are the ancient gods of the proto-Europeans, the first inhabitants of Europe, who were farmers, whereas the *aesir* are the gods of the immigrant proto-Indo-Europeans, who were cattle rearers and warriors (interpretation of the myth of the “War of the *aesir* and *vanir*”). The invasion of the new ethnos, which lasted for centuries, did not lead to the destruction of either the former inhabitants or their gods. Instead, the newcomers and their religion were assimilated into the substratum. As it was, the Indo-Europeans turned from nomads into farmers; consequently, the fertility gods joined the



existing gods in the pantheon as their peers. Gods were mutually accepted.⁹ When the Boat-Shaped Axe culture /of boat-like well-sharpened axes, *German* Streitaxtkultur, or the battle-axe culture/, which was of proto-Indo-European origin, reached the Baltics and Scandinavia, it speeded up the progress of land farming and cattle rearing, the new branches of economy, as well as the emergence of a polytheistic family of gods. This corner of the earth preserved the old worship of nature, too - as it was, the nature spirits, or sprites (Old Germanic *haldia*), were the future fertility gods. The gods of atmospheric phenomena - of heaven and thunder - were, however, the religious personae that rather appear to have been imported. Different languages developed and the gods got different names, yet the foundation remained the same. Figuratively speaking, the ancient Nordic nature worship clothed itself with a new robe. In this sense, Rein Sepp supposed, it is incorrect to speak about the Baltic, the Balto-Finnic and the Scandinavian religions but rather about the Baltoscandian, that is, the ancient Nordic, religion in its different forms.

The second facet is mutual contacts, which, according also to historical facts, date back to a distant past. Archaeologists, ethnographers, folklorists and mythologists have established similarities in archaeological finds, customs, vocabularies, stories and views. The sea was no barrier; man did not regard the capriciousness of nature as his enemy but quickly learned to harness it to further his own ends. The Baltic sea turned into an environment connecting peoples. This tendency is observable since the Bronze Age - the second millennium BC - at the latest. Particularly favourable was the first half of the early Metal Age, also in terms of its natural conditions; this speeded up the development of social relations and the economy and stepped up communication. Rock paintings with similar motifs can be found in South Scandinavia, Finland and Karelia alike. Archaeological finds of similar types have been reported on either side of the sea. Based on archaeological finds, myths and interpretations of historical information, the Estonian archaeologist Vello Lõugas has repeatedly pointed to potential connections between religions and forms of worship on both the Estonian territory and those of Germanic tribes. The types of stone-coffin barrows, the burial customs, the sacrificial stones with a small concavity (cup-marks) and certain types of items bear evidence of erstwhile connections and interaction between the Balto-Finnic, Baltic and Germanic peoples.¹⁰ Insofar as is known, Germanic loan words pertaining to social structure and economic relations first appear in the vocabulary of Estonian tribes at the turn of the Christian era; however, there is no evidence to rule out their earlier appearance. The early Metallic Age



- the first millennia BC (particularly, younger Bronze Age) - has even been called the first Viking Age by tradition. The prehistoric era in Estonia evidences numerous cases of contacts between the Germanic, Baltic and Balto-Finnic tribes also in subsequent archaeological periods; they were particularly intensive in the later Iron Age. The military campaigns as well as commercial and cultural exchange of the Viking Age did not pass Estonia by either. A clear evidence of that is, for instance, the toponym or ethnonym *Eistr* - the Land of the East, as, apparently, our land was called by the Scandinavians in “Ynglinga’s saga” (Eistur was the name of the people and the land was called Eistland but these names do not appear to be connected with the stem “austur” (East) in which case the names would have been Eystur and Eystland); an even clearer one is *Austrvegr* - the Eastern Way, as was called the great trade route of utmost importance to the East via the Baltics.¹¹ And we may be certain that apart from military campaigns and commercial expeditions, Estonia and the entire Eastern Baltic region have been impacted, at least at the turn of the second millennia AD, by the written culture. The first missionaries and ecclesiastics carrying the written word did not necessary come from the east or the south alone. Certainly, an equal partner in this regard was Scandinavia; as is known, Iceland, the land of immigrants, had created an outstanding literature as early as in the 12th century. It was a period in which the notion “to create”, apparently, did not differ significantly from the notion “to write”, as has been shown by the Russian Scandinavianist Mikhail Steblin-Kamenski.¹²

Thus, similar physical circumstances started to shape a similar attitude towards life and of mind already thousands of years ago. It led to the birth on either side of the Baltic sea of a common worldview, which, albeit based on different languages and differing in details, denoted a uniform attitude of mind in the entire pre-Christian Baltic sea region. And when in the 10th and 11th centuries the Scandinavian countries accepted Christianity along with the medium of civilization, Latin, and books written in that language, the establishment of a written culture also on this side of the Baltic sea became merely a matter of time and circumstances.



CONCLUSIONS

1. Naturally, Rein Sepp the Germanist has enriched Estonian culture above all by his translation work. His students, who are scientists themselves, need to continue the work, and they are capable of doing that.¹³

2. As well, it is clear that the ideas of Rein Sepp the philosopher, which he arrived at by scrutinizing the *Edda* songs, will not prove easy for scientific proof. Even if they fail to be acknowledged as more than myths, however, they will look to the future. We have had a common past. We have started to jointly seek and also recover the valuable cultural and economic experiences of that past. This recovery does not come about quickly; neither is it easy. However, by the beginning of the third millennium AD, the world has become immeasurably broader and also changed beyond recognition compared to just a hundred years ago. The trust once lost is being recovered in this corner of the earth. This recognition, however, allows us to hope that one day we will again live in a common Nordic home - the day that might be called the New Common Nordic Period. Leading the way to the recognition of the idea of a common ancient Nordic period and a common Nordic home is the second significant achievement of Rein Sepp's lifework.

NOTES

¹ Sepp and Tedre 1970. Saateks [Foreword]: 236-244.

² Maas, Alar. Rein Sepa vaimsest testamendist [Of the Spiritual Testament of Rein Sepp]. *Verbum habet Sakala. Korp! Sakala koguteos 1999 [Verbum habet Sakala. The 1999 Collection of the Students' Corps Sakala]*. Tartu: Korp! Sakala, 2001, 170-181.

³ See, e.g. Ariste, Paul. Keelekontaktid. Eesti keele kontakte teiste keeltega [Linguistic Contacts. Contacts between Estonian and Other Languages]. *Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Emakeele Seltsi Toimetised [Transactions of the Mother Tongue Society of the Estonian Academy of Sciences]*, 14. Tallinn: Valgus, 1981, 5-25.

⁴ Maas, Alar. Op. cit.



⁵ Maas, Alar. Op. cit., 177.

⁶ See, e.g. Künnap, Ago. Maakaart maskis. Taas uurali asjust [A Map in a Mask. About the Ural Affairs Again]. *Akadeemia [Academy]* 10 (91), 1996, 2019-2029, Abstract in English 2201-2202.

⁷ Sepp, Rein. Eddalaulud ja Noorem Edda [Edda Songs and Snorra-Edda]. *Verbum habet Sakala. Korp! Sakala koguteos 1999 [Verbum habet Sakala. The 1999 Collection of the Students' Corps Sakala]*. Tartu: Korp! Sakala, 2001, 209-213.

⁸ Kant, Edgar. Eesti geograafilisest kuuluvusest [Of the Geographical Belongingness of Estonia]. In: *E. Kant. Linnad ja maastikud. Eesti mõttelugu [Towns and Landscapes. The History of Estonian Thought]*, 28. Tartu: Ilmamaa, 288-293.

⁹ *Poetic-Edda: Völuspā 21-24; Snorra-Edda: Skáldskaparmál*; see, e.g. Puhvel, Jaan. *Comparative Mythology*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987, 210; Simek, Rudolf. *Lexikon der germanischen Mythology*. Stuttgart: Kröner Verlag, 1984, 460.

¹⁰ Lõugas, Vello. Pronksiaeg. Varane rauaaeg [The Bronze Age. The Early Iron Age]. In: *L. Jaanits, S. Laul, V. Lõugas, E. Tõnisson. Eesti esiajalugu [The Prehistory of Estonia]*. Tallinn: Eesti raamat, 1982, 128-203; Lõugas Vello. Kaali kraatriväljal Phaetonit otsimas [Looking for Phaeton in the Crater Fields of Kaali]. Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 1996, 138-143.

¹¹ About etymology see, e.g. Mauersberger, Arno. *Erläuterungen. Tacitus. Germania*. Zweisprachig. Aus dem Lateinischen übertragen und erläutert von Arno Mauersberger. Taschenbuch 471. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1980, 132; Simek, Rudolf. Op. cit., 32.

¹² Steblin-Kamenski, Mihhail. *Islandi kultuur [Icelandic Culture]*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1973. Translated from *Kul'tura Islandii*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1967.

¹³ See, e.g. Odini ruunilaul. Tõlkinud ja kommenteerinud Tõnno Jonuks [Odin's Runic Song. Translated and Commented by Tõnno Jonuks]. *Akadeemia [Academy]* 1, 1995, 30-43; Loddfavniri laul. Tõlkinud ja kommenteerinud Tõnno Jonuks [Loddfavnir's Song. Translated and Commented by Tõnno Jonuks]. *Akadeemia [Academy]* 4, 1996, 681-691.



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