

Estonian sky - constellations and starlore

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Abstract. An ethnoastronomy study of astronynes, beliefs and knowl-edge, related to astronomy is carried out on the base of archives, dictionaries, chronicles and publications in the last centuries. Three geografic areas with different names of the constellation are elucidated: Saaremaa Island, Kadrina parish and South Estonia.

Key words: science and society, ethnoastronomy

Естонското небе - съзвездия и звездознание

Андрес Куперянов

На базата на архиви, речници, хроники и публикации е проведено етноастрономическо изследване на астроними, вярвания и занания, свързани с астрономията. Изявени са три географски области с различни системи имена на съзвездията - остров Сааремаа, енория Кадрина и Южна Естония.

Introduction

Estonia is a small country in the Baltic region of Europe. The indigenous population, the Estonians (approx. 1 million nowadays), belongs to the Finno-Ugric peoples. The nearest neighbours are Finns, Swedes (Germanic), Latvians (Baltic) and Russians (Slavic). Estonian folkloristic material shows great influence from Christianity and the Germanic folklore, since it belonged to the Germanic cultural area from 12th to 19th century.

Ethnoastronomy studies astronynes, beliefs and knowledge related to astronomy, which are part of the culture handed down by one generation to the next. Celestial objects served some practical purposes, too - the stars were the only signs telling the way to mariners in the open sea, farmers organized the economic activities by the phases of the moon, etc.

1 About the material

The collections in the Estonian Folklore Archives [CEFA] have a long history. The ethnoastronomical text corpus of 9000 records was founded by German dictionary compilers and chroniclers. The earliest heavenly phenomena are mentioned in 17th century dictionaries (Hiarne, 1680) and chronicles (Russow, 1578). The star name 'Wolf' Hunt along with the 'Bull' or 'Ox' Harg, is mentioned in S.H.Westring's Dictionary (1720-1730) [WLEG], and these and the Milky Way have been repeatedly referred to by Wiedemann (1869, 1876).

The quality of the ethnoastronomical material is not very good. It is obvious that the data has been collected in an inappropriate manner: the collector knew little astronomy, the questioning took place during daytime and probably the narrator was not instructed to identify the objects more closely, necessarily resulting in making the recorded material ambiguous. The quality of the material would have been immensely improved, if star maps had been used as aid material and if collectors had asked about connections with other constellations. The current material is characterized by lengthy answers from single informants only, unique answers and an abundance of reports of low reliability. Since even questions on common knowledge were asked and recorded in a non-uniform manner, the material cannot be analyzed by statistical means. All in

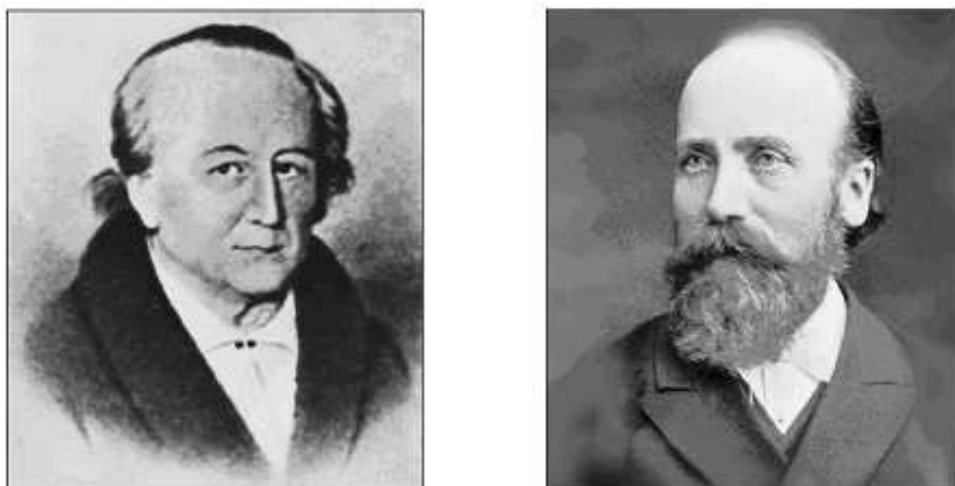


Fig. 1. Johann Wilhelm Ludvig v. Luce (left) and Jakob Hurt (right)

all, the sources from the earliest to the latest mention almost two hundred different constellation and planet names.

The oldest known manuscript source on folk astronomy comes from Saaremaa Island from 1817-1822. Johann Wilhelm Ludvig v. Luce (a pastor from Kaarma) established the Estonian Society in Arensburg in 1817. It started collecting ethnological material at the beginning of the 19th century. It also recorded some data with astronomical contents, and is the first organized collection of oral folklore heritage in Estonia.

In 1888 large-scale collecting of old Estonian oral treasure started organized by Jakob Hurt. He published his *Estonian Astronomy* at the end of the 19th century, based on collection results and earlier materials (Hurt, [1899]).

Cosmological principles had been explained in calendars since the beginning of the 18th century. The systematic collection of folk astronomy material started, however, a hundred years later, at the end of the 19th century. By this time, the clock and the printed calendars had made practical folk astronomy extinct. That is why the materials from the beginning of the 19th century, like the Saaremaa manuscript, are very important.

There are three main areas in Estonia where constellation names have been collected (Fig.2) and the most ancient names are probably from Saaremaa. Possibly, all the western islands and also the western coast of Estonia, area of (Swedish influenced) good navigators - Estonian Vikings - belonged in this set.

The most interesting material was collected at the end of the 19th century from an old lady in Northern Estonia, Kadrina parish. The woman reported complex, very different symbolic constellations with old-fashioned names. She was also a very good observer - she knew the variability of Algol and called it Hiding Star. From the Johvi parish there is also an old-fashioned name of a constellation (the name means serpent and probably refers to Orion), which may belong in this set.

South Estonian material splits into two parts - in the Orthodox (Setu) areas constellation names are more similar to North Estonian, than to most South Estonian ones. Here are examples of constellation names for Orion: Saaremaa - Spear Stars, Southern Estonia - Flail and Rake, Northern Estonia and Setu - Flails.

Fig. 2. Three different areas of constellation names. (1) Saaremaa Island: the most ancient view of the Sky. Constellations are small but some of them were well known at the beginning of 20-th century. (2) Kadrina parish (Palmse): the most complex, symbolic view of the Sky. Probably some constellations were influenced by classical astronomy. (3-4) South Estonia: complex, a bit different view of the Sky than in main North Estonia. Orthodox (Setu) area (4) has more similarities to North Estonian constellations

2 Wolf alongside the Bull

One of the oldest star/constellation names is Wolf alongside the Bull (or Ox), mentioned first in S.H.Westring's Dictionary (appr. 1720-1730) [WLEG]. These are Mizar & Alcor in Ursa Major. There is a story published first by Jakob Hurt in 1899 in his Estonian Astronomy (Hurt [1899]). In the story, the wolf tore off the ox, when a man went with his wain through the forest. Grandfather (the God) harnessed the Wolf and put the animals onto the sky, because the Wolf broke the law when trying to eat up the Ox, which worked as a draught animal. The story has also some variations - a man called Peedo or Peedu drew logs, the animals were put to the sky as a sign that the smaller can kill the bigger when the latter is busy.

This story is the only good example of astral mythology from Estonia and so far it was accepted as unique Estonian starlore. At the end of May 2004 I visited Ljubljana and met Milko Matichetov. I read his article on Slovene star names (Matichetov [1973]) and, to my great surprise, I found the same name (volk in vol - Wolf and Ox) among the Slovene astronimes. In the Slovene story, St Martin was carrying logs of wood, when the wolf came, killed the ox and broke the shaft. Then the saint harnessed the

wolf beside the ox to make him to pull the wain, the wolf pulled toward the forest and the ox - in the opposite direction.

The tale about harnessed wild and domestic animals is common in the hagiography (Matichetov [1973]). It also has many variations - with different saints or with just a man without a name, the wild animal may be a wolf or a bear. This tale is also defined as AaTh 1910 - Bar (Wolf) im Gespann (Matichetov [1977]). But the connection between this story and the stellar sky is known only to Slovenes and Estonians.

So, Slovenes had in their sky St Martin's Wain. The connection between the Great Wain and St Martin sounds logical to me, because St Catherine has some connections with the Milky Way in Estonian folk astronomy, and they both have cosmological contexts in Estonian festival traditions.

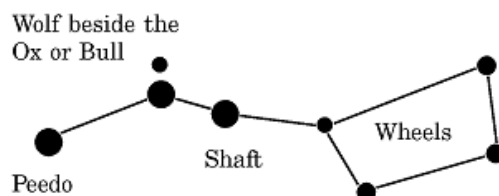


Fig. 3. The constellation Great Wain

Ursa Major was known throughout Estonia as the Great Wain. But in Saaremaa each star was known mostly by its own name, see Fig. 3. Great Wain is probably a new name for Ursa Major. An older known name is Odamus with some variations, but the meaning of this name is still unclear, probably its origin lies in the old Finno-Ugric word Oda (Spear).

3 Other constelations

Three different systems of constellation names, corresponding to three geographical areas of Estonia - Saaremaa Island, Kadrina parish (Palmse) and South Estonia are listed and shown in Fig.4 - 6.

4 Other objects

The Milky Way was mostly known as the Birds Way, but there are also other names (Kuperjanov [2001]). From the structure of the Milky Way dividing in the constellation Cygnus and brighter area in the Scutum (Yarn Baskets from Palmse) was known. Among the planets Venus was well-known (Morning or Evening Star, sometimes it was called Agu). Agu or Aotaht was the main synonym for Star in the triad Sun, Moon and Star. In the relation master-servant we may find out that Mercury was also known (it is very hard to see Mercury from this latitude). Other planets cannot be defined exactly - one known name is Walking Star. Also the name Moons Servant may be connected with planets. Comets (Stars with a tail) and falling stars were known for Estonians too.

Conclusions

Estonian ethnoastronomy is a systematically researched field since the end of the XIX century. Several articles and three special issues (Hurt [1899], Priller [1968], Kuperjanov

Fig. 4. Constellations from Saaremaa Island

Fig. 5. Constellations from South Estonia

[2003]) were published in this period. In these works, based mainly on materials of the Estonian Folklore Archives, more than 100 constellation names and many dialect forms of them are listed. Different sets of these names are shortly described.

Fig. 6. Constellations from Palmse

Variability of folk names for stars/constellations is common everywhere, but there is one peculiarity among Estonian names of celestial objects. The name of the Pleiades is everywhere Soel (Sieve) with only dialectal variations. It means that the Pleiades are for Estonians on the same level as the Sun or the Moon, unlike the nearest neighbours, the Finns, who have many different names for this constellation.

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