

The logo for the journal 'Mirator' is displayed in a stylized, cursive font within a light brown rectangular background.

Mirator 1/21 (2021)

eISSN 1457-2362

Glossa ry - Keskiajan tutkimuksen seura / Sällskapet för medeltidsforskning /

Society for Medieval studies in Finland

<https://journal.fi/mirator>

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä

The Desired Darkness of the Ancient: Kalevalaicity, Medievalism, and Cultural Memory in the Books Niemi and Viiden meren kansa

Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä

Department of Cultures, Folklore Studies, University of Helsinki

heidi.haapoja-makela@helsinki.fi

 Orcid: 0000-0001-5372-9290

To cite this article:

Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä, 'The Desired Darkness of the Ancient: Kalevalaicity, Medievalism, and Cultural Memory in the Books Niemi and Viiden meren kansa', *Mirator* 2/20 (2021), 24–49

The Desired Darkness of the Ancient: Kalevalaicity, Medievalism, and Cultural Memory in the Books *Niemi* and *Viiden meren kansa*

HEIDI HENRIKKA MÄKELÄ

The *Kalevala* (1835/1849), the national epic of Finland, and the poetic cultures and language it refers to comprise one of the most emblematic symbols of the construction of ‘Finnish culture.’ The epic and its vast archival body of materials of oral traditions were formed during the nineteenth century in accordance with national romantic ideals of Finnishness, in order to create history, language, and culture for a nation that had been a part of the Swedish and Russian Empires for hundreds of years. Above all, this was a project of modernity, which entailed a story of building modern institutions, economic infrastructures, public education, and standardized language.¹

One of the key elements in this process were the oral poetic cultures in the border areas of Finland and Russia, where the trochaic meter on which the *Kalevala* is based was largely part of the everyday life and discourses in the nineteenth century. The poetic form (often anachronistically called the ‘Kalevala-meter’²) used in these areas—as well as other Finnic regions, such as Ingria, Karelia, and Estonia—is a tetrameter that emerged in the form known today during the Late Finnic language period of ca. 200–800 CE.³ It was used in a number of genres, including epics, lyrics, rituals, occasional songs, incantations, proverbs, and riddles.⁴ The meter was used by common people (both men and women) and by *tietäjäs* (sages/healers) or well-known *runo* singers of epic songs. The naming of the poetic traditions as ‘Finnish’ stems from the nationalist aims of the folkloristic, linguistic, and musicological paradigms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The contemporary field of folklore studies acknowledges the transnational features of the poetic cultures as well as the power relations that characterize the collection, analysis, and uses of the oral

¹ See, e.g., Pertti Anttonen, *Tradition Through Modernity: Postmodernism and the Nation-State in Folklore Scholarship* (Studia Fennica Folkloristica 15), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2005; Juhana Saarelainen, ‘The Kalevala and the Cartography of Poetry and Knowledge’, in Hannu Salmi, Asko Nivala & Jukka Sarjala eds., *Travelling Notions of Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Routledge: New York and London 2016, 113–32; Lotte Tarkka, Eila Stepanova & Heidi Haapoja-Mäkelä, ‘The Kalevala’s Languages: Receptions, Myths, and Ideologies’, *Journal of Finnish Studies* 21 (2018), 15–45; William Wilson, *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington & London 1976.

² I use the term ‘Kalevala-metric poetry’ in this article because of its proverbial use in Finnish culture and because the Finnish version *kalevalamittainen runous* is mentioned several times in the materials of this article. On other options, see Kati Kallio, Frog & Mari Sarv, ‘What to Call the Poetic Form – Kalevala-Meter or Kalevalaic Verse, regivärss, Runosong, the Finnic Tetrameter, Finnic Alliterative Verse or Something Else?’, *RMN Newsletter* 12–13 (2017), 139–61.

³ Frog, ‘The Finnic Tetrameter – A Creolization of Poetic Form?’, *Studia Metrica et Poetica* 6 (2019), 20–78.

⁴ See, e.g., Frog 2019; Pentti Leino, ‘The Kalevala Metre and Its Development’, in Anna-Leena Siikala & Sinikka Vakimo eds., *Songs Beyond the Kalevala: Transformations of Oral Poetry*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1994, 56–74.

traditions in Finnish research and society.⁵

The *Kalevala* and Kalevala-metric poetry have been central elements in creating imagined Finnish pasts since the eighteenth century. In this article, I discuss the use of Kalevala-metric poetry as a tool for imagining the Middle Ages in Finland from the perspectives of *medievalism* and *cultural memory*. I concentrate especially on contemporary Finnish authors' works: Juha Hurme's essayistic book *Niemi* (2017, 'The Cape') and Risto Isomäki's collection of historical short stories *Viiden meren kansa* (2018, 'The Nation of Five Seas'). These works have been chosen due to their wide circulation, recent publication date, and the discussions they have aroused in society, as historical fiction has the ability to become a part of the mediated cultural memory of a nation (or other groups) only when it is widely read and discussed.⁶ Both Hurme and Isomäki are established and well-known authors in Finland: Hurme and his book *Niemi* won the venerable Finlandia Prize literary award in 2017, and Isomäki was given the State Award for Public Information in 2020 for his life's work of disseminating scientific information. Both of the books analyzed in this article contain artistic interpretations of Kalevala-metric poetry or poetic traditions and the medieval period. In analyzing these books, I ask the following questions: How is Kalevala-metric poetry used in the contemporary authors' texts? How are poetic cultures and forms tied to the images of the Middle Ages? What kinds of other temporal layers are created in these processes? And how do these processes reflect the contemporary society's values, images, and discourses?

The usage of Kalevala-metric poetry in contemporary culture has not been studied widely due to the alleged 'inauthenticity' of the phenomenon in relation to the old poetic cultures of the Finnic area. Per se, folklorists have concentrated on archival materials and 'authentic' sources. Due to the heritage of the formalist and structuralist paradigms, the field of studying Kalevala-metric poetry has been rather text-centered, as the research has largely focused on textualized representations of poetic cultures.⁷ Studies on the contemporary uses of Kalevala-metric poetry are few: research has been done on contemporary folk music,⁸ UNESCO-related and institutional intangible cultural

⁵ Anttonen 2005; Heidi Haapoja-Mäkelä, 'Silencing the Other's Voice? On Cultural Appropriation and the Alleged Finnishness of Kalevalaic Runo Singing', *Ethnologia Fennica* 47 (2020), 6–32; Eila Stepanova, 'Karelian Cultural Heritage in Finland's Folklife Sphere', *Western Folklore* 79 (2020), 377–99; Tarkka, Stepanova & Haapoja-Mäkelä 2018.

⁶ See, e.g., Linda Kaljundi, Eneken Laanes & Ilona Pikkanen, 'Preface', in Linda Kaljundi, Eneken Laanes & Ilona Pikkanen eds., *Novels, Histories, Novel Nations: Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia* (Studia Fennica Historica 19), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2015a, 8–25, at 13.

⁷ On studies of Kalevala-metric poetry, see, e.g., Pertti Anttonen, 'Oral Traditions and the Making of the Finnish Nation', in Timothy Baycroft & David Hopkin eds., *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century*, Brill: Leiden & Boston 2012, 325–50; Jouko Hautala, *Suomalainen kansanrunouden tutkimus*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1954; Lauri Honko, 'A Hundred Years of Finnish Folklore Research: A Reappraisal', *Folklore* 90 (1979), 141–52; Anna-Leena Siikala, 'Body, Performance, and Agency in Kalevala Rune-Singing', *Oral Tradition* 15 (2000), 255–78.

⁸ Heidi Haapoja, *Ennen saatuja sanoja. Menneisyys, nykyisyys ja kalevalamittainen runolaulu nykykansamusiikin kentällä* (Suomen Etnomusikologisen Seuran julkaisuja 22), Suomen Etnomusikologinen Seura ja Helsingin yliopisto: Helsinki 2017; Juniper Hill, 'Global Folk Music Fusions: The Reification of Transnational Relationships and the Ethics of Cross-Cultural Appropriations in Finnish Contemporary Folk Music', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 39 (2007), 50–83; Kristin Kuutma & Helen Kästik, 'Creativity and 'Right Singing': Aural Experience and Embodiment of Heritage', *Journal of Folklore Research* 51 (2014), 277–309.

heritage discourses,⁹ neopagan movements,¹⁰ and new spiritual phenomena.¹¹

Furthermore, in the fields of history and philosophy, some attention has been paid to pseudo-historical interpretations of Finnish ancient history and Kalevala-metric (epic) poetry that have been popular during the last decades, for example, among some New Age believers, amateur history enthusiasts, and right-wing nationalists. These interpretations have often included ideas of the *Kalevala*'s poems' relation to 'unknown' or 'unrevealed' historical events, such as ancient Finnish kingdoms, or that the events described in the *Kalevala* would be connected, for example, to Ancient Greece.¹² I argue that even though these have become rather popular in certain Internet forums, the majority of the interpretations of Kalevala-metric poetry and the Finnish past are not as wild as the most frenzied fantasies of ancient Finnish kings. Thus, in this article, I concentrate on somewhat more acknowledged and banal views of the Finnish past, Kalevala-metric poetry, and the medieval period. In particular, I pay attention to the ways in which the 'kalevalaic' past is admired, desired, and othered due to its alleged relation to 'paganism' and 'darkness'. My goal is not to argue that the contemporary interpretations of Kalevala-metric poetry would be somehow implausible or false from the folkloristic point of view.¹³ Instead, I am interested in the dynamic relations between the present and the past: the focus is on the contemporary mnemonic practices related to the remote past. The article asserts that *Niemi* and *Viiden meren kansa* utilize Kalevala-metric poetry and so-called 'kalevalaic' features (such as oral poetry-related themes, images, and linguistic markers) in order to underline the 'darkness' of the medieval period, as the 'kalevalaic' features are understood as 'pagan', 'barbaric', 'authentic', and 'close to nature' in contemporary culture. Furthermore, Kalevala-metric poetry and fragmentary knowledge of old folk beliefs function as tools through which the medieval Finnish 'ordinary people's' or 'folk's' thoughts and behaviors are imagined and brought forth.

⁹ Heidi Haapoja-Mäkelä, 'Näkymiä suomalaisen muinaisuuteen: Aineeton kulttuuriperintö, kalevalaisuus, paikka ja maisema', *Terra* 131 (2019), 97–112.

¹⁰ Jenni Rinne, *Searching for Authentic Living Through Native Faith. The Maausk Movement in Estonia*, Södertörn University: Huddinge 2016.

¹¹ Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä, 'Menneisyys metsässä. Metsäjooga, uushenkisyys ja muinaisuuteen ulottuva muisti 2020-luvun Suomessa', forthcoming.

¹² See, e.g., Sirpa Aalto & Harri Hihnala, "'Saagat tuntevat Suomen kuninkaat'" – pseudohistoriallisesta kirjoittelusta Suomen muinaisuudesta', *J@rgonia* 15 (2017), 1–30; Inkeri Koskinen, *Villi Suomen historia. Välimeren Väinämöisestä Äijäkupittaan pyramideihin*, Tammi: Helsinki 2015. On the historical background of the *Kalevala*-related pseudohistorical interpretations, see Fewster 2006.

¹³ As Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney put it: 'So in setting out here to examine the particular role of literature in the production of cultural memory, we are not concerned with its 'merits' relative to institutionalised historiography (such comparisons are often pointless, and are in any case beside the point here). Instead we want to consider various aspects of literature as a memorial medium in its own right as a way of contributing to the larger discussion of the ways in which societies recollect their past.' Astrid Erll & Ann Rigney, 'Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory: Introduction', *European Journal of English Studies* 10 (2006), 111–115, at 112.



Figure 1. Kalevala-metric poetry has inspired artists in Finland since the publishing of the *Kalevala* epic (1835/1849). Certain stereotypical visual images related to *runo* singers (such as their *patalakki* headgear) soon became widespread.¹⁴ Furthermore, the sexual tension between the *Kalevala* characters, the old and wise sage Väinämöinen and young Aino, has been a popular theme in Finnish art.¹⁵ Anders Ekman 1855: Väinämöinen Stringing his Kantele. Source: Finnish National Gallery. CC0.

¹⁴ On the concept and spread of the *patalakki* representation, see Derek Fewster, *Visions of Past Glory: Nationalism and the Construction of Early Finnish History* (Studia Fennica Historica 11), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2006, 64–91.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Riitta Konttinen, *Sammon takojat. Nuoren Suomen taiteilijat ja suomalaisuuden kuvat*, Tammi: Helsinki 2001.

Cultural memory, medievalism, kalevalaicity, literature

Cultural memory is comprised of representations (such as texts, rites, monuments, and institutional communication) that ‘form a store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity’.¹⁶ This mnemonic process is always related to an actual and contemporary situation: the past is remembered from changing perspectives of the present.¹⁷ Historical fiction is one of the main research interests in the field of cultural memory studies. The field is especially interested in how historical fiction can channel, fix, distribute, and transform memories; how it is related to other media, such as popular and professional history writing, visual culture, theatre, film, music, and so forth; and how historical novels can function as ‘portable monuments’.¹⁸ The latter means historical fiction’s powerful ability to produce ‘invented’ memories and historical understandings: the memories created and narrated in fictional and artistic contexts can turn out to be more enduring and memorable than those produced, for instance, in the context of historical research.¹⁹

Indeed, the *Kalevala* epic might be characterized as a portable monument, as it has powerfully participated in creating images and narratives of the Finnish past. However, it is not only the actual content of the epic that is so memorable; it is the constant reproduction of its narratives and imageries and the receptions that produce the durability of its storyworlds.²⁰ This has resulted in a situation in which the so-called ‘kalevalaicity’ (*kalevalaisuus*) has become an important aspect of Finnish cultural practices: when something is represented as ‘kalevalaic’ in contemporary Finland, it does not necessarily point at the *Kalevala*’s text or content but to the aesthetics, values, cultural contexts, images, language, and/or mythic worldviews that are understood as stemming from the *Kalevala* or the oral poetic cultures / tietäjä traditions related to it.²¹ The remembering of the Finnish past through ‘kalevalaicity’ does not necessarily adhere to specific timeframes or personal memories but to ‘times of the forefathers’, ‘time immemorial’, ‘ancientness’, or ‘mythic times’.²²

However, as Derek Fewster has shown, ‘kalevalaic’ features have frequently been used in Finnish fiction and art in order to represent the Iron Age as well as the Middle Ages. This was caused by the nineteenth-century nationalistic attempt to interpret the poetry and the poetic images

¹⁶ Jan Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 125–33, at 130.

¹⁷ Assmann 1995; Ann Rigney, ‘Remembrance as Remaking: Memories of the Nation Revisited’, *Nations and Nationalism* 24 (2018), 240–57, at 242.

¹⁸ Kaljundi, Laanes & Pikkanen 2015a, 11–12.

¹⁹ Ann Rigney, ‘Portable Monuments. Literature, Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans’, *Poetics Today* 25 (2004), 361–96.

²⁰ See also Juhana Saarelainen, ‘Becoming of a Memory Box: the Kalevala. Sung Poetry, Printed Word and National Identity’, in Heta Aali, Anna-Leena Perämäki & Cathleen Sarti eds., *Memory Boxes: An Experimental Approach to Cultural Transfer in History, 1500–2000*, Transcript Verlag: Bielefeld 2014, 155–75.

²¹ Tarkka et al. 2018.

²² Mäkelä, forthcoming.

as if they represented ‘reality’ and history.²³ Even though the poetry is nowadays mainly understood as representing mythic knowledge, historical interpretations still lurk in the background (for instance, of Finnish fiction), although they intermingle with artistic renditions: many authors have constructed the Finnish medieval (or earlier) past through references to Kalevala-metric poetry, the *Kalevala*, or *tietäjät* traditions, and ‘kalevalaic themes’ have been used ‘as markers of the ancient roots of the Finnish-language culture.’²⁴ The utilization of ‘kalevalaic’ features has been most popular among visual artists, playwrights, and poets,²⁵ but many of the ‘kalevalaic’ works belong to the genre of the historical novel.²⁶ Furthermore, the images are popular in fantasy,²⁷ as well as in historical romance, which has often been characterized as ‘women’s literature’.²⁸ The ‘kalevalaic’ features of Finnish literature have been studied surprisingly little,²⁹ but Riikka Rossi (2020), for instance, has profoundly examined the primitivist strand of the early twentieth-century literature in Finland,

²³ Festwer 2006; Derek Fewster, ‘Kalevala ja muinaisuuden politisoituminen’, in Ulla Piela, Seppo Knuuttila & Pekka Laaksonen eds., *Kalevalan kulttuurihistoria*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2008. In the beginning of institutionalized folklore studies in Finland, the researchers tried to date the poems and place them on historical timelines and on geographical locations in order to promote the nationalist goals of the time. The poems were interpreted as if they represented ‘reality,’ but this reality was tied to the political and social contexts of the moment in which the poems were analyzed. Later, the poetry came to be regarded as mythic and transnationally traveling, even though historians mused on the historical interpretations as late as the 1980s. Anna-Leena Siikala, ‘Transformations of the Kalevala epic’, in Anna-Leena Siikala & Sinikka Vakimo eds., *Songs beyond the Kalevala: Transformations of Oral Poetry* (Studia Fennica Folkloristica 2), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1994, 15–38; see also Matti Klinge, *Muinaisuutemme merivallat*. Otava: Keuruu 1984; Martti Linna ed., *Muinaisrunot ja todellisuus. Suomen kansan vanhojen runojen historiallinen tausta*. Historian Ystävien Liitto: Jyväskylä 1987.

²⁴ Kaljundi, Laanes & Pikkanen, ‘Introduction: Historical Fiction, Cultural memory and Nation Building in Finland and Estonia’, in Linda Kaljundi, Eneken Laanes & Ilona Pikkanen eds., *Novels, Histories, Novel Nations: Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia* (Studia Fennica Historica 19), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2015b, 26–76, at 35.

²⁵ Kaljundi, Laanes & Pikkanen 2015b, 35. On the use of the Kalevala meter in Finnish poetry, see Eino Leino, *Helkavirsiä I–II*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2000 [1903 & 1916].

²⁶ See, e.g., Juhani Aho, *Panu*, WSOY: Porvoo 1909 [1897]; Paavo Haavikko, *Rauta-aika*, Otava: Helsinki 1982; Mikko Kamula, *Ikimetsien sydänmailla*, Gummerus: Helsinki 2017; JP Koskinen, *Kalevalanpoikien kronikka. Historiallinen romaani*, WSOY: Helsinki 2018; Jari Tammi, *Kalevan solki*, Kuippana Kustannus Oy: Turku 2002. On similar themes in Estonia, see Lennart Meri, *Hopeanvalkea. Matka menneeseen oppaina aurinko, fantasia ja folklore*, Gummerus: Helsinki 2006 [1983].

²⁷ See, e.g., Mervi Heikkilä, *Louhen liitto*, Haamu: Vaasa 2015; Anne Leinonen, *Metsän äiti*, Atena: Keuruu 2017; Arto Paasilinna, *Ukkosenjumalan poika*, WSOY: Helsinki 2012 [1984]; Johanna Sinisalo, *Sankarit*, Tammi: Helsinki 2003.

²⁸ See, e.g., Kaari Utrio, *Vaskilintu*, Tammi: Helsinki 1992; Kristiina Vuori, *Elinan surma*, Tammi: Helsinki 2018.

²⁹ See, e.g., Elli-Mari Ahola, ‘Kertoja ja sisäistekijä maailmanrakentajina Jari Tammen Kalevala-muunnelmaromaanissa Kalevan solki’, *Kirjallisuudentutkimuksen aikakauslehti Avain* 2 (2018), 58–75; Merja Leppälahti, ‘Kalevalan kankahilla. Kalevalainen maailma sekundaarimaailmana suomalaisessa fantasiakirjallisuudessa’, in Ulla Piela & Petja Kauppi eds., *Tuolla puolen, siellä jossakin. Käsityksiä kuvitelluista maailmoista* (Kalevalaseuran vuosikirja 99), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2020, 125–46; Eliisa Pitkäsalo, *Kalevalaiset sankarit nykymaailman menossa. Tutkimus Johanna Sinisalon romaanista Sankarit* (Nykykulttuurin tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisu 104), Jyväskylän yliopisto: Jyväskylä 2011; Kari Sallamaa, ‘Kalevala sanataiteessa 1860–1935’, in Ulla Piela, Seppo Knuuttila & Pekka Laaksonen eds., *Kalevalan kulttuurihistoria*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2008, 28–65; Antti Tuuri, Ulla Piela & Seppo Knuuttila, *Kirjailijoiden Kalevala* (Kalevalaseuran vuosikirja 92), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2013.

which is closely tied to the images and language of ‘kalevalaicity’.³⁰ Furthermore, Derek Fewster has thoroughly mapped the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century nationalist literature that discusses elements of Finnish ‘ancientness’ (*muinaisuus*) and the medieval period.³¹

I utilize here the concept of medievalism, as it helps to understand ‘how people have, since the fifteenth century, conceptualized the thousand or so years of history that preceded that date.’³² Medievalism researchers ask similar questions as the cultural memory researchers: the focus is on newer interpretations and the contexts themselves, and on the ways the medieval becomes considered in them.³³ The study of medievalism has also brought the questions of scholarly ‘authenticity’ and the so-called ‘convergence culture’ to the fore; in contemporary culture, images of the medieval period are circulated across a variety of media such as fiction, film, games, etc., and consumers are more and more able to do ‘research’ and explore the period by themselves.³⁴ This tension between scholarly knowledge and popular images is related to cultural memory studies’ discussions on ‘invented memories’ and historical fiction’s role; among other culturally important works, *Niemi* and *Viiden meren kansa* may be among the foremost sources through which contemporary and future readers imagine and experience the Finnish medieval period. As I show in this article, the ‘kalevalaic’ elements in literature are important means of enhancing the experience of the medieval: poetic language and images comprise key features that make contemporary medievalist interpretations so memorable—and perhaps durable as well.

I discuss the use of Kalevala-metric poetry in the medievalist literature as an element through which the image of the Middle Ages as a ‘dark’ period is emphasized. I argue that ‘darkness’ in this case is primarily *desired*, and only slightly shunned. The idea of *desired darkness* could be described as a positively charged and affective utilization and admiration of the mythic, ‘pagan,’ ‘grotesque,’ ‘barbaric,’ violent, or supernatural elements often associated with Kalevala-metric poetry as well as with the medieval period.³⁵ The desired darkness in this case is a similar driving force as that, for instance, which inspires consumer-oriented tourists to visit places of ‘dark herit-

³⁰ Riikka Rossi, *Alkukantaisuus ja tunteet. Primitiivismi 1900-luvun alun suomalaisessa kirjallisuudessa*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2020.

³¹ Fewster 2006.

³² Richard A. Marsden, ‘Medievalism: New Discipline or Scholarly No-man’s Land?’, *History Compass* 16 (2018), e12439, at 1.

³³ See, e.g., Helen Dell, ‘Nostalgia and Medievalism: Conversations, Contradictions, Impasses’, *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2 (2011), 115–26; Marsden 2018; David Matthews, ‘In Search of Lost Feeling: The Emotional History of Medievalism’, *Exemplaria* 30 (2018), 207–22. For studies on medievalism in Finland, see, e.g., Fewster 2006; Leena Valkeapää, ‘Käyttökelpoinen keskiaika. Historiakulttuuria nykypäivän Ulvilassa ja Raumalla’, *Alue ja ympäristö* 35 (2006), 79–91; Reima Välimäki, ‘“Uusi Turku tupineen.” Hilda Huntuvuoren (1887–1968) historialliset romaanit ja kuva varhaiskeskiajan Turusta’, in Marika Räsänen, Reima Välimäki, & Marjo Kaartinen eds., *Turun tuomiokirkon suojissa: pohjoinen hiippakuntakeskus keskiajan ja uuden ajan alun Euroopassa*, Turun historiallinen yhdistys: Turku 2012, 215–40.

³⁴ Stephanie Trigg, ‘Medievalism and Convergence Culture: Researching the Middle Ages for Fiction and Film’ *Parergon* 25 (2008), 99–118.

³⁵ See also Marsden 2018, 3–4.

age’ related to death, disaster, and atrocities,³⁶ fascinates Black Metal music enthusiasts,³⁷ or charms visitors at medieval castle ruins that provide multiple and open-ended possibilities for interpreting and experiencing the aesthetic of the sublime and the ‘gothic sentiment’.³⁸ In this article, I show how the idea of desired darkness is woven into the use of ‘kalevalaic’ poetic lines and images in contemporary literature and how these uses are tied to images related to the Middle Ages.



Figure 2. A Stack of ‘kalevalaicity’-related books on the researcher’s desk. © Author.

Materials and methods

The books analyzed in this article represent widely known Finnish contemporary literature. Juha Hurme’s *Niemi* (2017) has been one of the most read books in the Finnish language since its publication,³⁹ as it won the Finlandia prize of the best novel of the year in November 2017. Furthermore, Finland celebrated its centenary in 2017, which generated a great deal of metadiscursive talk on Finnishness, as did the *Suomi 100 / Finland 100* program coordinated by the Prime Minister’s

³⁶ See, e.g., Avital Biran, Yaniv Poria & Gila Oren, ‘Sought Experiences at (Dark) Heritage Sites’, *Annals of Tourism Research* 38 (2011), 820–41.

³⁷ Eric Smialek, ‘Getting Medieval: Signifiers of the Middle-Ages in Black Metal Aesthetics’, in Ruth Barratt-Peacock & Ross Hagen eds., *Medievalism and Metal Music Studies: Throwing Down the Gauntlet*, Emerald Publishing Limited: Bingley 2019, 35–55.

³⁸ Duncan Light & Steve Watson, ‘The Castle Imagined. Emotion and Affect in the Experience of Ruins’, in Divya Tolia-Kelly, Emma Waterton & Steve Watson eds., *Heritage, Affect and Emotion: Politics, Practices and Infrastructures*, Routledge: Oxfordshire & New York 2017, 154–78.

³⁹ ‘HelMet-kirjastojen lainatuimmat aikuistenkirjat’. Accessed 12 January 2020. Available at: <https://hri.fi/data/dataset/helmet-kirjastojen-lainatuimmat-aikuistenkirjat>.

Office.⁴⁰ *Niemi* and *Viiden meren kansa* were, at least indirectly, part of this festive ethos. *Niemi* was highly appraised in several reviews, including a review by the *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest newspaper in Finland.⁴¹



Figure 3. The cover of *Niemi*. Cover art: Jenni Saari. ©Kustannusosakeyhtiö Teos.

Figure 4. The cover of *Viiden meren kansa*. Cover art: Jussi Karjalainen. ©Into Kustannus Oy.

Niemi is an essayistic book by the theater director Juha Hurme; according to the blurb of the book, it contains: ‘Elevating and puzzling incidents for benefit and amusement, from the Big Bang to the year 1809 in the certain cape region that later became known as Finland.’ The same text describes the book as ‘the cultural history of the universe’.⁴² However, the majority of the book discusses the history of the Finnish area during the years 0–1809 CE (pages 79–440). The first three chapters cover the earlier periods, starting from the Big Bang and the geological Hadean Eon. The name

⁴⁰ On the *Finland 100* program and its relation to the (re)production of nationalistic images, see Anu Printsmann, Hannu Linkola, Anita Zariņa, Margarita Vološina, Maunu Häyrynen & Hannes Palang, ‘Landscape 100: How Finland, Estonia and Latvia Used Landscape in Celebrating Their Centenary Anniversaries’, *European Countryside*, 11 (2019), 187–210.

⁴¹ The journalist Mervi Kantokorpi states that ‘Hurme brilliantly tells his own version of cultural history’. See Mervi Kantokorpi, ‘Oliko Agricolaista enemmän haittaa kuin hyötyä? – Juha Hurme kertoo loistavasti oman versionsa kulttuurihistoriasta’, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 26 September 2017. Accessed 14 January 2021. Available at: <https://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/kirja-arvostelu/art-2000005382383.html>.

⁴² Translation: author. Original: ‘Käsissäsi on maailmankaikkeuden kulttuurihistoria à la Juha Hurme. Kohottavia ja askarruttavia sattumuksia hyödyksi ynnä huviksi alkuräjähdyksestä vuoteen 1809 sellaisen niemennokan seutuvilta, josta jossain vaiheessa tuli Suomi.’ Hurme 2017.

of the book, *Niemi*, is related to the constructivist idea that Finland did not exist in the sense of the contemporary understanding before the year 1809, when the area became a part of the Russian Empire and achieved the status of Grand Duchy of Finland. Thus, the title of the book ('The Cape', in English) refers to the geographical shape of the peninsula between the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Bothnia. In 2020, Hurme published a sequel, *Suomi*,⁴³ which discusses the years between 1809 and the present day. This book is not included in the materials of this article, as *Suomi* does not discuss the medieval period apart from short passages.

Viiden meren kansa (2018) is a collection of eight short stories that discuss the prehistorical 'turning points' of the Finnic people or their ancestors before the thirteenth century. Themes such as the inhabiting of the Finnish peninsula area, the isostatic uplifts and other natural phenomena that the hunter-gatherer cultures encountered in the Neolithic Era, and the Northern Crusades are examined in the book. The novel was positively welcomed in a review by the *Helsingin Sanomat*, which appraised the book as 'a strong counterpart to *Niemi*.'⁴⁴ According to Isomäki, the writing of the book was inspired by new studies in archaeology, linguistics, and genetics, but as Isomäki himself describes in the epilogue,

While trying to imagine how things might have happened, I have taken great artistic liberties. Even though academic research has produced many interesting fragments of knowledge, literary work, unlike scientific study, has to fill the huge gaps between the fragments in some way.⁴⁵

The epilogue is a very intriguing source for a cultural memory researcher, as it contains Isomäki's own interpretations as well as descriptions of the academic literature he used in the background work. The epilogue sums up beautifully the themes that have interested medievalism scholars lately: the tension between scholarly authenticity and 'the desire for the narrative pleasure of world-building'.⁴⁶ In this article, I concentrate especially on the sixth (*Paholaisen tyttäret*, 'The Daughters of the Devil') and seventh (*Karsikkopuun kuolema*, 'The Death of the Karsikko Tree') short stories, as they are based on stories of the first and second Swedish Crusades and contain several references to Kalevala-metric poetry and kalevalaicity-related *tietäjä* traditions. The book also contains a short story (*Lemminki ja lohikäärme*, 'Lemminki and the Dragon') in which the Iron Age-related kalevalaic mythology is discussed in light of geological history, but the story is not analyzed here due to its timeframe, which does not refer to the medieval period.

In this article, the books are scrutinized through a detailed close reading and analyzed in relation to other related texts, such as folkloristic research, history writing, other novels, and artistic genres. I have read the material systemically, juxtaposing the texts and identifying intersecting themes and thematic entities in them, especially in relation to the idea of desired darkness. During

⁴³ Juha Hurme, *Suomi*, Teos: Helsinki 2020.

⁴⁴ Jukka Koskelainen, 'Suomalainen heimo oli alun perin sekalainen sakki, Risto Isomäki näyttää historiatriillerissään – Viiden meren kansa on vahva vastine Juha Hurmeen Niemelle', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 7 September 2018. Accessed 12 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000005818657.html>.

⁴⁵ Isomäki 2018, 285. Translation: author.

⁴⁶ Trigg 2008, 100.

the process, I have identified and named three themes: 1) Christianity and ‘pagan’ Finnishness, 2) ‘pagan-ness’ and the crusades, 3) and the desired/othered medieval body. These themes are introduced in the next sections of this article.

Of becoming and being Christian: Kalevala-metric poetry as a symbol of ‘pagan’ Finnishness

The first important theme that characterizes the ‘dark’ narratives of the Middle Ages in the analyzed books is the tension between Christianity and ‘pagan’ Finnishness. Overall, this is a profoundly important feature of the cultural history of the reception of Kalevala-metric poetry and the *Kalevala* epic, as the compiler Elias Lönnrot paradoxically removed all the Christian influences from the published poems—and invented an ending for the epic in which the main hero Väinämöinen leaves and Jesus becomes ‘the guardian of all powers’.⁴⁷ Even though Lönnrot wished to create a depiction of the Finnish pre-Christian past, his epic reflected the narrative of European modernity in which ‘Christian lightness’ beats ‘pagan darkness’.⁴⁸ As I show in this article, this narrative still characterizes Finnish kalevalaicity-related medievalist writing, but in a changed way: the ‘dark’ and ‘pagan’ past is now admired, desired, nostalgized, and seen as ‘authentic’.

The tension between Christianity and pagan Finnishness is frequently discussed in earlier Finnish medievalist literature: for example, the novel *Panu* (published in 1897) by Juhani Aho is a foundational work that tells the story of a *tietäjä*, Panu, who wrangles with a Lutheran priest. Subsequently, the tensions between (Catholic) Christianity and ‘ancient’ folk beliefs have been negotiated in several literary works. Quite often the emphasis of the authors has been on (re)telling and glorifying the greatness of pagan Finnishness in the Early Middle Ages and underlining the otherness of the Catholic religion.⁴⁹ For example, in *Panu*, the *tietäjä* tradition and belief are depicted in ‘idealist, almost sublime tones’.⁵⁰ However, some works have represented Christianity as an unavoidable development that enabled new heroic times for the Finns under the cross.⁵¹ In more recent books, the ‘pagan’ times and folk beliefs have mostly been regarded as material for creating, deepening, and explaining the fantasy elements in the novels, and Christianity has been seen as somewhat irrelevant or frivolous.⁵²

In the works analyzed in this article, Christian belief is seen in a rather negative light, and the authors’ voices seem to conform to the ancient worldviews—at least in a rationality-emphasizing and progressive manner. Especially in Hurme’s books, the Kalevala-metric poetry is regarded as representing the ancient Finnish language and beautiful poetic expression and communication, but also the ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ belief systems that rather sadly faded away due to the influence of first the Catholic and then the Lutheran Church. Hurme’s ironic voice calls Christians ‘freaks’, as he describes the atmosphere of the Early Middle Ages:

⁴⁷ *Kalevala* 50, line 478.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Anttonen 2005, 29.

⁴⁹ Fewster 2006, 279–84, 340–45; Välimäki 2012, 220–21.

⁵⁰ Kaljundi et al. 2015b, 36.

⁵¹ Välimäki 2012, 221.

⁵² See, e.g., Kamula 2017; Paasilinna 2012 [1984].

Now, the development of Scandinavia and the Cape with it started to be influenced by a phenomenon born about a thousand years earlier in a Roman province at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. It all started very small. An odd group of freaks waiting for the Apocalypse denied the Roman gods and began to worship an invisible creator-god and particularly his virgin-conceived visible son, who had been executed as a criminal. Furthermore, these guys had the gall to assert that this son-god had resurrected and would return from heaven in short order and bring the end of the world with him.⁵³

Hurme continues to describe how Christian belief began to spread in Northern Europe, and depicts the change of religious life in the Finnish area as ‘rather placid’ (*suht lupsakka*)⁵⁴ when compared to many other areas in Europe. In a tactful manner, he follows the interpretations of today’s historical research and archaeology, which emphasize the gradual diffusion of belief in Christ through the Finnish peninsula and critically consider the former ideas of the three ‘Swedish Crusades’. However, Hurme uses Kalevala-metric poetry as evidence of the early medieval period’s vernacular-religious thinking and attitudes toward Christianization; in *Niemi*, he interprets the attitudes found in poetic verses that discuss Christian themes (such as biblical characters or church buildings) in relation to old mythic images (such as the Great Oak or World Tree). Hurme argues:

Not every citizen was at all interested in changing their ancient faith and belief to the odd doctrine of strangers. It is speculated that, for example, in the Satakunta and Häme regions, people escaped to the North in the Early Christian period because they did not want to accept the Christian belief that was being force-fed in their former home regions.
[--]

The passing of the old religion and the arrival of the new one are described with heart-breaking melancholy in the following poem in which the mythic World Tree refuses to serve as material for the new ideology and institution:

Two Karelians, five,
or six Estonians
honed for a day their axes
another the other side
and for a third the whole blades
and they went in search of wood
to catch an oak-tree.
They found a tree, caught an oak
began to hack the oak-tree

The oak chattered with its tongue:
‘What do you men want of me?’

⁵³ Hurme 2017, 111. Translation: author.

⁵⁴ Hurme 2017, 118.

The men answering said:
 We seek wood for a church threshold
 wood for raising an altar
 wood where a deacon may sing
 wood for Mary to lie on.

The oak answering replied:
 ‘My wood will not serve for that
 no wood for a church threshold
 wood for raising an altar
 wood where a deacon may sing
 wood for Mary to lie on:
 a wolf has run on my roots
 a bear has lain on my foot
 a squirrel in my branches
 a bird has sung in my top.’⁵⁵

The quoted nineteenth-century poem type⁵⁶ originates from the Ingrian region, which is located in Russia between St Petersburg and Estonia and thus outside the borders of today’s Finland. During the nineteenth century, Ingria was a multicultural area where different Baltic-Finnic ethnic groups (such as Votes, Izhorians, Ingrian Finns, Finns, and Estonians) interacted more or less with Russians, Germans, Swedes, and Roma people.⁵⁷ The poem, collected from the Lutheran village of Venjoki, reflects the complex relationships between Ingrian Christian religiousness and their role as an ‘other’ in the realm of nineteenth-century national romanticism; according to emic understandings, Christian identity was a very important one in the area, but especially the Finnish elite that came to the area to collect ‘archaic’ poetry regarded the Ingrians as nearly pagan and uncivilized, and thus more ‘authentic’ from the angle of the old Kalevala-metric poetry.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Hurme 2017, 118–119. Translation: author (Hurme’s text) / Matti Kuusi, Keith Bosley & Michael Branch, *Finnish Folk Poetry – Epic: An Anthology in Finnish and English*, Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 1977, 325 (poem). Original poem: Oli kaks karjalaista / virolaista ol viisi, kuusi, / hihhoiit päivän kirvestäse / toisen päivän toista puolta / kolmannen koko terää. / Menniit puuta etsimään / tammee tavittamaan: / löysiit puun, tapasiit tammen / alkoit tammen hakata / Tammi kielelle rupesi: / ‘Mitä työ miehet minusta?’ / Miehet vasten vastasivat: / ‘Etsim kirkon kynnyspuita, / alttarin asetuspuita, / lukkarille laulupuita, / Maarian makauspuita.’ / Tammi vasten vastajeli: / ‘Ei minusta niiksi puiksi / ei o kirkon kynnyspuiksi / alttarin asetuspuita / lukkarille laulupuita / Maarian makauspuiksi: / sus on juossut juurillain / karhu on maannut kannoillain / oravainen oksillaini / lintu laulo latvassain.’

⁵⁶ *Kirkon tarvaisaineiden etsintä* (‘The Search for Materials for a Church’) SKVR IV1651. Venjoki. Collector: Reinholm 1847. See also SKVR IV1, 182. Hietämäki. Europaes 1848; SKVR IV1, 787. Kupanitsa. Törnerooos 1859; SKVRIV2, 2400. Spankkova. Saarinen 1893; SKVR IV3, 3167. Tyrö. Haltsonen 1903; SKVR IV3, 3810. Koprina. Patomäki 1907.

⁵⁷ Kati Kallio, ‘Interperformative Relationships in Ingrian Oral Poetry’, *Oral Tradition* 25 (2011), 391–427.

⁵⁸ Kati Kallio, *Laulamisen tapoja. Esitysareena, rekisteri ja paikallinen laji länsi-inkeriläisessä kalevalamittaisessa runossa*, Helsingin yliopisto: Helsinki 2013, 44; Ergo-Hart Västriik, *Vadjalaste ja isurite usundi kirjeldamine keskajast 20. sajandi esimese pooleni. Alliktekstid, representatsioonid ja tõlgendused* (Dissertationes folkloristicae Universitatis Tartuensis 9), Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus: Tartu 2007.

In addition to Hurme's *Niemi*, this particular Ingrian poem was published in the 1970s in a Finnish-English anthology called *Finnish Folk Poetry*⁵⁹ and in 1980 in its Finnish version, *Kalevalaista kertomaruoutta*.⁶⁰ This may explain its reappearance in newer contexts, as the books were published by the established Finnish Literature Society and thus disseminated rather widely in Finland, as well as elsewhere. The poem is related to other Ingrian and Karelian poems, in which timber suitable for the keel of a boat is sought in order to create a fine boat for an otherworldly voyage. Such poems include hybrid views in which elements of Christian and folk belief are intertwined.⁶¹ As the editors of *Finnish Folk Poetry* note in the commentary section of the book, 'The Tree [poem] is an adaptation by early Christian Ingrians of a pagan theme. [...] The motifs in the adaptation have a symbolic function [--]: the wood of the tree is rejected as unsuitable for a church because it has been defiled by animals associated with evil. [The] verses suggest that the archetypal poem contained a passage describing how the woodmen sought and found a suitable tree, i.e. one associated with animals symbolizing God and virtue.'⁶² Thus, the poem might actually be interpreted not as a 'refusal' of the oak tree to serve as material for a church, but as a Christianity-laden lamentation of its connections to 'evil' animals, such as the snake and the raven (mentioned in other versions).⁶³ Analogously, the poem reflects the nineteenth-century Ingrian community's understanding of what was good, evil, Christian, and proper.

Even though Kuusi et al. associate the poem with 'pagan themes' in the quotation above, the Kalevala-metric poetry collected during the nineteenth century is, as a matter of fact, not a black-and-white entity from which 'pagan' and Christian themes could be easily separated. Above all, the hybridity of world views was inescapable in the remote border areas of Karelia and Ingria, where the Orthodox and Lutheran Churches as well as the old folk beliefs defined the everyday life and were constantly negotiated.⁶⁴ As for the 'pagan-ness' or temporal layers of the particular Ingrian poem above, one cannot *de facto* say if some of the verses refer to early medieval vernacular poetic images or not, but it is quite plausible that the Christian influences are considerably newer.⁶⁵ However, it is very intriguing that Hurme creates the temporal connection between the 170-year-old poetic verses and the early medieval period. Interestingly, Hurme's interpretation of the Ingrian poem as a window to the battle between Christianity and old folk belief seems to have touched Finnish readers: according to a single Google search of the verses, at least two literature bloggers have quoted the poem in their reviews of *Niemi*, and on the Internet forum of *Tiede* ('Science') magazine an anonymous writer has cited the lines in the thread *Jumalan olemassaolo* ('The Existence of God') in order to describe how 'an atheist can be emotionally moved by religious things as well'.

Why does this particular Ingrian poem have the ability to touch contemporary readers and

⁵⁹ Kuusi, Bosley & Branch 1977.

⁶⁰ Matti Kuusi, *Kalevalaista kertomaruoutta*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1980.

⁶¹ See, e.g., SKVR I1, 339. Latvajärvi. Cajan 1836; SKVR III1, 346. Soikkola. Länkelä 1858; Kaarle Krohn, 'Venepuun etsintä', *Virittäjä* 2(6) (1898), 93–102.

⁶² Kuusi, Bosley & Branch 1977, 556.

⁶³ See Kuusi 1980, 235; Krohn 1898.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Tarkka 2005, 22–27.

⁶⁵ See Krohn 1898, 98.

create and fill such huge temporal time spans in people's minds? In this, I argue, the idea of desired darkness plays an important role: as the idea of 'Finnish pagan-ness' is appealing in medievalist contexts, there seems to be a tendency to interpret the Kalevala-metric poetic verses through the 'pagan' frame despite the verses' cultural background, which is—from the medievalist point of view—frustratingly hybrid, versatile, and not easily understandable from the twenty-first-century perspective.

Furthermore, the poem includes certain symbols of Finnish stereotypes of 'pagan-ness,' 'backwardness,' and 'traditionality'; it mentions the wolf and the bear, well-known and simultaneously frightening symbols of Finnish nature and wilderness.⁶⁶ This image is circulated also on the cover of Isomäki's *Viiden meren kansa* (see Figure 4), which includes a skull of a bear hanging on a pine branch. The tree on the cover refers to the short stories in the book that discuss sacred trees and hunting, for example. A bear skull is often interpreted as a visual symbol of 'kalevalaicity' and 'pagan-ness,' as there existed a great number of Kalevala-metric poems concerning bear hunting and including descriptions of old bear rituals in the Eastern Karelian border areas between Finland and Russia.⁶⁷ The bear symbol of 'pagan' and 'traditional' Finnish culture is repeatedly reconstructed, and this reconstruction applies to the above-mentioned Ingrian poem as well, even though the lines of the poem refer quite vicariously to the old, non-Christian bear-related rituals or poetic images.

Pagan Finns and the Crusades

The idea of 'pagan' and 'kalevalaicity'-related Finnishness is also negotiated in the materials of this article through the narratives of crusades. In contrast to Hurme, Isomäki adheres to the well-known stories of crusades, which is a common trend in the Finnish medievalist literature. However, unlike the previous medievalist works, Isomäki discusses the so-called 'Northern Crusades' and expands the idea of 'Finnishness' to 'Fenno-Ugric' identity; for instance, he writes on the raid in Saaremaa, Estonia in 1227 in order to underline the connection between 'pagan' Estonians and Finns in the Middle Ages. In addition to this, he discusses the canonical Finnish narratives on the crusades, as he depicts the so-called 'Second Swedish Crusade' (possibly in the mid-13th century) as well as the very well-known 'First Swedish Crusade' (possibly in 1150), which is based on the *Legend of St Henry*. Even though contemporary historical research or archaeology does not acknowledge the Swedish Crusades as authorized crusades but rather military raids or even imaginary events, they have had a very important role in understanding, describing, and interpreting Finnish Christianity

⁶⁶ Wolves have been regarded as dangerous, frightening, and a symbol of otherness for hundreds of years; see, e.g., Juha Hiedanpää, Jani Pellikka & Sanna Ojalampi, 'Meet the Parents: Normative Emotions in Finnish Wolf Politics', *Trace – Finnish Journal for Human-Animal Studies* 2 (2016), 4–27; Sakari Mykrä, Mari Pohja-Mykrä & Timo Vuorisalo, 'Hunters' Attitudes Matter: Diverging Bear and Wolf Population Trajectories in Finland in the Late Nineteenth Century and Today', *European Journal of Wildlife Research* 63 (2017), 63–74; Jouko Teperi, *Sudet Suomen rintamaiden ihmisten uhkana 1800-luvulla* (Historiallisia tutkimuksia 101), Suomen Historiallinen Seura: Helsinki 1977.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., Vesa-Matteo Piludu, *The Forestland's Guests. Mythical Landscapes, Personhood, and Gender in the Finno-Karelian Bear Ceremonialism*, The University of Helsinki: Helsinki 2019.

and Finnishness since the Middle Ages.⁶⁸ Rather than commenting on historical research, Isomäki's text discusses interpretations that have been used so often, for instance, in discourses on nationality, Europeanness, and religion. However, even though Isomäki brings forth the 'Finnish' (or 'Fenno-Ugric') vernacular point of view in order to emphasize the 'pagan-ness' or 'uniqueness' of Finns when compared to the Christian world, his attitude toward Christian belief is somewhat milder than Hurme's, as in the epilogue he distances himself from criticizing religious worldviews:

I have described the crusaders as disturbingly violent brutes. This results merely from the fact that the crusaders were disturbingly violent brutes. [--] These stories are not meant to be interpreted as a general critique of Christianity or religions, but only as a critique of the misuse of religions.⁶⁹

Isomäki presents the 'pagan' Finns at the hands of the crusaders either as innocent victims with a childlike nature (*Paholaisen tyttäret*, 'The Daughters of Evil,' referring to the Second Crusade) or as strong wrathful warriors (*Karsikkopuun kuolema*, 'The Death of the Karsikko Tree,' referring to the First Crusade). Isomäki does not cite any Kalevala-metric poetry, but both stories include features that refer to Kalevala-metric oral cultures and *tietäjä* (sage) traditions. The short story *Paholaisen tyttäret* depicts, for example, how the 'pagan' villagers arrange summer orgiastic fertility rituals at the Rapola hill fort in Häme, eat hallucinogenic mushrooms, and regard *tietäjäs* as their leaders. At the end of the short story, Birger Jarl and his troops brutally slaughter the villagers in the name of God and the Swedish king. Isomäki's picture of the 'pagan' villagers refers to stereotypical images of northern indigenous religious rituals as well as to the images of both pagans and the Catholic Church that the Reformers created in Finland in the sixteenth century.⁷⁰ Indeed, before modern times, Kalevala-metric poetry was used in certain fertility celebrations such as *Ukon*

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Tuomas Heikkilä, 'An Imaginary Saint for an Imagined Community. St. Henry and the Creation of Christian Identity in Finland, Thirteenth–Fifteenth Centuries', in W. Jezierski & L. Hermanson eds., *Imagined Communities on the Baltic Rim, from the Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries*, Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam 2016, 223–52; see also Georg Haggren et al., *Muinaisuutemme jäljet. Suomen esi- ja varhaishistoria kivikaudelta keskiajalle*, Gaudeamus: Helsinki 2015.

⁶⁹ Isomäki 2018, 324–25. Translation: author.

⁷⁰ Descriptions of celebrations that included free sex are very few, and these notions are often based on the Reformist Mikael Agricola's 'List of Deities' in *Davidin Psalmtari* (1551), in which he describes the feasts held in honor of Ukko (the god of the sky): 'Ja quin kevekyluö kyluettin / silloin ukon Malia jootijn. / Sihen haetin ukon vacka / nin joopui Pica ette Acka. / Sijtte palio Häpie sidle techtin / quin seke cowltin ette nechtin. And when the spring-sowing was done / then the old man's toast was drunk. / For this was Ukko's wooden vessel fetched / and the girl and the wife got drunk. / Then were shameful things done there / as was both heard and seen.' Cited and translated in Unto Salo, 'Agricola's Ukko in the Light of Archaeology: A Chronological and Interpretative Study of Ancient Finnish Religion', *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 13 (1990), 92–190.

vakat,⁷¹ mushrooms were probably used as intoxicants in shamanistic rituals,⁷² and *tietäjäs* were, as mentioned above, important persons in using and distributing knowledge related to folk beliefs. However, the image created of ‘pagan’ Finns in this case may have clearer references to New Age and neopagan imageries, as well as to the popular culture images of pagan rituals mediated, for instance, through fantasy TV series on streaming services.

In the short story *Karsikkopuun kuolema*, Isomäki refers to the liturgical *Legend of St Henry* that was written at the end of the thirteenth century in the area of modern-day Finland on the commission of the bishop of Turku. The Legend is the oldest and one of the most important sources of Finnish Christianization, even though it is a hagiographical text that was written more than a century after the alleged events it describes. In the Legend, the English-born bishop Henry is asked by the Swedish king Eric to go to Finland and proselytize the heathen Finns. Henry then builds and strengthens the Finnish church, but he is murdered by a criminal during his occupational duties. After his death, St Henry performs eleven miracles that are described in detail in the Legend. As Tuomas Heikkilä notes, the Legend was—even in the medieval period—a very important element in showing that the Finnish region was part of the worldwide Christian community; it ‘showed God’s work in the past and present’, and it created a Christian history and imagined community for Finns that did not have one.⁷³

The part that describes the death of St Henry is rather short in the original Legend—and the murderer himself is described only very briefly. However, variants of the Legend have numerous vernacular—probably medieval—Kalevala-metric variants that concentrate more closely on the details of the murder. The sources of these variants of *Pyhän Henrikin surmavirsi* (‘The Death Song of St Henry’) are texts written down mainly by the eighteenth-century scholars of the Academy of Turku, but also include the folklore collections of the nineteenth-century.⁷⁴ The vernacular versions that name the murderer as Lalli and also describe his mother (or, in some versions, wife) Kerttu, were extremely popular in the modern times as well; for instance, a prose version of the Kalevala-metric ‘Death Song’ was published in the widely read overview on Finnish culture, Topelius’ *Maamme kirja* (‘The Book of Our Land,’ 1876).

The vernacular versions describe how the bishop and his men visit the peasant Lalli’s home Lalloila, but the mistress of the house does not want to give any food or drink for the party. The bishop’s men nonetheless take what they want, but they pay for what they have taken. When Lalli comes back home, his mother/wife Kerttu (called *paha emäntä*, or ‘evil mistress’) lies to him and insists that the bishop’s men stole the food. Lalli gets angry, follows the bishop’s party, and finally

⁷¹ On *ukon vakat* and the use of fort hills, see, e.g., Julius Krohn, *Suomen suvun pakanallinen jumalanpalvelus, neljä lukua Suomen suvun pakanallista jumaluusoppia*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1894, 33–34.

⁷² See, e.g., Anna-Leena Siikala, *Suomalainen šamanismi*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1999 [1992], 238. However, as Siikala’s research shows, ‘shamanism’ is not a proper word or frame for the nineteenth-century Karelian context in which the majority of Kalevala-metric poetry was collected. Even though Siikala has identified certain shamanistic features in the Kalevala-metric oral traditions and poetic images, the period of the folklore collections was more or less shaped by modernization, Christianity, and the vanishing *tietäjä* system.

⁷³ Heikkilä 2016.

⁷⁴ Martti Haavio, *Piispa Henrik ja Lalli. Piispa Henrikin surmavirren historiaa*, WSOY: Porvoo & Helsinki 1948.

kills the prelate. Afterwards Lalli steals Henry's miter and puts it on his head. When he gets back home and tries to get the miter off, his hair and scalp peel off as well. Finally, after getting harassed by mice, Lalli dies. As Professor Martti Haavio describes, the 'Death Song' is 'greatly handsome, lively, colorful, faultless in design, rich in details, catholic in spirit, folksy in tone, smooth in style, and kalevalaic in its poetic structure'.⁷⁵ The vernacular variants are in the background of Isomäki's short story, as he concentrates on the perspective of the murderer Lalli.

However, *Karsikkopuun kuolema* offers an explanation for Lalli's destructive behavior that is not mentioned in the Legend or the vernacular variants: Isomäki depicts how the bishop's men cut down the sacred *karsikko* tree—a symbol of pagan Finnishness in this case—of Lalli's family while he is away from the house.⁷⁶ This makes Lalli terribly wrathful. In the end of Isomäki's story, Lalli hangs the bishop's severed head on the remaining branch of the *karsikko* tree.



Figure 5. An educational poster for school teaching. E. Jaatinen 1928: Bishop Henry and Lalli. Source: Turun museokeskus. CC-BY-ND 4.0.

⁷⁵ Haavio 1948, 12.

⁷⁶ The *karsikko* tree tradition is a Karelian and Baltic-Finnic premodern phenomenon. The *karsikko* tradition was practiced in order to remember and honor the dead by carving the name of the deceased or other markings on a pine tree. The markings were thought to prevent spirits from coming back, and many stories were told about ghosts seen around *karsikko* trees. Uno Holmberg, 'Suomalaisten karsikoista', *Kalevalaseuran vuosikirja* 4 (1924), 7–82.

In Isomäki's interpretation, Lalli's alleged pagan-ness is important; following the atmosphere of desired darkness, the pagan Lalli becomes a contradictory hero, a possessor of vernacular knowledge and belief that is often regarded in the contemporary medievalist literature as something profoundly Finnish, authentic, interesting, and a little bit dangerous. As for Lalli's paganness, the historian Tuomas Heikkilä argues that 'it is necessary to note that neither the Latin Legend nor the popular oral tradition represented by the *Piispa Henrikin surmavirsi* [...] lead to the understanding that St. Henry was martyred by a pagan.'⁷⁷ Indeed, while the original Legend does not scrutinize the murderer's profile at all, some versions of the 'Death Song' do in fact represent Lalli as pagan: for instance, the version collected as early as 1739 by Andreas Heikkilä mentions Lalli as 'the worst of pagans' ('*Lalli pahin pacaoifta*').⁷⁸ Furthermore, *Maamme kirja*—which was used as a text book in Finnish and Swedish schools for almost a century since the 1870s⁷⁹—underlines the image of Lalli as a heathen: 'It is told, that here lived a pagan Lalli-named man who hated the bishop.'⁸⁰ These post-Legend interpretations seem to have strengthened the vernacular understanding of Lalli as a pagan even and especially in the modern period, an image that can then be seen circulating in contemporary renditions as well. In Isomäki's text, Lalli's pagan-ness is narrated through the materiality of the *karsikko* tree, as it becomes a symbol in which 'pagan' belief, Finnish nature, generations, and the landscape intersect:

Something was missing.

From where he was standing he should have seen the sacred *karsikko* tree of his family in front of him. A pine tree into which every birth and death of the family during the last twenty generations was carved. The top of the sacred tree should have risen high above his head and above the heads of other mortals, to the height of twenty men.

But it was not there.

And when Lalli turned his head toward the place where the *karsikko* tree had stood that very morning, he only saw a hideous, ragged stump. A stump a fathom thick, and the axe-splinters scattered around it in the snow.

And beside the stump... the fallen tree and the dark shadows of its branches sticking out upwards and to the sides.

Kerttu saw how Lalli's shoulders tightened.

—I am... so sorry, sobbed Kerttu. —I tried to stop them. I tried my all. I said that they should sooner kill me than cut down the sacred tree of my husband's family.⁸¹

As Tuomas Heikkilä points out, in the medieval and post-medieval periods, Lalli and his wife Kerttu were 'important as representatives of the otherness: albeit not necessarily pagans, they were something evil outside the community of the good, someone who did not respect and apply the

⁷⁷ Heikkilä 2016, 238.

⁷⁸ SKVR VIII, 990. Vaasa region. Heikkilä 1739.

⁷⁹ See, e.g., Päivi Kannisto, *Suolatut säkeet. Suomen ja suomalaisuuden diskursiivinen muotoutuminen 1600-luvulta Topeliukseen*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1997.

⁸⁰ Topelius 1981 [1876], 230: 'Täällä sanotaan olleen Lalli-nimisen pakanallisen miehen, joka vihasi piispaa.'

⁸¹ Isomäki 2018, 218–19. Translation: author.

virtues and values St. Henry stood for'.⁸² Juha Hurme shares this view; in *Suomi*, he writes that 'the texts and rhymes woven around the legendary martyr Henry were essential materials for the aboriginals who fumbled their way to the Christian role models and values.'⁸³ Indeed, the story of Lalli and Kerttu was a moral lesson and a guideline for people living in Catholic and Reformist Christian societies. But in Isomäki's text, Lalli's and Kerttu's otherness is something quite different; they become critics of the establishment, small but strong individuals before the oppressive system. Their 'pagan-ness' is transformed into something special, 'indigenous,' and authentic in a similar way as in the former anthropological writing that admired, othered, and exoticized their research objects. As Pertti Anttonen has noted, the representation of Lalli as a national liberator has become very common in contemporary contexts: for instance, Lalli was placed in fourteenth position in 'the top 100 great Finns of all times' competition organized by the national broadcasting company YLE in 2004.⁸⁴ St Henry was not on the list, which indicates that Isomäki's interpretation of Lalli as a pagan and 'authentic' Finn is a somewhat accepted and widespread image in contemporary society.

Desired/othered bodies

Adjectives such as 'barbaric,' 'backward,' and 'grotesque' often characterize medievalist interpretations of the Middle Ages, especially those made in the post-WWII period. Even though these adjectives have always been at the center of medievalism, alongside the idea of 'the romantic,' the barbaric image has strengthened especially in political contexts because of, for instance, the misappropriations and misuse of pseudo-medieval fantasies in contexts such as Nazi ideology.⁸⁵ The 'barbarity' of the Middle Ages has often been seen not only as something other and aversive but admired and entertaining as well; for example, the trope of Vikings as barbaric, violent, raping, and exceedingly masculine has become very popular in fiction and film.⁸⁶

As for the idea of desired darkness and Kalevala-metric poetry, the admiration of the 'barbaric' and 'grotesque' elements of the medieval period is obvious even though the 'kalevalaicity'-related cultural phenomena have been non-violent and rather banal in contemporary Finland.⁸⁷ In this section, I concentrate on interpretations in which Kalevala-metric poetry and poetic cultures are used to describe and portray medieval human bodies as somehow grotesque or 'other' from the perspective of modernity. Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes the grotesque body as unfinished, open, irrational, messy, and shaped by excrement, dirt, and death, as well as free from individual-centered thinking. The grotesque body is opposed to classical bodies, which are clean, closed, ethereal,

⁸² Heikkilä 2016, 238–39.

⁸³ Hurme 2020, 48. Translation: author.

⁸⁴ Pertti Anttonen, 'The Finns Party and the Killing of a 12th-Century Bishop: The Heritage of a Political Myth', *Traditiones* 41 (2012), 137–49.

⁸⁵ See Marsden 2018, 4; Matthews 2018.

⁸⁶ Amy S. Kaufman, 'Muscular Medievalism', *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 31 (2016), 56–66; Erika Ruth Sigurdson, 'Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction', *Scandinavian Studies* 86 (2014), 249–67.

⁸⁷ See Haapoja 2017, 111–27. This is probably a result of state-led heritage politics in Finland: for example, *Kalevala*-related (patriotic) discourses have been taught at public schools since the publication of the epic. However, more research should be done on this topic, as the right-wing nationalist groups in Finland have recently appropriated 'kalevalaic' images and discourses, at least to some extent.

sublime, and clear-cut.⁸⁸ In the materials of this article, the medieval period and particularly the Kalevala-metric poetry related to it are seen as representing the grotesque elements of the world and the human body.

In *Niemi*, the medieval body is admired for its ability to be free from the demands of classical bodies and modernity. In Hurme's writing, the Middle Ages comprise a period of body odors, excrement, and genitalia not prudishly hidden behind the curtains of modesty:

Talking about sex and bodily functions is still very okay and natural for the medieval inhabitants of the Cape. The vocabulary sounds modern: cunt, cock, ass, piss, shit. These are not used as swear words, and these terms do not have prudish equivalents.⁸⁹

In underlining this, Hurme uses Kalevala-metric poetry that, in fact, includes a considerable number of descriptions of genitals or other sexual content. Sex-related poems were mainly collected during the nineteenth century, and among the collectors was, for example, the compiler of the *Kalevala* epic, Elias Lönnrot. Due to reasons of modesty, these poems were not published before the 1990s, and even folkloristic research paid attention to this material only after feminist gender studies had broken through in the Finnish scholarly atmosphere.⁹⁰ Originally, such sexuality-related poems were archived because of the folkloristic historical-geographic method, which aimed to search for the 'originality,' 'archaicity,' and 'urforms' of the poems; thus, everything needed to be collected and stored in order to contribute to that huge project.⁹¹ Furthermore, a great deal of these poems originate from the collections of folklore collectors who belonged to the lower classes themselves and were thus more permissive in respect to sexual content.⁹² However, the collections were not widely available to the public until 1997, when the last volume of the series *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* ('The Old Poems of the Finnish Folk') was published by the Finnish Literature Society. Today, the entire archived material of Kalevala-metric poetry is published online in the Finnish Literature Society's open access database *SKVR-tietokanta*,⁹³ which also includes verses with sexual content. In *Niemi*, Hurme cites several of these poems in order to emphasize the grotesque nature of the medieval period as well as its completely disparate and 'respecting' attitude toward the female body:

⁸⁸ Mihail Mihajlovič Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington 1984.

⁸⁹ Hurme 2017, 156. Translation: author.

⁹⁰ See, e.g., Satu Apo, *Naisen väki: tutkimuksia suomalaisten kansanomaisesta kulttuurista ja ajattelusta*, Hanki ja jää: Helsinki 1995; Matti Kuusi & Senni Timonen, 'Alkusanat', in Matti Kuusi & Senni Timonen eds., *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot XV. Runoja Henrik Florinuksen, Kristfrid Gananderin, Elias Lönnrotin ja Volmari Porkan kokoelmista*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1997, XXV–XXXVII; Ulla Piela, 'Lemmennostoloitsujen nainen', in Aili Nenola & Senni Timonen eds., *Louhen sanat. Kirjoituksia kansanperinteen naisista*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1990, 214–23; Laura Stark-Arola, 'Vaginan tuntematon historia. Naisen seksuaalisuuden kuvat suomalaisessa suullisessa kansanperinteessä', *Naistutkimus* 2/2001, 4–22; Lotte Tarkka, 'Natalist' on nakru tehty. Nauru ja lempi vienankarjalaisessa mieronvirressä', in Jyrki Pöysä & Anna-Leena Siikala eds., *Amor, genus & familia. Kirjoituksia kansanperinteestä* (Tietolipas 158), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1998, 17–55.

⁹¹ On the geographical-historical method, see, e.g., Kaarle Krohn, *Folklore Methodology: Formulated by Julius Krohn and Expanded by Nordic Researchers*, University of Texas Press: Austin 1971; Hautala 1954, 174–349.

⁹² Apo 1995.

⁹³ SKVR-tietokanta. Accessed 26 January 2021. Available at: <https://skvr.fi>.

The parts of the following poem that include an incantation of origins date back to the Iron Age, but the final shape of this lovely and fresh female-respecting work of art was formed during the Middle Ages. Elias Lönnrot found it on his first folklore collecting journey in 1828.

The vagina is not made from evil,
 but neither quite from good:
 Made from fat, made from butter,
 from pure pork meat,
 the mother hole from an Angel,
 the tongue from the flesh of Jesus.
 vittu [cunt] according to the words of vihat,
 raspberry in the language of men,
 called sweetheart,
 mentioned as strawberry,
 it is said to be a tradesman's ring,
 an apple her own name.
 The Bear put his two paws,
 to both sides of the hairy one,
 the bee brought honey
 an entire three stone,
 for young men to lick,
 for horny ones to take.⁹⁴

The poem above was recorded in Pielisjärvi, Finnish Karelia, near the contemporary Russian border.⁹⁵ It was a part of an unknown *tietäjän*'s repertoire, as the original draft by Lönnrot includes several themes, such as *vitun vihat* ('the vagina's/cunt's wrath') and *vitun synty* ('the origin of the vagina/cunt'), which were recited by a *tietäjä* in cases in which the vagina's *väki* (the impersonal forces of a vagina) was believed, for example, to be infecting a wound. The *tietäjä* said the verses aloud in order to heal the patient; in this, he/she had to 'threaten and cajole, flatter and shame the vagina [--], demonstrating that he knows its origins, the elements from which it was originally made'.⁹⁶

In the context of *Niemi*, the poem turns into a more general description of the female body, and Hurme interprets it as a 'female-respecting work of art'. As I have argued elsewhere, the contem-

⁹⁴ Hurme 2017, 232–233. Translation: author / Laura Stark, 'Gender, Sexuality and the Supernatural: Finnish Oral-Traditional Sources', in Catharina Raudvere & Jens Peter Schjodt eds., *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, Nordic Academic Press: Lund 2012, 153–84. Original poem: 'Ei pillu ole pahoista tehty / eikä aivan arvosista: / tehty kuusta, tehty voista / silkasta sian lihasta, / emä reikä Enkelistä, / Kieli Kiesuksen lihasta. / Vittu vihalla sanoin, / mesi marja miesten kielin, / kutsutahan kultaiseksi, / mainitahan mansikaksi, / sanotan saksan sormuseksi, / omena oma nimensä. / Karhu laski kaksii kämmmentähän, / kahden puolen karvaseksi, / mehiläinen mettä kanto, / koko kolme leiviskätä / nuorten miesten nuoleskella, / hakia halun alaisten'.

⁹⁵ SKVR XV 414. [Pielisjärvi.] Elias Lönnrot. Lönnrotiana 17:143. [1828].

⁹⁶ Stark 2012, 171.

porary uses of sex-related Kalevala-metric poetry tend to emphasize the sexual content's liberating aspects for women as well as its otherness in relation to modern discourses on sexuality.⁹⁷ There seems to be a tendency to contest the modern discourses on sexuality (e.g., the paradoxical tension between repression and confession) and the Foucauldian idea of bio power in which sexuality and human bodies are controlled and monitored through these discourses.⁹⁸ In the contemporary literature, the medieval period—and the Kalevala-metric poetry alongside it—represents a time in which these restrictions were absent, or at least milder than today.⁹⁹

However, as Laura Stark notes, even though the Kalevala-metric poetry might serve as a window onto a period in which the Foucauldian discourses on sexuality and the from-above power over human bodies were not as potent as today, one has to contextualize the poems in relation to the past local societies; for example, the vagina-related discourses may have been in many senses more unrestricted and open than now,¹⁰⁰ but at the same time, the poems also point to the dangers and fears that were related to sexual relationships in pre-modern Finland. Furthermore, the vagina-related poems could also be pejorative or associated with judging of the female body and gender.¹⁰¹ In the contemporary medievalist literature, this creates a tension between the present and the past: even though the medieval body is admired and even desired in its ability to be 'free' from the restrictions of the modern times, through this admiration it is simultaneously othered and separated from its original context.

In the materials treated in this article, the 'barbarity' of the medieval body has different layers and meanings depending on the relationship to Christianity: the Christians are often described as violent and brutal, and the pagans as violent but also sexual and 'close to nature'. For instance, in Isomäki's *Paholaisen tyttäret*, the villagers arrange festivities in which they dance and have sex with several partners. The society seem to have matriarchal-like features; if girls become pregnant during these rituals, the resulting children are regarded as 'Gods' babies'. In the short story, one of the crusaders, Björn, happens to participate in the summer solstice festivities. He has sex with a village girl named Arja, who is described as seductive but intoxicated due to 'sacred beer' and the mushrooms she has eaten. Her body is depicted as having the classical features of a beauty:

Arja's eyes seemed larger than normal and there was something odd in her laughter. Her behavior was also...different.

- Do you claim you did not understand what would happen here? asked Arja.

Arja's laughter slashed Björn's heart.

- But...one woman and...

⁹⁷ Heidi Haapoja-Mäkelä, "'Kansanrunoudessa seksi on paljasta ja ilmaukset reheviä": Mitä kalevalamittaisten seksiaiheisten runojen esilletuonti mediassa kertoo menneisyydelle annetuista merkityksistä?', *Myyttinen presens* blog of the Kaleva Society, 2020b. Accessed 16 August 2021. Available at: <https://kalevalaseura.fi/2020/10/21/kansanrunoudessa-seksi-on-paljasta-ja-ilmaukset-rehevia/>.

⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, Vintage Books: New York 1990.

⁹⁹ Jaakko Tahkokallio has argued that contra to the many postmedieval interpretations of medieval sexuality, the controlling of sexual behavior was rather strict in medieval societies. For instance, nakedness and undisguised intercourse were regarded as shameful. See Jaakko Tahkokallio, *Pimeä aika. Kymmenen myyttiä keskiajasta*, Gaudeamus: Helsinki 2019, at 225–27.

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., Apo 1995, 20.

¹⁰¹ Stark-Arola 2001, 19.

- What of it? This is the celebration of summer solstice!
- One cannot behave like that, Björn protested.
- Can you not? Arja wondered.—They seem to do it!
- It is wrong! exclaimed Björn. [--]

Björn noticed that Arja's breathing was short. He watched how Arja grabbed the hem of her white linen dress and pulled it upwards. He was mesmerized as Arja's dress rose higher still and revealed her thighs and then the dark hairy triangle between her legs as well as the flat stomach and firm breasts.¹⁰²

As noted before, the idea of 'pagan Finnish culture' as a sanctuary of free love is based on very few historical descriptions. The aforementioned 'List of Deities' is one of the only sources for such an interpretation, but the verses that Agricola provides on the subject ('Then were shameful things done there / as was both heard and seen') are quite unclear in their meaning. For instance, the researcher Annamari Sarajas interprets them as referring to *Ukon vakat*-related alcohol-drinking, which was a punishable act in sixteenth-century Finland.¹⁰³ The folklorist Martti Haavio also discusses *Ukot vakat* in his influential study *Suomalainen mytologia* ('Finnish Mythology'), explaining it as a drinking party based on a medieval taxation-related *vakka* tradition of the Finnic area.¹⁰⁴ Yet, Haavio himself has acknowledged elsewhere the possibility that Agricola's verses could refer to an open sexual act that was linked to the *hieros gamos* (the sacred marriage) myth. For this, he refers to Central European mentions of fertility rite-related ritual intercourse in cultivated fields.¹⁰⁵ Haavio's ideas have been circulated in studies of folklore and comparative religion, and this may explain their emergence in contemporary literature. Some of the studies in which these images have been negotiated have been quite popular in Finland, even outside of the scholarly field.¹⁰⁶ The idea of Ukko-related sex rites is used in other contemporary medievalist literature as well; for instance, the author Mikko Kamula depicts the *Ukon vakat* celebration as an occasion for excessive drinking and free sex.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the historian Tuomas M.S. Lehtonen notes that Agricola's writing should not be interpreted as direct evidence of pre-Christian beliefs but understood in the context of Reformist texts and discourses: 'The list cannot be taken as an awkward and detached addition,

¹⁰² Isomäki 2018, 196.

¹⁰³ Annamari Sarajas, *Suomen kansanrunouden tuntemus 1500–1700-lukujen kirjallisuudessa*, WSOY: Helsinki 1956. Sarajas notes that Agricola's brother-in-law Clemet Henrikinpoika Krook was a head of Savonlinna in 1545–1550 and convicted local people for drinking alcohol in order to worship Ukko. This information may have influenced Agricola's writing (p. 13). Furthermore, Henrik Gabriel Porthan (1739–1804) does not mention anything sex-related in relation to *Ukon vakat* or *Ukonjuhla*; see, e.g., Henrik Gabriel Porthan, *Vanhosten suomalaisten teoreettisesta ja käytännöllisestä taikauskosta*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1982 [1782].

¹⁰⁴ Martti Haavio, *Suomalainen mytologia*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 1967, at 148–58.

¹⁰⁵ Martti Haavio, *Karjalan jumalat. Uskontotieteellinen tutkimus*, WSOY: Porvoo 1959, at 86, 287.

¹⁰⁶ See, e.g., Veikko Anttonen 2012, 'Literary Representation of Oral Religion Organizing Principles in Mikael Agricola's List of Mythological Agents in Late Medieval Finland', in Catharina Raudvere & Jens Peter Schjodt eds., *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, Nordic Academic Press: Lund 2012, 185–223; Satu Apo, *Viinan voima. Näkökulmia suomalaisten kansanomaiseen alkoholiajatteluun ja -kulttuuriin*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2001; Risto Pulkkinen, *Samaaneista saunatonntuihin*, Gaudeamus: Helsinki 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Kamula 2017.

but is fully consistent with the idea of fulfilling the first commandment of the Law of Moses, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”¹⁰⁸.

As professor Satu Apo notes, fertility has indeed been a core notion and source of interest in the northern premodern cultures, as several aspects of agricultural life—such as farming and stock raising—were understood as dependent on it. The relationship between man and woman was a very central one—instead of an individual, it was a basic unit of society. The sexual relationship between them was an important aspect of life, and this was reflected in the folklore of these cultures. However, the societies were somewhat patriarchal.¹⁰⁹

The picture of medieval ‘pagan’ Häme villages as social communities in which (unmarried and married) women could have free sex and use drugs at fertility festivities is an artistic interpretation. However, the image is interestingly intermingled with certain neopagan imageries, such as the ones related to the Wicca witchcraft movement that utilized so-called ‘sexual magic’ in the 1950s in a search for social and political liberation. Here, sexual rites and nudity were important, but notorious in outside society as well.¹¹⁰ In addition to neopagan imageries, the picture of ‘pagan’ villagers seems to have been influenced by representations of prehistorical ‘ancient Finnishness,’ which are easily intertwined with the medieval, at least at the level of imageries. Since the nineteenth century, representations of the Stone Age and Bronze Age (and to some extent, the Iron Age) have created an image of ‘nature-child’ people who live in harmony with the surrounding nature. Especially Stone Age representations have often included the idea of nakedness.¹¹¹ This beautifully illustrates the fact that in medievalist contexts, the ‘medieval’ and the ‘ancient’ are often non-specific entities into which different temporalities are woven.

Concluding remarks

The Finnish contemporary medievalist literature that utilizes ‘kalevalaic’ features is shaped by an admiration of the ancient past, which is understood as ‘pagan,’ slightly grotesque and barbaric, ‘authentic,’ and ‘close to nature’ in contrast to Christianity and the modern times. The medieval period functions as a temporal backcloth that is simultaneously close enough but still far away; the historical knowledge of the period—especially in relation to ‘ordinary people’ or the ‘folk’—is sufficiently scant for open-ended imaginative and artistic interpretations.¹¹² In this, Kalevala-metric poetry and the fragmentary knowledge on old folk beliefs function as tools through which the medieval Finnish people’s thoughts and behaviors are brought forth, even though the referred poetic verses themselves were collected hundreds of years later.

¹⁰⁸ Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen, ‘Pious Hymns and Devil’s Music. Michael Agricola (c. 1507–1775) and Jacobus Finno (c. 1540–1588) on Church Song and Folk Beliefs’, in Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen & Linda Kaljundi eds., *Reforming Texts, Music, and Church Art in the Early Modern North*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press (2016), 179–216, at 187.

¹⁰⁹ Apo 1995, 18–20.

¹¹⁰ Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*, University of California Press: Berkeley 2006, at 162–90.

¹¹¹ See, e.g., Liisa Kunnas-Pusa, ‘Kivikauden kuvia – Kaukaisimman menneisyyden representaatiot Suomi-kuvaa rakentamassa’, *Ennen & nyt* (2018), 1–22; Timo Salminen, ‘Kuvitukset Suomen esihistorian yleisesityksissä 1880-luvulta nykypäivään’, *Muinaistutkija* 1/2018, 2–28.

¹¹² See also Valkeapää 2006, 89.



Figure 6. The tragic Kalevala character Aino has often been depicted as a ‘pagan beauty’ in Finnish art. Kaarlo Haltia 1898: Aino. Photo: Daniel Nyblin. Source: Kansallisgallerian arkistokokoelmat. CC-BY-SA 3.0

Kalevala-metric poetry is a tool to emphasize the ‘darkness’ of the Middle Ages in contemporary literature; it enhances the experience of the Other, including the uncanny, mythic, and mystical. Furthermore, medieval sexuality and corporeality are presented by utilizing ‘kalevalaic’ verses and images, which creates a tension that simultaneously sees the medieval human as a desired but othered object. This reflects the modern discourses and images on sexuality, non-Christianity, and the corporeality of the Other, which in this case not only stems from geographical or cultural othering but from the temporal distance.

The utilization of Kalevala-metric poetry in the contemporary medievalist literature is an active act for the purposes of the present—and the future. It reinforces the already existing national narratives on Finnishness and ‘ancient Finland,’ but it is also used as tool for criticizing modernity’s alleged pain spots, such as restricted corporeality, alienation from nature, and an abusive use of religions and Christianity. As for these aims, the choice to use ‘kalevalaic’ elements in writing enhances the books’ ability to create ‘invented memories’ of the medieval period, and the poetic language and images provide an opportunity to embroider what may otherwise be regarded as rather unsuspenseful history writing.¹¹³

¹¹³ Acknowledgements: I am grateful to the reviewers and the editors of *Mirator* for their insightful comments, as well as to Samppa Mäkelä, who helped me to translate the convoluted language of the novels. The research and writing of this article were made possible by the project ‘Ownership, Language, Cultural Heritage: Ideologies of Folk Poetry in the Areas of Finland, Republic of Karelia, and Estonia’ (2017–2021), funded by the Kone Foundation.