

The Estonian reception of the saga literature, the translations and some remarks on saga translation based on personal experience.

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The topic of my talk today is the Estonian reception of saga literature: a subject that is certainly broad enough to handle on its own. However, I still feel it would be unfair to leave out other translations from Old Norse to Estonian, especially of poetry and poetical works. And I also feel that it would be too narrow and in a way misleading to focus only on the traditional material of reception studies, such as newspaper reviews and so on. Instead, what I am going to do is to give an overview over which works of Old Norse literature have been translated into Estonian, when and by whom, and I will also present to you a kind of a theory of what this all has meant for the Estonian culture, focusing on Rein Sepp who was, sorry to say, not a saga translator – but he definitely was an Edda translator. In the end, I am also going to share with you some more general reflections about saga translation in Estonia and what might come out of it in the future.

As a point of departure, I would claim right away that Old Norse literature has a special place in the hearts of Estonians. You could probably do a large comparative study that would contrast the Estonian situation with that of other languages with a comparable number of speakers, and my feeling is that Estonian would come out looking pretty good.

I'll just bring Finnish as a counter-example, since the Finnish ambassador isn't here at the moment. Nobody knows exactly, but let's say, there is 1 million speakers of Estonian. The number of sagas that have been translated by now – I am not counting *þættir* – is 11. Very roughly, this means one saga per 90 000 potential readers. Finnish, with five times as many speakers, has only about twice as many texts, even though one of these texts, the whole of *Heimskringla*, is admittedly very long.

So, on to how it began. The first adaption of stories from Eddic poems into Estonian appeared already in 1924. It was probably translated from German and it was aimed at young readers. The first book-length work of saga scholarship published in Estonia also appeared before the Second World War, Per Wieselgren's "Quellenstudien zur Völsungasaga" (1935-36).

Then followed an almost complete silence for about 30 years, until in early 1960's, the germanist and poet Rein Sepp published his first translations of Eddic poems in an anthology of medieval literature. These were in turn followed by a complete translation of the Poetic Edda, which appeared in 1970. This magnificent work reflects in its way the difficult conditions under which translators had to work during the Soviet times – with almost no access to western scholarly

literature and even no newer dictionaries. The text edition that Rein Sepp used as his source, for example, had been published in Switzerland in 1853, more than a hundred years before, and it was probably the only one that he at all had access to. This, of course, is not meant as criticism against him, but rather as something that makes his achievement even more impressive. And his translation left indeed a great mark on the Estonian cultural landscape.

To understand why, we must keep in mind that any literary qualities of eddas and sagas are just one side of the story. The other side is Estonian history and identity.

The 1970's and 1980's were the time when the economical stagnation seriously set in in the Soviet Union. About 70 percent of the economic output was being directed towards keeping up with the United States in the arms race, which was financed mainly by oil export. This led to stagnation in most other areas of life, while the regime also became more rigid after Kruschev's Thaw of the 1960's.

At the same time, there was a generation shift taking place in Estonian intellectual life, meaning that people who had grown up in Soviet Estonia were starting to take the places of those whose careers had begun in the independent Estonian republic of 1930's. This produced a feeling that personal continuity with the era of independence was being broken. Also, labor immigration from the rest of the Soviet Union into Estonia was having an increasingly noticeable effect on the ethnic composition, and there were serious fears that Estonians would soon become a minority in their own land. Therefore, Estonian intellectuals turned to a kind of soul-searching in what might be described as a minor national awakening.

What I mean by that is that 1970's and 80's saw an increase in myth-construction meant to strengthen the Estonian national identity. This often included conjectures about the obscure Estonian pre-history. A famous example is Lennart Meri, later better known as the first post-Soviet president of Estonia, who in 1976 published a book called "Hõbevalge" about the myths and culture of courageous seafaring Estonians on the shores of the pre-historic Baltic Sea. The theories it presents are kind of doubtful from a purely scholarly point of view; for example he connects Estonia to the Ultima Thule of the ancient Greek explorer Pytheas. But Meri's book and its 1983 sequel fulfilled an important function in the atmosphere of the economic and cultural stagnation of Soviet Estonia.

I would argue that Rein Sepp's translation of the *Poetic Edda* must also be seen in this context. It came to be read and appreciated mostly by this new generation of young Estonian intellectuals, historians, archaeologists, literary scholars, writers and poets. *The Edda* was also inseparable from its translator. Still today, when these people talk about Rein Sepp, they do it with a deep feeling of admiration for someone who has opened new, previously unknown vistas for the benefit of Estonian

culture, someone who has brought to us, to Estonians unique access to ancient and arcane knowledge.

The most concrete form that this admiration took were the pilgrimages that many of these young intellectuals undertook to Rein Sepp's house in the middle of pretty much nowhere near the border of Latvia. Rein Sepp was living there alone as a kind of a solitary mystic. It seems to me that he was often quite bored, so that he was usually happy to welcome guests. The reason people went there was that the published *Edda* translation was actually only a part of the story. There was also a kind of an esoteric oral tradition that could only be received from Rein Sepp himself. He was namely deeply convinced that the myths of *The Edda* were a common cultural heritage of the whole pre-historic Baltic Sea area, including Estonians, and he was keen to point out all sorts of connections between Old Norse lore and Estonian fairy tales, proverbs and what not. He also had strange ideas about his local landscape being somehow connected to the myths, and his house and its surrounding corresponding to different features of Old Norse cosmology. This had of course nothing to do with what we might call serious scholarship, but it was still important for these young intellectuals to feel they were discovering something about the roots of their culture. Many people who visited Rein Sepp had almost mystical experiences there, staying awake for days at the time and listening to these stories, and these pilgrimages themselves would in turn become legendary, living on in a kind of oral tradition.

I think there is also a deeper reason why it was *The Poetic Edda* in particular that could play this role. This has to do with the deeply ingrained idea among Estonians that Estonia, in some sense, is a Nordic country, culturally belonging to the same space as Finland, Sweden and other Nordic countries. Since the 19th century national awakening it has been an important part of Estonian identity to believe that Estonians had been unfairly relegated to Russian or German cultural spheres of influence, or lumped together with Latvia and Lithuania in what is called the Baltic States, whereas the peoples who Estonians actually have the most in common with, are found in Finland and Scandinavia. And one way to look for evidence of this connection, is of course to look into the ancient past, the dark mists of Estonian prehistory, which is something that both Lennart Meri and Rein Sepp did.

This might seem innocent enough, but even just to be in some way interested in Scandinavia in Soviet Estonia was in itself a covert form of resistance. I have met people who translated from Scandinavian languages back then, or conducted research into the 17th century Swedish period in Estonian history, and my impression is that this is the way they felt themselves: it was a passive way of fighting back.

Another thing that certainly played a role in building up the reputation of the Poetic Edda in

Estonia was the strength of traditional cultural nationalism and romantic ideas about language, folk poetry and traditional ways of life. These notions were partially cultivated as a way of resistance to Soviet tendencies towards cultural uniformity, but they were partially also supported by the regime through this weird complex of ideas that was Soviet nationalities policy. Anyway, a part of this romanticism was the interest in national epics, the belief a single work of literature can and should somehow encapsulate the entire soul of the nation.

There was of course an Estonian national epic, *Kalevipoeg*, telling about the exploits of its eponymous hero. The problem with *Kalevipoeg*, though, was that it is only very loosely based on actual folk poetry, and was more than anything the work of a single 19th century author, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald.

This basic inauthenticity of the Estonian national epic is something that has troubled Estonians quite a bit. In this light, *The Poetic Edda* became a sort of an anti-*Kalevipoeg*, readily acquiring these highly valued connotations of authenticity and primordial purity. For example, Ülo Tedre, the folklorist who had written the epilogue to Rein Sepp's *Edda* translation, wrote in 1995, in an obituary to Sepp as follows: "Perhaps the epics seem so important to us also because we don't have our own folk epic. Whatever we say, we have to admit, that Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg* is only a so-called national epic". And so, here we have it, in Estonian translation an epic that was somehow seen as encapsulating the Nordic world view and way of being, and was therefore also assumed to tell us something about the ancient roots of Nordic Estonia. It is no wonder it was important, being both the first work of Old Norse literature to be translated into Estonian and one that has left the most lasting legacy.

In 1990, Rein Sepp also contributed another work, this time the *Younger* or the *Prose Edda*, sans *Háttatal*. But it was his translation of the *Poetic Edda* that paved the way for other translators, and now the floodgates could open. Admittedly, they initially opened pretty slowly. Fourteen years after Rein Sepp's *Poetic Edda* followed the next work to be translated, "Grettis saga" by Arvo Alas

Arvo Alas was also the first professional translator from Old Norse into Estonian in the sense that he had actually studied Icelandic at the university of St. Petersburg (or Leningrad at the time). Before "Grettis saga", he had also translated into Estonian "Icelandic Culture" by Mikhail Steblin-Kamenski, which has still remained as the only general overview of its kind in Estonian. In 2001, Arvo Alas also completed what might be said to be still the most monumental saga translation into Estonian, namely *Njáls saga*, and in 2003, he followed up with a translation of the two Vinland sagas: Erik the Red's saga and the Greenlanders' saga. A year later, he also published a curious self-help book called "Viikingite hea äri õpetus" or, in translation, "Viking Business Guide" which was actually a partial translation of the Old Norwegian didactic work "Konungs skuggsjá" or "The

King's Mirror”, giving some good business advise.

In 2003, also another translator from Old Norse debuted with a book-length translation on his own. This was Tõnno Jonuks with “Ynglinga saga”. Tõnno had been one of the younger members of Rein Sepp's circle and had previous to that translated together with Sepp a couple of Eddic poems. He had also been studying in Iceland, and he has also written scholarly articles about Estonia in the sagas – the opposite to sagas in Estonia, which is my topic today – and this should again be seen as a sign that Estonian saga translation and saga studies had become professionalized. A further sign is that two years later, in 2005, Kristel Zilmer defended her doctoral thesis on Baltic Sea travel motifs in Old Norse literature and in rune carvings. This was the first Estonian dissertation ever written on an Old Norse subject, and being the first, it of course had to be extra thick.

Mainly thanks to Kristel Zilmer and Toomas Lapp, the department of Scandinavian Studies of University of Tartu, this very place here, became an institution where Old Norse literature and the Icelandic language were taught and studied. And I would say that also in all subsequent developments in this area in Estonia, it has been Skandinavistika that has stood in the centrum, especially since 2010 when Daniel Sävborg started his professorship here. We have had very many foreign guests giving guest lectures and seminars, we have also had several larger events such as this one, and recently, as Daniel said, we also got a grant from Estonian research council funding a project about supernatural motifs in the sagas of Icelanders.

But back to saga translation. As you can probably imagine, the heritage of such strong personalities such as Arvo Alas and especially Rein Sepp is something that one has to come to terms with. They established translation from Old Norse as a high-status field of cultural activity in Estonia and it is, of course, difficult to live up to their legacy. This is one of the reasons why when I myself started translating back in 2007-2008, I initially chose to work with a genre that had never previously been translated into Estonian, namely *fornaldarsögur* or the sagas of the ancient times. I would not touch the Eddas and the sagas of Icelanders, just to be on the safe side. Later, I have become more of an upstart and have also tried my hand at these texts, so that the latest sagas which have appeared in my translation are actually among the sagas of Icelanders, namely *Hrafnkels saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*.

So, why should we translate sagas into Estonian? Of course, we live in very different times compared to the Soviet era, and Estonia's contacts with the Nordic Countries have become very much of an accepted thing, as is also witnessed by this very event here. This means that nothing we can nowadays do will replicate the cultural impact and importance of Rein Sepp's Edda translation from 1970. But at the same time, this is probably also a good thing, and a sign that the situation has

been normalized, because the more you have of the real contacts and real cooperation, the less you need to cultivate the myths.

But several things do persist: the high status of Old Norse literature in Estonia, the interest on the part of readers, and last but not least, the Estonians' wish to assert our connection to Norden.

So it might be just a case of major wishful thinking on my part, but I do wonder if there could be a complete translation of all of the sagas of Icelanders into Estonian, so that Estonian might become the sixth language, after Icelandic, English, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, in which all these texts exist. My feeling is that it would not only be a major literary merit to have these texts in Estonian, but it would also be a powerful political statement and an assertion we want to partake in this shared Nordic cultural heritage. I do not think it is entirely impossible either given the developments this far, which I have outlined, but especially because we are, indeed, having this release event here, today, in Tartu. To me, this seems like a sign of greater things to come.