



# **THE GREAT OAK: AN ANNUAL CALENDRIC AND AGRICULTURAL FERTILITY MYTH OF THE BALTIC FINNS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

'The Great Oak' is one of the most important myths presented in the poetry of the Baltic Finns. The contents of the myth have been formed and reformed in various cultural environments during many different historical periods. In this paper, the myth is analysed and its historical development is reconstructed by investigating its details and by comparing it to other similar myths and the known history of the Finnic peoples. It is shown that 'The Great Oak' is mainly a calendric and agricultural fertility myth related to the annual solar and vegetation cycle. Certain mythemes encountered in many variants of the poem reveal that it was related to slash-and-burn cultivation and the success of the annual agricultural yield, the measure of which was the production of beer for festival and ritual use. It turns out that the poem was sung on the fields of Ritvala in Tavastia in the rites held between the start of the sowing season in May and the midsummer. It is thus shown that the concrete use of the poem was connected to the annual rituals performed to ensure agricultural fertility.

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**KEYWORDS:** myth of the Great Oak, Finnic mythology, calendric myths, cycle of the year, solar mythology

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The ancient calendars and the astronomical and calendric mythology of the Finnic peoples living around the Baltic Sea can be reconstructed from historical and ethnographical sources (e.g., Vilkuna 1950; Lintrop 1999; Koivulehto 2000; Siikala 2012; Ridderstad 2014a, 2014b). The central astronomically themed mythology related to the annual calendric cycle and the celestial bodies includes well-known myths such as *The Great Oak*, *The Robbery of Sampo*, *The Liberation of the Sun*, *The Wedding of Päivölä*, and *The Birth of the Bear*.

To understand the development of the calendric myths of the Finnic peoples it is first necessary to briefly review the history of these peoples, as it is currently known, based on historical records as well as linguistic, genetic and archaeological studies.

According to the present knowledge, the Finno-Ugric peoples lived roughly in the area between the mid-Urals and the eastern end of the Bay of Finland until the Bronze Age (Häkkinen 2010a, and references therein). During this period, their contacts with various Indo-European peoples were already extensive. It is currently not known whether the Finno-Ugric peoples had any direct contact with the Paleo-European peoples inhabiting the area of Finland until the Bronze Age. The speakers of the early Sami languages first entered Finland in the early Iron Age from ca. 500 BCE on (Häkkinen 2010a, 2010b). They were followed by the Finnic peoples, who spread from the area of present Estonia and the eastern end of the Bay of Finland to the northern side of the Bay ca. 1-300 CE. Tavastia, the inland southern Finland was settled by these peoples ca. 300-500 CE. Germanic peoples probably inhabited the southern coastal Finland several times from the Bronze Age (1500 BCE-500 BCE) until the start of the Viking Age, ca. 700-800 CE. During the Viking Age, many regions of the coastal Finland were abandoned while, simultaneously, Scandinavian influences seem to have intensified (see, e.g., Kivikoski 1951). At the end of the Viking Age ca. 1000 CE, clear

signs of the spread of Christianity appear in Southern Finland (Purhonen 1998). Both Finland and Carelia were Christian by the end of the 14th century, although the pre-Christian religion still continued to thrive, mixed with Christian influences, until the 17th century in Western Finland and until the 19th century in Eastern Finland (Siikala 1992: 288-291). The Finnic ethnic mythology and poetry recorded during the 16th-20th centuries was very similar to the one that had been created during the Medieval Catholic period before the Reformation in the 16th century.

The myths, i.e., the poetry citing the myths presented in this paper, were written down mostly in the 19th century. Before this, they were in a constant state of change. The myths were always reinterpreted and new relations were built, leading to the relatively young age of some important themes present in the mythology, while some of the mythological content likely has very distant origins both in place and in time. Some mythemes could be as old as Neolithic, even Mesolithic or Paleolithic. Mostly, however, the Finnic mythology probably contains themes that were created during the period when agriculture was known and practised, i.e., from the late Neolithic or the start of the Bronze Age (ca. 2000 BCE-1800 BCE) to the late medieval times (ca. 1200-1550 CE in Finland).

Thus, there are several different layers of traditions of different ages present in the Finnic mythology. There also seem to be many layers in the ancient calendric system of the Finnic peoples. For example, the ancient Finnish year could be divided into months or other periods in more than one way. The most important of these were the common Indo-European concept of the eight-divided solar year with the division points being the two solstices, the equinoxes and the four mid-quarter days between these, and the ancient Finnic division of the year into two halves by the 'Bear Days' of Midwinter and the Midsummer, and again into summer and winter halves by the Summer and Winter Nights, all of which were determined by the seasonal changes

and the lunar calendar (see Vilkkuna 1950: 104-105, 283-285). Naturally, there were also local variations in the calendric traditions and the related mythology concerning the cycle of the year.

In this paper, a central myth related to the annual calendric cycle of the ancient Finnic peoples, the myth of the Great Oak is discussed. The content, age and origins of *The Great Oak* are analysed and traced using not only the myth itself, but also some other related calendric myths. It turns out that several layers can be recognized in the myth that can be related to some major cultural developments among the Finnic peoples and their ancestors. It also turns out that this myth can be related to similar annual ritual use in agricultural fertility rites, as has been previously demonstrated in the case of the myth of the Robbery of Sampo.

## 2. METHODS

To investigate the origins of the myths and their mutual relations one must consider the way myths are created, sustained, and changed. Every myth is related to the features of the culture it was created and/or used in. A myth and its central mythemes, which are the minimal units or kernels of the myth, can often be related to some central cultural feature(s) of a period, e.g., the need for achieving agricultural fertility or successful hunting; the basis for certain practices in wedding ceremonies, trading customs, or the social relations between persons in different social orders; and so on. Often the traces of the previous versions of a myth, related to the central cultural features of preceding cultural periods or other cultures may also be seen in the myth. It can be observed that when a culture changes, so does its mythology: the myths may be reinterpreted, acquire new content, or be combined. Myths may sometimes be abandoned completely, although, in general, they seem to be extremely persistent against profound changes or disappearance – most often their central content and interpretation is merely adjusted to suit the new cultural context. The persis-

tence of myths and mythemes is probably related to the universality of the mental imagery encountered in them; that also enables them to cross temporal, cultural and language barriers more easily. By tracing the central themes and mythemes and their mutual temporal order one may reconstruct the historical development of a myth to some degree.

It is obvious that the history of every myth is extremely complex and investigating its history is an immense task. A myth has been in a constant state of alteration during all of its history, so usually no first or 'original' version of a myth can in practice be reconstructed – every version of the myth is an 'altered' version. Therefore, the comparison of several different myths with similar themes greatly enhances the possibilities for associating the myths with correct cultural developments and historical periods.

If a myth can be shown to have had a definite connection to or even a concrete use in a ritual, a celebration, a ceremony, etc., that connection will lead to the interpretation of the myth in the culture in question. For example, a cosmic creation myth could be sung or performed in founding ceremonies, a vegetation myth could be performed during agricultural fertility rites, the creation myth of an animal species can be performed during hunting rituals, and so on. Thus, a valid proof that a myth is related to certain cultural features can be obtained via recorded historical use of the myth in rituals.

In the following, I will try to shed some light on the annual calendric mythology of the Baltic Finns by analysing the Finnic myth of the Great Oak and tracing the purpose it served in the late Iron Age and historical times. I will investigate its historical developments, connect it to some important cultural features of certain periods, and compare it to other myths of similar kind. Finally, I will show that it can be connected to actual ritual activities that were practiced in certain times of the year.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The myth of the Great Oak is known from several different full and partial versions of the Finnish and Carelian poems as they were sung by revered local poetry singers and subsequently recorded by Finnish scholars travelling in distant villages mainly in the 19th century (e.g., SKVR I4: 800, 807, 825, 832, 835, 836, 862, 855, 870, 882; III1: 615, 617; III3: 3671; VIII1: 777; VIII4: 2642, 2652, 2687, 2710; XII2: 6065, 6070). I will not present any full versions of the poem here, as they can nowadays be conveniently viewed in the Internet (see SKVR (2013)). Moreover, there is considerable variation in the details, which makes it difficult to choose any particular version for translation. Instead, I will present a detailed description of the poem, based on the different versions and thus including the major features of all of the most important variations.

In practice, the Great Oak was often cited as a prologue to an incantation that described the origins or creation (Finn. *synty*) of sharp sudden pain or disease, believed to be caused by a curse or black magic. It thus served a practical purpose in a healing ritual. Another common use was to combine the poem of the Great Oak with a poem that described the brewing of beer for the wedding of Päivölä, i.e., the wedding of celestial gods. Because this latter version is obviously related to both agricultural activities and the major celestial deities (the sun, the moon, the sky god) I will pay special attention to it in what follows.

In Table 1, five well-known Finnic myths, which are connected to the cycle of seasons, the alteration of light and darkness, the mutual relations of the major celestial bodies, and, thus, also to the annual calendar, are presented (see also, e.g.: Vilkuna 1950: 183-186, 359; Haavio 1967: 179-282, 342-357; Lintrop 1999; Siikala 2012: 157-162, 200-216, 268-279, 413; SKVR I1: 54, 79, 96; I2: 816, 834, 849; VII1: 679; XII1: 81, 99). It can be seen right away that *The Liberation of the Sun*, *The Robbery of Sampo* and *The Great Oak* all contain the idea of the sun

or *sampo* being liberated. *Sampo*, which is either the same as *sammás*, the world pillar and the supporter of the sky and the sun, or a magical object related to the function of *sammás* as the *primus motor* of the seasons and the agricultural cycle, is in a role similar to the life-supporting sun in the two other myths. All of these three myths are thus about the restoration of cosmic order and the return of the sun to its proper place. The fourth myth, *The Wedding of Päivölä*, is also related to the movements of the sun and the annual cycle, as is shown below. Below, I will analyse the details of *The Great Oak* poem and compare it to these other myths and poems containing similar themes and mythemes.

**Table 1 Five Finnic myths related to the annual cycle (see also Table 2 for the list of deities).**

Myth (poem)	Contents of myth
The Liberation of the Sun ( <i>Päivän päästö</i> )	The sun and the moon have been stolen and taken to Hiitola or Pohjola in the North. "The only son of God", "The daughter of the smith", Virgin Mary, or Luonnotar liberates them miraculously and hangs them on the branches of a tree, where they can shine to all people.
The Robbery of Sampo ( <i>Samon ryöstö</i> )	Sampo (cf. <i>sammás</i> , the world pillar), a magical object for producing unlimited wealth, has been stolen by the lady of Pohjola and is held inside the mountain of Pohjola in the North. Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen go to retrieve it, using the singing of Väinämöinen as their primary means. The mistress of Pohjola chases them and Sampo gets broken into pieces.
The Great Oak ( <i>Suuri tammi</i> )	A giant oak grows out of magical substances (e.g., the remains of a previous great oak) and blocks the light of the sun. Only a mythical being, a small man from the sea, is able to hack it down so that the sun can shine again.
The Wedding of Päivölä ( <i>Päivölään häät</i> )	Lemminkäinen crashes the wedding of the son or daughter of Päivölä, the sunny and warm habitat of deities in the South (cf. Finn. <i>päivä</i> , the sun), and gets killed. His mother rakes his pieces from the river of Tuonela, puts

him back together with the help of a bee, and resurrects him.  
 'The Bear Year' The Bear dies in Midwinter and is born in Midsummer.

In short, the poem of the Great Oak (Finn. *Suuri tammi*) describes how a giant oak, grown out of mythical ingredients and/or the results of the actions of mythical beings, continues to grow so tall that it eventually blocks the light of the sun. A special mythical being is needed to bring it down so that the sun can shine again.

Many versions of *The Great Oak* start with the description of three or four maidens raking hay out of the sea. The hay collected then gets burned by a deity or other powerful being: Tursas the god of war, Ukko the sky god, or the great eagle Kokko from Lapland. The resulting ashes can be used to make soap to wash the hair of the son of Päivä, the sun. After this, the ashes are sowed, e.g., in front of the gates of Pohjola in the North, and out of the ashes grows an oak. In some other versions, the oak grows out of drops of blood, the tears of an adder or a maiden, the hair of a maiden, an acorn, the chips of wood from a previous oak, the drool of a pig or an elk, or the foam of beer. The oak grows and grows, preventing the clouds from moving in the sky and blocking the light of the sun and the moon, which of course causes the grain crops to die, lakes to freeze, etc. The tree needs to be hacked down, and someone able to perform this enormous task is searched for, but not found. A mythical being or a deity then emerges. In some versions, he is a very small completely black man, the size of a human thumb, who rises from the sea. His hat, gloves and boots are made of stone or iron, and in his belt he carries a steel axe, which he uses to hack down the oak with three strikes. In some Carelian variants of the poem, the tree falls so that its top points towards the midsummer, the trunk towards the north. The fallen oak forms a bridge to the Underworld, across the river of Tuonela. In some incantations, the pieces of the fallen oak are used by a Lapp wizard to make magical

arrows, which are able to cause pain and disease or kill the elk of Hiisi. In some other versions, for example some encountered in Estonia and in Ingria (Finn. Inkerinmaa), the oak grows outside a girl's window and her brother finally hacks it down (Siikala 2012: 202-203). In these variants, the wood is used to make all kinds of profane tools and even to build a sauna, which is then used by God and his children for bathing – the latter image is probably a Christianized mythical feature (Siikala 2012: 203).

At first sight, *The Great Oak* seems to be a cosmological myth expressing the threat of chaos caused by the blockage of sunlight (Siikala 2012: 200). This aspect of the myth is universal and has many parallels in various cultural environments (see Haavio 1967: 346-350). Closer inspection reveals, however, that the Finnic version of the Great Oak myth is connected to matters more familiar and pressing to the peoples practicing agriculture in the demanding environments of Northern Europe: the solar and seasonal cycles and agricultural fertility.

The three or four maidens in the beginning of the poem can be connected to the three divine maidens of nature or destiny (*luonnottaret*) and perhaps also to *päivättäret*, the daughters of the sun goddess Päivätär, who commonly appear as performers of divine activities in the Finnic poetry. The raking of the sea is an activity that Lintrop (1999) has convincingly connected to the combing of the hair of the solar maiden and, via that, to solar imagery and the movement of the sun at low altitude above the sea horizon. The raking of the sea, the combing of the hair of the solar maiden, and the rays of the low-lying sun above the sea can be connected to the washing of the hair of the son of the Sun for his wedding – a solar mytheme, which explicitly appears in some versions of *The Great Oak* (Lintrop 1999; e.g., SKVR VII4: 2642). The wedding in question is the wedding of the celestial bodies or their son's and daughter's – a well-known theme in the mythology of the Balts (Kuusi 1963: 142-146). In Carelia, *The Great Oak* could be

sung as a prelude to the Wedding of Päivölä, which reveals that the celestial wedding is the same one that Lemminkäinen crashes (Siikala 2012: 205).

The wedding of the celestial bodies can easily be interpreted as calendric mythological imagery: the bringing together of the cycles of the sun and the moon. The creation of a lunisolar calendar has been an important issue in all agricultural societies, which needed an accurate solar-based annual calendric system with which the old lunar calendar, suitable for the time-keeping for shorter periods, could be combined. In Finland and Estonia, there was the so-called 'division period' (Finn. *jako-ika*) of 11 or 12 days before the Finnic New Year *Kekri* in the beginning of November (Vilkuna 1950: 290-294). In Scandinavia, a corresponding period of ca. 12 days was held around the midwinter. These traditions were quite obviously created already in prehistoric times, when the period of 12 or 13 lunar synodic months needed to be fitted with the ca. 365 days of one solar year (e.g., Vilkuna 1950: 293-294, 356). This adjusting of the different periods was probably done in connection with some important solar calendric marker: the solstices, the equinoxes, or the mid-quarter days – note that *Kekri* approximately corresponds to the solar mid-quarter day of early November (see, e.g., Nilsson 1920; Vilkuna 1950: 290). The celestial wedding of the sun and the moon can thus be interpreted in the context of bringing together the movements of these celestial bodies by adjusting the annual lunisolar calendar during the "division period". Other possible interpretations of the 'wedding' of the sun and the moon could include the eclipses. However, the eclipses cannot be related to the annual fertility cycle and have been universally seen as primarily negative events, which makes their connection to the concept of wedding unlikely.

The burning of the hay in *The Great Oak* can be connected to slash-and-burn cultivation, which was the primary method of cultivation in Finland until the late medieval times and continued in Eastern Finland

well into the 19th century (see Taavitsainen et al. 1998). In some versions of *The Great Oak*, it is the sky god Ukko who burns the hay – an image that can be connected to ignition by lightning. Thus, the sky and thunder god Ukko, who as the provider of rain was a central figure in agricultural rituals, also participates in the creation of the Great Oak by providing fire from the sky. One of the names of Ukko was Perkele, which is related to the sky god Perkunas of the Balts. For the Balts, the oak is the sacred tree of Perkunas.

The small man from the sea, who hacks down the Great Oak, has been connected to the descriptions of the spirits of the dead, which sometimes were also described as being very small, apparently, because they lived in *Lintukoto*, the land of the dead beyond a large sea, where the sky-vault was very low (Ganander 1789: 50; Toivonen 1947; Siikala 2012: 176-177). *Lintukoto* could be reached by following the trail of the birds via *Linnunrata* (lit. 'the way of birds'), the Milky Way (see, e.g., Siikala 2012: 177). In this context, his sudden appearance is not surprising, since the darkest time of the year, late autumn and winter, when the oak was at its tallest, causing the darkness, was traditionally believed to be the time when the dead could roam the earth.

It should be noted that the Finnish word *tammi* also has the meaning of 'axis'. In some poems, the oak is described using the word *tasmatammi*, which Haavio (1967: 350-351) interpreted as a tree that connects the heaven and earth. The oak is also called *rutimoraita*, which means 'a red tree', possibly referring to the reddish tint of iron or brass (Haavio 1967: 352). The oak thus has properties that are similar to the properties of the world pillar *sammas*, which was imagined to be a metal pole supporting and rotating the sky-vault (Setälä 1932; Harva 1943).

In *The Liberation of the Sun*, the celestial lights are placed on the branches of a tree, which thus can be interpreted as a world tree. The tree could be taken to refer to the world tree aspect of the Great Oak, even

though an oak is not explicitly mentioned in any variants of the poem. Unfortunately, all the known versions of the poem are markedly Christian and do not contain many archaic details (Siikala 2012: 209-215). The hiding place of the celestial lights in the poem, however, is Pohjola or Hiitola – the same place where *sampo* or *sammas*, the world pillar, is captured in *The Robbery of Sampo*. The liberation of the celestial lights is thus paralleled to the retrieval of the world axis and ensuring the continuity of the celestial movements and annual fertility.

Siikala (2012: 178-199, and references therein) has shown that the Finnic mythological imagery of the center of the cosmos included a tree identified as an oak. Harva (1948) interpreted the Great Oak as the Milky Way, which resembles a giant celestial tree that is mostly visible during the winter time – in the summer months, the night sky is too light for it to be seen at the latitudes of Finland.

As the Milky Way and the ‘axis tree’, the Finnic Great Oak definitely has an aspect that can be interpreted as a world tree. It is clear from the myth, however, that taking down the oak does not cause the end of the world to happen as does, for example, the fall of Yggdrasil, but instead enables the sun to shine and, via the pieces of the oak, a new oak to grow, thus bringing about the (annual) cycle of light and darkness. The Finnish Great Oak is thus the *primus motor* of the seasons and the annual vegetation cycle.

That the Finnic concept of time was generally cyclic can be seen from the name of the New Year’s festival *Kekri*, which derives from an ancient Indo-European word meaning ‘wheel’ or ‘cycle’ (Koivulehto 2000). As seen above, *Kekri* was the festival that ended and started a new agricultural, solar and lunisolar cycle. Thus, as a myth describing to the solar cycle and the alteration of seasons, *The Great Oak* is not only a myth that explains the vegetation cycle, fertility and the annual cycle of life, but is clearly also a myth intimately connected to the annual calendric cycle, i.e., the lunisolar

calendar starting and ending on *Kekri*. The cyclicity of the growing of the oak is emphasized in those versions of the poem where the oak grows from the chips or an acorn of a previous oak.

In some versions of *The Great Oak*, there are verses that present the oak as a tree of destiny or a tree of life: “Whoever cut a branch, took happiness forever; whoever cut a bunch of leaves, got a love forever.” (SKVR I4: 836; transl. by the author). In some other poems that could, apparently, also be sung independently or as a part of *The Great Oak*, an oak is described as a magical tree, which has an apple on every branch, with a sun for every apple, with a cuckoo for every sun, and silver and gold running out of the beak of the cuckooing bird (e.g., SKVR II: 873; IV2: 1653; VI1: 539). An oak could also be the ‘oak of honey’ with honey running from it (e.g., SKVR VII3: 305). These mythical images can be related to the idea of the tree of life (Siikala 2012: 197). In the context of the calendric myth of the Great Oak, the above mythemes of the “honey oak” and the “sun-apple oak” can be understood as concretizations of the abstract idea of a tree that ‘supports’ the annual life cycle.

The poem of the birth or creation of beer was often sung as a prelude for *The Wedding of Päivölä* (e.g., SKVR I2: 816). On the other hand, as seen above, *The Wedding of Päivölä* could be sung as a prelude for *The Great Oak*, and the Great Oak could grow from the foam of beer or the saliva of an animal that in prehistoric and early historic times was used as the fermenting agent in the brewing of beer (see Haavio 1967: 271). We can thus see the following picture emerge from the network of connections between the aforementioned myths and mythemes: beer is brewed for the celestial wedding that marks one full cycle of the movements of the sun and the moon – the Great Oak grows out of the by-products of the brewing of beer; the oak grows and causes darkness until it is hacked down; out of the remains of the oak can grow a new oak. The oak thus grows in a repeating cycle that is connected to the movements of

the celestial bodies via the wedding in Päivölä. The theme of resurrection is also a central element in *The Wedding of Päivölä*: the amorous hero Lemminkäinen, who is killed in the wedding, comes back to life.

That the creation of the Great Oak is connected to the brewing of beer and not for example to the production of bread or porridge can be explained in two ways. The mytheme of brewing beer is probably very archaic: the production of alcoholic beverages seems to have been one of the first agricultural products used in a region after agriculture had arrived there (see Dineley 2004). This may have been the case especially in Finland and surrounding areas, where the natural conditions for cultivation of crops are relatively poor and it took a long time for agriculture to become the main source of livelihood. In later times, when agriculture already had been the dominant source of livelihood for a long time, beer could be brewed in large amounts if the yield was large and of good quality. Beer was brewed for all the main annual festivals and it was one of the products which, according to historical records, was especially used in offerings for Ukko, the god of rain and thunder (see Harva 1948). Thus, beer was the measure of the success of the grain crops and the use of it connected the worlds of men and gods during festivals.

It is known that the poem of the Robbery of Sampo was sung during sowing time in Carelia as late as the 19th century (e.g., Vilkuna 1950: 185). The myth was thus concretely used in actual ritual context to ensure agricultural fertility. It can be shown that the poem of the Great Oak was used in a similar way.

The Helkajuhla festival, celebrated annually in the village of Ritvala of Sääksmäki in Tavastia in the southern inland Finland, is the sole living Finnish remnant of the many prehistoric agricultural fertility rites, and their later Christianized versions, that were held on the fields at the beginning of the sowing season and during the late spring and early summer, i.e., at the start of the growing season, in

general (Enäjärvi-Haavio 1953; see also, e.g., Haavio 1967: 148-56). Nowadays Helkajuhla is celebrated on the Pentecost, but the ritual seems to have originally been performed during several days between early May and the midsummer (see SKVR IX1: 95-98). In the festival, the young maidens of the village form a procession that walks a cross-formed route in the village singing the Helka songs. Finally, they end up on a small hill, where they dance in a circle. After this, later in the evening, bonfires are lit. It was generally believed in Ritvala, as late as the 19th century, that if the Helkajuhla festival tradition would ever cease, the fields of Ritvala would never bear fruit again (SKVR IX1: 84-87).

The present Helka songs (SKVR IX1: 80-87) are poems of the archaic Finnic type, meant to be performed by singing. The present contents of the three longest songs are probably medieval and have markedly Christian content. The so-called End Song (SKVR IX1: 87), however, is different, and most of it is clearly pre-Christian. In the End Song, it is described how the elk of Hiisi runs and drools, and out of the saliva grows a giant tree, now a bird-cherry or a juniper, but originally probably an oak (it should be noted that oaks are rare in Tavastia). The poem states that "whoever took a branch of [the tree], took eternal happiness; whoever cut a bunch of leaves, got eternal love". The End Song thus consists of some of the verses usually encountered in the poem of the Great Oak. It can be concluded that, in its original form, the poetry cited in the ritual has probably included some more extensive variation of the poem of the Great Oak.

As the present Helkajuhla festival is a remnant of the pre-Christian agricultural fertility rituals that were performed on the fields to ensure the success of the grain crops, it can be concluded that the Great Oak was originally used in Ritvala of Sääksmäki in a manner similar to the use of the poem of the Robbery of Sampo in Carelia. This connection provides the final evidence that the Finnic myth of the Great Oak was not so much a cosmological myth



expressing the fear of darkness and chaos, but rather an agricultural fertility myth related to the annual solar and vegetation cycles.

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the details of the Great Oak myth of the Finnic peoples the following historical developments for the myth among these peoples can be proposed. The cosmological aspect of the myth, i.e., the myth of a giant tree blocking the light of the sun and causing darkness and chaos is probably very ancient, as can also be deduced from the distribution of similar myths all over Eurasia, even as far as in South-Eastern Asia (Haavio 1967: 346-350). The myth of the Liberation of the Sun seems to be as widespread and probably of equal age (see Haavio 1967: 226-227). Although that poem only survives as a Christianized version, the central themes of these two myths are clearly similar: the threat of universal darkness and the resulting chaos.

In an agricultural context and the temporal scheme of the annual solar cycle, both of these poems can be given an interpretation that is related to the seasonal alteration of light and darkness. However, unlike *The Liberation of the Sun*, the Finnic version of the Great Oak myth is so intimately connected with the ideas of the annual vegetation cycle and the slash-and-burn cultivation that it was probably connected to agriculture from very early on, possibly already in the Bronze Age. At that time, the ancestors of the later Finnic peoples lived on the eastern side of the Bay of Finland and had already been in contact with Indo-European peoples for a long time, acquiring, e.g., the early forms of the words *sammás* and *kekri*, and possibly also the concepts of the world pillar and the eight-divided solar year ca. 2000-3000 BCE (see Koivulehto 2000; Parpola 2005; also Siikala 2012: 424-425, and references therein). The Indo-European cosmological and calendrical concepts may then have partly replaced the more ancient concepts arising from the northern hunter-gatherer cultural traditions. The latter are still reflected in the 'bear year' Finnic calendric system orig-

inally based on the combination of the changing seasons and the lunar calendar.

The replacement of the eagle Kokko with the male sky god, possibly originally Ilmarinen as the provider of fire to burn the sea-hay may be related to the increasing importance of the latter as the sky-smith during the Bronze Age or the early Iron Age (see Salo 2006). During this period, the ancestors of the Finnic peoples gradually moved from the eastern side of the Bay of Finland to the southern side of it and towards Carelia in the north. As a result of long contact with the Balts, the Finnic sky god obtained increasingly the same qualities as the Baltic thunder god Perkunas. In this form, the sky god was later influenced by Christian monotheism, becoming ever more important as Ukko, the main sky god, the provider of rain in agricultural rites (Krohn 1915; Salo 2006).

The mythical images describing the oak in the centre of the cosmos as an axis and thus also as a bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead, as well as to the idea that the sun could be hanging from the branches of an oak, are central features in the world tree myths of Germanic peoples, including the Scandinavians. Those features may have entered the mythology of the Finnic peoples or their ancestors starting at the time when they came into contact with the Germanic tribes at the shores of the Baltic Sea in the Bronze Age or the early Iron Age. However, it is also possible that those mythemes had already (partially) been adopted in earlier Indo-European contacts and were merely re-enforced or transformed in later contacts (see Parpola 2005 for the Indo-European concept of the sun at the top of or turning around the world pillar or mountain).

In its present form, the Finnic Great Oak myth is, in my opinion, most closely related to the mythology of the Balts, where the oak is the sacred tree of the sky and weather god Perkunas. The very identification of the Finnic cosmic tree as an oak seems to be of Baltic origin: The Finnic peoples identified the sacred tree of the Baltic sky god with the world pillar forged by their own

sky god Ilmarinen, possibly under the influence of the world tree imagery of the Germanic peoples. Since the wedding of the celestial lights is a well-known and central theme in the mythology of the Balts, the connection of *The Great Oak* to this mytheme may also have formed during the same period, before the migration of the Finnic peoples to the northern side of the Bay of Finland.

The Finnic peoples started to move from the area of present Estonia into the inland of Southern Finland ca. 200-300 CE, which opened the possibilities for local Finnish and Estonian developments, although the Baltic contacts continued extensively, probably for hundreds of years. Based on the archaeological finds, the Scandinavian influence in Finland intensified during the Viking Age, ca. 800-1000 CE. Many features, including the hero-like, adventurous characters, connect the present form of the myth of the Robbery of Sampo to the Viking Age (Siikala 1992: 148-149; see also Frog 2012). Also the nature of *The Wedding of Päivölä* as an adventure type of tale, including the bold and amorous warrior hero Lemminkäinen, seems to have been created as a result of the values of the Viking Age society (Siikala 1992: 264; 2012: 279-280).

The first Christian influences probably arrived in the late Viking Age, while full-scale Christianization began around 1000 CE in Southern Finland (Purhonen 1998). Extensive mixing of the pre-Christian be-

liefs with the Christian ones happened during the Middle Ages ca. 1200-1500 CE (see the many examples in Vilkuna 1950). In the late medieval times, Savo and Northern Ostrobothnia were inhabited by immigrants from Tavastia and also Carelia, which lead to the mixing of traditions. The poem of the Great Oak, however, seems to have stayed relatively unaffected by Christian influences in many regions, as evidenced by the lack of Christian figures and themes in many of the most complete recorded variants of the poem.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

I have shown above that the myth of the Great Oak as it is presented in the poetry of the Baltic Finns is mainly a calendric and agricultural fertility myth related to the annual solar and vegetation cycle. The contents of the myth have been formed and reformed in various cultural environments during many different historical periods. Certain mythemes encountered in many variants of the poem reveal that it was related to slash-and-burn cultivation and the success of the annual agricultural yield, the measure of which was the production of beer for festival and ritual use. The concrete use of the poem was connected to the annual rites held to ensure agricultural fertility, as it was sung on the fields of Ritvala in Tavastia in the rituals held between the start of the sowing season in May and the midsummer.

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Table 2 A list of Finnic deities and spirit beings.

Name of deity or spirit being	Explanation
Ukko	male god of sky, thunder and rain; Ukko is an honor name and the original name is not known, though it may have been Perkele (cf. Perkunas of the Balts); the image of Ukko was probably strongly affected by Christian monotheism
Ilmarinen	male sky god, mythical smith, forger of the heavens
Väinämöinen	<i>tietäjä</i> , a Finnic wizard/shaman; male creator god; also a warrior hero
Lemminkäinen	bold warrior hero figure in the epic; originally probably a male fertility deity, a 'dying god'
Sampsa	male fertility deity of vegetation and cultivation; like Lemminkäinen, a resurrecting deity
Pellervoinen	
Joukahainen	male deity, a Lappish wizard figure
Tapio	male deity, king of the forest
Nyyrikki	deity or spirit governing game and hunting, sometimes mentioned as the son of Tapio
Mielikki,	wife of Tapio, mistress of the forest and its animals
Tapiotar	
Tellervo	maiden of the forest, daughter of Tapio
Päivätär	sun goddess, the main solar deity
<i>Päivän poika</i>	the son of <i>päivä</i> , the sun
Kuutar	moon goddess
<i>päivättäret</i>	daughters of Päivätär
<i>kuuttaret</i>	daughters of Kuutar
Ilmatar	female sky creator deity
<i>luonnottaret</i>	three or four female creator or protector deities; sometimes identified with fate goddesses, cf. the Greek Moirai
Vellamo	female water spirit or deity; mistress of lakes, rivers, etc.
Osmotar	female spirit or deity, mistress of beer and brewing
Louhi	female spirit or deity; the mistress of Pohjola, the ultimate North; a powerful, evil witch figure
<i>emuu</i>	the ancestral spirit or deity of an animal species; cf. <i>emo</i> , mother
Hongotar	<i>emuu</i> of the bear, sometimes identified with Tapiotar
<i>haltija</i>	guardian spirit; everything and everyone had their own guardian spirits
<i>tonttu</i>	guardian spirit of the house or household
<i>maahinen</i>	spirit beings living underground and in the forests; trickster figures who could cast spells on humans
<i>menninkäinen</i>	gnomes or goblins; small, human-like spirit beings living in forests; probably originally the spirits of the dead
<i>peikko</i>	malevolent spirit being; an ogre or a troll
<i>lintukotolainen</i>	very small human-like spirits or beings from Lintukoto, the edge of the world, a mythical place for the dead

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