

THE CHURL'S WAGON

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Abstract: *Suur Vanker* ('the Great Wain' in Estonian, the Big Dipper) is a commonly known constellation in Estonia. In addition to *Suur Vanker*, the astronym *Hunt Härja kõrval* 'Wolf beside the Ox' is one of the oldest written recordings of ethno-astronomic designations. The tale about farmer Peedu and his wagon, formalised and elaborated by Jakob Hurt based on his collections, has been printed in school textbooks since the issuing of Mihkel Kampmann's reading book, *Kooli lugemise raamat* at the beginning of the previous century. Thus, the story is widely known and has been simultaneously considered an Estonian astral myth.

Key words: constellations, churl, ethno-astronomy, saint, *sant*, wolf beside the ox

In good old times when mechanical clocks were rare, a diverse variety of methods was used to determine time. The illusory movement of stars, in the darkness period, was one the most prevalent of them. As the positions of stars in the sky, and the relevant connection with the observed ground-based orienting objects, depends on the time, date and local observation circumstances (openness of the horizon, visible expanse of the sky, direction of observation), such time determination actually presupposes the continuity of observations and knowledge of the sky. The easiest and most functional method to orientate in the starry sky is to group the brighter stars into stellar groups of a reasonable size – constellations. Such images make it possible to easily memorise the starry sky as a picture, and also to describe it and convey this to others. One of the most significant constellations, used for the determining of time, by way of its position and ground orienteers, has been *Suur Vanker* 'the Great Wain'. This is an intrinsic asterism comprising bright stars from the official Ursa Major constellation. According to common belief, the constellation of *Suur Vanker* consists of seven stars, this mistake was recently repeated in the Estonian version of the well-known television programme *Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader?*

4th grade nature studies: how many stars are there in the Suur Vanker constellation? The player suggested six. The correct answer would have been seven. As the desk-mate Maarja also gave a wrong answer, Kadri left the show with 10,000 Estonian kroons. (<http://targem.elu24.ee/?id=108754>)

Indeed, this is how it seems at first sight, and the figure is not incorrect in the general global context, when searching for the image of the Big Dipper, known as such in international popular astronomy. However, in Estonian folk astronomy, *Suur Vanker* has always comprised eight stars. The little *Alcor* being just as important as the other seven (Kuperjanov 2003: 180–182).

As *Suur Vanker* has always been important in determining time, and as an ancillary in finding the North Star, it has probably also been the absolutely best known constellation. Yet, not at all times and not for everyone has it been *Suur Vanker* as the constellation has had several other names. The oldest designation is considered to be *Odamus*, in Finland *Otava*. There are several hypotheses with regard to the origin of this name, yet however, the etymology still remains unclear. For instance, in a text narrating about the determining of time

Those who didn't have a rooster looked to the stars to determine time. The time was figured out by the Sieve and Pole, and Sandivanger, 'the Churl's Wagon' – the smaller one is the Churl's Wagon – was also important. In olden times, there were churls around, where would the churl go with the great wain, he wouldn't have money or bread, so it's good enough if he can do his business with the little wain (i.e. Ursa Minor). (ERA II 159, 263 (37) < Risti parish)

an interesting name, *Sandivanker* (the Churl's Wagon) is used. Another variant of the name, from the same region, has also been registered in the dialectal collection:

Santvanker (Suur Vanker, taevas 'sky'). (AES < Risti)

These two contradictory examples gave an impetus to elaborate on the subject matter, and will probably also be referred to below.

HUNT HÄRJA KÕRVAL 'WOLF BESIDE THE OX'

The wide-spread common belief that the constellation of *Suur Vanker* comprises seven stars, and the very significant eighth one is being forgotten, was already cited above. One of the earliest concrete recordings of astrononyms originates from the beginning of the 18th century. In Salomo Heinrich Vestring's

lexicon, we can find the name *Hunt Härja kõrval* (Vestring), i.e. in current astronomy, *Alcor*. This is indeed the forgotten eighth star, yet still of such an importance to be recorded at the same level of significance with *Suur Vanker*, *Sõel* (Sieve) and *Koidutäht* (Venus). Likewise, antique mythology has also paid attention to *Alcor* (80 UMa), associating it with the Lost Pleiad. Even in real astronomy, *Alcor* is also somewhat of an anomaly. While stellar classification, pursuant to the Bayer system, utilises the Greek alphabet, in decreasing order of brightness, and a star always has a classical name, i.e. a respective Greek letter, the relatively bright (3.99 m) *Alcor* has been left out of this system and is referred to only as Flamsteed number 80. Evidently, *Alcor* is not a companion of *Mizar*, as their actual distance is approximately three light years.

In his speech on Estonian astronomy, in 1899, Jakob Hurt presented a tale about *Suur Vanker*, continuously published as an Estonian folk tale in official reading-books for schools, at least since Mihkel Kampmann's *Kooli lugemise raamat* (1913). The following example is taken from my 3rd grade school textbook (Siim & Vallner 1967), the main difference with Jakob Hurt's original text being the fact that the term *Vanaisa* 'Grandfather' (synonym of God) has been scarcely used.

WOLF BESIDE THE OX

Estonian folk tale.

Once upon a time a peasant, named Peedu drove his wagon, with an ox harnessed in front, through the woods. Suddenly, a wolf came out of the woods and attacked the ox, wishing to kill the harnessed draught animal in the shafts. But this was against the law. The wolf was indeed allowed to kill and eat animals but never at the time when the animal was working. In order for the wolves not to do such evil in the future, Grandfather lifted Peedu, his wagon and ox, and also the attacking wolf into the firmament. As a punishment, he harnessed the wolf next to the ox to pull the wagonload.

As a proof to what had happened, we can still see in every clear night, from the stars of Suur Vanker in the sky. Four stars set as a rectangle are the four wagon wheels. The first of the three stars in front of the wagon is the shaft, the next is the ox and the third, the very first in the front, is master Peedu. But next to the middle one or the ox, there is another little star: this is the wolf. The wolf does not want to pull the load and drags towards the woods. This is why the middle star, the ox in the Suur Vanker constellation, is pulled aside from the straight line and inclines towards the woods.

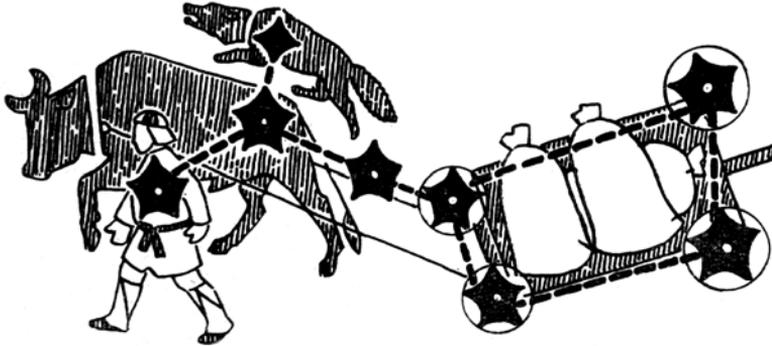


Figure 1. Imbi Ploompuu's illustration from the school reading-book (Siim & Vallner 1967).

The same story, following the original more closely, has also been published in the *Täheke* children's magazine in 1971.

This narrative has been considered the only proper astromyth of definite Estonian origin. Milko Matičetov, currently a member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences, has found a totally analogous narrative about the Great Wain in Slovenia (Zemona, pri Ilirski Bistrici), with the only main difference being the name of the man, Saint Mart(in), who harnesses the wolf attacking the ox next to the bovine animal (Matičetov 1973). Indeed, the variants of astronyms for this constellation, recorded in two regions in Slovenia, comprise the Wagon of (Saint) Martin. The same association could have also been known in Estonia.

Latin *sanctus*, i.e. 'sacred', 'saint', has been considered as one of the possible origins for the contemporary Estonian word *sant* ('cripple', also 'churl'). The connection of the Great Wain constellation with a saint or a prophet has been explicitly recorded in Slovenia, associated with Martin, the Saint of Tours. The astronym Saint Peter's Wagon is known from Hungary, first recording thereof dating from the 16th century, whereas David's Wagon is known from the Roman territories and Kursk gubernia in Russia. The astronym Elijah's chariot of fire is known all over Europe, and is also well established in Estonian folk astronomy.

A wagon goes over the roof of our house at the end of the day. Looks like a wagon with four wheels and a pole in the front. Elijah had driven a chariot of fire. The horses had detached themselves on the road, separated from each other. (AES I < Palamuse parish)

Ursa Major was known as a wagon already in the ancient world, in parallel with the name Big Bear. On British islands, the constellation was known as



Photo 1. *Elijah's Chariot on the wall of Rila Monastery in Bulgaria.*
 Photo by Andres Kuperjanov 2008.

Charles's Wain, with three horses harnessed in the front, and *Alcor* as Jack, the driver on the middle horse. According to some opinions, the substantiation for this name is proto-Germanic *karlas wagnas* (referring to E. Cobham Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, 1895, *Churl's Wain*, Anglo-Saxon *ceorles wan* – peasant's wagon, *Charles's Wain* is the relevant modification thereof). On the other hand, some authors have considered *Churl's Wain* a dysgraphic form of *Charles's Wain* and regarded the origin thereof to be the similarly widely known royal wagon (e.g. Allen 1963) and *Charlemagne* – Charles the Great, King of the Franks. The astronym *Suur Vanker*, 'the Great Wain' reached us probably through the German peoples, evidently by way of the Swedes (could also be Odin's or Thor's Wagon, now prevailingly *Karls Vagn*). This had to happen very early as the parallel names, distinct from the wagon, are nearly non-existent. Likewise, *Odins Vagn* is also one of the possible etymological candidates for the Finnish name *Otava*.

While the harnesser, in the Jakob Hurt's recorded tale about peasant Peedu (maybe Saint Peter, proceeding from the Hungarian variant of the name; Peedu is mainly known in Võrumaa area, with the astronym *Pedovanker* recorded from there), is Grandfather (i.e. a divine creature), in the Slovenian example, this is done by Mart (St. Martin – Martin of Tours). Proceeding from this data and dwelling thoroughly into the subject matter, Milko Matičetov published an article in 1977, *Bär (Wolf) im Gespann (AaTh 1910)*, in the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, wherein it turns out that the harnessing of wild animals (a wolf or bear) is a relatively common activity for saints in hagiographic texts (e.g. St. Herve, St. Fillan, St. Naum, St. James of Tarentaise), known in Roman areas and also in those of the Greek Catholic Church.

For instance:

A similar story happens to St. Lucius, when ploughing with an Estonian farmer, he harnesses a bear in front of the plough, next to the ox.

In the case of the blind St. Herve, the wolf kills the ox while ploughing. The wolf, affected by the prayers of the holy man, becomes embarrassed for his sins, takes the ox's place and helps to finish the job.

St. James of Tarantaise was a Syrian knight in the service of the Persian King. When he was building the church and pulling wood from the forest, a big bear killed his ox. The saint reproached the bear for the sin and the bear promised to be harnessed in front of the wagon. Once the work was done, the village people wanted to kill the bear, yet the saint convinced them to release the animal.

St. Naum from Ohrid: a fresco from the beginning of the 19th century, in the monastery on the border of the Macedonian-Albanian border, depicts St. Naum driving a wagon, with a wolf and an ox as the draught animals.

Moreover, the wolf has not only been harnessed by the saints but also by Baron Münchhausen (accidentally), Kalevipoeg, the hero of the Estonian national epos, and, pursuant to Eisen's folk jokes, by a grandfather of a man from Nõva village.

According to Darina Mladenova's book *Zvezdnoto nebe nad nas*, the combination of a wolf and an ox (harnessing of a wolf to replace the killed ox) has also been found among Bulgarians, Serbians, Greeks, Romanians and Hungarians, in addition to Slovenians; in some occasions, this motif has been transferred also to Orion; similarly, the first star of Ursa Major (η UMa – *Alkaid*, *Benetnash*) has been depicted as a wolf attacking an ox-driven wagon (Mladenova 2006). In oral conversation, Nikolai Sivkov of Komi origin claimed that the same wolf/

ox/wagon tale, published by Jakob Hurt, was also widely common among the Komi as a fairy tale, however, not associated with the firmament.

Back to the Estonian material. When compiling an overview of Estonian astronyms, the star name Mart, existent in the index file, seemed extremely suspicious and was thus classified as a seemingly disorienting single record. Still, considering the above, it is highly possible that this was a trace of the miracle of Martin of Tours. As Oskar Loorits had stated that *kadrisandid* (St. Catherine's Day's mummers) could be associated with the Milky Way, and this has evidently been the point of reference for the opinion stating that *mardisandid* (St. Martinmas' Day's mummers) could have a certain connection with Ursa Major, the above seems to confirm this. At least one text, originating from Kodavere, from which the name of the star, Märt, has been taken from, indicates that the association with St. Martin is not unfamiliar: *Märt – the old ones said, well, there! Ox and Märt* (AES < Kodavere parish, Sassukvere 1932). And in such a saint context, we could once again look at the two examples given at the beginning of the article, the *Sandivanker* 'Churl's Wagon' is indeed Ursa Major in the second example, and the first one states that a *sant*, 'churl', 'cripple' would not need a big wagon, it would be sufficient for him to have a small one. In a peculiar way, these examples seemingly document the alteration of the meaning of *sant* in a language history sense.

THE OX AND THE WOLF

There are several sayings known from old Vienna in which the wolf is represented as the symbol of Protestantism (see, e.g., <http://www.sagen.at/doku/woderwolf/sagenfiguren.html#menschen>). One of such interesting motifs of the wolf and ox was found in the 1980s, during the repair of a house in Vienna, at Bäckerstrasse 12, now known under the name "Wo die Kuh am Brett spielt".

The relevant story goes as follows.

Protestantism, initiated by Martin Luther, had completely encompassed Vienna at the beginning of the 16th century. This was not to Ferdinand I liking and in 1551, he summoned the Jesuits to set an order and restore the Catholic faith. The nearly a hundred years long bloody war ended in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. On the fresco, the ox represents Catholicism and the wolf – Protestantism, whereas the backgammon game depicts the nearly a century-long warfare.

Thomas Aquinas, one of the most substantial ideologists of Catholicism, has been frequently considered the prototype for the ox. Such a nickname was



Photo 2. A wolf and an ox playing, the ox having an extremely triumphant face.
Photo by Vahur Kuperjanov 2008.

attributed to him by his teacher Albertus Magnus. The Protestant wolf image was probably a bothersome and pig-headed element, being, as such, an opposite of a dumb ox who would tread his daily track.

OTHER ASTRONYMS OF CHRISTIAN ORIGIN IN FOLK ASTRONOMY

Greater and Lesser Crosses. These constellations have been described, in the format known both in Estonian and pan-European folk astronomy, by Saint Gregory of Tours in the 6th century. His *De cursu stellarum*, written in 573, was a guideline for monks to determine prayer time according to the stars (the Greater Cross is the constellation of Cygnus, and the Lesser Cross that of Delphinus). The same Gregory was also the compiler of the biography and hagiographic texts of Saint Martin, another Tours-based man, mentioned above. Altogether, he managed to compile four books on the miracles of Saint Martin.

Likewise, the three stars comprising the Orion's Belt are also directly associated with the *sant* (*Sandisauad* 'churl's staffs', *Sandioda*, 'churl's spear', *Moose kepp* 'the cane of Moses'), and, in addition, the three delineated stars in the constellation of the Eagle, one of them Altair, a bright star.

Sant, Sant souedega. 'kolm heledat tähte vist kotka tähestikus' ('churl', 'churl with staffs', 'three bright stars probably in the constellation of the Eagle'). (KKI, WS < Jämaja parish, Mäebe village 1923)

ASTRONYMS OF CHRISTIAN ORIGIN WITHIN ESTONIAN FOLK ASTRONOMY: CONCLUSION

There are quite a few designations with direct Christian origin among the astronyms. Four of them have been used in Estonian ethnoastronomy: Churl's Wagon, Elijah's Chariot of Fire, Greater Cross and Lesser Cross. Three of the above names have definitely been common all over Europe, yet, assumptions can be made, regarding the Churl's Wagon, that it had been widely used and faded out later.

Sandivanker 'Churl's Wagon'. In current Estonian language use, *sant* denotes a crippled person, either mentally or physically. In earlier phraseology, *sant* meant a saint, *sanctus*. Thus, as such, the name of the constellation actually denotes the wagon of a saint, be it probably that of Saint Martin of Tours, or Mart. Similarly, in quondam times, the wolf-ox motif has evidently been a common comparison in folk tradition and hagiographies. For instance, an expression *nagu hunti härga kisuvad / üks metsa, teine kodu poole* 'tearing like a wolf and ox, one towards the forest, the other towards the home' can be found in the database of Estonian phrases (<http://www.folklore.ee/justkui/>)

Eelija vanker 'Elijah's Chariot of Fire' is another extremely well-known and widely spread folk name for Ursa Major.

The Greater Cross as the name for the Swan constellation, and the **Lesser Cross** for the Dolphin constellation have been perpetuated by Saint Gregory of Tours and are widely known as such all over Europe.

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ARCHIVAL SOURCES

AES – dialectal collection of the Academic Mother Tongue Society

E – Matthias Johann Eisen's collection in the Estonian Folklore Archives

ERA – Estonian Folklore Archives

H – Jakob Hurt's collection in the Estonian Folklore Archives

KKI WS – the vocabulary collected according to F. J. Wiedemann's "Estonian-German Dictionary"

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