

Reality as Presented in Estonian Legends of Hidden Treasure

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Abstract: Stories of hidden treasure are different from other folkloric forms as in the Estonian folk tradition the motif of money is present in all genres. Monetary relations are discussed in proverbs and riddles. The problems of poverty and wealth are present in fairy tales. Opinions and dreams concerning money are verbalised in poetic forms in folk songs. People know and still practice various methods, partly based on traditional beliefs, that are known to bring good luck in money. The techniques of old magic meet modern recommendations of various kinds. In this article, the focus is on tradition relating to stories of hidden treasure. The legends and other stories (about 5,000 archive texts and recordings) are kept in the Estonian Folklore Archives and date back to the 19th and 20th centuries, although there are more recent materials. We can find three main fields in this tradition, depending on their connection with reality: 1) stories based in fact and on a real event, as evidenced by for example an archaeological find; 2) narratives that are part of local historical and toponymic traditions representing mental geography; 3) unlocalised stories that do not represent folk beliefs or legends and instead deal with more general questions such as what the real price of economic growth is, what consequences humans can face when luck smiles on them, what dangers – including supernatural sanctions – threaten people, and what consequences can be expected when they come into contact with treasures of unknown origin.

Keywords: hidden treasure legends, Estonian folklore

Tales of hidden treasures stand out among other folklore for their special themes. At the same time, these same themes are found in all genres of Estonian folklore: money is mentioned in proverbs and riddles while problems of wealth and poverty are common in fairy tales. These problems are articulated poetically in folk songs and in general in society there are also beliefs and customs concerning money. Today people know and practice various techniques, partially based on traditional beliefs, that should ensure good luck in money matters. Here the old magic intersects with modern financial recommendations of various kinds. Applying comparative content analysis to the text corpus on treasure lore, the purpose of this article is to reveal how this topic is implemented in Estonian folk narratives, to ascertain what stories are found and how they relate to reality, as well as what actions people take in these stories. We will investigate legends of hidden treasure stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives and collected in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as referring to the latest material.

We distinguish three main layers in treasure lore, the degree of connection of which with reality varies. 1) Stories based in fact and real events, for example, discovering a real hoard of artefacts; 2) stories related by local historical traditions, so to speak, representing local mental geography. This kind of legend is usually highly localised in time and place and is associated with real people; 3) stories that are rarely localised and are based on certain mythological ideas and beliefs that could explain people's moral and ethical choices, especially as found in cautionary legends¹.

Through the prism of folk belief, people's actions in various situations are considered, questions about the real cost of financial success are discussed, and the consequences that people face when they find hidden treasure and the conditions under which they obtained the found fortune are examined. Even though the events and situations presented in the narratives look fantastic, they are conveyed as potentially possible and reliable. Storytellers use various narrative strategies and rhetorical means to persuade their audience (Oring 2008). The use of various narrative devices in the telling of treasure legends indicates that narrators of legends above all want to convince their listeners of the authenticity of the stories. According to Elliott Oring (Oring 2008: 157), "a legend is more likely to be considered true if it meets the cognitive, emotional, and moral expectations of its audience". Folk narratives about hidden treasure

seem to correspond to the cognitive, emotional, and moral expectations of a traditional group.

An interesting fact is that, with all the desire for authenticity, we find purely fictitious elements in treasure legends, when stories are told for the sake of a joke, they have an ironic attitude to the content. That is, we can say that contradictory images and understandings are expressed in treasure lore. In some stories where there is hope for a happy find, protagonists talk about improving someone's life situation, while others show how the fortune found causes trouble for generations to come. In other stories, an agreement with the devil himself seems possible that won't entail undesirable consequences, while in others, communication with evil spirits leads if not to the deprivation of treasure, then to danger to life and health. There are stories in which trash or coal turn into gold, and in others silver coins found transform into leaves or other useless garbage.

One of the important episodes in these legends is the indication of to whom the events in the story happen. This aspect, in turn, corresponds to the answer to the question of how the character (or the traditional group to which the corresponding story belongs) learns about the place where the treasure is hidden, as well as how to find it (for example, the treasure appears in a dream). First-person narratives are not uncommon, usually showing the narrator at the centre of real or fictitious events. People mentioned in legends can be close or distant relatives of the storyteller such as acquaintances, grandparents, neighbours, residents of the same village (both in the past and in the present of the stories).

There are stories of how 'money lights' were seen, about pots of money found in a hill or in a field, about rumours in a rural community saying that the prosperity of a particular farm was explained by a found pot of money, etc. It is very common, of course, to refer to a very long-standing local tradition through certain verbal formulas, for example, "popular rumour says" or "there have been rumours here for a long time", etc. There are interesting connections with written culture: sometimes people claim that information about treasure can be found in "old books" and in maps that are located somewhere in an archive either in a local city or abroad.

Stories about real treasure finds

Among the archival texts there are descriptions of events that took place in real life. In most cases, the degree of folklorisation is relatively low with the stories not deviating far from the original events. Such stories become research objects for the folklorists who analyse stories that dealing with real events, family folklore and other group traditions. These stories transmit facts, sometimes with some added narrative episodes (for example, a treasure dream), reflect archaeological objects from the common people's perspective, or discuss strange visions of lights. Other tales are told about finding money in old houses. At the same time these legends are ways of discussing how, for example it is possible that another villager has become wealthy, seemingly overnight, when he or she was poor.

Although folk descriptions of archaeological finds cannot be considered traditional legends, they still form their own area in the field of folklore. Such stories relate how the find occurred and indicate the circumstances of discovery, characterising the container in which the find was stored. The objects found are described (for example size, shape, signs and inscriptions, condition) and sometimes numismatic remarks are added along with a description of what happened with the found object (it was taken to a museum, exchanged at a bank for money, given to children to play with, divided among those who found it, or it just disappeared).

The stories of real finds in turn probably inspired the re-telling and remembering of other, more traditional legends about hidden treasure. It is also notable that local tales of treasure provide valuable information for archaeologists (Tõnisson 1962: 228). There are also undesirable concomitant phenomena including knowledge of where valuable coins were found encouraging people to make additional illegal searches in the hope that something else was hidden.

An example from southern Estonia:

In Tepu pasture, the girl Minna found old silver coins. She took feed to the pigs to eat and money was scattered next to the trough, where the pigs dug it up. The money was probably hidden inside a container made of bark because spruce bark was scattered everywhere. All the coins were the same size. Minna gave away some of the money. (RKM II 393, 470 (34) < Rõngu – Anu Korb < Elmar Maasik, b. 1927 (1985)).

Since the search for money pots continued over the years despite written and unwritten prohibitions, the search itself also became the subject of stories. Often, the personalities of the treasure hunters and their actions provided a reason for pranks and jokes.

Unknown treasure seekers using ‘treasure maps’

Interesting connections between legends and reality emerge in stories about unknown treasure hunters. These narratives are based on the historical tradition that somewhere there is a treasure that everyone has tried to find, without success, until strangers came and took it away. We can see how various practices of different professions are associated with treasure hunting in folk tales, for example, geodetic surveyors (Torim 1990), ethnographers, even archaeologists (Viskovatov 1894; Jung 1898: 238-239). During fieldwork, archaeologists are constantly asked if they have managed to find treasure (Randla 2002). In Estonian folklore, the characters in such stories are always outsiders, mainly Swedes who are noticed by or communicate with villagers, since outsiders specify the location of a particular tree or stone. For comparison, in Lithuanian stories, Poles come in search of treasure (see Kerbelytė 1973, No. 96) while in the South Slavic tradition it is the French (see also Karanović 1990: 62). An important detail is that the foreigners use some kind of map or plan and have measuring and digging tools with them. Local people also talked about seeing traces of strangers’ activities. Judging by the stories, searches were often effective, although sometimes the result is unclear. Here we encounter a hidden conditional imagination, i.e. local people would have found the treasure if only they had access to foreign archives, had known the right foreign language or had maps.

An example from the northern Estonia:

Someone has hidden a kind of treasure in the muddy park in Ravila, although no one knows who exactly. In September 1936, the treasure was dug up. The excavation was carried out by four men who were well dressed and arrived by car. They had maps and various measuring instruments with them. They measured and studied until they spotted the right location. They started digging. They dug up the treasure from a depth of about one meter and then left. Many have seen these diggers. The excavation pit

was visible to everyone. I asked to take a picture of this pit, I will send the photo to the Archive. (ERA II 132, 425 (34) < Kose – T. Võimula (1936))

Treasure stories based on real local events are included in regional place lore along with more widely known migratory legends representing widespread international tales. They are very well adapted to local realities and are told as if they happened in a well-known place, to specific people, at a particular time. Together with the rest of folklore, they form the mental geography of the area, an invisible layer covering the visible landscape (cf. Ryden 1993). In turn, corresponding motifs from migratory legends evoke a sense of something special, contributing to the adaptation of tradition to specific conditions so that the physical, historical and emotional geography of a place, and the motif of that place, are localised (Ryden 1993: 83) so that the events of the legend and the place name are combined.

In Estonia, we find various place names indicating treasures and money: Kullamägi (golden hill), Rahaaugumägi (hill with a hole where the treasure is located), Hõbeorg (silver ravine), Rahakivi (money stone) and Rahaallikas (money spring). In some cases, such toponyms are formed simply on the basis of an apparent association and there is no connection with the legend, while sometimes this happens the other way around, the treasure story functions with the place name indicating treasure, for example in Virumaa (north east Estonia) there is a place called Tammiku Rahaaugumägi (Tammiku hill with a hole where the treasure is located). This place seems to attract various types of treasure story as the text corpus contains legends about searching for treasure (indeed, pits and ditches left by the treasure seekers are visible on the hill) and villagers seeing treasure lights. Another type of legend has been known here, according to which the finder of the treasure must donate a specified part of the find to the poor. As the story goes, if the condition is violated the treasure hunter loses the treasure. Associated with the same place is a legend about the transformation of pieces of coal handed to a random passer-by into silver money. Rahaaugumägi is an archaeological site and is listed as an ancient hillfort (Tõnisson 2008: 221-222).

In Estonian folklore, stories about treasure that are based on the norms of behaviour and supported by folk belief and religion, and which tell about contact with supernatural beings, are sometimes told in such a way that the content is presented in close connection with the circumstances of reality, while

at other times the connections with aspects of reality, i.e. the specific time and place, remain undefined. In both cases, the legends contain an account of the dangers and consequences associated with the acquisition of treasure. In folk narratives, both success and, conversely, fatal events are presented in a variety of ways. This topic is always surrounded by some uncertainty and ambivalence. Such folklore reflects notions that are widely known, widespread among an extensive variety of peoples, and borrowed into the local tradition as a single whole narrative. These themes, characteristic of a wide cultural region, are supported by the postulates of local living folk beliefs (for example, the idea of creatures guarding treasure, or that treasure will manifest itself, or that in certain situations you cannot talk or look back at something, or that you need to say certain formulas, etc.). Regarding folklore related to the subject of treasure, Lauri Honko's says that in the tradition of a community, both seriously held beliefs and entertainment legends (fabulates) coexist as stories, although the latter are not directly based on folk belief (Honko 1964: 13).

The devil is one such legendary character with whom humans come into contact when they want to find treasure, according to Ülo Valk (Valk 1998: 9), and it turns out that the devil is even the most popular mythological character in Estonian folk narratives. The beast can be the keeper of treasures, even their owner. His presence often scares people away, which is usually enough for people to give up searching. The protagonist often makes a conscious decision not to engage in what is the patrimony of the evil one. In texts that border on fairy tales by genre, the accents are placed differently; in such stories, it turns out that even the devil can be a reliable partner in financial matters, and no harm will occur (for example, the Mythical Creditor ATU 822*).

Stories about treasures in which a sacrifice is required to obtain a treasure (you need to give someone away, kill a person or animal, shed blood, take something somewhere, or take something away) are difficult to interpret. In addition to legends that say sacrifice is required, there are tales in which people must place an object belonging to them at the location of a treasure, for example a knife, sickle, scythe, axe, pipe (Eisen 1919: 84). People believe that the guardian spirit will no longer be able to dispose of money where someone else's property is situated (E 1779/81 (11) < Risti – J. Holts (1892)). Legends about treasure that include a demand for sacrifice are a way of narratively discussing the symbolic exchange that people are willing or unwilling to perform in order to possess the treasure.

Many legends, in their essence, serve as warnings against greed, as well as against frivolous promises to gain wealth, which lead to death (without the coveted treasure). The pre-condition for finding money is often so difficult both physically and morally that the hero of the story evades fulfilment. Legends are in this way a suitable channel to provide popular explanations, in this case showing, through different storylines, how the refusal to search means that treasure is so rarely found. At the same time, not finding treasure leaves the topic open, implying that treasure is still hidden and therefore still to be found.

Folk tales with transformational motifs are more difficult to interpret as they contain both the transformation of worthless objects into gold and silver, as well as opposing examples in which we find the transformation of gold and silver into worthless garbage. Ulf Palmenfelt, who has studied treasure tales in Gotland, Sweden, believes that legends containing episodes of magical transformation exhibit varying degrees of fictitiousness, conveying either realistic (thinned coins found can crumble to dust), or totally unrealistic narrative elements that represent a game of imagination (Palmenfelt 2007: 18).

A note on the relationship between treasure legends and time

In stories about treasure, the timescale that comes to the fore in connection with the relationship between the former owners and those who might find the treasure is emphasised. The treasure belonged to ancestors who once hid it and who somehow went on taking care of it (for example, by deciding who might get the treasure). Stories are often associated with ancestral burial sites; perhaps they are partly based on the idea of the inviolability of places that belonged to former settlers, for example, in the story about treasure in an old cemetery, seekers experience incomprehensible feelings and abandon the idea of finding the treasure. In other cases, misfortune befalls the violator of the burial place, with the legend functioning as a warning. However, this sense of respect is not always present, as archaeologists describe signs of grave looting that have remained since ancient times (Tamla 1990).

With the advent of the 21st century, the search for treasure has reached a new stage, and today thanks to the use of detectors, it has become much more effective than ever, resulting in a significant growth of problems associated with

the protection of ancient monuments (Ulst 2010). Opinions and news on relevant topics are published in the media (Kalda 2008; Ulst 2010: 160–161, 165).

In conclusion

We can state that legends of hidden treasure are a thematically diverse group of tales, and that the variety of episodes and motifs has amazed the folklorists who have studied the topic. The article focused on three main trends in how markers of reality were presented in folk narratives. The credibility of the story in the tradition group depends on how strongly reality is integrated into legends. Depending on the proportion of elements of reality, we see stories in the text corpus that,

- firstly, convey local events as they really happened, or in which only a few folklore motifs are found (vernacular journalistic in a sense);
- secondly, contain numerous markers of reality, although next to them and interspersed with them there are beliefs, images and elements of migratory folklore in almost all possible combinations. That is, this is the area of traditional legends;
- thirdly, contain episodes where markers of reality lose their concreteness even though they are told about events the place, time and characters of which are not specified or are only rarely specified. The legends of this last group are very similar to the time, place and character of fairy tales, although they still do not achieve the generality of fairy tales.

The destiny of traditional treasure tales today is generally to remain in stories on the pages of folk tale anthologies. However, as examples they are interesting as old legends are associated with various attractions and are sometimes reproduced in different places on the Internet conveying traditional images and narratives of hidden treasure to those interested in old tales. Stories of hidden treasure represent the choices people face, accepting or not benefits that can come from outside. Legends support in their own way everyday monetary relations, the essence of which consists in forming and reaching agreements, honesty and cunning, magic and common wisdom, crime and punishment, receiving and deprivation.

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Notes

¹ For comparison, Natalia Kotelnikova considers Russian treasure lore “a multi-genre conglomerate of stories united by a single artistic system. The underlying folk beliefs about treasures are diverse, but interconnected” (Kotelnikova 2012; for more detail, see Kotelnikova 1999).

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