

# The First People in Belarusian and Estonian (Baltic-Finnic) Tradition

*Elena Boganeva, Mare Kõiva*

**Abstract:** This article provides a comparative analysis of Estonian and Belarusian aetiological narratives concerning the creation, fall, and early life of the first humans. Both traditions frame Adam and Eve narratives as folk reinterpretations of Genesis, enriched with humorous, explanatory, and moralising elements. Central shared motifs include dualistic creation, in which the Devil defiles the newly formed human; the widespread tale of the woman created from a dog's tail; explanations of bodily traits such as the "fingernail body" before the fall; and the division of the serpent into the snake and eel (or loach in Belarus). These narratives function simultaneously as playful tales and as accounts of ancient truth for tradition bearers.

The article demonstrates how biblical material, apocrypha, and local worldview merge into cohesive macro narratives. Comparative study of these motifs highlights both universal narrative patterns and region specific innovations, and invites further research into deeper historical and cultural connections between Baltic Finnic and East Slavic traditions.

**Keywords:** aetiology, legend, creation of humans

## Information about aetiological collections in Estonia and Belarus

In comparison to fairy tales, aetiological legends are a poorly studied corpora of texts. Oral aetiologies in Estonia and Belarus began to be recorded at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is quite late. The aetiology is usually embodied in the form of legend or fairy tale, as well as in the form of local legends, with texts reflecting the local landscape, natural and cultural objects. The register of ethology narratives covers a wide stylistic range, from serious narratives to humorous origin stories (UIM 2014: 9–10; Loorits 1928; Etioloogiad 2026). The retelling of Bible stories or similar texts were not favoured by collectors: one hundred years ago scholars emphasised that oral stories held far greater value, and it was supposed that biblical stories were written down from the Bible or other books. The best period for collecting stories was certainly 1905–1939, as many people lived in rural areas and the network of local correspondents was dense.

The topic of the first people was discussed by Oskar Loorits during the 1926–1928 period, and also in 1999, following the author's death, when a book about the religion of the Livonian people was published. Loorits had a monumental approach to Estonian folk belief, including some of the motifs relating to the first people (published during the 1949–1952 period).

In Estonia, the topic of the first people was considered by Oskar Loorits in volumes I–III (1926–1928) and IV–V (1999) of *Folk Belief of the Livs* (Loorits 1926: 126; 1928: 181; 1999: 144, 146, 151–152), he examined Estonian motifs in his *Grundzüge des estnischen Volksglaube* (*The Main Features of Estonian Folk Religion*) (1949–1951). The main motifs are listed in the *Catalogue of Fairy Tales and Legends of Estonia*, by Antti Aarne (Aarne 1918: 139–153, AaS 10–26<sup>2</sup>).

In the Estonian Literary Museum's Estonian Folklore Archives, in the handwritten card files on aetiology, there are more than 2,400 texts – just a fraction of the materials collected from the manuscripts of different years. The overwhelming majority of these texts have not been published. A total of 227 Estonian texts, used in the current article, were found in the Skriptoorium<sup>3</sup>. The majority of the texts are about the creation of humans, and the life of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and after the fall. In addition to the main story points, the data is also extremely interesting in terms of explanations, arguments and conclusions about male and female life. There are interesting comments in the narratives, although these will have to remain a separate topic of study.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of regional studies were conducted within the territory of Belarus, as a result of which a fundamental corpora of folklore texts was published, including folk prose containing a substantial proportion of aetiological legends, including Biblical topics (Dobrovol'skiy 1891, Romanov 1891, Romanov 1912, Shein 1874, 1893, Federowski 1897, Serzhputovski 1911, 1930, Pietkiewicz 1938). During the Soviet era – starting in the 1930s in the Eastern Slavic countries and later in the countries of the 'socialist camp' – religious legends (as well as memorates and any kind of genre variety that mentioned religious forces such as mythological fairy tales, miracle stories, mythological stories about God's help or punishment) were on the fringes of research, exactly because of their religious nature.

However, from the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and to the present day purposeful field research is being conducted in Belarus, as a result of which a rather extensive corpus of legendary and mythological narratives has been collected.

Modern Belarusian folklore materials, including the legends about the first people, are reflected in such publications as *Legends and Traditions* (Grynblat and Gurski 1983; 2005), *Belarusian Folk Bible in Modern Records* (Boganeva 2010), corresponding articles

dedicated to the oral Bible and aetiological legends in the 10-volume series *Traditional Belarusian Art Culture*<sup>4</sup> (Tradytsyynaya 2004: 719–724, 752–761; 2006 (2): 348–399; 2009 (2): 373–439; 2011 (2): 384–454; 2013 (2): 526–611), *Ethnography from Polotsk* (PEZ 2011 (1): 25–26), Boganeva 2020, etc. The database of the Belarusian ethnolinguistic atlas<sup>5</sup> contains 3,580 legends and mythological narratives, 163 of which are legends about the first people.

## **The perception of aetiologies by the bearers of tradition: truth and fiction**

Rural sources define oral texts on biblical themes and plots descriptively, referring at the same time to the oral tradition and the written source – the Bible and the Law of God. For example, a Belarusian source answers a collector’s question about who Adam and Eve were: “According to the Bible, Adam is the priest. And Eve is the mother of Nikolai Wonderworker.” (BNB 2010: 32). As modern studies from 1995 to 2019 show, Belarusian bearers of tradition can refer to aetiologies as ‘tales’, ‘parables’, ‘fairy tales’, ‘sayings’, without giving any precise genre designation to these names. However, even when referring to aetiological legends as ‘fairy tales’ or ‘tales’, sources most often believe that they are describing true events that took place an indeterminately long time ago. For example, at the beginning of the story of a rare aetiological story describing the causes of gender differences, the source immediately states: “That, baby, is true. It’s true. That’s how the light started, kid, it’s true. It’s not a fairy tale, no. It’s true, honey, that’s the way it is.”<sup>6</sup> (TMKB 2011: 389–390). And this despite the aetiology of the difference between the genders almost always having a humorous tone. In other words, aetiological legends in the modern perception have a dual status: on the one hand, they

are not quite serious, i.e. they are axiologically 'lower' compared, for example, to the Scriptures (although in their verbal existence they are often mixed with one another); on the other hand, these texts, sanctified by tradition, explain the phenomena of the world in an edifying way, and are thereby essential for storytellers.

Estonian aetiologies were recorded en masse from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1940s, existing today mainly in archival folklore collections. As a rule, archival records do not reflect the narrator's attitude towards the truth of the story. If the aetiology sounds humorous, it is still primarily characterised as explanatory, as seen in recordings of the same stories from different narrators in different regions in Estonia<sup>7</sup>.

## **Some of the most common motifs in the Estonian and Belarusian traditions**

The first people plot, including their fall and the consequences of the fall, is one of the most popular, and, probably, most diverse plots aetiologically in the Estonian and Belarusian oral Bibles. In plots associated with the names Adam and Eve, many European (and Jewish) traditions have three chronological parts following one after the other, differing significantly from the biblical original:

- 1) stories about the creation of the first people;
- 2) stories about the fall and change of both the nature of the first people and the world;
- 3) stories about the subsequent life of Adam and Eve after their exile from paradise (Kaspina 2001). In each text, these sections can follow each other, forming a single narrative, meaning that they can exist either in parallel with or independently of each other.

Due to the limited scope of this report, we will consider only some characteristic Estonian and Belarusian texts that belong to these three sections and focus on parallels from our traditions.<sup>8</sup>

In Estonian and Belarusian traditions, texts associated with the names of the first people – Adam and Eve – are often retellings of biblical stories (Gen 1–3) and combine all three first people plot sections. However, these retellings are embedded in purely folk settings. There are also dualistic motifs in Estonian and Belarusian legends about the creation of people in which the Devil takes part in creation. The content of these texts is far from the Bible, although they are relevant because texts with dualistic motifs of this type are widely spread around the world (cf. StTh-MIFL A2; Berezkin B 01; ATU 773)<sup>9</sup>

### Dualistic creation

Let us consider the following Estonian text from the Pechora area as an example.

*Ku' Jummal inemise tekk valmist ar', syss tä pand tuu sauõtsõ kujo kuioma. Esi läts hinge perrä. Pand huss mano vahi pääle. Halv tiiäi midä hussilõ lubasi, nigu huss lask ar mano. Sülel' inemise ar' nigu ei teeägi. Tull Jummal mano, pühk, pühk, õks jõua-as kyikõ ar' pühki. Kandlitsoppõ jäi veel tuud süolge. Muido mi olnu ka' nii puhta nigu elläi. Olnu-us kuurõivit es midägi. ERA II 194, 475 (11) < Setumaa, Petseri v., Risjova k. – Ello Kirss < Tat'o Kallaste, b. 1875 (1938)*

When God created man, He set his clay figure to dry, and started creating his soul, placing the snake to guard him. And the Devil – who knows what he promised the snake? (And the snake] let the Devil get close to man. Then the Devil spat on man. God came and began to wipe the man. He wiped, wiped, but at the corner of the buttocks there was still saliva. If it weren't for Satan, we'd be as pure as the beasts. There wouldn't be a period of menstruation or something like that.

Alternatively, it is the dog that allows the Devil to enter paradise and Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit.

Belarusians have similar legends in the records of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. God creates man, goes away and places the dog as a guard. The dog, in its original form, was without fur and very afraid of the cold. The Devil blows cold air onto the dog, promising to give her a fur coat in exchange for free passage to the man. The dog lets the Devil in, and he spits on the man. When God return, the Devil advises Him to turn the man inside out, so that all of the impurities, and with them the diseases, remain inside. God does so (Dobrovoľski 1891: 230–231)<sup>10</sup>.

In today’s world, this legend does not exist among Belarusians, as in general, legends with dualistic motifs are extremely rare today.

Similar motifs (the Devil spits on man, with the spitting the Devil creates diseases, God turns man inside out) in the aetiology of the creation of man are also found among Russians (UIM 2014: 228; VESiL 2019: 15–16), Ukrainians (Bulashev 1992: 91–92, 104; Dragomanov 1876: 1), and Bulgarians (Badalanova 2017: 338–341).

Such motifs are found in the *Slavic Apocrypha* ‘How God created Adam’ (Pypin 1862: 12–13)<sup>11</sup>. Only in the specified apocrypha does the Devil not spit on man, instead poking at him with a stick from afar, because the dog does not let the Devil near the man.

## **Texts about the names of the first people and the re-creation of people**

Livonians have an original dualistic legend about the creation of man, collected by Oskar Loorits and published in Estonian in 1926.

Once, God decided to create a man and a woman. ‘Let there be Adam and let there be Eve!’ – and He went away, leaving them alone.

The Devil was standing in the bushes, watching and listening to what God said. He heard the word ‘Darme’, instead of ‘Adam’. And as God left, the Devil immediately came out and said to the pieces of clay, of which the people were made, ‘Let there be a gendarme and let there be Eve!’

As soon as he said it, God came out of the bushes and ran to the Devil. The Devil, having noticed Him, grabbed the people and started running as fast as only he could. He managed to hide underground with both, the gendarme and Eve. He was about to hide, but God managed to grab Eve’s head. The pile of clay that was Eve’s head remained in His hands.

And then God quickly made a new man and a new woman out of this piece of clay. Since there was a paucity of material, He was unable to make the people as tall as He wanted.

God did not have enough clay, so He created people as tall as possible with the clay He had. This is the reason why we are shorter than the very first people. If only the Devil had not stolen them! There was a lack of material, thus God created hair on the head and between the legs on both man and woman. And so we are. (--) (Loorits 1926: 147; Loorits 1926a: US 16 + 25)

The text features a humorous and even somewhat satirical character, relating in particular to naming: the Devil did not hear what God had called people and, running away with His creations, called them gendarme and Eve. Moreover, he manages to hide the gendarme under the ground, and from part of Eve’s head God makes another pair of people. In other words, in the text there is also a comic description of the origin of the (police rank) gendarme, who is not a descendant of the first human pair<sup>12</sup>.

The folk etymology of the names Adam and Eve is also humorously used in a Russian legend: the newly created man points to Eve and exclaims “Eve!” in surprise. And Eve winks at him and promises: ‘Oh, I’ll give it to you!’ (*A, дам!*») God punishes them by calling them these names (UIM 2014: 242–243)<sup>13</sup>.

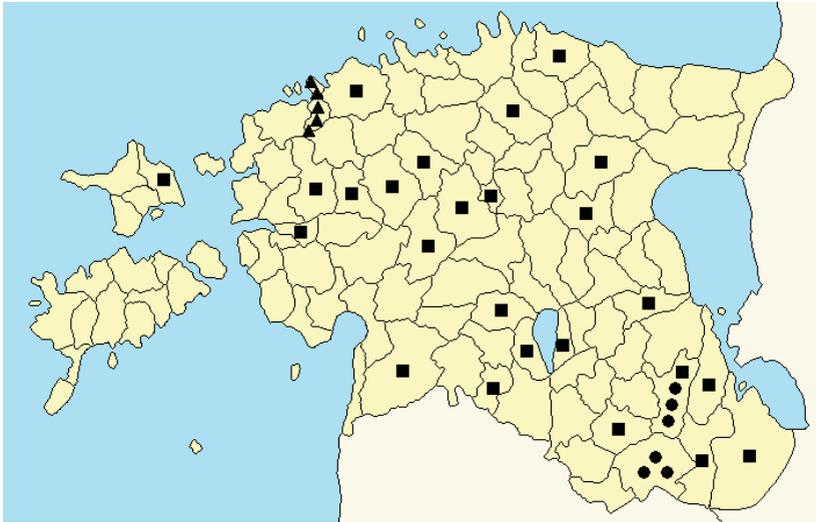
These motifs have parallels not in Slavic, but in Jewish traditions. In Jewish rabbinical sources one can find the fact that Eve was created several times. Midrash Bereshith Rabba points out Adam’s strange biblical comment, as he sees his wife: “And Adam said, this now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). This verse is commented on as follows: “For the first time, Adam saw all the details of creation: blood and discharge – and then God removed everything and created it again” (Bereshith Rabba 18: 4).

### **The woman from the tail**

In Estonian and Belarusian folklore there are versions of the creation of a woman from a dog’s tail (the same applies to Adam, to the monkey and to the Devil) (ATU 798).

When God wanted to create a woman, He took Adam’s bone. Cut out a piece with a large knife. Went a little further away. The dog came and stole the bone. God started chasing the dog, but the dog ran away. God had no way to catch the dog. Finally, He caught the dog’s tail and cut it off with a knife. And so, the woman is made from that. The dog continued on with the bone. (ERA II 1, 382 (75) < Tartu I. – Paul Ariste < Oskar Gnaderteich. (1927)

This version of the creation of woman is very popular in Estonia (see Map 1)



Map 1. Eve created from a dog's tail motif.

In Estonian, different variants of these events are followed by all kinds of aetiology. The woman, with her qualities, is a different type of creature; women listen to men only partly and often argue; women are show-offs and coquettes (they play with men like a dog chasing its tail); women, like dogs, have a lot of fleas; women, like dogs, move quickly and strive to bite, etc.

In a Belarusian legend recorded in Daugavpils County in Latvia (this version is closest to the Estonian version), God removes a rib from Adam, sets it to dry, and the dog grabs it and runs away.

*Хоць і не такая выйдзе як трэба, усё ж на бабу будзе пахожа, бо тут ёсьць і костка, і мяса, і шэрсць».*  
*Завершает расказчык історыю следуючай сэнтэнцай:*  
*«Ну ўгледзісь, з чаго баба, калі ні з хваста!*

The angels chase the dog, until finally a younger angel grabbed the dog by the tip of the tail, tore it off, brought it to God and said: 'Although it will not turn out as it should,

after all, it will look like a woman, because there are bones, meat, and fur.’ The narrator ends the story with the following sentence: ‘See what the woman is made of – a dog’s tail!’ (Latvia, archives of S. Sakharov. Latviešu folkloras krātuve (LFK)).



Ill. 1. Adam and Eve. Found in the ruins of Maasi stronghold (Maasilinn). Currently in the Museum of Saaremaa, Kuressaare Castle.  
Photo by Mare Kõiva 2018.

In Western Belarus, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the following version of the legend was recorded:

*Бог як створыў Адама, то створыў яго з хвастом; пасля Бог апамятаўся, што кепско гэтак, каб усе — і жывіна, і людзі — былі з хвастамі, так навярнуў на Адама сон і адрэзаў ему хвост, і палажыў кала яго, і зрабіласе з таго*

*хваста жонка Ева. То кабеты паходзяць з мужчынскага хваста.*

God, when He created Adam, created him with a tail. After God came to His senses, it was not good that everyone – animals and people – would have tails, so He gave Adam a dream and cut off his tail, and put a woman, Eve, near him, to make a woman from that tail. Women come from the male tail (Federowski 1897: 201).

There is also a Belarusian version that says when Eve grew out of Adam's tail, they were joined by the tail for a while, until the Devil seduced Eve<sup>14</sup>. There are also parallels with Jewish tradition here. In the Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, the creation of woman is described as separating her from Adam's back (i.e., originally man was an androgynous being). "While Adam was sleeping, Ashem detached the female body attached to Adam from the rear, and replaced the part thus taken with flesh." This interpretation is derived from the verse (Tehilim 139:4) *Ahor wakedem tsartani*, 'Front and rear' (i.e., a double being) 'You created me' (*Rashi, Ketubot*) (Bereshit Rabbah). It should be noted that in the Talmud, the word meaning 'rib' is also used for 'tail', from which such a variant could occur (Kaspina 2001).

This plot was repeatedly recorded by all Eastern Slavs (see VESiL 2019: 415–418). Publications of this story are available in Finland, France, Portugal, Germany, as well as in Latin America (ATU 798).

### **Retellings of the Bible in macro stories**

Often in Estonian and Belarusian traditions, texts associated with the names of the first people, Adam and Eve, paraphrase biblical texts (Gen. 1–3). In some cases, this is a retelling, a copy that

conveys the main content of the biblical fragment. However, the biblical original is generally too concise and needs detail, clarification, explanation, etc.<sup>15</sup>

Let's have a look at the following Estonian text as an example, which combines all 3 parts of the macro story about the first people: their creation, the fall, and life after the fall.

God has created Adam first (and let him go to heaven]. Adam was walking alone in the garden and was lonely. Then God put him to sleep, and from the left side took a rib, cut out a small piece of it and created Eve. And God allowed them to eat of every tree in the garden except for one. Adam and Eve did not need clothes, because their bodies were like fingernails.

Our fingernails are the memory of those first people. Nobody could enter Heaven. Adam and Eve lived there, but no one from the outside could enter. Then the Devil persuaded the serpent to carry him in its mouth into the garden. The Devil began to speak (with Adam and Eve] from the serpent's mouth: 'What are you all afraid of? God was jealous of you and he did not allow you to eat. If you eat the fruits of this tree, you will be the same as God'. Eve hurried to try the fruit and gave some to Adam.

From that moment on, they became naked, they were ashamed, and they began to hide in the bushes. And they began to make themselves an apron of leaves to cover their shame.

When God came, He said, 'Adam, Adam, where are you?' But Adam did not dare to respond. God called him one more time and Adam replied, 'I can't come out!' God asked 'Why did you break the rule?' Adam replied: 'Why did you give me such companions?'

God asked Eve: ‘Why did you take it?’ Eve replied: ‘The serpent gave it to me, and I took it!’

Then God took the serpent and divided it into 2 parts. One part was thrown into the sea, and the other, with the head, left on the ground. And He said to the people, ‘Get out of the garden!’

And He told Adam that he would have free time, but not the woman. And He said to the woman: ‘I will make your pains in childbearing very severe and when you see a snake, you must smash its head!’

After that, God led the people out of paradise and set an angel with a burning sword at the gates of paradise. And there it still stands. ERA II 163, 82/4 (19) < Setumaa, Järvesuu – Nikolai Ress < Aleksei Mägjoja, 62 yrs, 1937)

In this text, we can distinguish the following plot complex, which organically combines both biblical (referred to here by book, chapter and verse of the Bible) and non-biblical motifs. The latter are considered in relation to the Belarusian (and more broadly Slavic) folklore Bibles.

1. God creates Eve from Adam’s rib (Gen 1:15–25);
2. The first people had a nail-like body before the fall (folk motif);
3. Satan asks the serpent to take him in its mouth, to carry him to the garden of Eden (folk motif);
4. Satan tempts Eve, Eve tempts Adam (Gen. 3:1–6);
5. People become ashamed of their nakedness and cover their bodies with leaves (Gen. 3:7);
6. God divides the serpent into 2 parts, one remains on the ground (the snake), the other is thrown into the sea (the eel) (folk motif);

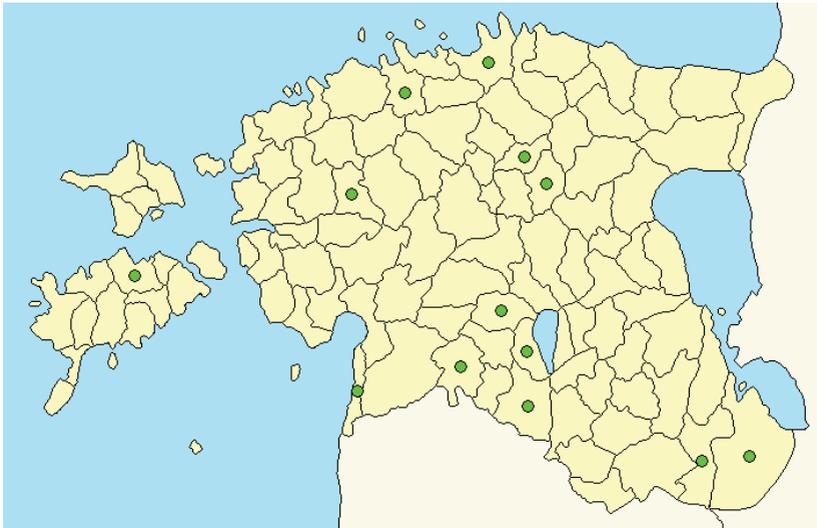
This motif is also traditional to the Belarusian folk Bible, as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was recorded in the eastern (Dobrovol'ski 1891: 236) and western parts of Belarus (Federowski 1897: 201). The motif of fingernail-like bodies also occurs in Ukrainian, northern Russian, Polish, Bulgarian, Lithuanian, aetiologies (Bulashev 1992: 103; Belova 2004: 239–241; Zowczak 2013: 97; Badalanova 2017: 369–371), as well as in Jewish sources (Kaspina 2000: 125–126). The Polish legends state that the fingernail-like body is even and firm (similar to the way people were moulded from clay at the beginning of creation) and had hidden inside the sexual differences of men and women (Zowczak 2013: 97). After the fall, the fingernail body fell off, and underneath there was a 'sinful body', i.e. the gender differences were apparent. Many Belarusian texts emphasise the existence and presence of a 'sinful body' – 'saromasty' – just after the fall. A parallel view is found in Jewish Talmudic tradition, where, on the one hand, there was an idea that the original man, Adam, was an androgyne (Piotrovskiy 1991: 41–43), while on the other hand the first people were asexual (Tokarev 1991: 359).

The motif of the fingernail body of the first people is connected to the belief that you cannot throw nail clippings around: after death, with their help, you will need to climb a high mountain to God in Paradise or you will need them at the Last Judgment. This belief is found both in Belarus and Estonia, but is also widespread among different nations such as Jews, Slavs, Balts, and Scandinavians (Bulashev 1992: 103; Levkiyevskaya 2004: 427; Volodina 2018: 181–206).

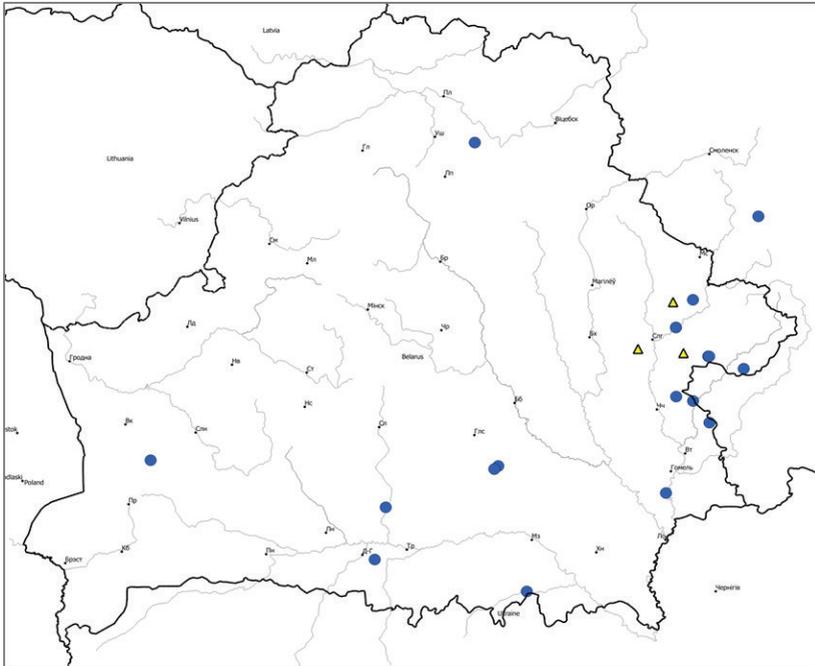
The motif of the fingernail body in Belarus is popular in the upper and lower Dnieper and eastern Polesye areas, as well as separately in Ponemanye and Dvina. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a belief in western Belarus that when a man scattered his nails during his lifetime, his soul would not enter heaven or hell after death, but would remain on earth in the form of a stork as pun-

ishment, until he had collect the discarded nails, and only when everything is together will he become human and go to heaven.

*Who throws off the cut-off nails, its soul does not go to heaven or hell after death, but walks, God willingly, like a stork until it has gathered all the cut nails.* (Federowski 1897: 221). Once the stork has gathered all the nails, it will be converted back into a human being, and will be taken to heaven because his punishment is over. (Federowski 1897: 185).



Map 2. The fingernail body of the first people (Estonia).



Map 3. The fingernail body of the first people (Belorus).

● - the fingernail body of the first people

▲ - belief, that you cannot throw cut nails around, as they are needed to climb the mountain after death

### **Motifs of the snake, eel and weather loach**

The Estonian motif where ‘Satan asks the serpent to take it in his mouth, so that he would carry it to the Garden of Eden’ is original and has no analogues in Slavic traditions. This motif is a detailed figurative illustration of the universal idea in which the serpent-tempter is identified with Satan.

The motif of dividing the serpent into two parts, one of which remains on the ground (the snake), the other left to float away

into the sea and become an eel, is found in Estonian aetiologies in a variety of ways, when God / Jesus / Moses dissect the serpent for various reasons.

In some Estonian aetiologies the snake and eel appear from two pieces of rope: one piece is animated by the Devil, it becomes a snake and bites it, the other part is revived by God, it becomes an eel and does no harm to the Creator, even when He takes the creature in hand (ERA II 162, 9/11 (1) < Latvia, Ludza – P. Voolaine, 1935).

In the Lithuanian legend the eel uses its own body to plug a hole in a boat on which Christ sailed, since that time people can eat eel, although it looks like a snake (UIM 2014: 148–149).

The eel is a rare fish for Belarus, so Belarusians have no legends about the eel, but there are legends about the loach – a freshwater fish that looks like a snake (and an eel in miniature). Belarusians have two versions of the origin of the loach: 1) the nail that the Gypsy stole at the crucifixion of Christ and threw into the river becomes a loach (BNB: 119–120); 2) when Christ was crucified, they gave him grass snakes to eat. Christ made these snakes into fish loaches, and said that now they can be eaten by people:

*‘I am the only one who heard (the stories) from the loach. I heard what our people were saying. Even my mother, when they brought our fish, and the loach was in the catch: ‘It’s a snake!’ The loach is a snake. When He (Christ) was crucified and tortured in every way, Christ was given a snake, given snakes as food. There were people near Him – His people. And He said, said unto them: ‘Go, eat; fear not’. And He gave the snake two ends, one and the other, and it was all. It doesn’t have such a fish tail, but it’s a real snake.*

*‘Eat, fear not. He who eats believes in me.’*

*That's what I heard. And He said: 'Just cut the head off because the head bites. Cut off the head and eat the rest, don't be afraid.' That's what I heard about a loach or a snake.<sup>16</sup>*

The second version of the origin legend of the loach is similar to the Estonian aetiology of the eel: the loach, just like the eel, appears from the (grass) snake and remains similar to its ancestor.

### **A woman has no free time**

A woman has no free time, because she sinned first. The motif is equally common in the Estonian and Belarusian traditions. However, Belarusians are more likely to have an aetiology associated not with the first people, but with a wandering God. When God walked the earth, he asked a woman to show him the way, but the woman was working and did not even straighten up, she showed which way to go with her foot. The man left his job and led God in the right direction, since then women always have work. Numerous versions of this story are published in the Belarusian book series *Traditional Artistic Culture of Belarusians* (Tradytsyynaya 2006 (2): 370–372; 2009 (2): 434–435; 2011 (2): 445–447; 2013 (2): 605–607).

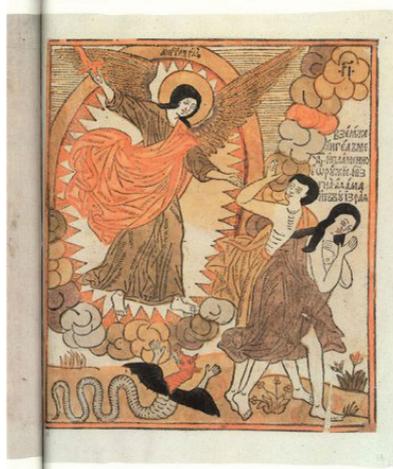
In Estonia, this motif is not popular. Instead, there are various other motifs. For example, the woman shows Jesus/God the way with her foot, and He says: “Men should always have time to lead me across the river. But women should not have time to show me the way with a foot. In the second version Jesus and Peter have asked the man to show the way. Man shows them the way with a foot. A woman, working busily, is ready to teach them, showing how Jesus assigns a good woman to a lazy man.

A woman answered God's greetings arrogantly, so God assigns her everlasting work. A woman does not deny her useful inventions but says that she did it all by herself. A man denies his work

and says that God has taught him. The moral is that the woman's work is not profitable because she said that she had done everything herself while the man's work is profitable because he said that God has taught him. A woman does not open a gate for Jesus in Jerusalem and so has everlasting work. (Cf. with the motif of the woman asking for work on Sundays and receiving it in full).



Ill. 2. Adam gives the apple to Eve. Altar from Kaarma church (13<sup>th</sup> century). Currently in the Museum of Saaremaa, Kuressaare Castle. Photo by Mare Kõiva 2018).



Ill. 3. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Vasily Koren, a native of the Belarusian town of Dubrovno, carved the Book of Genesis and the Apocalypse on lime boards. Vasil's Bible was important for the common people, who could not read or write.

## **The death of the first people**

The Seto people have a text about Adam's death that has been influenced by a book source.

When Adam lived with Eve, and they were already old, then the Father (God) told the family that if your old man (Adam] dies, tell me about it. He died and they went to God and told him – somehow they could do it. He gave them 3 heavenly grains, and said that when they bury Adam, they need to sow the grains at the grave. A beautiful tree with three branches grew on the grave. And from this tree a cross was made for Jesus.

Since the tree was very beautiful, one king ordered that a bench be made out of this tree for the church, and left it

ready to sanctify it in the morning. An old woman had a dream in which she saw that she needed to go and sit on this bench, 'And you will be more blessed than the king', the old woman heard in her dream. And she did it.

The king saw from the window that the old woman was sitting on the bench in the morning. Then he (got angry] and rejected the bench and threw it out of the church. But the people began to come to the bench to recover from diseases. Then the king threw the bench into the forest. But the people went there. Later they made a cross from it for Jesus. If the king had not thrown the bench, Jesus would not have had a cross. ERA II 194, 479/80 (16) < Setu, Petseri v., Risjova k. - Ello Kirss < Tatõ Kallaste, s. 1875 (1938).

This text is obviously influenced by the 'Tale of the Tree of the Cross' in the Apocrypha, which was attributed to St. Gregory the Theologian and is known in the Serbian, Bulgarian and Russian lists (cf. Federova 2012: 89–107).

Belarusians and Poles, in their collections of legends about King Solomon, have narratives about Sibyl (Sébilía), the prophetess who refused to walk on the wooden bridge across a river or stream, saying that the cross of Christ would be made out of this wood (Boganeva 2015: 57–64). In Belarus, this plot is rare, whereas in Poland it is widespread (Zowczak 2013: 201).

In the Estonian text there is an original image of the bench, which corresponds to the image of the wooden bridge across the river, and a nameless king who is the equivalent of King Solomon, who usually appears in the legends of Sybil the Prophetess (Sébilía).

## Conclusion

We have reviewed only some of the Estonian and Belarussian texts about the first people, revealing a number of common motifs and identifying some local features. This can be partly explained by the universal, transcultural influence of biblical literature. Based on the examples of common aetiological motifs of Estonians and Belarussians, such as ‘why women always work’ and ‘why children do not walk from birth’, the mechanism of adaptation of folklore-based aetiological subjects to biblical themes is clearly visible.

We demonstrated the verbal side of the legends outlining basic types and principles such as variation, intertextuality and the influence of apocrypha. We excluded non-verbal legends, i.e. the influence of art and architecture, the role of the imagination, and the pragmatics of legends (cf. humour and entertainment). Certain aetiologies can move relatively freely in the space of the biblical storyline and form new compounds without violating the internal logic of one or other aetiology that did not result from a new folk biblical history.

Links between Belarussian and Estonian folklore have so far received very little study. Further research will not only establish common and special motifs in the mythology and folklore of Estonia and Belarussia, but also perhaps consider in greater detail the non-verbal side of legends, or even the hypothesis that there are Baltic and Finno-Ugric substrates in the ethnogenesis of the Belarussians.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An exception is O Belova's article, in which she compares Slavic and Finno-Ugric legends, generally using material from the Komi people as examples of Finno-Ugric legend (Belova 2007: 229–241). In addition, there are a number of books and articles on the myths and legends of the Komi people in Russian (Limerov 2005; 2012; Sharapov 1996: 310–320; Smirnova and Chuv'jurov 2002: 14–16; Kuznetsov 2018: 169–180, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> AaS marks the legend type in the register of Estonian legends in Antti Aarne's register.

<sup>3</sup> Part of the digital archives and a working tool of the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum.

<sup>4</sup> The author of these sections of the series is E. Boganeva.

<sup>5</sup> The database belongs to the Center for Research of Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature of the National Assembly of Belarus, the J. Kolas and J. Kupala Institute of Linguistics, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, Department of Ethnolinguistics and Folklore.

<sup>6</sup> Written by E. Boganeva and T. Varfolomejeva in 2007 from Larisa Guleitsik, b. 1939, Kamenka village, Uzdenski region, Minsk territory, Belarus.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, in the Estonian archive there are numerous records of legends telling how a woman got a job on Sunday. A woman/spinster asked God for work on a Sunday afternoon. God asked her to pray, and she said that even then there was too much time left. Then God threw a handful of ashes on her head, which became lice — and now women have work on Sundays (H I 4,724 (6) Otepää, 1879; ERA II 54, 224/5 (247) Tartu–Maarja.)

<sup>8</sup> Since almost no Estonian aetiologies about the first people have been published, we will cite some texts translated from Estonian to English, some of the texts will be given in retellings.

<sup>9</sup> Slavic peoples have extensive literature on dualistic legends. For a review of the research on this subject see Kuznetsova 1998; NB 2004: 44–57; Belov and Petrukhin 2009: 312–323; Badalanova 2008: 235–242; Badalanova 2011: 134–136; Badalanova 2017: 23, *et al.*

<sup>10</sup> The version of the legend was recorded by Michal Federowski at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Western Belarus (Federowski 1887: 200, No 780).

<sup>11</sup> From Rumyantsev's collection of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>12</sup> Given the intense activity of gendarmes in Russia and other European countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we can conclude that the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were still a time of active formation or reformation of folklore biblical aetiologies.

<sup>13</sup> Word play with sexual connotation. This record of the Russian legend was made at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the Cherepovets district of the Novgorod province (now the Vologda region) (UIM 2014: 427). Estonian legends and mythological texts often demonstrate parallels with the legends of the Russian North.

<sup>14</sup> See Serzhputouski 2009: 62.

<sup>15</sup> About biblical retellings see (Boganeva 2010: 4–13; Boganeva 2014: 116–125).

<sup>16</sup> Transcribed by E. Boganeva, N. Petrov and N. Savina in 2014, from Maria Romanenko, b. 1922 in Zhuravel village, (evicted) Tserikov region, Tserikov, Mogilevsk oblast, Belarus.

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