

# The Kalevala and Finnish Language Policy: A Case Study in Constructing National Identity in 19th- Century Europe

EC2U 2026

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# Kalevala Day

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**Kalevala Day** (**Finnish:** *Kalevalan päivä*), also known as **Finnish Culture Day** (**Finnish:** *suomalaisen kulttuurin päivä*), is celebrated on 28 February in honor of [Finnish culture](#) and the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. The tale has profoundly shaped the [Finnish national identity](#), influencing the country's [literature](#), [music](#), and [visual arts](#). The date is based on the day in 1835 when [Elias Lönnrot](#) signed the preface to the first edition of the *Kalevala*. It is one of the official [flag flying days in Finland](#).<sup>[1][2]</sup>

Anniversaries of Kalevala Day are observed based on both the first edition of 1835, known as *Old Kalevala*, and the *New Kalevala*, published in 1849, which expanded the epic significantly.

The first known celebration of Kalevala Day took place in 1865, organized by university students in Helsinki. Over time, the event grew in significance, with major public celebrations held on the 50th and 75th anniversaries of the *Old Kalevala*. The [Kalevala Society](#), founded in 1919, has played a central role in organizing and promoting these celebrations, overseeing cultural programs and academic gatherings. Large-scale celebrations also took place on the 100th and 150th anniversaries of both versions of the *Kalevala*.

In 1978, an additional title, "Finnish Culture Day", was officially adopted, reflecting a shift in focus from exclusively celebrating the *Kalevala* to recognizing Finnish culture more broadly.



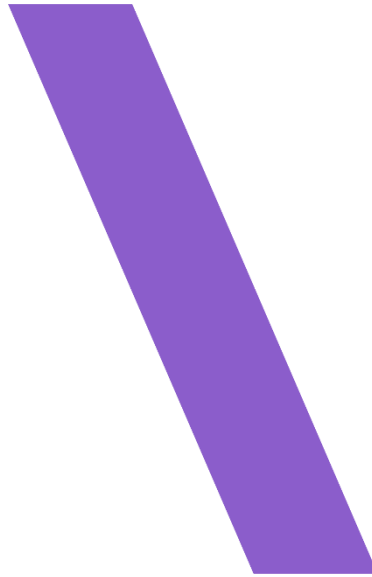
A statue of [Väinämöinen](#), the hero of *Kalevala*, decorates the [Old Student House](#) in Helsinki, Finland.

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# On the topicality of Kalevala

- [Kalevala - Das finnische National-Epos - radioWissen | BR Podcast \(2025\)](#)
- Kullervon tarina (2026): [Trailer](#)
- Today's exit: [3-2-1 Exit \(EC2U\)](#)

# What is the Kalevala?



<https://youtu.be/EjbmGfXxfaU>



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# How do I research the Kalevala?

- Master's thesis: Comparison of the Kalevala and the Nibelungenlied in the 19th century as **national epics**.
- Comparison of **epic theories**: How does an epic emerge?
- **Turku Romanticism**: Which thinkers influenced Lönnrot?

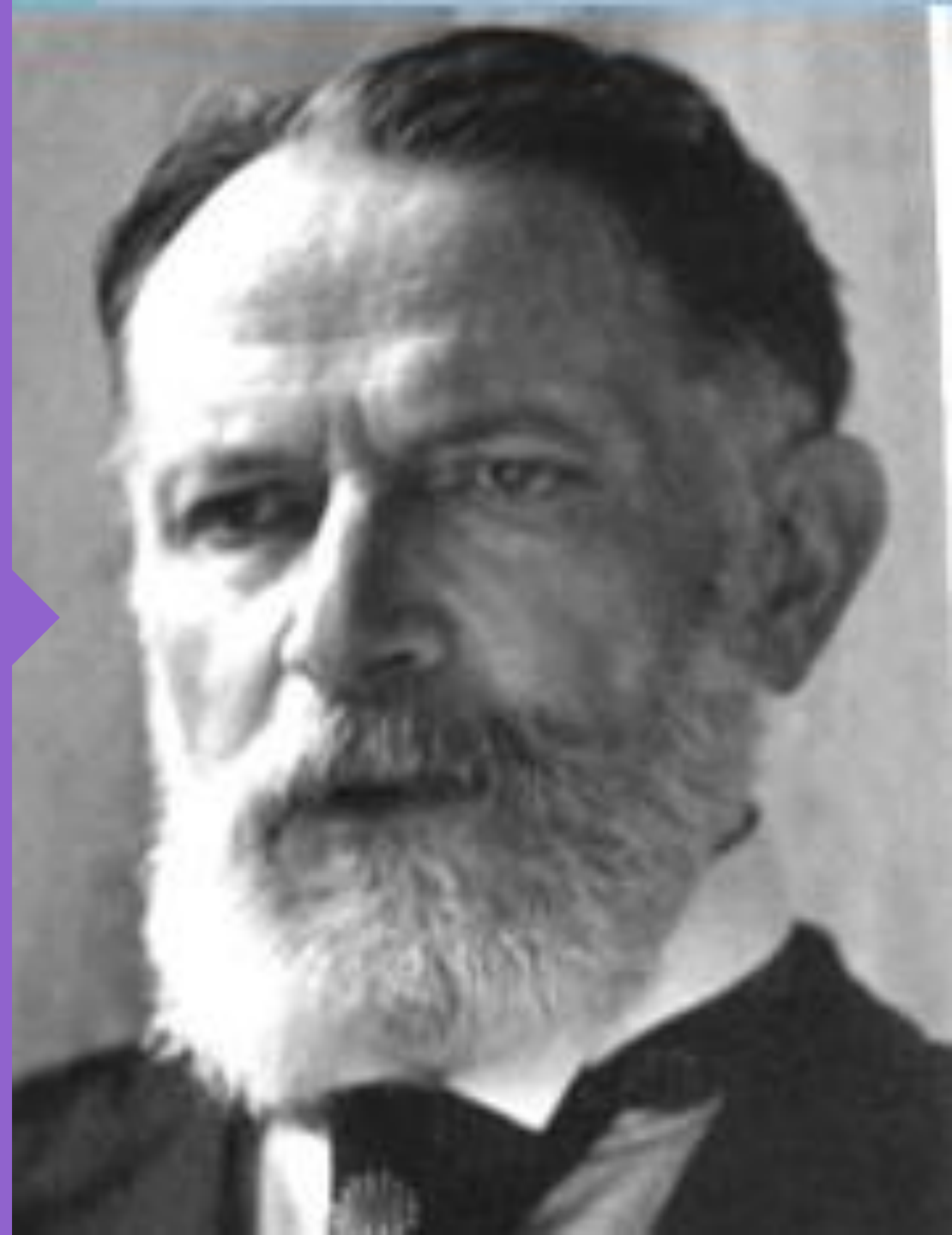


**Epics: extensive narrative poems written in an elevated style, recounting heroic deeds that hold significance for the cultural identity of a group ( Lauri Honko)**

“It would be questionable to call the Homeric epics oral, though some scholars have sought to do so. Instead they should be classified as tradition-oriented epics, along with the Kalevala and most of the great European epics, such as Beowulf, the Song of Roland and the Nibelungenlied. The fact that they belong to the same category means they have the same or a similar history of textualisation. The attitude of their performers and editors to their traditional material and poetics likewise differed at certain points. They nevertheless share a desire to preserve and respect the oral poetry on which they are based.”

([Honko](#))

# Karl Lachmann vs. Andreas Heusler





# Overview

- Finland: On the Historical Background
- Turku Romantic Movement
- Emerge of the Kalevala and it's Importance for National Identity
- Methodology I and II
- Conclusion

**Finns are a  
people “who  
are silent in two  
languages”**

Bertolt Brecht



# Finland: On the Historical Background

- Since the Christianization in the 12th century, part of the Swedish Kingdom
- Coexistence of Finnish and Swedish
  - Finnish as the language of the (rural) majority
  - Swedish as the language of administration (and education); Language of the upper class
- Finnish as a *written language* since Mikael Agricola's Bible translation (1510–1557; New Testament)
- Rich Finnish folk poetry (oral), whose epic songs migrated to the Finnish periphery



# Finland: On the Historical Background

- First universities in Sweden
  - Uppsala (1477)
  - Tartu/Dorpat (1630; now Estonia)
  - 1640 Royal Academy in Åbo/Turku (Finland)
- 1630 Decree by King Gustavus Adolphus II:
  - Collection of folk poetry and songs: The Swedish language and nation were to be considered among the oldest
- 1700 Daniel Juslenius: *Aboa vetus et nova*:
  - Finnish is a primal language, Finns are a cultural people with a glorious history



*Fennophilia*





# Henrik Gabriel Porthan (1739-1804)

- Father of Finnish historiography
- Historian, philologist, Enlightenment thinker, and ethnographer
- Discussed the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder in Finland
- Dedicated himself especially to Finnish oral poetry, storytelling, and singing traditions.
- „De poësi Fennica“ (1766–1778); 5 volumes
- Disciple Christfrid Ganancer: "Mythologia Fennica" (1789)
- Porthan was also familiar with Friedrich August Wolfs "Prolegomena ad Homerum" (1795)



"The Finnish language has been quite neglected in this regard, but it possesses a firm, natural position from which its nature will soon be grasped. [...] This language has much strength and charm in its typical rune songs. Some examples will show that it is well-suited for heroic poetry." (Porthan)

# Mythologia Fennica (1779)

- "Mythologia Fennica, or an explanation of De Nomina Deastorum, Idolorum, Locorum etc., or idols and idolesses, prominent figures of antiquity, sacrifices and sacrificial sites, ancient customs, giants, trolls, forest, lake, and mountain spirits, etc., appearing in older Finnish magic and origin songs, spells, fairy tales, riddles, etc., all in daily use; for those who wish to gain a thorough understanding of the Finnish language and a taste of Finnish history and Poësi, collected and interpreted from ancient poetry by Christfrid Ganander [...]."

PROLEGOMENA

AD

HOMERUM

SIVE

DE

OPERUM HOMERICORUM

PRISCA ET GENUINA FORMA

VARIISQUE MUTATIONIBUS

ET

PROBABILI RATIONE EMENDANDI.

SCRIPSIT

FRID. AUG. WOLFIUS.

VOLUMEN I.

HALIS SAXONUM,

IN LIBRARIA ORPHANOTROPHÆ,

MDCCLXXXV.



There is no single Homer; rather, the Homeric epics emerged from individual songs after the invention of writing.

# Finland: On the Historical Background

- 1809
  - Peace of Hamina: Sweden loses one-third of its territory and one-fourth of its population to Russia with the loss of Finland.
  - Finland becomes an Autonomous Grand Duchy (ruled by tsar) and thus a special status as nation
  - Friedrich Rühs' book "*Finland und seine Bewohner*"
- Adolf Ivar Arwidsson:

**"We are no longer Swedes, nor do we want to become Russians — so let us be Finns!"**



# Turku Romantic Movement

- 1810s and 1820s
- Searching for national identity
- increasing engagement with Finnish folk poetry
- Emergence of a folk poetry collection movement, whose most prominent exponent was first Carl Axel Gottlund



# Academy of Turku (only Finnish university of that time)

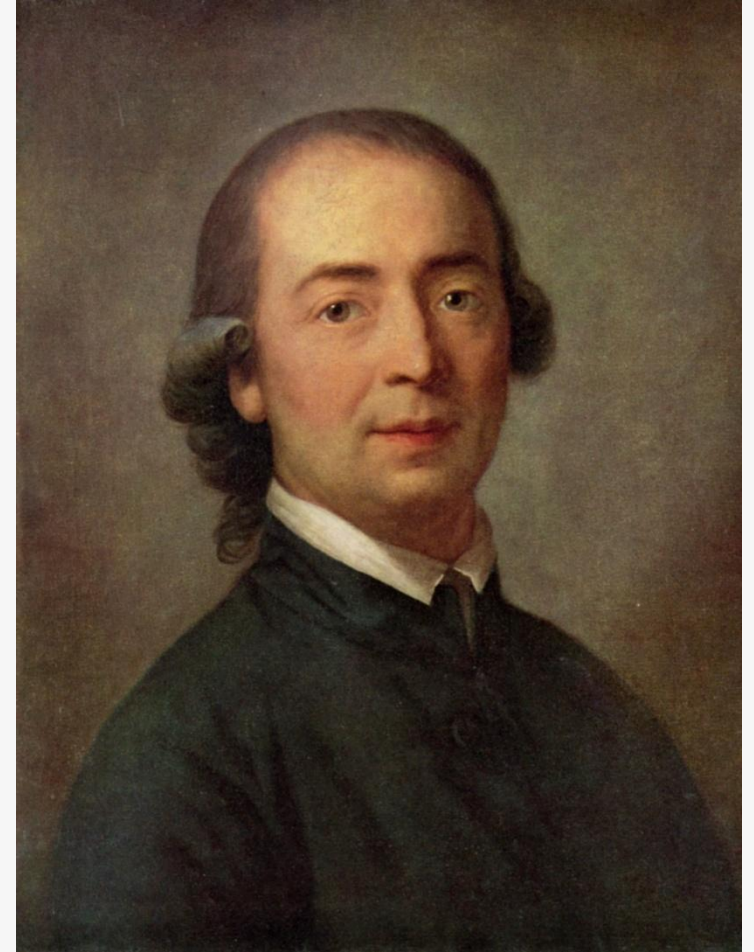
- **Henrik Gabriel Porthan (Professor 1777-1804)**  
**Matias Gottlund 1784-1787 Student of Porthan**
- **Enlightenment:**
- Knowledge derivable from obvious facts
- Nature / world comprehensible as a system (Collecting and organizing: C. v. Linné, Christfrid Ganander's *Mythologia Fennica* (1789))
- Engagement with Herder: Research / collection of folk poetry
- **C. A. Gottlund, Student in Turku 1814-1816**
- Oath in 1814: to collect folk poetry in the spirit of Herder (Sjögren, Poppius)
- Gottlund: Collection of folk poetry 1815-16

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## Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803)

- Significance of national identity (against the reception of classical antiquity); Nation as a community
- A nation is individualized through its language.
- The character of a nation is reflected in its language and literature.
- History as a continuous educational process
- National poetry emerges from a specific culture and diverse living environments
- Folk song as the voice of the nation

**→ Return to Finnish and the oral Finnish folk poetry**



# Herder in Finland

- It is no exaggeration to say that all the writers, scholars and politicians who played a major role in the intellectual and cultural life of 19th-century Finland were aware of Herder, or were influenced, one way or another, by his writings. Although Herder has occasionally been mentioned in the biographies of such major national figures as Henrik Gabriel Porthan, Frans Michael Franzén, J.G. Linsén, Adolf Ivar Arwidsson, Alexander Blomqvist, Anders Johan Sjögren, Matias Alexander Castrén, Elias Lönnrot, Johan Ludvig Runeberg, Fredrik Cygnäus, Johan Vilhelm Snellman and Zacharias Topelius, there is a lack of detailed studies of their reading of Herder's works and of the availability of Herder's works in Finland, from the end of the 18th century onwards. (Riikonen 2020: 399f.)

## Anders Johan Sjögren 1814:

"We made an agreement and promised each other to follow Herder's idea as best as we could, to collect monuments of the spirit of our ancestors, whether they found expression in poetry or any other form. In short, we committed to tracing and gathering everything—folk tales and the like—that could in any way contribute to the study of our ancestors."

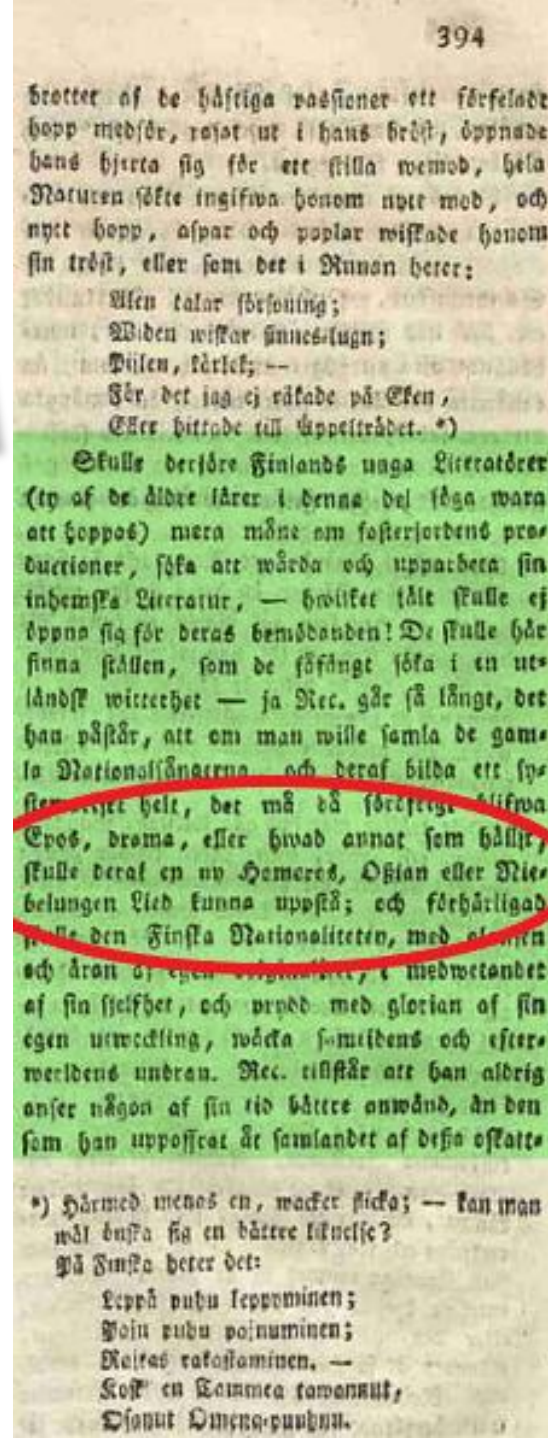


## C. A. Gottlund 1817 (Swensk Literaturtidning)



"The reviewer goes so far as to claim that if one were to collect the old national songs and shape them into a systematic whole—whether it became an epic, a drama, or something entirely different—it would result in a new Homer, Ossian, or a new *Nibelungenlied* [...] The reviewer admits that, in his opinion, he has never used part of his time better than the time he has devoted to collecting these songs of the ancestors."

Rezension: *Friedrich Rühs: Finland och Dess Invånare* [1809, swed. 1813]



## **Reinhold v. Becker (Lönnrot's academic supervisor):**

"Where Väinämöinen lived is unclear [...]. When Väinämöinen lived is unknown. He left the world a long time ago. In vain have a hundred heroes, in vain a thousand other significant men tried to become as famous as he. Their names have disappeared [...], but Väinämöinen's name will not disappear as long as the Finnish people are mentioned on earth."

# Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884)

- 1822 Studies at University in Turku (together with J.L. Runeberg [National poet] and J.V. Snellman [National philosopher])
- 1827: *De Väinämöine priscorum Fennorum numine* (Combination of the previously known folk poetry about the hero Väinämöinen)



*Elias Lönnrot.*

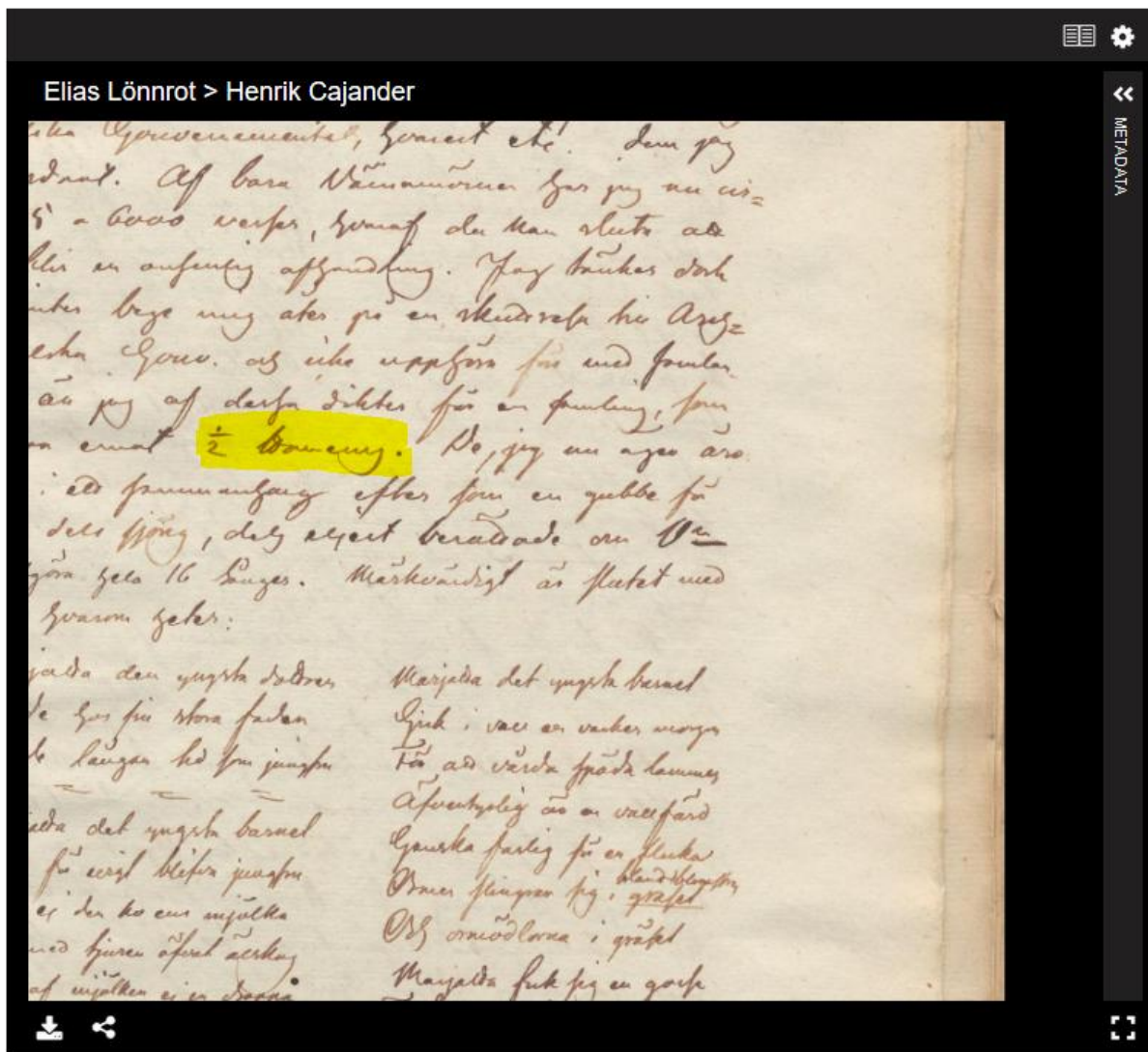
G. Borkowskiin v. 1845 tekemän piirroksen mukaan.

# Finnish Literature Society





# Elias Lönnrot > Henrik Cajander, 3.12.1833



Merkinnet  Selitykset  TEI

natura. Utom en mamsell Aejmelaeus, som redan länge legat i svår hysteri har jag en Assessor Flander besvarad af Hæmorroides mucosa med tidfall. påkommande svär hæmorrhoidal Colik och idag fick jag en patient med hæmorroides vesicæ. Det är nu alltsammans; för resten får jag sysselsätta mig med finskan, såmycket jag vill. Under inspections resan gjorde jag en utfart till Archangelska Gouvernamentet, hvarst etc. dem jag nu ordnat. Af bara Väinämöinen har jag nu circa 5 a 6 000 verser, hvaraf du kan sluta att det blir en anseelig afhandling. Jag tänker dock i vinter bege mig åter på en skuttresa till Archangelska Gouv. och icke upphöra förr med samlandet än jag af dessa dikter får en samling, som svarar emot **1/2 Homerus**. De, jag nu äger äro alla i ett sammanhang efter som en gubbe för mig dels sjöng, dels eljest berättade om V:n och utgöra hela 16 Sånger. Märkvärdigt är slutet med V:n hvarom heter:

Marjatta den yngsta dottern  
Lejde hos sin stora fader  
Lejde längan tid som jungfru  
=====

Marjatta det yngsta barnet  
Vill för evigt blifva jungfru  
Ville ej den ko ens mjölka  
Som med tjuren öfvat älskog  
Njöt af mjölken ej en droppe

Marjatta det yngsta barnet  
Skulle hemifrån bege sig  
Hingsten spände man för slädan  
Ej hon går i hingstens släda  
Stodet spändes då för slädan

Marjatta det yngsta barnet  
Gick i vall en vacker morgon  
För att vårda späda lammen  
Äfventyrlig är en vallfärd  
Ganska farlig för en flicka  
Ormen slingrar sig i gräset bland blomstren  
Och ormödlorna i gräset

Marjatta fick sig en gosse  
Fadren kunde ingen nämna  
Ingen kunde namnge barnet  
Luftson kallas det af morfar  
Kallas ingens son af mormor  
Faderlös af hela huset

## Lönnrot 1834

“[...] to create something from Finnish mythology that would correspond to the Icelandic Edda, [...] a collection that our descendants would value as highly as the Gothic peoples value the Edda or the Greeks and Romans value, if not Homer, then at least Hesiod.”

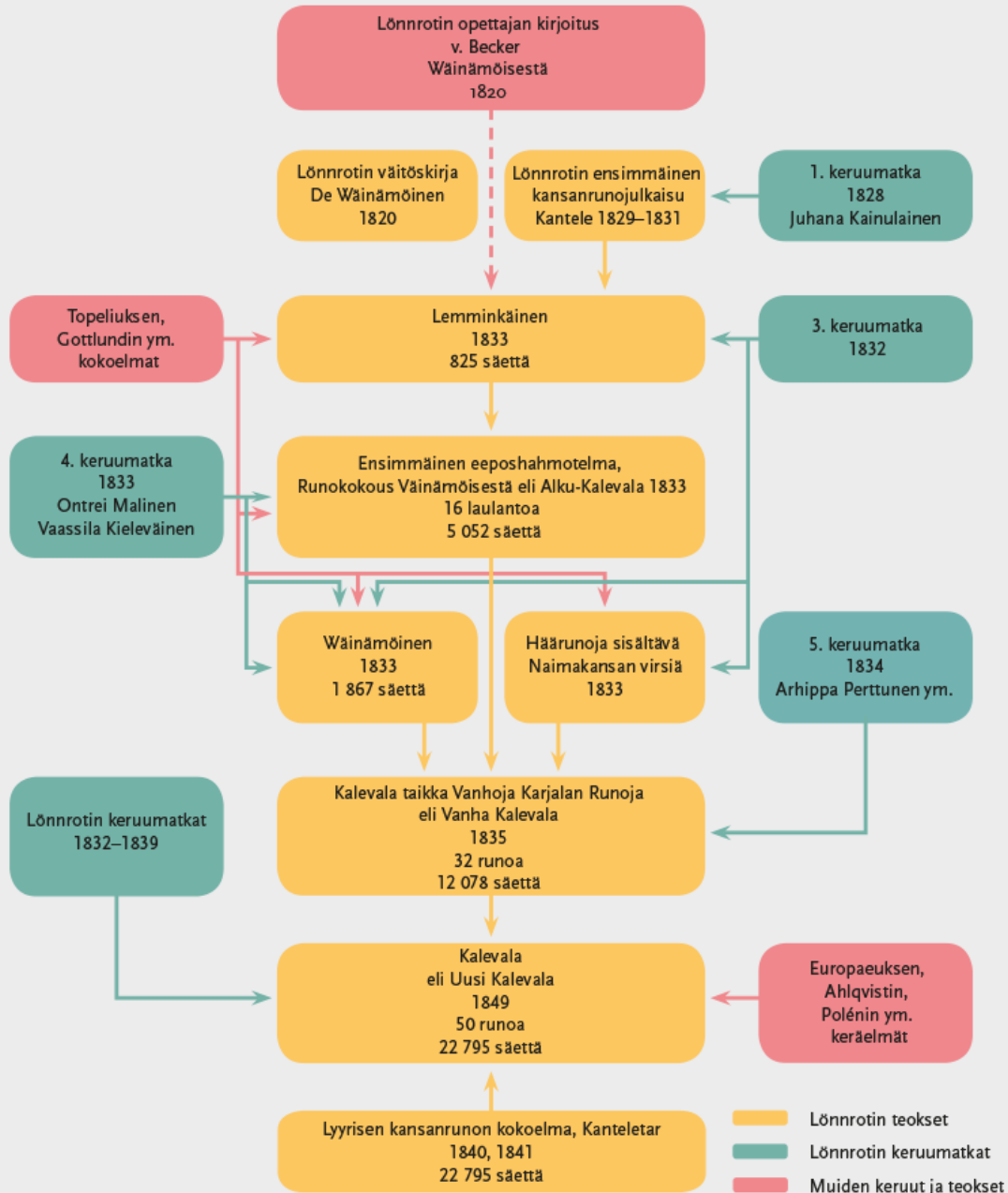
"This Vaassila, primarily familiar with incantation songs, was an old man. His memory had declined in recent years, so he no longer knew as much as he once did. However, he told me many things about Väinämöinen and other mythological figures that I had not known before. And if it happened that he had forgotten something I already knew, I would ask him more about it. Then he would remember again, and in this way, I gathered knowledge of all of Väinämöinen's heroic deeds in sequence. After that, I arranged the songs about Väinämöinen that are known." (Lönnrot 1833)

# Karelian Runesingers





# The Kalevala-Process



- 1835 "Old Kalevala" (32 runos, ca. 12.000 lines)
  - 500 expl.; most were only able to read it in the Swedish translation (M.A. Castrén; later 1<sup>st</sup> professor for Finnish language)
- 1849 "New Kalevala" (50 runos, ca. 23.000 lines)
- School Kalevala and other versions



## J. L. Runeberg 1835

The editorial team did not have the opportunity to review the additional cantos of the Kalevala but believes it is in a position to confidently determine, based on the available [9th runo], that Finnish literature has gained a treasure from this collection of poems. This treasure is comparable in tone, attitude, grandeur, and value to the finest epic masterpieces of Greek art [previously, direct reference is made to Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey"]. All these merits—the magnificent and composed narrative flow, the completeness of the imagery, and the significance—are also present in the Finnish collection of poems. Perhaps it even surpasses them, if it is possible to surpass perfection [...]

# J. G. Linsén (Chair of SKS) 1836:

"In possession of these epic poems, Finland can, with growing confidence, properly understand its prehistory and, through this, also its future intellectual developments. It can say to itself: I, too, have a history."



# Jacob Grimm (13.03.1845)

- „Über das finnische Epos“
  - A) Lönnrot altered the plot of the *Kalevala* after Grimm's speech
  - B) Grimm's positive review and his support for nationally patriotic Finns led to Europe-wide interest in the epic and motivated Finnish patriots



# J.V. Snellman

- Finnish national philosopher, followed Hegel's philosophy
- Important representative of the so-called 'Fennomania'
- state cannot exist without a nation, and a nation cannot exist without a language
- Snellmann (like all educated people except Lönnrot, Swedish-speaking): 'One nation, one language.' (i.e. Finnish!)



# J.V. Snellman

- Key figure behind the Language Decree of 1863 (Finnish to be granted equal status alongside Swedish within 20 years).
- Today: ca. 87 % speak Finnish as their mother tongue, 5 % Swedish



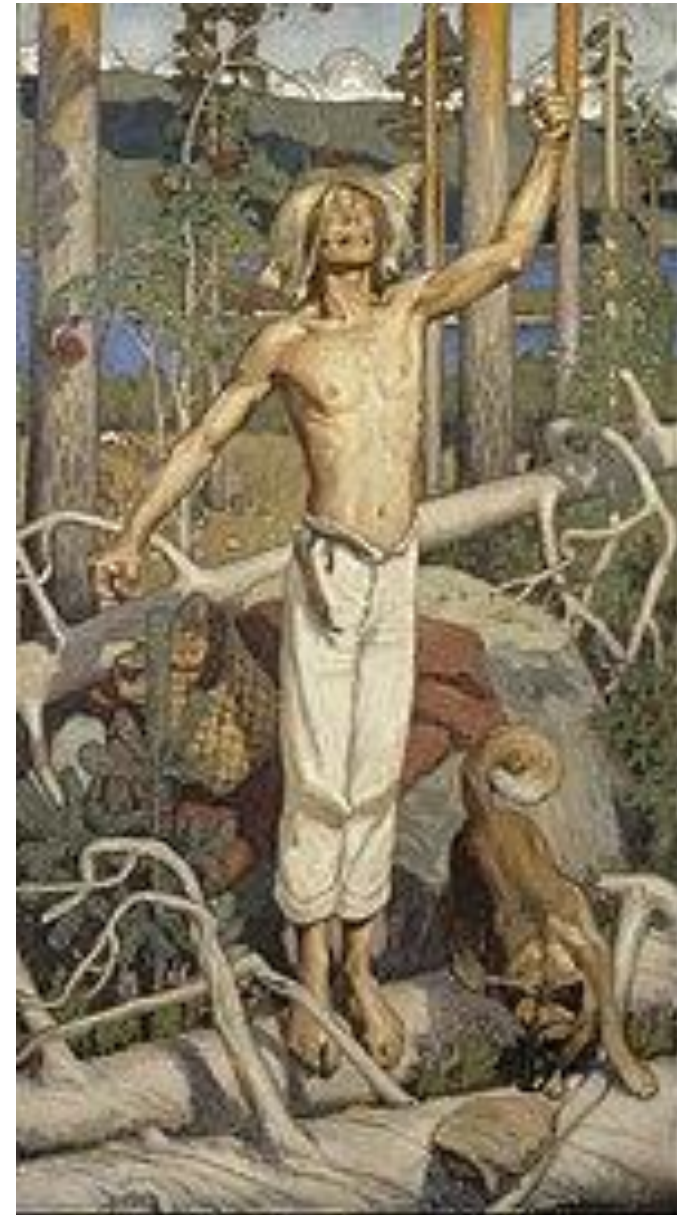
## Academic engagement with the Finnish language

- M.A. Castrén (1<sup>st</sup> professor for Finnish language, 1851-2): National 'identity formation through kinship research.'
- E. L. Lönnrot + A. Ahlqvist: Creation of tools such as dictionaries and grammar (many students were not able to understand Finnish)



# Conclusions I

- **Historical Context and Bilingualism:**
  - Finland's history and traditional bilingualism shaped the development of national sciences.
  - Swedish, as the official language, dominated over Finnish, spoken by the majority.
- **Influence of Herder's Ideas:**
  - Finnish folk poetry, primarily oral, gained increasing attention under Herder's influence.
- **Post-Separation from Sweden (1809):**
  - Establishment of the autonomous Grand Duchy under the Russian Empire.
  - Rise of the Fennomania movement to promote Finnish language and culture as expressions of national identity.



# Conclusions II

- **The Kalevala as a National Epic:**
  - Compiled by Elias Lönnrot from Finnish folk poetry.
  - Immediately recognized as a national epic, supported by Jacob Grimm's positive reception.
- **J.V. Snellman's Political Philosophy:**
  - Influenced by G.W.F. Hegel's ideas, emphasizing the systematic elevation of the Finnish language and its scholarly study.
- **Enduring Significance:**
  - Finnish folk poetry and the Kalevala remain central subjects in national sciences.
  - The path from Fennophilia to Fennomania branched into the development of a distinct Finnish philology.



# Methodology I

- Philology + Folklore + Context
- Textual criticism & variants
- Textualisation (oral → written)
- Historic-geographic method (Julius + Kaarle Krohn)
- Eddas as comparative model
- Kalevala as
  - folkloristic transformation
  - Nation-building project embedded in historical discourse
- Nation theory: Hobsbawm; Graus

► **Kalevala = constructed epic**

# Methodology II

- Comparative literature
  - Intertextual network (Homer, Eddas, Nibelungenlied)
  - Reception history
    - Narrative structures and hero types
    - Shared ideological functions
  - Authenticity debate
    - Symbolic resource
    - Tool in language policy and identity formation
  - Discourse analysis
- ▶ Kalevala = cultural discourse

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# Group task

## EC2U Group task



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