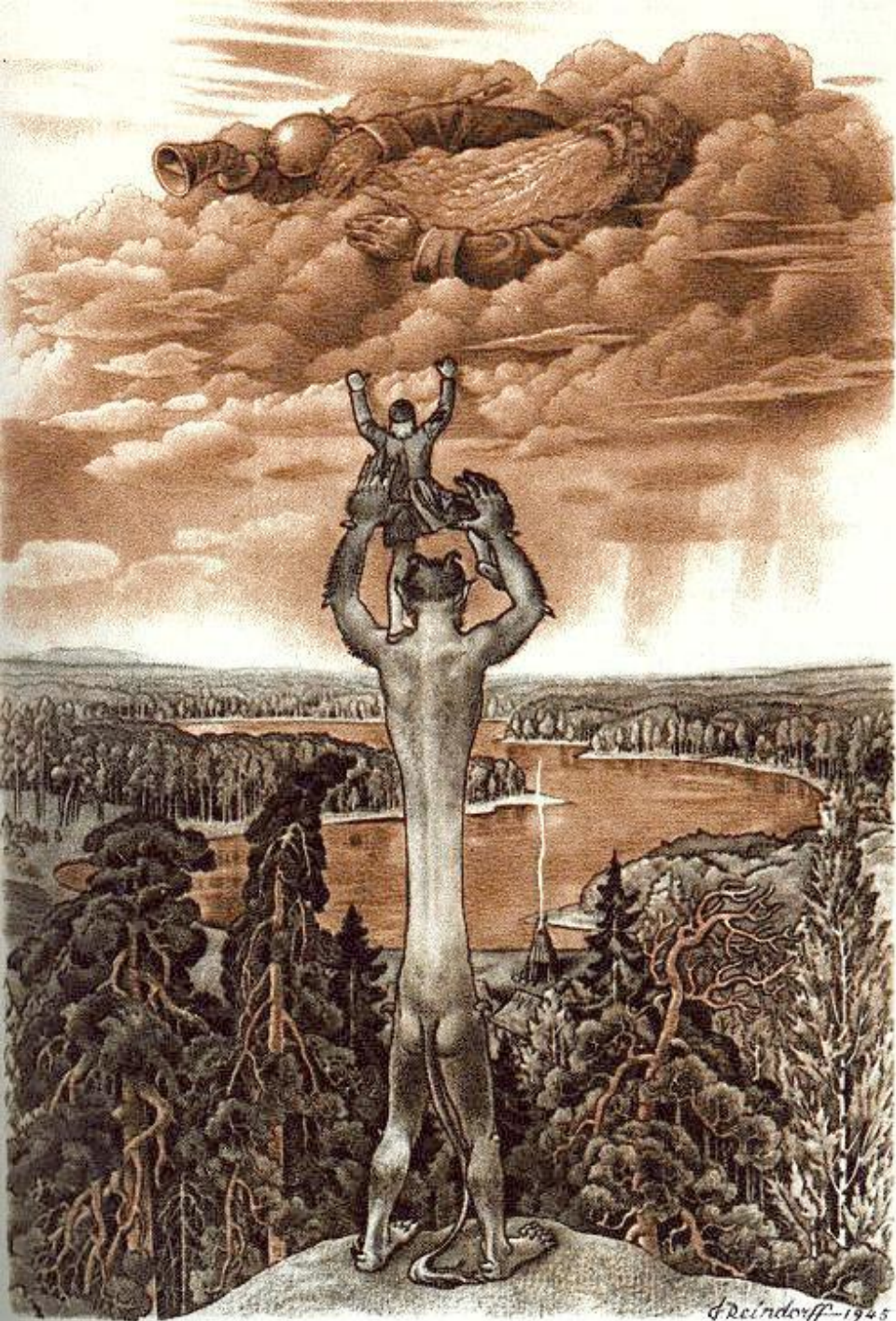




# Signs of Giants in the Islands

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Supported by ESF grant 8147



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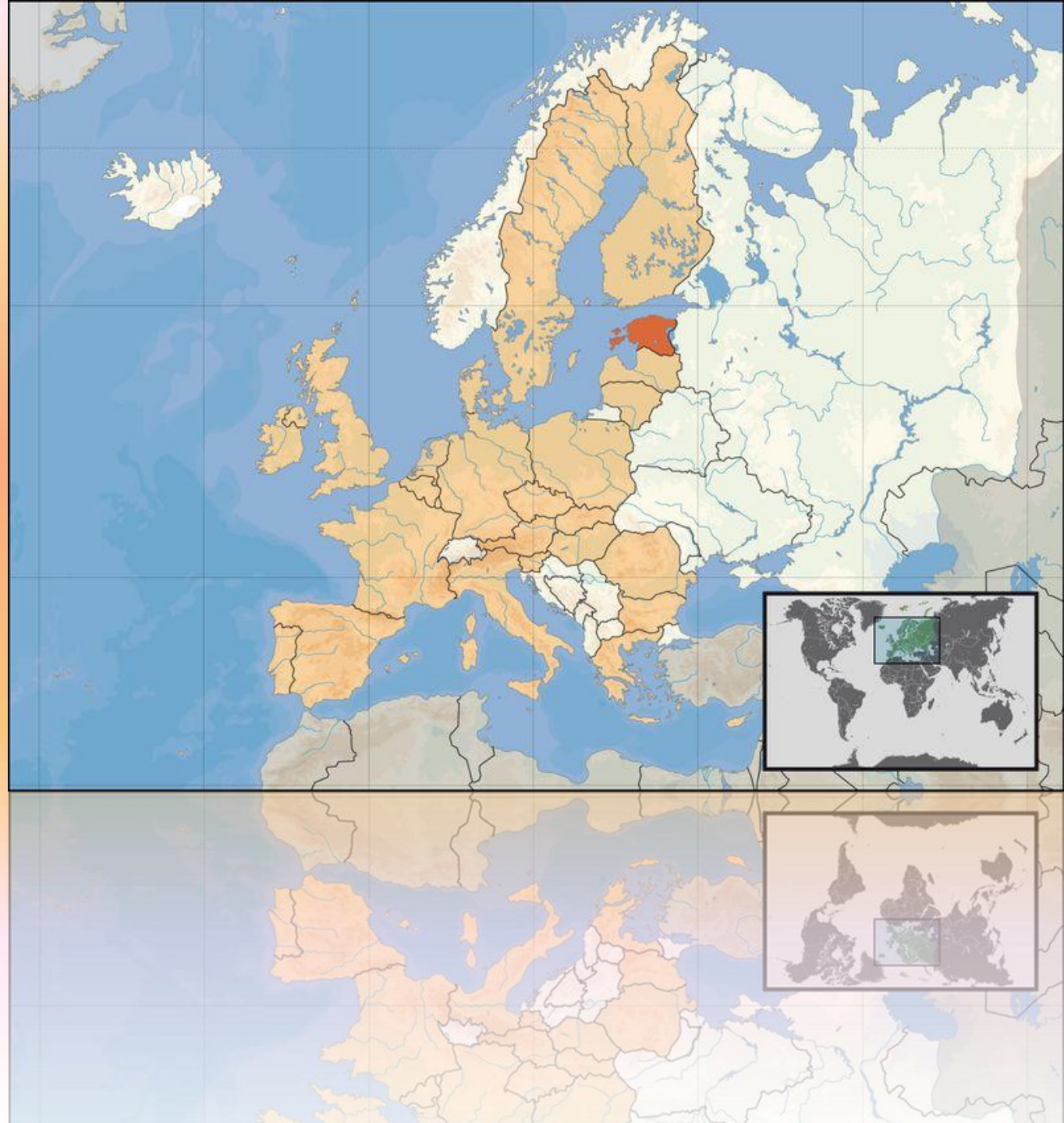




## **Background.**

The island of Gozo features a wonderful monument – a temple from 3500 BC with walls 3 meters high. According to folklore, the Ggantija temple was built by giants.

The present paper gives an overview of giant loess from Estonia (42,000 square km), by the Baltic Sea, bordered by Finland and Sweden in the north, Latvia in the south and Russia in the east.



Estonia has about 1000 islands in the Baltic sea, most of the smaller islands uninhabited or habited by a few families only.

During the time under the Soviet Union, many of the beautiful islands were closed border region, occupied by army bases or used for bombing practice with local people turned out.



The largest western islands are

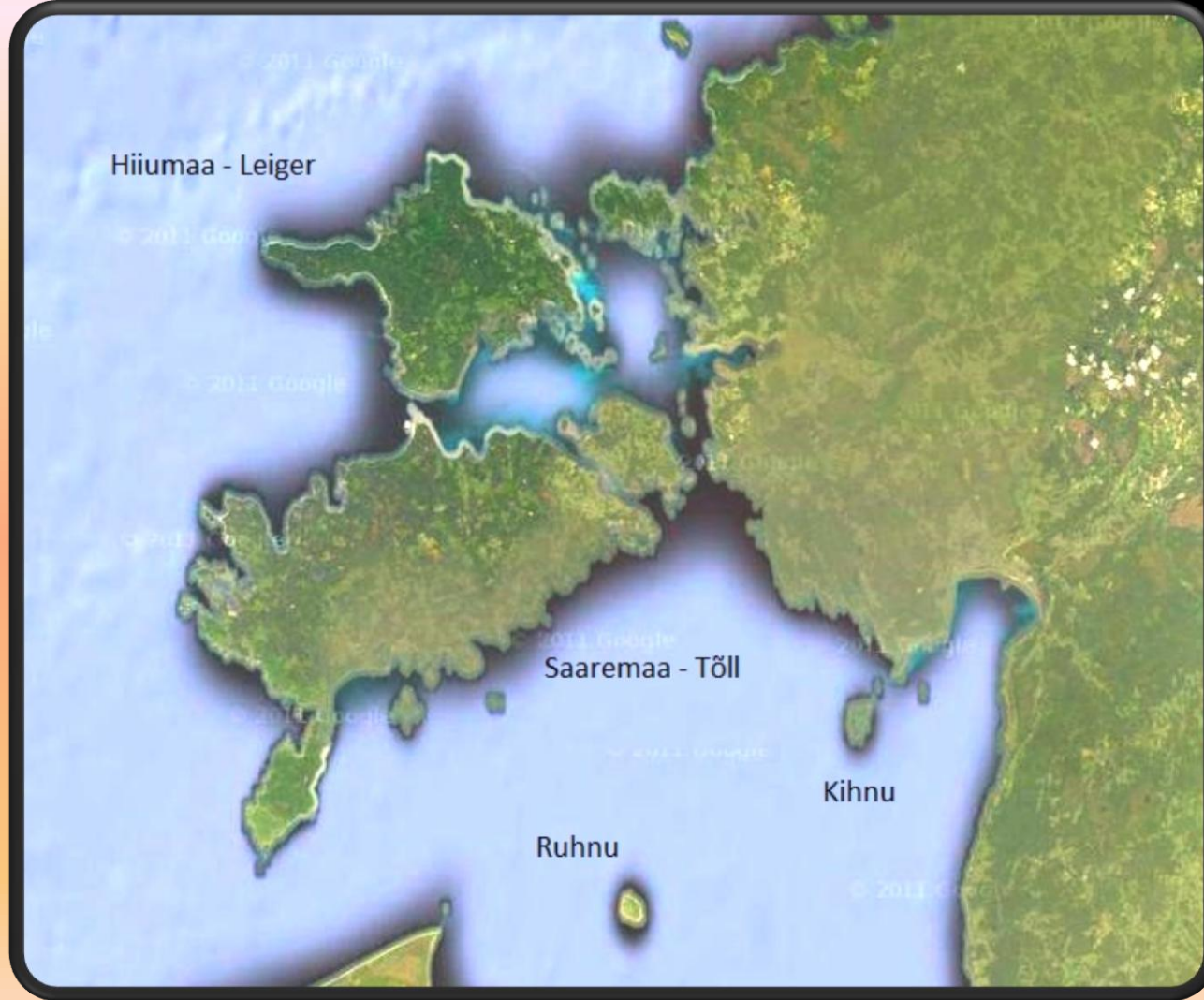
**Saaremaa (Ösel)**,  
with

**Hiiumaa** (literally  
Giantland) north of it  
and

**Muhumaa**

forming a triangle,

as well as the former  
coastal Estonian  
Swedes islands  
Kihnu, Ruhnu and  
Vormsi.



Saaremaa has glorious ancient and recent history.

All the bigger islands have remarkably unique features in their folk culture and lifestyles, with division of labour and social relations until recent times quite different from the mainland. Kihnu and Ruhnu are reservoirs of unique culture, Kihnu is on the UNESCO world heritage list for its folklore

We are going to give an overview of one aspect of Saaremaa's identity – its giant lore, found in folk narratives and contemporary tourism as well as the self-image of island dwellers.

Our topics will be:

1. General outline of the giant lore
2. Giants and the landscape
3. Giants and epics
4. Giants and identity



# 1. General outline.

We have hundreds of recorded stories of giants from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are various giants in Estonia – in eastern Estonia **Kalevipoeg**, in south and west **Vanapagan**, in Saaremaa island **Suur Tõll** and in Hiiumaa island **Leiger**. Giants usually live as families, meaning that for example Tõll has a wife called **Piret**, there are giant-daughters who carry ships in their pockets, there are brothers and sisters.

Giants are of really great stature, some stories say they looked weird, they may eat people, turn into stone at sunrise and we find other motifs blended into the general mythology of giant beings.

- For example the Estonian dualistic creation myths say the world resulted from a competition between God and devil or the giant Vanapagan. Many of the landscape forms are a result of that contest – for example the stretched-out peninsula of Sõrve in Saaremaa came to be when the pagan wanted for spiteful reasons to separate that piece of land from the island proper, and the small island of Abruksa is one he succeeded with. Giants are related to the creation of hills and rivers; hills and valleys are their sitting and sleeping places, caves (in south and west called “hells”) are their dwellings.

- Their steps are found on boulders, the bigger boulders (leftover from the ice ages) are stones they threw about.

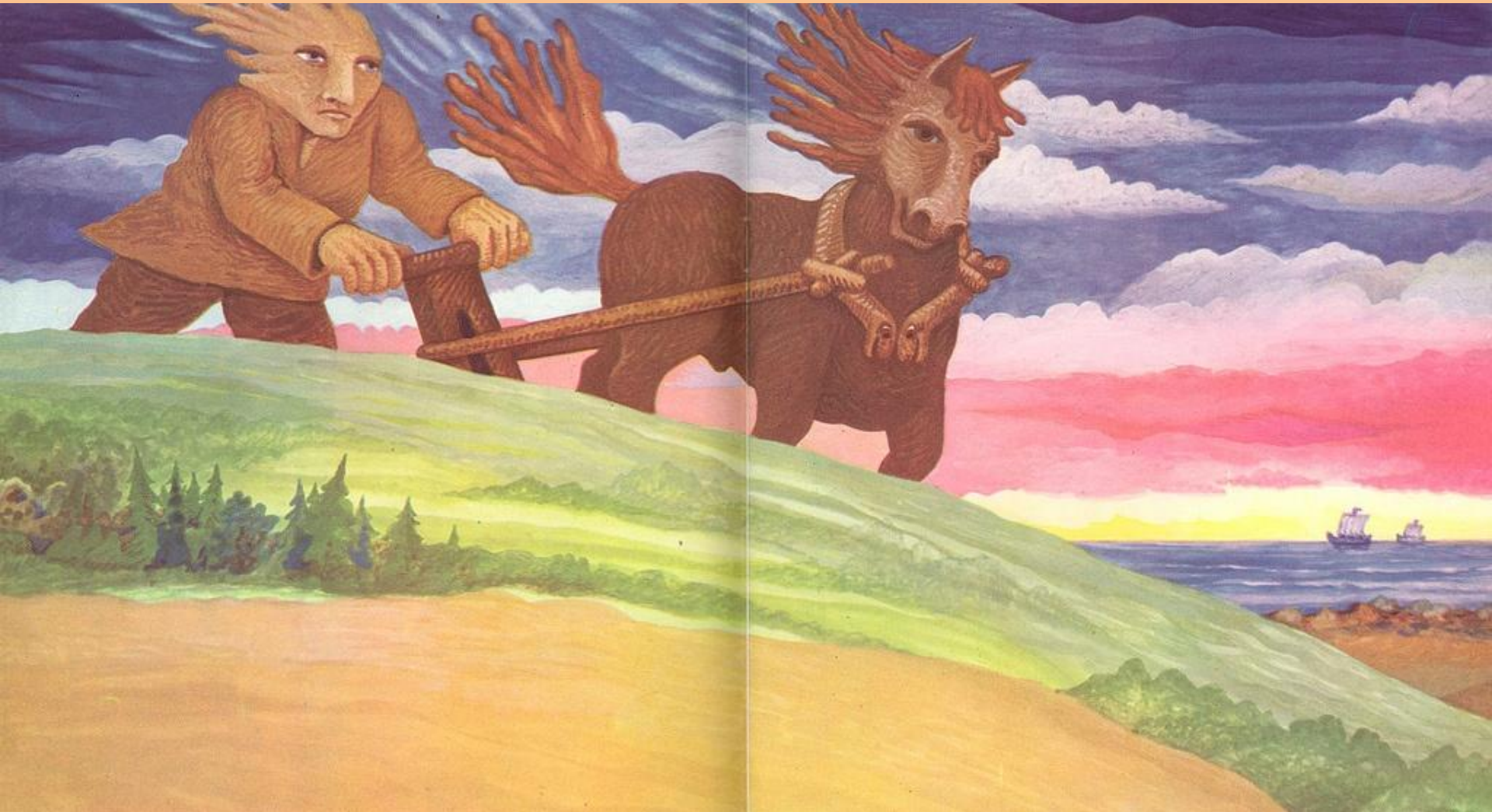
- Many of the animals and bugs – like the wolf, mosquitoes and flies – were created by the devil / giant Vanapagan.



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## 2. Giants and nature



- The creation myths are old and were not well known in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, However, there was an abundance of stories on how various places and natural objects came to be.
- The main features of giant lore tell of their daily life, using this to explain how significant natural objects emerged: considering the number of boulders all over Estonia, they naturally provoked interest in people's minds.
- The most popular motif tells of a stones throwing contest between giants, often aiming at a church tower, or just for fun, but the stones can also just spill from the apron of giant's wife.



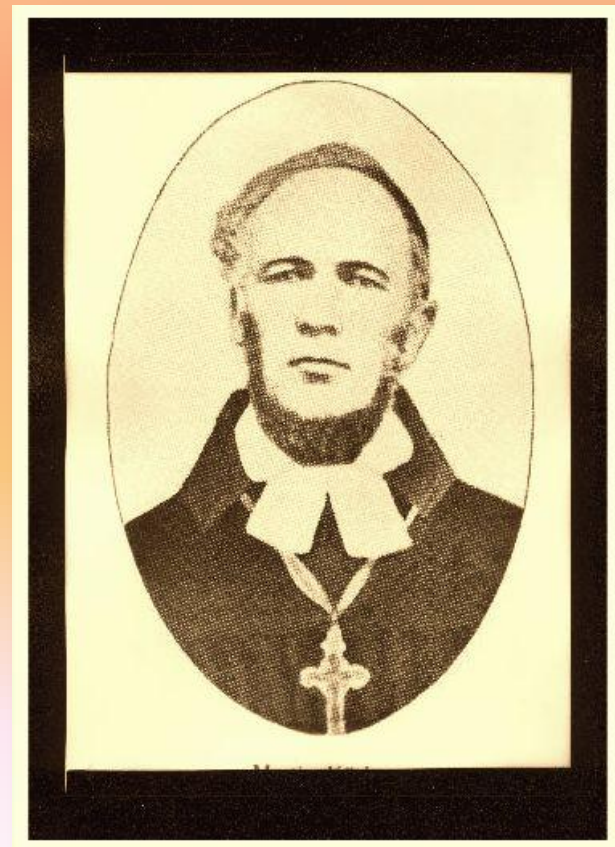
- spill from the apron of giant's wife – Pireti kivi.



The giants lived in a specified area and we can see signs of this in the landscape, we see great fields of boulders and various landscape forms, leading us to conclude where they walked about and what they did.

Nevertheless, giant-lore is not just explanation for landscape forms, nor is it mythological heritage of giant beings.

**Martin Körber**, priest and penman, writes in his “Ösel Einst und jetzt”:



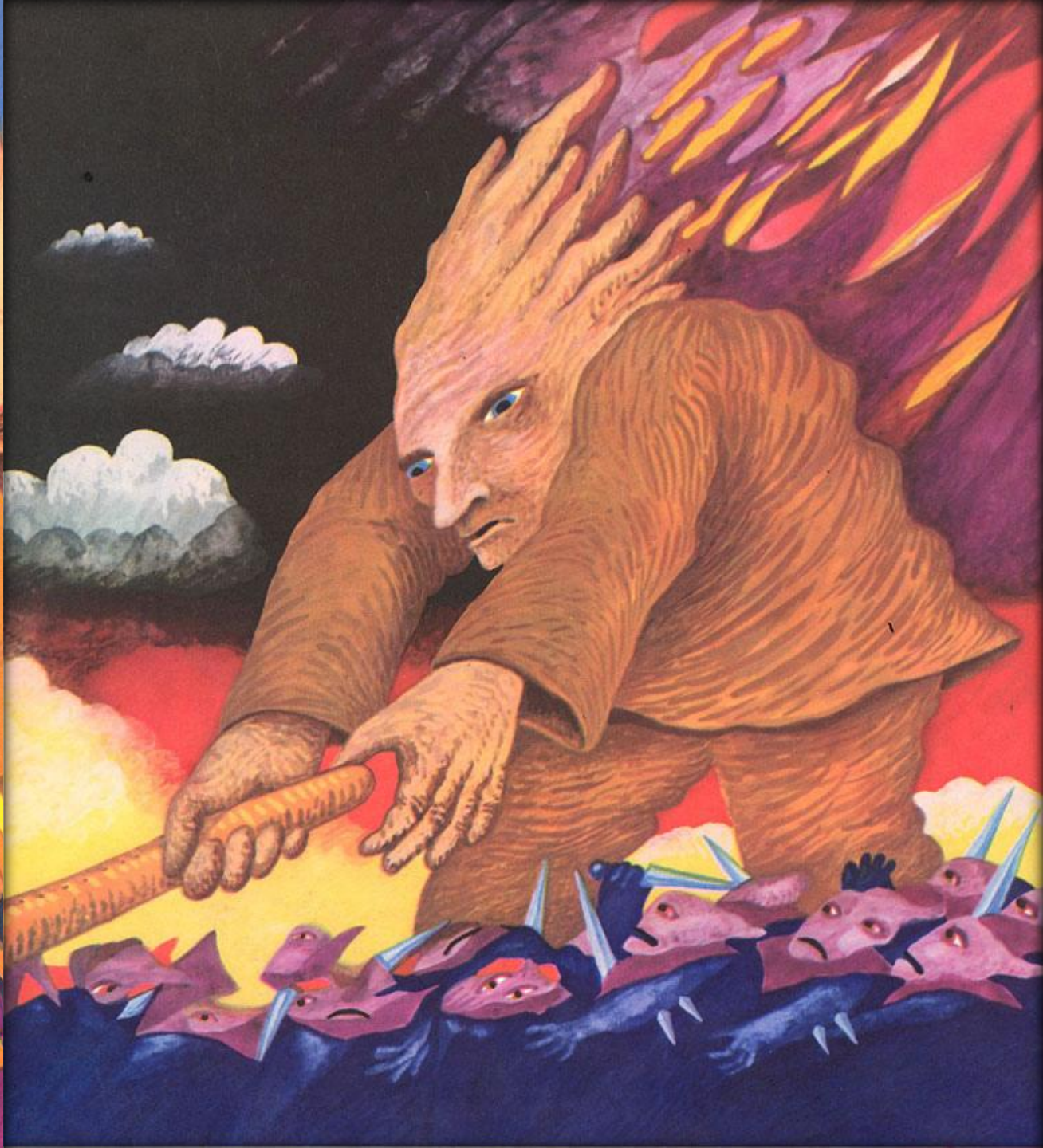
“Once upon a time in Saaremaa there lived a *folk leader, strong man, hero and warleader king*, with superhuman build and strength, a man called ***Töll*** (also *Töllu* and *Suur Töll*). In addition to the usual, his war weapons included balms, granite boulders and ox-wagons.

The latter he would spin about himself with ease, putting his index finger through the hole in the front of the wagon used to hitch the oxen. With ease, he could tear trees up from the ground with roots, with a fist punch he could demolish houses. His walking stick was a five fathoms long beam.









To visit the islands around Saaremaa, he needed no boat but stepped through the sea, even ten miles to his cabbage field – on Ruhnu island.

Before setting out there, he had put a kettle on fire. By the time the water boiled, he was back home in *Tölluste*, in his dwelling place in Püha parish.



Stoned cart used by Tõll  
in *Tölluste*.



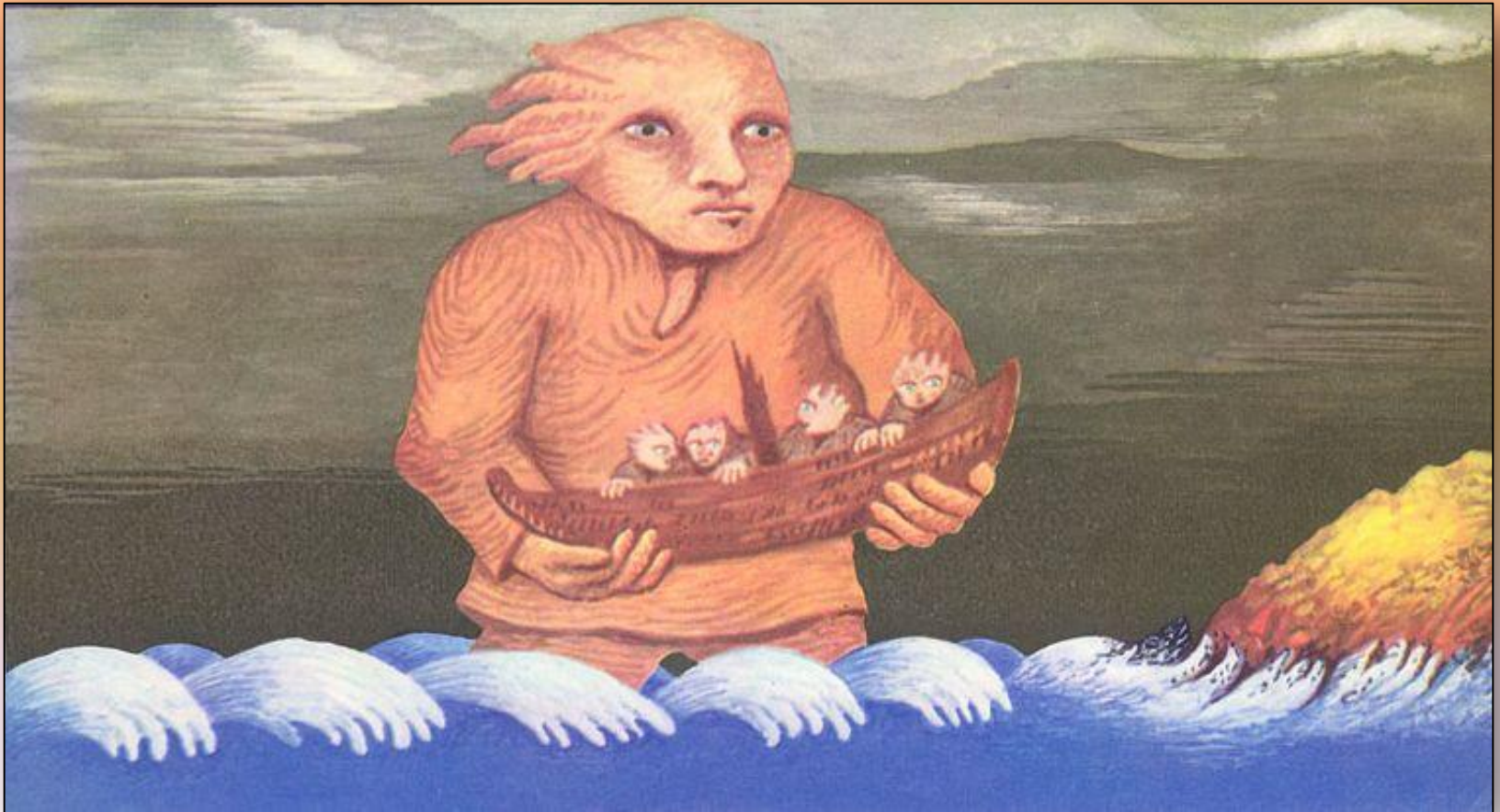
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Just like the mainland one, the Saaremaa hero had two brothers, as well as land-leaders, one on Hiiumaa island, another in Valjala parish of Saaremaa. With the latter he shared a spade.”



Another range of motifs besides describing the daily life of giants, is relate to helping people. Some stories tell of saving people on the open sea or people picked up out of curiosity – and put into his pocket



Another range of motifs besides describing the daily life of giants, is relate to helping people. Some stories tell of saving people on the open sea or people picked up out of curiosity – and put into his pocket.

Giants are involved with fights between themselves and outside enemies (Christian knights from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and later land conquerors). In the fight against invaders of the island, the giants are on the of the local people.

Once the foreign enemies landed on the beach of Kihelkonna.

At once, a plea for help was sent to Tölluste, which Töll did respond to, but only on the next day as he wanted to have a sauna in Hiiumaa first. When he went to Kihelkonna the next day, the mere news of his arrival was enough to make the enemy flee to their ships. Then he went onto a hill to rest there and gave the order to not wake him unless there was danger of war.

But the herders from Vödruka village, curious how tall he would be standing up, woke him with the cries «Töll, Töll, get up, enemy on the land!»

He came to his knees, looked over the pine trees around him. Seeing a man that tall made the children run away. When he understood he'd been fooled, he was upset and shouted:

«Because you fooled me, I will not come to your help before your blood is up ankles!»



## 2. version:

Deputies from Sörve came to him with calls for help because the enemies fleeing from Kihelkonna had then landed in Sörve and looted without resistance because all the weapon-bearing men are out at sea.

Therefore they asked also for warriors to help. This made Töll hurry.

First he put ten men into each coat pocket and had the pockets sewn shut above their heads. Then he put another ten men above the sewn-in men so that their heads were just above the pocket edge.

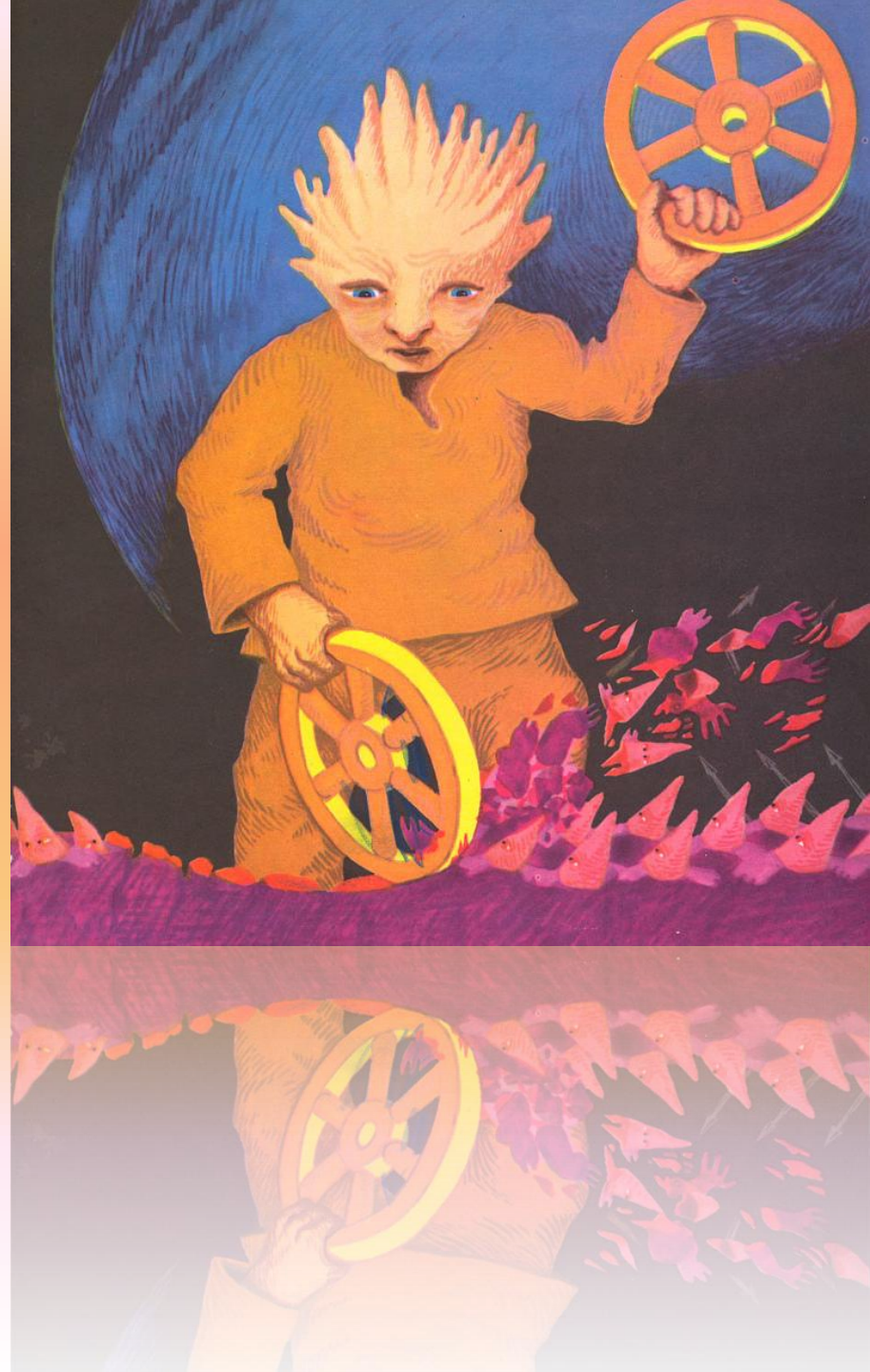
To keep the lower men from suffocating, a hole was cut for each man's mouth.

For weapons, for himself he took two ox-wagons, using them also to house warriors, putting twenty men in each wagon. In addition to this, he took another twenty men on his shoulder, arm and between the belt. Then he attached the wagons to each other, grabbed the first by its shaft and hurried towards Sõrve. In Jämaja, near Mäepea village, he spotted the enemy and gave the order to charge, supervising the fight. But when he noticed the enemy supremacy, he decided it was time to interfere personally.

With an ox-wagon in either hand, he started whirring them around his head so fast that that enemies fell like cut grass. The remnants fled down the Mõntu precipice; a single six-fathom tree killed them to the last man.

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When he was whirring the wagon, one wheel came off and flew through the air five miles to Koltse inn where it landed with so much force that it tore the forest down and tore the land up so much that a lake formed there.





The way giants die is significant. Kalevipoeg dies when his own sword cuts his feet off,

Tõll dies during a fight with enemies and grows into grass, becoming a hill. Both promise to rise back to life and come back to help when big trouble comes.



### 3. Giants and epics



Although we mostly see them connected to places and landscape locations, the stories of giants are interconnected with human history: they reflect the repeated, constant fight with adversaries coming from across the sea.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century can be described, among other things, culturally as the centuries of epics and old epic songs. Bruce Lincoln has pointed out how epics became the measure of dignified history and culture of a nation. The translations of *Poetic Edda* brought valor to Northern culture and widened the range of so-called old high cultures.

19<sup>th</sup> century Estonia saw the creation of several pre-epics and newer epics, the breakthrough being Fr. R. Kreutzwald's epic *Kalevipoeg* based on epic song style (runo song, Kalevala-metric song tradition) but formed on the bases of giant lore.



The static nature of giant lore can be seen from the epic which was not the instinctive material for creating a hero epic and lacking in other equal characters. During the following century, however, the epic *Kalevipoeg* became an important cultural landmark and part of Estonian identity.

Baltic German linguist Hupel published stories about the Saaremaa island giant Tõll in his “Topographische Nachrichten” in 1872.

The first longer, cohesive overview was published by the poet, musician and hobby scientist Martin Georg Emil Körber (1817-1893) in 1887.

This was a few years after giant heritage from Saaremaa was gathered by the schoolteacher Peeter Sudda (1830-1893) and collected into a single cycle of stories (“Vaikene vana varanduse vakk ehk Saaremaa vagimees Suur Toll” “Small chest of old treasures or the hero of Saaremaa, Suur Tõll” (1883)).

This slightly modified folklore publication became the epic of Saaremaa island, a source of identity that unified all of the island’s inhabitants.

On the initiative of folklore professor Eduard Laugaste, natural objects as well as the distribution of plotlines related to Tõll heritage were recorded and mapped (in 1949-1960), to be then published in an academic publication of giant legends.





## 4. Giants and identity



Schneider has drawn a distinction between oral tradition and oral history which consists of the stories that a group of people know, that they consider important enough to retell, and that they actually do retell and pass on to others (Schneider 2008: 161).

Stories of giants are one subsection of all stories and folklore formation. Saaremaa island is rich in natural monuments – protected boulders, ancient trees, sites of archaeological finds (recently a Viking ship complete with warriors and treasure), hill forts, fortifications from the 13th century and the Kuressaare castle with its walled-in knight, stories of forbidden love, lions fed with the disobedient, and many other fascinating stories.

Today, giant lore is used to introduce archaeological sites and protected natural monuments. These objects are often featured with selected narratives.

Identity-wise, Suur Tõll was most important in late 19th century as parishes and counties were creating their local identity, and again in the 20th century under Soviet occupation.

The glorious past of the islanders and their ancient contacts with other cultural spaces, success in battling vikings, etc. were a significant part of their oral historical information, spreading as word of mouth in families.

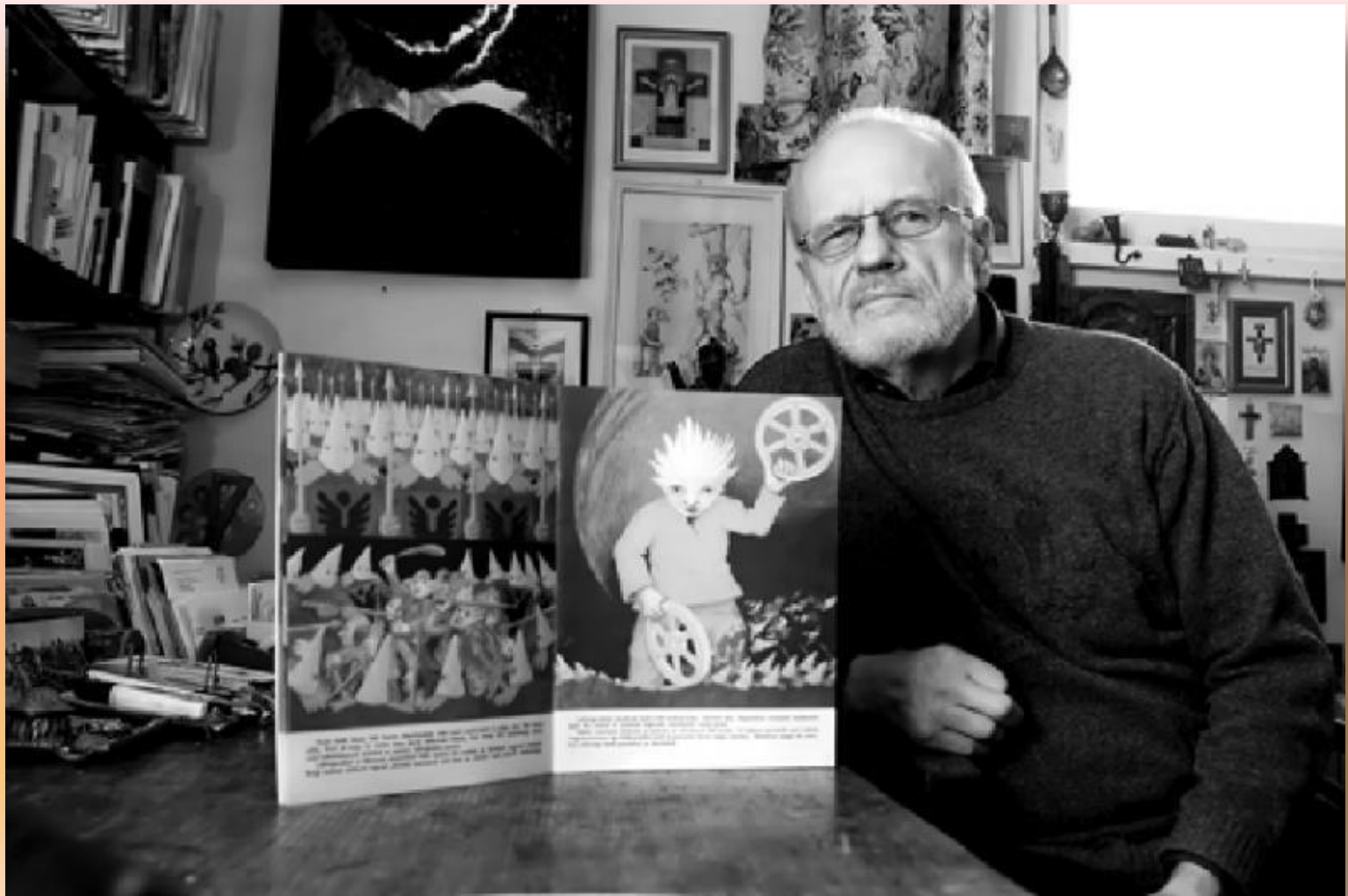


The stories blended into a whole, telling of a giant who in addition to being involved in many humorous and comic incidents, also protected the local people against all enemies, gained symbolic meaning.

The symbol was so strong, that when in the 1970s the artist Jüri Arrak drew him, this led to great discussion.

Can it scare children?

Is it ethical to depict this important hero as a scary freak?



At the same time, Arrak's artistic view was attractive for young people, freeing and inspiring interest in the heritage.

Politically, giants have produced some comic reactions: for example, a statue of Kalevipoeg in Tartu, kneeling with a sword in his hand, facing east, was one of the first monuments the soviet authorities had demolished. Was it because he was facing east, as people believed? However, the epic itself as well as other epic-like literary works were favored by the soviet authorities and translated into many languages.

So it came to be, that writers inadvertently and lacking other hero-figures, gave a peculiar life to clumsy giants whose stories have quite a lot of humour and mention local landmarks, as well as interesting fantasies.



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## Conclusions

Contemporary islander identity incorporates knowledge of giants that lived on the islands, Tõll-related hiking tracks, a pub-hostel named after him, as well as a popular rock band Metsatõll (Forest Tõll). The largest city of Saaremaa, Kuressaare, has many sculptures depicting scenes from the daily life of Tõll – for example, carrying a boat and fish with his wife Piret.

What gives these narratives in contemporary society the identity-forming power – humour, mention of local places, great fantasies, support from media and artists. This gives the giants the opportunity to remain a symbol even when there is no need for a protective giant.

