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LUCKY VOYAGE!

Old Beliefs Met With In Shipbuilding

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There are but few people like Oskar Loorits with such a wide interest in the seafaring and fishery traditions of the Estonians as to record them in writing.

A serial publication called *The Mode of Life in Estonia of Former Days* was begun at the Estonian Folklore Archives (but not completed).¹ The first volume (published in 1939) contains readings on everyday life of the sailors and fishermen. This serial was intended to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Jakob Hurt's birth.

Since this year is the 90th anniversary of the birth of Oskar Loorits, it seems high time to remember that the seafaring traditions are as closely linked with the history of our people as are agriculture and cattle breeding. It shows the cognizance of life, the manner of thought, experiences and skills employed throughout the centuries. This must be considered as a rightful part of the popular culture, although much has been taken over from abroad, adapted and merged into everyday use.

For thousands of years seafaring has played an important intermediary role between different cultures. Because of its variegated character seafaring has exerted a greater influence on culture and is more contact-promoting than many other fields of activity. Foreign influence is noticeable also in Estonian nautical terminology, which to a great extent can be traced back to western countries, specifically to the Germanic cultural regions. The same is true also for many a belief and custom.

Now I shall briefly deal with the beliefs and customs closely linked with the prerequisite of seafaring – the building of wooden vessels. The local building of bigger wooden ships does not go back far into history (only to the 19th century), whereas boats have been built on our coasts for a long time, both having many customs in common. The later well-known local shipwrights started their career as boatbuilders.

A ship, also a boat, is very important to a seafaring man. An islander without a vessel is like a sauna-goer without a bath-whisk, the coast-dwellers thought.² It is not only a means of living, of capital investment, or a working implement. For long periods of time the ship was the only foothold of the sailor in the vast expanses of the stormy seas. It was his home which he regarded with respect and reverence. Sailors have often compared ships with women. According to the English a ship is feminine. This was sometimes said to be true because the older the ship – the more painting, caulking and repairs it requires.³

Thus it is obvious that utmost care and thoroughness was exercised right from the start of building a ship. Everything possible was done to ensure success in seafaring.

Different artifices were practised and auguries watched for mainly during two stages of shipbuilding: when procuring and preparing the building timber, and when launching the vessel.

Skilled shipwrights and experienced workmen alone were not deemed sufficient to obtain a seaworthy ship with good sailing properties. Of equal importance was to gain the favour and goodwill of fairies and spirits who were believed to govern the fate of seafaring men.

*A sailor goes to sea,
A fisherman goes fishing,
Puts on a clean shirt and mittens
And a kerchief around the neck.
He either returns home or
Is lost at sea.⁴*

These verses were sung at Haljala.

The first important job was the procurement of shipbuilding timber. The felling of trees for several purposes was generally carried out in winter.⁵ The moon phases were followed out – the trees were mostly felled at old moon, because then they were believed to be dead and would not cause the vessel to rot.⁶ The time of new moon was sometimes chosen for cutting down trees – particularly conifers (spruce and pine).⁷ Tree-felling at full moon involved rather complicated activities. The following recollection comes from Reigi (Hiiumaa):

The best time for cutting down trees was when the sun and full moon were visible simultaneously. That occurred in February – the

moon was visible during the sunrise. Because of the shortness of this period the trees had at least to be marked off. In a dense forest where visibility was restricted a man had to climb up the tree to watch the sun and the moon. The timber thus obtained was of especially good quality – strong, yellowish in colour, drying rapidly and impervious to damage by woodworms.⁸

The Saaremaa islanders recollect their neighbours from the island of Hiiumaa choosing and cutting down timber for shipbuilding (a great many men of Hiiumaa were always engaged in shipbuilding on the island of Saaremaa).

Trees for shipbuilding had to be cut down at full moon. The Hiiumaa islanders used to cut down the trees for frame timber precisely by the clock. It had to be done exactly at the end of the full moon period.⁹

The use of timber from trees with upwards-growing branches (the so-called fire or wind branches) had to be avoided – such timber was supposed to cause shipwreck or destruction by fire. Neither was such timber to be used in house-building for the risk of fire.¹⁰

The wind was regarded as an omen when starting the building of a craft. The old saying on the northern coast, ‘No wind is the death of a new boat,’ was not without proper reason.¹¹

The trees were felled towards the north, or at least in a north-eastern direction into a strong wind. This was supposed to yield timber of great strength, and a fast vessel.¹² In Saaremaa the trees used to be felled against the ‘home wind’ blowing from the sea at the given location; then the boat was believed to always return to the shore.¹³ Shipwright Herman Sepp reminds his father’s practice – the direction of the wind has been the most important thing to follow. Sometimes you were caught in trouble to direct the trees rightly. After the war, with the start of planned economic life, the customs were not longer followed.¹⁴

Special care was exercised in choosing and cutting down appropriate trees for keel timber. We know of many charms and foretokens in connection with choosing timber for boat keels. But there also is scant information about bigger sailing vessels where the keels had to be made by joining two or more kinds of timber. Most artifices practised by the shipwrights were strictly kept secret. Great care had to be exercised in hauling the timber out of the forest. ‘Any person wishing to build even a small fishing boat, or a larger craft, must very carefully choose the keel timber, as it is the keel upon which the good or bad luck of the people in the boat will depend.’¹⁵

The old shipwrights exercised special care in placing and levelling up the keel. For keel timber they used pine (on the Island of Hiiumaa, the best trees grow on high sandy plains). These or oak trees were supposed to yield a lucky vessel.¹⁶ On the island of Saaremaa oak for keel timber was obtained from the Sutru forest near Viidumäe.¹⁷

A colourful story has been written down from the shipwright Matis Hohensee (1859-1940). He has built 29 sailing vessels, and he is remembered as an unequalled narrator. Especially in the old age, when unable to engage in serious work he was very popular with the younger men as a gifted story-teller. Nearly everybody who knew him from the days of building the sailing vessel *Juhan* remember that the only job of old Hohensee was to make deck-plugs. But every time he came to deliver the plugs men gathered around him to listen to his stories. In order to prevent such stoppages in work the shipwright Peeter Sepp asked Hohensee to deliver the plugs at the end of the day, because even the most conscientious men could not withstand the temptation of listening to Mattis' stories.¹⁸ The following story is about choosing keel timber for the sailing vessel *Andreas Veide* (built in 1891).

It was deemed important to go on a Tuesday to the forest in search of oak for steam, keel and sternpost timber. There also were a few shipowners who started their search on Thursday. But this was considered to be in league with Old Nick.

Before leaving for the forest, the horse had to be harnessed by men only. The departure took place at night, to stand in guard against bewitching by an evil eye. Women were believed to bring bad luck, and if they happened to see the search for timber, the koterman would not join the vessel. This probably would result in any kind of mishap during the search for oak timber. The horse was harnessed with the shafts of the sleigh pointing toward the house. Having harnessed the horse, the men jumped onto the sleigh and then only turned the horse round to pass through the gate. The reason was that the men feared that Old Nick might interfere in the shape of a cat. Although a domestic animal, the cat was feared more than Old Nick. Had the shafts been pointing towards the gate, a cat might have crossed in front of the sleigh and would have to be shot. A loaded gun hidden under the hay on the sleigh was provided for this purpose. The gun without a licence, having secretly been procured by one of the forefathers, had mysteriously chanced onto the sleigh.

Witnessing the search for keel timber was inadmissible to anybody except the owner of the vessel and the shipwright. A cat set on the road had to be shot dead, otherwise disaster might befall the ship. To feel sure, the dead cat had to be dragged by its tail back across the road. But if the cat managed to escape, the gun was discharged thrice into the air so as to frighten off Old Nick. Each man spat three times in opposite directions and against the wind, then continued on their way.

Meeting women on the road was unlucky. The men had started on their way at night because it was less likely to meet women. However, if a woman chanced to come along the road, her passing abreast of the horse had to be avoided. In such a case the horse was turned and driven back about a verst, then turned to a side road to by-pass the place of meeting the woman. Once it happened that shipwright Hohensee and the shipowner Veide, meeting several women on the road, were forced to take a round-about way of over 30 verst. Since the choosing of the required timber had to be accomplished during the night, haste was called for. So the horse was nearly driven to death, and later became unfit for any kind of work.¹⁹

Despite all these charms and artifices practised during the building, the ship was lost on her maiden voyage in fog off the English coast.

By choosing the timber the shipwright stepped close to the tree. Then he withdrew 6 paces away from the tree and looked up again. By the tilted position of his neck the shipwright estimated the height of the tree in feet.²⁰ The spacing of the annual rings of the tree was determined by the thickness of the dead bark. Closely spaced annual rings were indicative of heart wood that the timber required.²¹

Close to the roots of every fir tree, there are three resinous rings, one inside the other, surrounding the heart wood. If the rings do not form complete circles, but consist of separate parts, this timber can safely be used in building the boat. However, if the rings form uninterrupted circles, then the boat will earlier or later cause its crew to drown. This is no old-time superstition, but is proven true even nowadays, said the narrator to emphasise his comment.²²

The landing of a cut-down tree at a considerable distance from its stump presaged a vessel capable of goof speed. But if a falling tree damaged many smaller ones, the timber was not to be used in the keel because the ship became a man-killer.²³

A bird's nest among the branches of the chosen tree was a cheering sight, as this pointed to a lucky ship. Better still was a nest of a wild pigeon. The nest of a hawk or of any of the larger birds made the shipowner's breast swell with pride. This would make a seaworthy and staunch vessel. The treefellers may have whispered among themselves 'With his ship this shipowner probably won't earn his money in too honest a manner'.²⁴

As regards procuring the keel timber, there were other customary practices which had to be observed. When going to the forest, the axe had to be kept on the left shoulder. The master of the household or the shipowner had to make the first cut in the tree. Three sand-grains were strewn on every log and a cross

was drawn on the timber with a special stick.²⁵ A crowd of both old and young coast inhabitants used to come and watch the birth of the feeder of their neighbour's family, when the first chip was hewn off the keel timber. Appointed to the task of hewing of the first chip could be the best fisherman of the village, although not employed in the building of the vessel.²⁶

The best omen for a new ship on the way home with the keel timber was the meeting of a man driving a big load – the bigger the load, the better the luck and the possibility of carrying remunerative and large cargos. The first man met received a silver coin from the shipowner.²⁷

Even since ancient times theft was considered, by coast inhabitants and seafarers, as ignominious and severely punishable. In the 19th and 20th centuries in one special case an exception was made. Keel timber stolen from a state-owned or an estate forest was believed to ensure speed to the vessel, especially if the timber was brought home in the shortest possible time.²⁸

The keel timber had to be obtained on the sly and quickly removed from the forest. Stealing the keel timber from the forest was more to be feared than an approaching squall at sea. An utterly silent, ghost-like procession of men carried the stolen timber into a safe hiding-place. Their fear of the forest-keeper and the spirits of the forest was great.²⁹

What might happen to a thief of shipbuilding materials has been told in the story of the ship *Estland*. The ship was built in 1873 at Häädemeeste by Jüri Loorents and Prits Grünberg. The iron fittings for the ship had been stolen from the parish clerk Dubkovsky's shipbuilding site. Prits was suspected of stealing, and the stolen iron had been sought unsuccessfully. Prits told everyone: 'If there is anything stolen, let the ship wreck.' In spring, 1874 the ship capsized in a thunder squall. Only one owner, Jüri Loorents, escaped. It was said that he did not know anything about the theft.³⁰

The birth of the ship spirit, the *koterman*, had influenced the Estonian poetess Marie Under to write a poem.³¹ Various charms and artifices not known to the general public were practised to entice the *koterman*, a benevolent hobgoblin, into guarding the prospective vessel against future misadventures, such as poor sailing qualities, adverse wind conditions, storms, and all kinds of accidents.³² This guardian spirit, *koterman*, *poterman*, or *klabauterman* was believed to make his appearance when the first chip was hewn off the keel timber. From that moment one had to reckon with his presence. The *koterman*, mentioned in the Germanic traditional beliefs of the 17th-18th centuries, played an important role also in ensuring luck and welfare to our sailing vessels, particularly to those plying the oceans. A vessel abandoned by the *koterman* was sure to meet with disaster. Later with the development of steamships, the *koterman* is said to have disappeared.

The ship's spirit resembled the forest and water spirits. It has been very important for the shipwright, on hewing the first chip from the keel timber, to hide the chip (or three chips) quickly in the trouser-pocket.³³ This is the presumption for a good 'accomplice', the koterman. The manner in which the first chip fell permitted to foretell the fortune of the ship, too. If the chip fell upside-down, you could not use the timber, because the vessel would capsize.³⁴

The competition between kotermans has existed at all times. The primary right belonged to that one who appeared with the hewing of the first chip. The Swedes from Åland believed that there were two spirits watching over the shipbuilding – the water spirit and the earth spirit. On the eve of launching, both spirits had to fight for the priority. If the winner turned out to be the water spirit, the ship was believed to become a lucky one.³⁵

Great care was exercised in erecting the masts (they were next in importance to the keel). The lower part of the mast had to be made from nine pieces (3 x 3) because number 9 was believed to be fortunate.³⁶

A coin had to be placed in the mast step under the heel of each mast. Widely spread was the use of silver coins because of the well-known magic qualities of silver. The purpose of using golden coins was to ensure fast and profitable voyages. Nickel coins were believed to bring in new and fresh money³⁷. There have been *Katarinas* (silver coins) of Tsarist times; in the Estonian time, two-crown coins; in the fifties, the Muhu collective-farm pheasantry used 20-kopek coins in building boats.³⁸

The same was practised when changing masts.

In 1927 the sailing vessel *Dione*, owned by master Gustav Teng, was to have new masts fitted at Suursadam harbour, Suuremõisa. The old masts of the three-year-old vessel were not strong enough for the master, who was used to driving his ship under a press of sail in any weather. Here is what Paulin Vilu recalls: 'What I remember most vividly is fitting the mizzen-mast. The master and I were alone below in the hold. The mast was slowly being lowered through the mast hole in the deck. The master took a piece of folded paper from the pocket of his trousers. Standing with one side turned towards me, he began to unfold the paper. I saw the gleam of at least one gold coin (a 10-rouble piece) before he cast a glance at me, then he slipped the money into the mortise of the mast-step on the keelson, into which we guided the heel tenon of the mast. Neither then nor at any other time was this alluded to.'³⁹

A similar story relates to a sailing vessel founded after a fire in the harbour of Rohuküla in 1920. The vessel was sold at an auction to Otto Hamburg and the brothers Andevei, and rebuilt at the Loksa shipyard. The master of the vessel was Robert Nelberg, and the rebuilding work was directed by shipwright Kiil.

The square heel of the new mast was guided into the mast hole in the deck and the order was given to lower away. As soon as the mast-heel approached the mast-step, the master, the shipwright and two men went below. The men turned the mast heel into the required direction and a short time afterwards the heel tenon was lowered into the mast-step. This was the fore-mast.

Whether the master and the shipwright placed a gold coin under the mast heel or not, remained unknown; however, they busied themselves with something. A golden coin placed under the mast heel was believed to ensure rapid and lucky voyages.

The ship was christened *Vanemuine*. At the end of the same year the vessel happened to run aground in the Baltic Sea.⁴⁰

The placing of coins can be thought an old sacrifice. The last sailing vessel built in Papisaaire in 1937-38, the *Juhan*, had got his own coin of luck.⁴¹ In Germany the information on this custom has been recorded already in the 1770's,⁴² and the custom is known in Sweden, too.⁴³

Some old men in the 1920-30's thought that the observance of their forefathers' beliefs was the captains' and owners' duty only. They did not believe in the magic of coins, they did not trouble themselves about the future of their own handiwork. Sometimes the coins were stolen. The reason could be, for example, revenge on a stingy owner for an insufficient supply of alcohol.⁴⁴

Important during the building of a vessel was guarding against curses called down upon the vessel. A widespread belief was that the presence of a woman or a parson at the building site or on the ship would lead to accidents. No woman was permitted to appear barefoot at the building site or mount the deck of the vessel.⁴⁵

An even number of men with the same Christian name among the ship-building gang was considered a good omen.⁴⁶

The occurrence of accidents, or flocks of ravens and crows gathering in the vicinity of the ship under construction were believed to be a bad omens.⁴⁷ You had to avoid the number 13. Thirteen men at work on the ship was not permitted.⁴⁸ A month having five Fridays had to be avoided, too.⁴⁹

Some days of the week did not fit for beginning the work; those were Tuesday and Thursday, and absolutely unsuitable has been Friday.⁵⁰

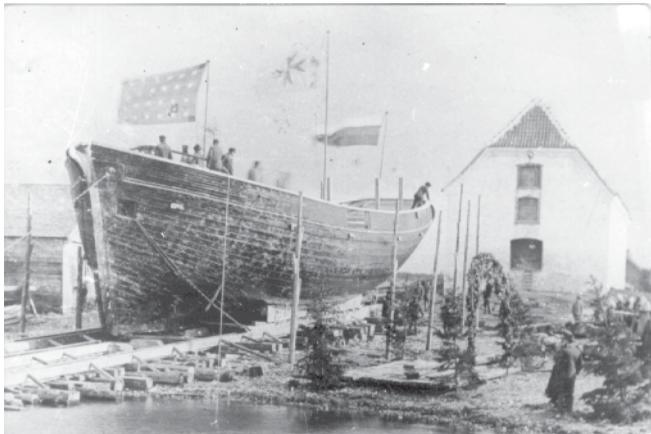
In 1905 the ship-owner Gustav Martinson himself built the sailing vessel *Ingersoll* on the coast of Häädemeeste. A shipwright was engaged for the purpose of launching the vessel who arrived on the 13th of the month. Although launching was not begun on that day there occurred many mishaps during the further preparations, so that launching the vessel was postponed to the following year.⁵¹

A vessel nearing completion could also be bewitched. This was done in a clear moon-lit night by placing some hair derived from black mare's tail and

mane, equal in number to the masts of the ship, under the heel of the main mast. Each horse-hair had to be knotted in the middle and then put into the mast-step while shading the moon-light. The horse-hair placer had to make sure lest these shady dealings be discovered by one of the builders who might frustrate the magic spell. It was not easy.⁵²

Against witchcraft one could use the hair of a dog, or a mixture of heated tar, seal oil and butter made of a white cow's milk.⁵³ Throwing salt over the building site or into the ship might also prove helpful.⁵⁴

Launching the vessel, sometimes called 'the ship's wedding', was an operation of great responsibility. It was generally believed that the fate of the vessel could be foretold by the manner of her behaviour during the launching process. These beliefs were based mainly on analogies. At the same time, earlier and later beliefs got intermixed. On the island of Kihnu, a vessel decorated with birch branches and a garland of flowers on the jibboom received the blessing of a priest and was sprinkled with holy water prior to launching, in order to gain the goodwill of all spirits. After that the laborious work of launching was started by the team of voluntary helpers.⁵⁵ When loud screeching and squealing noises occurred, in spite of the well-greased and soaped launching-ways, the vessel was said to be crying because unwilling to enter the water. This was thought to portend an unlucky vessel (such was the case with J. Markson's and M. Grant's three-masted barquentine *Arcturus*, launched at Kabli in 1898, and later lost with all hands).⁵⁶



Launching a ship at Suur-Sadam in the XIX century. Photo: MMF 21.

An old custom of some shipwrights was to throw a handful of salt against the vessel for luck.⁵⁷

After launching and safely anchoring the vessel, all voluntary helpers were treated to strong drinks and plenty of food. The islanders from Saaremaa and Hiiumaa made their famous homemade beer.⁵⁸

The later tradition of breaking a bottle of champagne or spirits against the bow of a vessel being christened is also a relic of the old habit of offering up sacrifices. It was believed to make up any errors made and to appease the god of the seas and the sea spirits for likely errors in the future.⁵⁹

In conclusion it may be said that the old shipbuilding customs prevailed throughout the whole era of building sailing ships. Those customs were largely influenced by Germanic traditional beliefs, as well as by the reverential attitude of the native inhabitants in woodland surroundings. The shipwright, descended from those people, extended his reverence to the vessel. The latter, being part of the environment known for ages, was to inspire a feeling of security in the ship's crew.

Perhaps no less important was the belief and trust of the seafaring man in his own abilities and in his shipmates.

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- ⁵⁹ERM KV 85, 1. 565

SPRING RITUAL AKASHKA OF THE SOUTH UDMURTS

On The Problem Of Typology Of Ritual Tunes

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The aim of this work is to determine the typological features of tunes of one ritual genre. The tunes of the spring rite of a small group of the Udmurts (living