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Introduction

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At the end of 2024, and in May 2025, while reviewing manuscripts submitted for the journal *The Yearbook of Balkan and Baltic Studies*, we decided to divide the contributions into two approximately equal parts. The first part focuses on the achievements of Lithuanian folkloristics and ethnology. Under the guidance of Žilvytis Šaknys and Skaidrė Urbonienė, this section has developed into a multifaceted overview of sacred places and phenomena, as well as everyday culture in a contemporary context. The articles seek symbols and patterns characteristic of Lithuanian culture.

The year 2025 marks 500 years since the publication of the first book in Lithuania. Latvian and Estonian scholars are also connected to this cultural milestone, as 2025 likewise represents the 500th anniversary of book culture for them, too.

Fate intervened in our plans. First, through the unexpected passing of E. Anastasova; second, during the evaluation of submitted articles, it became clear that we could also compile a manuscript from the contributions of Estonian scholars. However, the final decision had to await the assessments of two anonymous reviewers. We briefly discussed the need to introduce newer cultural phenomena while simultaneously paying greater attention to theoretical works, a goal that remains part of the editorial team's future plans.

Over the decades, various theoretical schools, methods, and objectives have risen, and been marginalised and questioned, leading to debates on positivism, the Finnish school, structuralism, phenomenology, comparative approaches, criticism and even rejection of folklore catalogues, not to mention disputes about authenticity (Bendix 1997). At the same time, some regions continue to employ these methods. Questions have been raised about whether anthropology or folkloristics still have a place in contemporary research.

Several comprehensive reviews of the development of folkloristics have been produced, an excellent example being Diarmuid Ó Giolláin's 2013 work, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity*, which highlighted factors that enabled or hindered the discipline's growth. The book offers explanations for why, in some smaller countries, folkloristics developed and expanded through the convergence of natural, social, and other factors.

Such overviews are necessary, especially considering that even in closely situated countries like Latvia, Finland, Estonia, and Sweden, folkloristics (and ethnology) have developed differently.

In discussions, the fragmentary nature of the present era repeatedly emerged: many articles are published in English in various journals, not to mention collections that are not even offered for open access. In the worst case, their print run is only 50 copies. Such research results are often unknown within local scholarly and linguistic contexts. Would more compact overviews – covering one country (including minorities) – be more practical? Probably so, especially if interpretations strive for objectivity, are well-argued and free from everyday perspectives.

In recent decades, regional developments in folkloristics and ethnography/ethnology in smaller countries have been revisited, with new opportunities provided (at least partly) by the digitisation of diaries and life stories revealing the personal dimension of some scholars, as highlighted by M. Metslaid's article on Gustav Ränk (Metslaid & Jääts 2023; Ränk 2010, Ränk 2017). Thus, alongside theoretical influences, other aspects of personal development have recently come into focus.

It is evident that using a large number of sources deepens knowledge of religious and folklore phenomena and makes the picture more diverse. This expansion is supported by open folklore corpora and the interpretations clustered around them. A vivid example is the large genre corpora of Estonian fairy tales, legends, contemporary folklore, humour, short forms, charms, witchcraft, and mythical characters, among others. The number of written sources available to study the individual has also grown immensely to include autograph albums, handwritten songbooks, joke collections, maxims, sayings, oral local history accounts, meteorological observations, economic records (income and expenses), calendars of work activities, as well as photographs, videos and audio recordings. Many of these reflect individual values, choices, and practices, yet their integration into a cohesive whole is rare, given the high levels of digitisation overall (e.g., Kikas 2024).

When observing and collecting data on new folklore phenomena, the history of different genres varies considerably. The first so-called urban legends were recorded the archives in the 1980s. However, systematic work began only after the 1992 school

folklore collection campaign, when scholars received new narratives. Internationally, research in this field along with theoretical development, attempts to create catalogues and publications, has progressed for over 40 years in collaboration with the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, of which Eda Kalmre is also a member.

In her article, Eda explores how contemporary horror narratives such as stories about men in white vans, killer clowns, and Slenderman spread among Estonian youth through social media and other online platforms. Using the concept of ostension, the study examines how these legends move from digital spaces to become real-life practices, sometimes triggering moral panic. The article highlights the interplay between oral and digital tradition, participatory culture and media amplification, showing how these tales reflect societal fears and blur the boundaries between fiction and reality.

A new wave of research on legends and related genres began in 1993 with the digitisation of mythological characters (Vesik 2006). These projects have continued to analyse religious narratives and their usage practices, conducting full-corpus studies of mythic tradition (legends, belief reports and related forms) and associated sacred texts (prayers, celestial letters, charms), along with the production of related outputs. Within the framework of these projects, studies have been completed on forest spirits (Laagus 1990), plague lore (Hiiemäe 1997), malaria (Paal 2014) and water spirits (Kõiva 2023).

In her article, Mare Kalda offers an important perspective on treasure legends analysing treasure tales that often depict success and failure, with laughter playing a key role in both storytelling and audience response. Humour and laughter demonstrate ambivalent feelings about treasure hunting, revealing the complex social and emotional dimensions of these narratives.

Mythological stories have been examined from an entirely different angle, characterising them as a resource for crisis resolution in contemporary contexts. In October 2025, a mental mapping workshop was convened in Estonia, facilitated by folklorists Reet Hiiemäe and Mare Kalda. The session brought together diverse stakeholders, including members of the general public, local community leaders, and environmental health crisis (EHC) specialists, to interrogate cartographic representations of crises across mythological narratives, contemporary media discourse, and scientific communication. The primary objective was to elucidate epistemic gaps and convergences in spatial prioritisation, narrative structuring, and associated risk assessment frameworks.

Place-lore has been gathered and recorded by Estonian researchers since the end of the 19th century, including a host of accounts of interactions with human spirits. Kristo Villem examines place-lore texts relating to burial sites that are stored at the Estonian Folklore Archive. His study highlights recurring motifs relating to entities that

assert territorial ownership or impose spatial restrictions. These patterns are interpreted as reflections of the cultural values and principles embedded in folk tradition.

Petya Vasileva-Grueva analyses data from the village of Ribnovo (Bulgaria), looking at its preserved traditions, which are integral to the identity politics of the Muslim community. Holidays are not just a connection with the past and the ancestors, but also an essential part of modern Muslim identity and the sustainable development of the community.

Vildane Özkan examines the social functions of highland festivals in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea uplands and their role in sustaining cultural continuity. Interpreted through a cultural sociological framework, the analysis shows how ritual performances operate as symbolic practices that reinforce identity, embody shared habitus, and mediate the tension between tradition and modernity.

Maria Markova investigates the identification of righteous and sinful souls and the belief that the consumption of particular Bulgarian food is as especially necessary for the dead. By preparing and feeding the dead, the living ensure that the dead maintain the 'correct' direction on their journey in the afterlife, guaranteeing the soul's place among the righteous.

Tomasz Kalniuk's article places significant emphasis on contemporary movements, particularly the formation of modern saint cults. The article explores the origins and development of St Andrew Bobola's cult in Strachocina, Poland. The cult began in 1987 after an apparition appeared to a local priest, leading to the establishment of a sanctuary and regular pilgrimages. Bobola's veneration revitalised the village's religious and social life, transforming it into a recognised pilgrimage site. The case chosen by Kalniuk demonstrates that the sacred and supernatural remain vibrant in contemporary Polish religiosity.

The article by Maris and Andres Kuperjanov examines the current values, human–plant relationships and balanced urban development in the tracing the evolution of horticultural cooperatives in Estonia through the example of Ihaste near Tartu. Established during the Soviet era to combat food shortages, these plots later became sites for summer houses and, after independence, permanent homes. Drawing on archive sources and interviews, the study highlights the socio-cultural role of this area from food security and autonomy under political oppression to leisure gardening today, while also addressing current land rights challenges, environmental risks and urban development.

The article by Mare Kõiva continues this theme, focusing on outdoor and indoor gardens. It examines in detail the types, functions, and influencing factors of indoor gardens such as balcony gardens, windowsill gardens, and rooftop gardens, as well as

the motivations for growing plants in apartments. Cultivating food, ornamental, and gourmet plants indoors provides satisfaction and privacy, supports the adaptation of people and their pets to the urban environment, fits in with certain worldviews and reveals connections to the tradition of gardening.

Part of articles examine the turbulent times in the Europe and their influence on folklore, art and humans.

The article by renowned architect Vladimir Vaingort explores the creative legacy of Estonian sculptor Amandus Adamson, focusing on his lesser-known two-metre sculpture of Peter I created in 1916. The study traces the statue's turbulent history – its disappearance and relocation three times due to social upheaval – and highlights how the architectural community of Poltava repeatedly preserved this significant work.

The article by Iryna Sikorska, Oksana Letychevska, and Inna Lisniak is focused on the Ukrainian musical culture of the 1930s within the context of Soviet-imposed 'new rituality'. It analyses how folklore traditions were transformed into ideologically regulated artistic forms. Mass musical events and ritualised spectacles, such as music Olympiads, replaced traditional rituals and served as tools of ideological mobilisation, glorifying Soviet leaders and promoting Party unity. Ultimately, musical creativity, both professional and amateur, was subordinated to state propaganda and political indoctrination.

The article by Zauresh Saktaganova, Alina Gladysheva, and Aimar Ventsel analyses conditions in prison camps at the beginning of World War II. Archived statistical data illustrates mortality rates for the children of female prisoners, as well as the children of free laborers in Karlag in 1941. For a comparative view of child mortality in the Gulag, the article uses data from two other camps in the system, Vyatlag and Bureilag. It appears that the number of children in Karlag in 1941 was significantly higher than in forest and railway industry camps, and the overall mortality rate of children of imprisoned mothers was lower on average.

We hope you find ample inspiration and fresh perspectives in this issue!

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