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St. Nicholas and St. Cornelius, transcultural relations

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine a selection of folk customs, beliefs and legends associated with St Nicholas the Wonderworker, focusing on their diverse typological features and the problems arising from their mutual intertwining. The first section discusses the ritual complex connected with St Nicholas (4th century); the second section analyses narratives about St Nicholas and John Cassian the Roman (Cassian, 3rd century) as confirmation of the hagiographic canon and as explanatory models; the third section explores the convergence between giant folklore and saintly traditions, historical sources and oral history, drawing on texts concerning Hegumen Cornelius of Pechory (16th century).

The analysis demonstrates the importance of St Nicholas and shared motifs with giant-like saints such as St Christopher (3rd century), as well as parallels with Christian and Islamic holy figures, gods and heroes. Particular attention is given to biblical motifs, historical reinterpretations, and narrative entanglements surrounding the death of Hegumen Cornelius, as well as the positioning of St Nicholas as a restorer of justice.

The analysis uses a comparative folkloristic approach drawing on early 20th century texts recorded among Russians and Setos in southeastern Estonia, as well as contemporary fieldwork materials from Belarus. Both the Seto and Belarusian belief traditions reveal a rich repertoire of motifs and suggest that these regions shared, to a significant extent, a common cultural-historical paradigm.

Keywords: St Nicholas the Wonderworker; John Cassian the Roman; Hegumen Cornelius of Pechory; giant folklore; religious syncretism

Introduction: Setomaa and Shifting Borders

Borders can be natural, cultural, psychological, economic or geographical dividing lines, and at the same time are unusual political constructions (Houtum 1998). This applies equally to Setomaa, the boundaries of which have changed repeatedly, especially during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this article we examine one critical period, the era beginning with the Treaty of Tartu (2 February 1920) through which the Pskov–Pechory territories (the ancestral homeland of the Seto) were incorporated into the Republic of Estonia. On 15 August 1944, 75% of the Petseri district previously belonging to Estonia was transferred to the Russian SFSR, and on 23 August 1944 the approximate area of the former Pskov Governorate was separated from the Leningrad Oblast and reorganised into Pskov Oblast, Russian SSR.

For centuries the Seto region belonged to the Russian Empire and was separated from Livonia and Estonia by administrative and economic boundaries. Setomaa formed part of the Eastern Orthodox cultural area. Livonia, in contrast, came under Catholic domination in the aftermath of the crusades from the twelfth century onward, and from the early sixteenth century under the Protestant Lutheran Church. Contacts between people of Setomaa and Estonians living in the administrative regions of Livonia and Estonia were limited (Lõuna 2024).

Major social changes occurred during the 1920s, including the abolition of the *hingemaa* ('soul land', a communal strip-farming system in Petserimaa), which enabled the development of independent agriculture. Communal landholding was replaced by individual farms. Important reforms also accompanied the establishment of schools and the introduction of unified education standards, resulting in increasing literacy and the spread of schooling in the region. Religious developments were equally significant: Orthodox Church reform began in 1919 at the same time as the implementation of the separation of church and state throughout Estonia. In 1924 the Diocese of Narva of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church was created, and all ethnically Russian parishes in Petserimaa (Lisja, Irboska, Jumalaema, Senno, Petški, and Šmšeritsa) were placed under its jurisdiction. The remaining parishes – including the Pskov-Pechory Monastery – remained under the Bishopric of Tallinn and the authority of Metropolitan Aleksander of Tallinn and Estonia. In 1934 a new law on churches and religious associations was passed (Riigi Teataja 1934, 107: 1821–1826) stipulating the creation of national congregations. Through this reform, the previous three Estonian and ten mixed congregations were reorganised into six Estonian and eight Russian congregations (Raag 1938). These reforms led to change and uncertainty, and continuity between clergy and congregations was no longer guaranteed. At the same time, identity-related initiatives also began in the 1930s (the Seto Congress, the Assembly of Seto Elders).

The central sacred institution of the period was the Pskov-Pechory Cave Monastery, founded in 1473 by monk Joann from Tartu. Hermit monks are known to have lived in the caves from the fourteenth century, but in the sixteenth century, under Hegumen Cornelius, the monastery was expanded and became an important center and contact zone among Orthodox communities from various regions. Earlier religious connections extended from northeastern Estonia to the northern coast and further into northern Russia; historical ties also linked the region to clerical centres in Belarus, Ukraine and Latvia (Panchenko 1998). After 1945 eastward movement was interrupted by the new border.

The most frequent figures in Seto narratives and belief texts are saints associated with the Eastern Orthodox tradition: St Nicholas Myra (known in the Eastern Church as Nicholas the Wonderworker, *Čudotvorec*, and Nicholas the Helper, *Ugodnik*); the Great Martyr St George the Victory Bearer (Jegorij in the Russian and Seto tradition); the Old Testament prophet Elijah; and St John Cassian of Rome. Locally revered saints and holy figures include: John, Archbishop of Novgorod (12th century); Makarii Roman of Novgorod (turn of the 16th century); Cornelius (Kornilii) the martyr of Pskov-Pechory; St Nikander of Pskov (16th century); and Matvei the Outcast of Izborsk (early 20th century). Other recurring figures in the texts are the Archangel Michael, King Solomon, John the Baptist, the Apostle Andrew the First Called, St Sergius of Radonezh, the Great Martyr and healer Panteleimon, the Great Martyr Paraskeva Pyatnitsa, the martyrs Cyricus and Julitta, the wonder workers Cosmas and Damian, the martyrs Florus and Laurus, the Great Martyr Anastasia the Deliverer from Bonds, the monks Savvatiy and Zosima, the martyr Antipas of Pergamon, and many others.

This article examines the folklore and religious practices associated with St Nicholas the Wonderworker from several angles and considers the folk discourse surrounding St John Cassian of Rome and his connections with St Nicholas. In addition, it will look at the folklore related to Hegumen Cornelius of Pechory and its points of intersection with the cult of St Nicholas in light of previous scholarship that has characterised the legends of St Cassian (Loorits 1954a), St George (Loorits 1955) and St Christopher (Loorits 1954b; Lielbārdis 2015).

The saint-related texts in the Folklore Archives in Tartu; Estonia at the Estonian Literary Museum constitute a heterogeneous collection in terms of genre and type, making it impossible to classify them within a single folk narrative genre. One of the aims of the article is to examine how saints and their actions are reflected in evaluative beliefs and narrative traditions. For this reason, we describe them on the basis of traditional genre divisions, type and thematic content. Folkloristic data and case analyses are essential to understand developments in a geographic region and to examine how religious, intangible and material factors interact.

Material

We selected for analysis a period marked by profound disruption during which customary routes of movement and communication became obstructed, for example, the closure of borders between Russia and Belarus. A distinctive feature of our region is that the collection of Seto folklore (an ethnic subgroup in southeastern Estonia) began approximately 30 years later than in other parts of Estonia, that is, in the early 1900s, and large-scale fieldwork campaigns started almost 60 years later, in the 1920s. The systematic documentation of Russian tradition in Estonia began only in 1927, with the establishment of the Estonian Folklore Archive (Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv, ERA).

A shared characteristic of this late period of collecting was the practice of sending stipend-supported students from the University of Tartu – many of whom were born and raised in Seto villages – back to their home region for fieldwork. As a special requirement, they were encouraged to record religious folklore (Kõiva et al. 2022; 2024; Vesik 2019). Alongside folklore manuscripts, valuable insights into regional mentalities and material culture are provided by the collectors' field diaries, which, at that time, each collector was obliged to submit. These diaries offer an excellent window into the culture of the Peipsi lakeshore region and Petseri area immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War and before the Soviet occupation of Estonia.

At that time the student fieldworkers often spent several consecutive months in the field, as documented extensively in their diaries (Antropov 2021, 2022 for a detailed account; Murnikova 1970; Ponomareva 2003; Ponomareva & Shor 2008). From 1927 onwards, archivists themselves conducted thematic field expeditions in Setomaa (for example women's feast days, prohibited dances). In addition, foreign collectors also travelled to the region; some had emigrated from Russia during political upheavals and had served in White Army units (Benfoughal 2021).

St Nicholas (15 March 270 – 6 December 343)

This highly important Eastern Church saint is well known and venerated not only throughout Orthodox Christianity but also among all eastern Finno-Ugric peoples and the Indigenous peoples of Siberia (Vinokurova 2015; Konakov 2015 [1999]; Panchenko 1996; etc.), where he occupies a central place in the pantheon of holy figures. The Orthodox Church commemorates his death on 6/19[1] December. His relics were transferred to Bari, Italy, in 1087, where they remain to this day, an event that is commemorated on 9/22 May.

Older sources indicate that Nicholas the Wonderworker was among the most revered saints of both Vepsians and Russians. In Russia, both the winter and

spring Nicholas days were national holidays until 1919. Among the Vepsians, two or even three Nicholas feast days were observed. His popularity is confirmed by the abundance of altars dedicated to him in the Vepsian area between the 15th and 18th centuries (Žukov 2011: 164 via Vinokurova 2015). His earlier prominence in Catholic times is reflected in Estonia in the large number of churches named Nigul in historically Protestant regions (Vahtre 1991; Pekko 2024).

Since the Seto territories were incorporated into the Republic of Estonia only in 1920, it is no surprise that the most frequently mentioned saint across different text types and genres is St Nicholas, followed by St George the Victory Bearer and the prophet Elijah. According to Hagu (2022: 53), there are more than fifty feasts associated with saints, twelve of which are particularly important; to these we must add the dedication feasts of churches and chapels (see also Loorits 1949; Valk 2011). Among the Setos, Nicholas (folk variants Mikul, Migul) was the patron saint of nine villages, celebrated with special feast days (Hagu 2022), and he received thanksgiving offerings. Offerings were brought to Nicholas in church, although work was permitted on his feast day.

In Seto narratives, saints appear in etiological legends. One tale explains how the Devil distilled vodka in the forest, offering the new drink first to God's messengers, i.e. various saints, including St Nicholas (Mikul). They became drunk, danced and sang, and did not return. Finally, God himself came to see what had happened, tasted the drink, and gave it a name. The narrator generalises the tale as "The Devil made the vodka and God consecrated it." (ERA II 194, 246/7 (7) < Setomaa, 1938, Origin of vodka explained, A1312).

As noted earlier, St Nicholas appears in all genres of folk prose. It is particularly interesting to observe how narratives ascribe to him the building and protection of monasteries, as well as other historical events. Past events are mythologised within religious storytelling:

> Mikul built the monastery together with the congregation, but a pagan emperor attacked it with his army. Naturally, Mikul had fortified the monastery, and the troops could not get inside. The army besieged the monastery for nine nights and nine days. As many servants as Mikul had, they defended the walls with hot water. On the ninth night, crows flew out of the monastery – there must have been many of them inside the walls – and they attacked the army, pecking out the soldiers' eyes. The crows were so fierce that the soldiers could no longer walk and were forced to press their faces to the ground. Terrified, the army broke and the emperor had to surrender.
> (ERA II 286, 259/60 (243) < Seto, 1940).[2]

Several narratives connected with St Nicholas are extremely widespread and internationally known. Although not all early motifs are attested in Setomaa (for example the miraculous birth legends; see Badalanova Geller 2017), well-known tales do appear: Nicholas resurrects a sailor who has fallen to his death, saves innocent men from hanging, or becomes the servant of a poor soldier and helps him with daily work in gratitude for rescuing his icon from the mud, cleaning it and placing it in the holy corner. In this story Nicholas is a benevolent and grateful Saint who rewards the soldier's good deed and assists him until he achieves a better life.[3]

The popular tale of St Nicholas "wearing out his boots" because he travels daily to help people was frequently recorded between 1920 and 1940 (and Setomaa also has similar tales about Cornelius of Pskov-Pechory). This belongs to the canonical repertoire of legends about helpful saints. Some versions are connected specifically with an icon from Pechory church: the saint is said to no longer travel because "bad boots" were made for him, which is visible in the icon (a concept connected with Seto religious concretism; see Loorits 1959, the motif of worn-out shoes as proof of a long journey is popular among Setos and Russians, F101.3):

> Mikul had walked all over the land, and the summers had been good. But his heavy wearing-out of boots was considered excessive. Boots made of leather scraps were put on his feet, and from that time onward Mikul no longer travelled. That is how he stands in the Pechory church: with a golden cap, patched boots, and a scythe in his hand. (ERA II 286, 129 (97) < Setomaa, 1940).

> Nicholas received new boots every day. He wore out one pair per day, so new ones had to be given. 'Well,' they said, 'we cannot afford this; let us make him tar-coated boots.' Then he gave up walking and now remains in Pechory. (ERA, Vene 14, 481 (8) Tartu, 1940).

In tales dealing with church-building, one key motif is the vow to build a church, as well as the theme of a construction offering. In one Seto tale a wealthy man is chased by robbers:

> „[…] Karp came from Pskov with a cart through the Taeluva valley, and robbers met him as well, wanting to kill him and take his horse. Karp prayed fervently that if he survived, he would build a church for Saint Migul. Suddenly the robbers heard horses and men approaching from behind and ran. Karp returned home and built the Taelova church. (ERA II 286, 204/5 (183) < Setomaa, 1940, motif Vow to build shrine).

Because the saint helps people, God in turn protects the saint from enemies and unbelievers. For example, the saint prays to be saved from pursuing robbers:

> […] Mikul had prayed to God that lightning would strike the robbers. The lightning hindered them in pursuit, and Mikul escaped. I do not know whether the robbers burned or whether the fire only confused them (ERA II 286, 229 (205) < Setomaa 1940).[4]

In the legends, Nicholas is invariably on the side of the poor and helps people in distress. In international tradition, Nicholas gives money to prevent three daughters from being cast out of their home[5]. In another story he rewards generosity. While travelling, he asks a ploughman for food. The man has only a poor and modest meal, but shares it willingly. Mikul tells him: "We have no money to pay you, God will reward you." The man resumes ploughing and the ploughshare uncovers a barrel filled with money. The ploughman runs after the holy men: "I found money, come and share it!" They reply, "It is yours; that is your reward."[6] (ERA II 286, 226 (201) < Setomaa, 1940)

This corresponds closely to tales in which Jesus travels with his disciples and provides unexpected, paradoxical solutions that require explanation.

In many texts offerings are brought to St Nicholas, and people attend church on his feast day. It is said that offerings were so numerous that they stood as high as the saint's nose in the icon, and that the gifts were afterward divided among church staff:

> Offerings are brought to Mikul as well. In Pskov there is the Church of Saint Nicholas. In earlier times people did not have so much wheat flour, so they brought barley breads. When I was a child, mother took me to church on Nicholas day. These barley breads were placed before Mikul's icon so that the pile reached his nose. Afterwards the priest and the sexton came, divided the pile in half, and then one half again. The priest received three parts, the sexton one. (ERA II 209, 246/7 (16) < Setomaa, 1939)

In many texts, help is requested from St Nicholas and from other saints known as 'gods'. The word *jumal* in Finnic languages (Seto, Karelian, Vepsian) means simultaneously god, icon, and saint (ETY 2012; Vinokurova 2015). In Russian too, saints are often referred to as gods and the icon shelf in the red corner is called *božnica* (the place of the gods). Even in Belarus, in eastern Polesia (Gomel region), the term gods appears in 21st century recorded folklore. This creates a broad and intriguing religious impression. When questioned directly, contemporary Belarusian informants can clarify the difference between saints and God and understand canonical hierarchy (Boganeva & Kõiva 2022: 73).

A saint (most often St Nicholas or St George) can also be 'integrated' into the system of nature spirits and household beings, whose mythological representations were familiar among Russian communities in Estonia between the 1920s and 1940s. The Russian collection at the Estonian Literary Museum contains over a thousand texts about nature spirits, revenants, hostile beings, werewolves, flying serpents, fire-breathers, and more. Before turning to these, we will briefly characterise the legends.

Informants describe Nicholas as a saint who helps with all manner of everyday tasks, and who governs the weather:

> Nicholas the Wonderworker of Myra is the Creator. He performs many miracles, saves people on the waters, and travels across the land. When there is drought, he is asked for rain.
> (ERA, Vene 4, 286/7 < Setomaa, 1933).

> Nicholas of Myra, the Wonderworker. Fifty years ago people prayed: 'Son of God, Almighty God, Nicholas the Wonderworker.
> (ERA, Vene 16, 589 (7) < Tallinn < Setomaa, 1941).

> Mikola is the manifest tsar of the land, the god of the fields. After Mikola has passed by, one looks to see how the grain grows.
> (ERA, Vene 16, 596 (3) < Setomaa, 1941).

> Mikalai Ukhodnik, the quick helper, the warm protector — he is asked to bring the spring; he is like the Lord of the Fields.
> (ERA, Vene 16, 686 (2) < Tallinn < Setomaa, 1941).

> Mikola is the master of the waters.
> (ERA, Vene 16, 589 (6) < Tallinn < Setomaa, 1941).

Nicholas assists in agriculture and animal husbandry (together with George), fishing, maritime dangers, storms and bad weather at sea and on land, matters of wealth and healing of illness.

> George the VictoryBearer is the god of livestock. He sees to it that snakes do not bite and is asked for help when going into the forest. Snakes obey him. He saves animals and people." (ERA, Vene 4, 286/7 < Setomaa, 1933).

> And Yegorij is the god of livestock. As the Lord is merciful, everyone greets Yegorij. Yegorij is the healer of our lives when illness strikes (among livestock)." (ERA, Vene 16, 598 (8) < Tallinn < Setomaa, 1941).

Similar patterns occur in Vepsian texts. Vepsians in Kapšina have tried to ward off snake attacks with charms addressed to St George the Victory Bearer or St Nicholas: *Jegorii milostivyi, azota!* (Merciful George, strike!), *Gad – kut! Stoi tut! Nikolas toporom, Jegorii* kosarem! (Snake – halt! Stand here! Nicholas with the axe, George with the scythe!) (Vinokurova 2015)

Irina Vinokurova (1994: 78) illustrates, drawing on other Vepsian researchers, the link between St Nicholas and agriculture, for example the spring Nicholas feast (9/22 May) was a recognised sowing marker. Sowing took place the week before Nicholas' day and only exceptionally the week after.

As a nature-related saint with a wide range of functions, Nicholas is asked to stop excessive rain, although in the Seto village of Pankjavitsa he is said to help *stop* rain rather than bring it:

> Mikul is our great helper. My great-aunt Kosselka always said: Do not pray to God, pray to Mikul – Mikul will surely help. We were threshing in the autumn. The machine had been brought into the yard, all the sheaves gathered. Then it began to rain. I saw everything would be ruined. My sister went behind the threshing shed and bowed repeatedly toward the Pankjavitsa church, praying to Mikul. Soon the weather cleared. Later the sun even came out. (ERA II 209, 213/4 (19) < Setomaa, 1939).

There was a widespread belief that one could go to the fields only after Nicholas had inspected them:

> On Nicholas day he walks over the fields the whole day, checking whether everything has been sown and whether everything is in order. On that day he wears out two pairs of new boots, because he walks around the whole world. (ERA, Vene 16, 720 (3) < Setomaa, 1941).
>
> Let Mikola come first and look over the field, then we will go. Previously no one went before Mikola had looked. (ERA, Vene 16, 597 (5) < Setomaa, 1941).

The system also includes commandments and prohibitions according to which Nicholas can show leniency toward farmers:

> Mikul said that whoever harrows the rye field before him, he will never heal that person again; do not plough or harrow anything before I have walked over the field with my white boots. Mikul is the boys' saint, the guardian lord of the fields. (ERA II 194, 413 (20) < Setomaa, 1938)

Such conceptions of Nicholas walking across the fields are also known in Belarus; this belief circle generally characterizes the Belarus–Russia border region. For example, a Belarusian spring song for calling the spring contains the line:

> *Мікола па межах ходзіць, межы аглядаіць, жыта раўнуіць. /* (Mikola walks along the borders, looks over the boundaries, smooths the rye.) (Shlyubskiy 1927: 91)

In the Mogilev–Smolensk border region people believed that after sowing, St Nicholas inspects the fields, while the Mother of God cuts the first rye of the harvest. An informant describes how one can recognise her footprints in the field. The belief also incorporates the idea that if humans do the first cutting, it harms the harvest:

> M.R.: "The Most Holy Mother of God heals people and cuts grain. I would not have believed it if I had not seen it myself. I went to the field with my mother and saw that a narrow path, as wide as a goat's track, had been cut with a sickle. And if she [the Mother of God] had not cut, but humans had been the first to do so, the harvest would have been bad. Their hands would start to ache and swell; they should rest from sickle-cutting for a day."
> E.B.: "And how can one see this?"
> M.R.: "Simply a narrow strip of cut rye — a path through the field. So narrow only one can pass. And before the three old women — who are pure, no longer sleep beside men, bathe, wear good clothing — go to cut, they call upon the Most Holy Mother of God and set bread out for her, so that God will send her to help. After those elderly women, everyone else goes and harvests."
> (BFELA, Belarus, Pochapy village, Krasnopolye district, Mogilev region — recorded by E. Boganeva and T. Volodina from Maria Rumyantseva, b. 1931, 2015)

The image of St Nicholas the Wonderworker also appears in fairy tales, both magic and legendary, in which he plays the role of helper and advisor to the tale's hero. Among the plot types in the Russian section of the ELM archive in which St Nicholas appears as an active character are ATU 307 "The Princess in the Coffin" (previously "The Princess in the Shroud)"; ATU 752A "Wonderful Threshing" (in plot type ATU 752A, St Peter is named as a character); ATU 753 "Christ and the Smith" (in this plot type as well, St Peter is named); ATU 778* "To Sacrifice a Giant Candle"; ATU 849* "The Cross as Security."

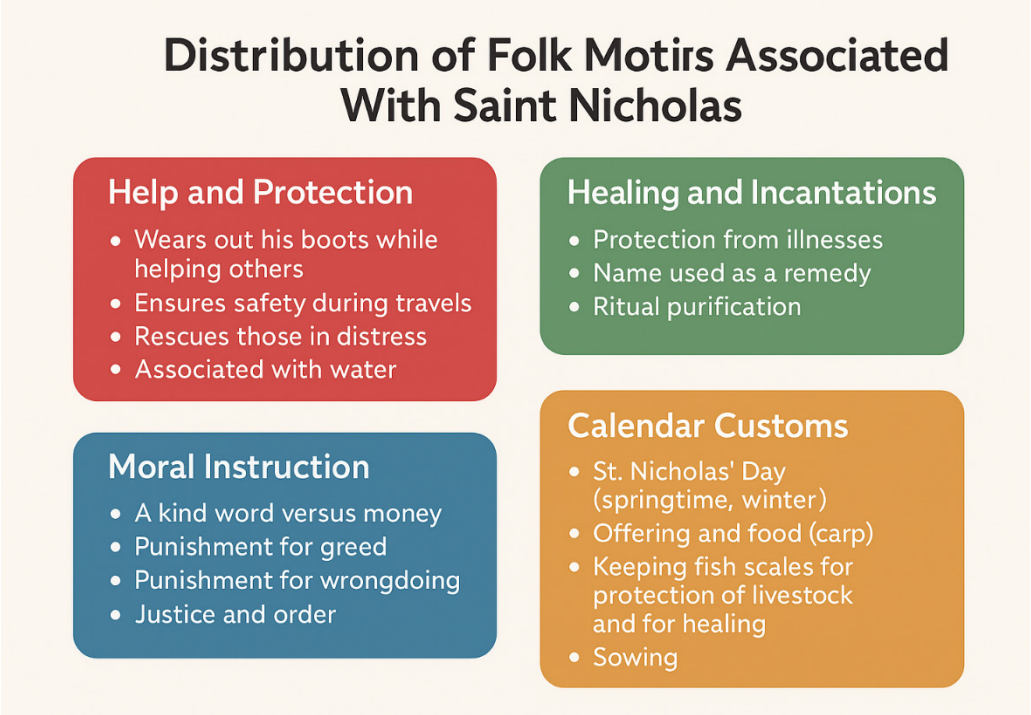


Fig. 1. The folklore motifs connected to Saint Nicholas.

Saint Kassian (Cassianus) and Saint Nicholas

TAccording to Tatiana Agapkina, in the figure of St Kassian, as he appears in East Slavic legends and folktales, one can clearly discern demonological features: he has unnaturally large eyelids, a deadly gaze ("whatever Kassian looks upon withers"), and crossed or narrowed eyes ("Kassian squints"); he is dangerous to others ("Kassian destroys everything"), ill-tempered, evil, and associated with the devil and demons. As a child he was abducted ("Kassian is the guardian of hell") and is described as jealous, quarrelsome and of small stature (in Bulgarian material). Because of his ability to harm and his malice and envy, the Lord punishes him and therefore his feast day is observed only once every four years (Agapkina 2002: 41).

The narrative about St Nicholas and St Kassian appears in the comparative Slavic catalogue (SUS – 790**)[7]. The tale belongs to the cycle of religious legends and includes aetiological motifs. According to the SUS catalogue, the text is known in Russian and Belarusian areas, with the Seto material alone including more than eight versions. The tale type is not listed in the international ATU index[8]. The text from the Russian Collection at the Estonian Literary Museum (ELM), together with Seto versions, helps to clarify the geographical spread of the plot (cf. Loorits 1954).

All of this belongs to the patterns of lived religion, a worldview in which elements of canonical Christianity, apocryphal texts, and folk tradition interweave, creating an unofficial tradition and a distinct interpretation of biblical and hagiographical characters (see Ammerman 2007; Brytsina 2008: 45; Bujs'kikh 2018: 58–76; Trubina, Lubna 2020: 185–188).

Texts associated with Kassian vividly demonstrate how far folk conceptions of a saint can diverge from the canonical prototype. The folk St Kassian – nicknamed 'the Merciless' – bears no resemblance to his canonical model, St John Cassian of Rome (360–435) whose liturgical feast day is 29 February, and since 2022 in the calendar of the American Episcopal Church, 23 July. St John Cassian was a Christian monk, theologian, founder of monastic communities in Gaul and an important theoretician of monastic life.

Folkloric texts follow the typical patterns of belief narratives: Kassian exerts a destructive influence on the surrounding nature and crops. Under the gaze of Kassian the Merciless, the forest dries up; when he looks at a person, that person withers (ERA, Vene 14, 452 (10), Setomaa 1940). Another version says that Kassian the Merciless looks down upon the earth only once every three years, and when he does, there will be no harvest, no bread, and nothing else (ERA, Vene 16, 579 (65), Setomaa 1941).

A separate cycle consists of narratives explaining the origins of feast days, in which saints Nicholas and Kassian (or, in variant forms, St Nicholas, Kassian and St George) travel to visit God. Nicholas always goes to help people in distress; or Nicholas and St George both offer help but Kassian refuses so as not to soil his clean clothes before meeting God. As a result, Nicholas – or Nicholas and St George – receive two feast days a year (a spring and an autumn/winter feast), while Kassian is granted only one feast day every fourth year:

> Mikul went to church with Kassian. A peasant was spreading manure by the roadside; his load overturned, and he called Mikul and Kassian for help. Mikul said: 'Let us go and help the man in his trouble.' Kassian replied: 'I will not go; I am wearing clean church clothes. How could I then go to church?' Mikul went and helped the man lift the load. Afterwards both went on to church. Therefore it has been ordained that Mikul has two feast days a year, while Kassian has one every three years, on the fourth year (ERA II 286, 186 (165), Setomaa, 1940).

In Seto narratives, Kassian is also referred to by the older name Vyssokos ('Leap Year'):

> Mikul, Jüri, and a third wicked man [Vyssokos] went travelling. Mikul lifted the sods for a man ploughing the land; Jüri also did good deeds, but Vyssokos trampled the grain. A man's load overturned. Mikul and Jüri

> helped him lift it, but Vyssokos mocked him: 'Let it stay lying in the mud!' Therefore God granted Mikul and Jüri two feast days each year, while Vyssokos received one every three years. On that day everything is brought before him — people, animals, and even snow. Whatever he looks upon is destroyed. It is an ill-omened day, and all other feasts are postponed. (ERA II 194, 629 (9), Setomaa).

Among Belarusians there is a narrative about St Kassian in which he appears together with St John Chrysostom (SUS – 790***).[9] The epithet of St John Chrysostom ('Golden-Mouthed'), was given to him for his eloquence. In the Belarusian legend he is called Zlatovus ('Golden Moustache'), and the tale provides an original interpretation of this epithet in a vivid example of folk etymology.

Kassian and Ivan Zlatovus serve the liturgy together in church. Kassian deliberately singes Ivan's moustache with fire from the censer (the vessel used for burning incense), and Ivan, in turn, sets Kassian's beard on fire with a candle. God acknowledges that it was Kassian who started the quarrel and assigns his feast day to be celebrated only once every four years. To John he grants golden moustaches, and therefore he is called Zlatovus (Romanov 1891: 16–17).



Fig. 2. Photo Monument to the martyr Cornelius, hegumen of the Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery. Photo: Pavel Parmenov, 2019.



Fig. 3. Giant Suur Tõll and Crusaders; author Jüri Arrak 1982.

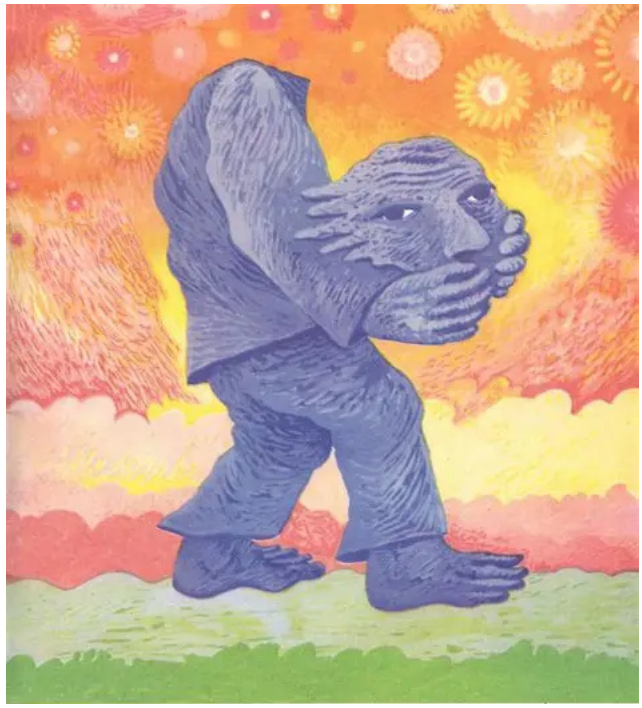


Fig. 4. Gigant Suur Tõll decapitated, author Jüri Arrak 1982

3. St Cornelius (1501–20 February 1570): His Associations with Giants and Saints

Historical sources contain numerous references to the Pskov Pechory Cave Monastery and to its high theological standards, as well as reports of the monastery's miraculous preservation during times of war. In this section we address only those folkloric motifs that are directly connected with the first Hegumen Cornelius.

Cornelius headed the Pskov-Pechory Monastery from 1529 to 1570 expanding it in every respect. He promoted the spread of Orthodoxy among the local population, winning many converts who later helped to defeat the forces of the Livonian Order during the Russo-Livonian War. Cornelius supported the establishment of churches, hospitals and orphanages, enriched the monastery library and was the author of multiple chronicles. His death was unexpected: in 1570 the violence-prone Ivan IV visited the monastery and killed Cornelius during his stay, decapitating him because he suspected him of treason.

Folklore, however, reveals a fascinating complex of motifs in which universal and local, along with hagiographic, elements are interwoven. Unexpectedly, some narratives reflect the archaic worldview according to which gods, saints and heroes

of various peoples were giants. Folk narratives emphasise the unusual qualities of the religious leader: he is described as being of giant size, as are his brothers, with whom he cooperates in building monasteries in the region.

The giant builder motif is well known in Estonian tradition, where giants erect large buildings. This is an international folktale motif: a giant builds a town, church or monastery but lacks sufficient tools, and therefore several giants share a single tool, throwing it to one another over great distances. In Seto and Russian narratives Cornelius builds a monastery or church together with his brothers, throwing a hammer across long distances as they work. Similar motifs appear in Estonian stories about Kalevipoeg, Vanapagan and other giants, as well as in the stories of the Slovenes and other Slavic peoples (Kropej 2012: 62 ff.; Oinas 1979). There are also stories about the Slavic giants of Pomorje, Western Ukraine, and the Smolensk region of Russia (Belova 1995: 301–302), and stories about giants in the United Kingdom (Fionn mac Cumhaill/Giant's Causeway) (Simpson & Roud 2000) and Scandinavia (Klintberg 2011, Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1988).

Cornelius is also connected, through several motifs, with the well-known western Estonian giant Tõll. Although building churches is the central theme, another characteristic motif is walking across a large body of water without getting wet feet, or only barely.

One of the best-known examples of walking on water is described in the Bible in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 14:22–31), the Gospel of Mark (Mark 6:45–53), and the Gospel of John (John 6:15–21). Christ went up on a mountain to pray alone, and then walked across the surface of the water toward the boat in which His disciples were sailing. In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter wished to go to Jesus on the water; Jesus permitted him, but after walking some distance Peter became frightened by the wind and began to sink. Jesus reached out His hand to him and reproached him for his lack of faith.

In both ATU and SUS there is tale-type ATU 827 "A Pious Innocent Man Knows Nothing of God (previously A Shepherd Knows Nothing of God)". A pious man (a farmer) worships God in his own manner and never goes to church. A travelling preacher teaches him how to pray properly and then continues on his journey. When the pious man forgets the prayer, he follows the preacher's ship by walking on the water. Through this miracle, the preacher recognises the man's holiness and understands that pious innocence is pleasing to God (Uther 2011: 465).

St Cornelius crosses water without wetting his feet, a motif that parallels both the Estonian giant Kalevipoeg and St Christopher (Latin *Christophorus*), who bears the Christ child across a river (as narrated in the *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine 1993/1995). The visualisation of the motif is widely represented in medieval church art. In Estonian tradition, Kalevipoeg also ferries the divine across water (on his palm), paralleling Cornelius's water-crossing without wetting

his feet. Christopher is widely known in the Baltic region and across the western Slavic world, and was also previously venerated as a saint in Britain and elsewhere. The motif appears in 14th century Slovenian church paintings, where the saint walks in water that reaches over his feet. A similar image is found on a cliff-side shrine painting in Slovenia (Kropej 2012). The cult of Christopher spread widely in the eastern Baltic by the 14th century (see Loorits 1954; for Latvian Catholics Lielbārdis 2015). On the Vilnius coat of arms (1330) he is depicted wading through water carrying the Christ child on his shoulders. A large monument to him stands in front of the oldest Church of St Nicholas in Vilnius, recalling the legendary event. The motif of carrying God or Jesus across deep waters is one of the core features of saintly legends (cf. Tolstaja, Belova 2009: 594).

Similar features – gigantic stature and associations with sacred sites and bodies of water – also appear in the imagery of several Islamic holy men. One of Bulgaria's oldest Alevi sanctuaries, the Demir Baba türbe, was built upon a 3000-year-old Thracian sacred site. In the sixteenth century a mausoleum was constructed there in honour of the sage Demir Baba, a figure associated with miracles and giant-like qualities (Teodorova, Gergova 2006; Kõiva, Kuperjanov, Vesik 2015: 56–58).

Folk narratives portray Cornelius in multiple ways. They tell how the *bogatyr* ('giant') Cornelius built a wall around the monastery without the tsar's permission, how he built several churches instead of one, or how, when ordered to build a horse stable, he built a new church instead. He was granted permission to erect a fence around the monastery grounds, which were supposed to be the size of an ox hide, but the clever hegumen cut the hide into thin strips (another widely distributed motif),[10] outlined a much larger territory and built a stone wall around it.

Let us set aside these shared legendary motifs, fascinating though they are – particularly the miracle-working and protective icons and other monastery-related material – and turn to Cornelius's death. Here too the narratives contain varying details, especially regarding place: sometimes Ivan IV meets Cornelius at the monastery gates, sometimes in front of the monastery, sometimes at a considerable distance from the sacred site. Ivan IV receives Cornelius, and the tsar decapitates him, allegedly because someone had whispered that the wall around the monastery had been built to detach the monastery from the Russian state.

The dramatic scene that follows describes how Cornelius walks back to the monastery carrying his severed head under his arm, in his hands, or on a plate. This motif also appears in the Estonian legend of the Saaremaa giant Suur Tõll, who leaves his place of death with his head under his arm (Laugaste et al. 1963). In other variants, Ivan IV repents, taking Cornelius's bloody corpse in his arms and carrying it into the monastery. As punishment for his deed he becomes blind. After making numerous donations and performing good deeds for the monastery, the tsar's crime is absolved and he regains his sight.[11]

The motif of beheaded heroes or saints is present in Bible (John the Baptist Matt. 14:1–12, Holofernes Judith 13:4–10, Goliath 1 Sam. 17:49–51) and popular in Christian art. A cephalophore (from the Greek meaning 'head-carrier') is a saint who is typically depicted carrying his or her severed head. Thus, the original and perhaps most famous cephalophore is Denis, patron saint of Paris, who, according to the *Golden Legend*, miraculously preached with his head in his hands while travelling the seven miles from Montmartre to his burial place. Although St Denis is the best known of the saintly head-carriers, there were many others: the folklorist Émile Nourry (1929: 158–231) counted 134 examples of cephalophory in French hagiographic literature alone.

An unusual motif relating to the dead Cornelius comes when he rises from his grave to extinguish a fire. Afterwards he sleeps, or 'dies', promising to come to help the people in times of great distress. In one version a curious woman tests whether he will indeed come to their aid and awakens him without cause. Angered by the deception, the saint declares that he will return only in times of true catastrophe. A similar motif appears in the western Estonian tradition of Suur Tõll in which young men repeatedly awaken the hero without good reason, and Tõll vows to return only when severe calamities strike.

Eduard Laugaste describes Tõll as follows:

> Although Tõll appears in the eyes of the people as a kind of natural giant whose actions determine the placement or transformation of natural objects (fingerprints on rocks, traces on hills, etc.), he is also known as a military leader who fought in several battles against enemies. Thus Tõll appears both as a giant and as a hero. The young Tõll has fewer giant-like qualities – he is a labourer and, in part, a musician. (Laugaste, Liiv 1970).

Again this parallels storylines in which we find the 'king/hero sleeps in a mountain' motif (Thompson 1955–1958). Cornelius rising from the grave to save people in dire times resonates with many European stories such as, to name a few, Frederick Barbarossa (Kyffhäuser), Charlemagne (Untersberg), King Wenceslas (Blaník), King Arthur (Avalon) (Simpson & Roud 2000), the Slovenian Kralj Matjaž (the sleeping ruler under Mt Peca) (Kropej 2012). In the Estonian area, Suur Tõll promises to return when there is a catastrophe, a close formal analogue to Cornelius's posthumous guardianship.

In summary, Tõll carries out activities characteristic of giants such as shaping the landscape, building churches and fighting enemies. The ancient enemies of the Saaremaa giant Tõll are the Devil and the German crusaders. In contrast, the narrative cycle of Cornelius is predominantly religious, although he too builds

churches in a giant-like manner. Both cycles share the motif of promising to come to the aid of the people and the land in times of hardship.

We have already seen that St Nicholas is attributed more traits and motifs than most other saints. Nicholas and Cornelius share several motifs. According to a widespread motif, Cornelius travels to help people and his boots wear out quickly. St Nicholas, however, wears out a pair of boots every day, and from this arises the explanation for why he no longer travels (cf. ERA, Vene 14, 481 (8) Tartu, 1940; ERA, Vene 16, 576/7 (56) Setomaa, 1941 et al.). Analogous walking until the boots wear out motifs appear in Western tales of mendicant or itinerant saints (Nicholas among them) (Voragine 1993).

In folk legends, a blending of chronology frequently occurs, where events and characters from different eras are combined. Thus, in narratives recorded in Setomaa, St Nicholas is often linked by storytellers with Ivan IV (the Terrible).

Within the monastery-related cycle, Nicholas repeatedly shows Ivan IV the righteous path. Although the saint's life seems to be in the tsar's hands, the dangerous situation is – according to the rules of folk narrative – less harmful to the saint. When Ivan IV becomes blind after killing the holy man, he understands personally and directly the impermissibility of his action.[12] In the legend, his instruction is conveyed through visions, images in the mind, and also through physical experience that reveals the nature of Ivan the Terrible's behaviour.

In one tale St Nicholas throws away vodka, claiming that he used it to extinguish a fire in Jerusalem. Special messengers are sent to verify the claim. With fairy-tale swiftness they travel there and back, confirming the truth of the event. In another tale Nicholas admonishes Ivan the Terrible and pierces his foot with a sword in the same manner that the tsar himself punished soldiers when in a foul mood:

> Then Mikul rebuked the wicked king and made him understand what kind of man he was, that he tormented the people in such a way. 'Look', he said, 'when you came to the town, everything seemed as if it were deserted – they fled from you. And just as you pierced his foot with a sword, now see yourself whether you can stand'. The king stood without uttering a sound. He feared Mikul but was very angry at the people. After Mikul's instruction he is said to have become somewhat better. They said he was a king with a jealous heart. (ERA II 209, 18/20 (10), Setomaa, 1939).

The tale ends with the narrator's summary, essentially a moral much like those appended to medieval narratives, or a device by which the storyteller balances the narrative and its ethical dimension: "After Mikul's instruction he is said to have become somewhat better."

St Cornelius – whose figure combines historical elements with older hagiographic representations, including associations with St Christopher, St Spyridon of Trimythous, St Athanasius of Constantinople/Kharkiv, St Nicholas, older rulers and even Islamic holy men – embodies a particularly interesting strand of folkloric tradition.

Conclusions

Durkheim emphasised that the religious rituals of a community are fundamental to shaping "collective life" (Durkheim [1912] 2007: 27). Examining the traditions of St Nicholas in Estonia – particularly in the Seto and Russian folk-Christian environment – we find a complex blend of hagiographic elements, apocryphal traditions and folklore. This includes various etiological (including cosmological) and eschatological conceptions as well as ethno-confessional understandings. Although the motifs are strongly connected with older layers of saint's traditions, para-biblical motifs display numerous widely distributed international parallels. The narratives recorded between the 1920s and 1940s, together with ritual practices, omens and beliefs, have been adapted to local conditions and the surrounding landscape.

The stories are shaped by an ethical framework whose key components include ideas of good and evil, sin and miracles, harmony and balance in the world, the relationship between Creator and creation and norms for human coexistence. These notions are deeply embedded in the entire folklore system and expressed through its genres and subgenres.

Texts about saints form a distinct corpus that reflects a characteristic peasant worldview in which feast days and saintly cycles constituted a shared social experience uniting the poor and the less poor. Narratives about saints appear in genres of folk prose (fairy tales, legends, myths, miracle stories), in belief accounts, in conceptions of saintly functions and customary practice, in prayers addressed to saints and in ritual action. As we have seen, St Nicholas is attributed more benevolent qualities and motifs than other saints.

It becomes clear from the above that the motifs associated with religious characters, who share partly overlapping sets of genealogical features, are remarkably close. In the Pechory region, social and political conditions changed rapidly between 1920 and 1940. Religious culture, however, remained stable for decades, as evidenced by local recordings, the spiritual folklore collected by research fellows, and materials preserved in the French museum fellowship collections (Benfougal et al. 2021; Belobrovtseva 2020; Kirss 1922; Katajeva-Valk 2019; Zassedskaja, Kalinina 2021: 537; Belousov et al. 1976). At the same time, the broader world was clearly changing. Belarusian parallels cited in this article derive from the BFELA

database and related publications. It is evident that Belarusians, Setos and local Russians shared, to a large extent, the same cultural-historical paradigm.

It is worth noting how many international giant and saint-related features are interwoven in the recorded narratives: the giant may acquire traits of a cultural hero or saint, while the saint may adopt motifs typical of giants. Religious tales engage with the landscape, local history and local culture. Folk traditions connected with saints can lose their link to the canonical prototype, or, conversely, can expand and reinforce it. Changing and migrating motifs connect local traditions with universal saintly cycles. At the same time, it is moving to find fragments of narrators' personal attitudes and other individual elements.

St Cornelius – whose narrative cycle contains a blend of historical motifs and older hagiographic representations including associations with Christian Saintsand, and even Islamic holy men – represents a particularly intriguing strand of folk tradition that merits deeper study.

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Notes

[1] The first date follows the New (Gregorian) Calendar, while the second corresponds to the Old (Julian) Calendar.

[2] Nicholas defending monastery: there is also number magic (nine) and crows attacking the enemy.

[3] The popular narrative motif. Nicholas rewards soldier for icon rescued, several variants from Seto and Russians. ATU 755 – "Help from Heaven for a Kindly Act", belongs to the group of legends about St Nikolaus as grateful helper: F823.3 (Grateful Saint assists benefactor), F871 (Saint serves human being in disguise), Q431.3 (Good deed to a sacred object rewarded), V361 (Icon rescued from profanation brings blessing).

[4] ATU 960 B – Miraculous Rescue by Lightning; Motif D 2121.2 – Lightning strikes pursuers; D 2190 – God sends lightning to protect the righteous.

[5] ATU 779: "Three Maidens and Their Dowries"; "Miracle of the Three Maidens" is the central motif in the Vita Sancti Nicolaus traditsioonis, cf "Vita sancti Nicholai" from The Early South English Legendary or Lives of Saints, Dr. Carl Horstmann, editor. First published for The Early English Text Society by Trubner & Co., London, 1887.

[6] There is no exact equivalent in ATU (~ ATU 755 "Help from Heaven for a Kindly Act" (closest match), in Motif Index: H551 (Reward for hospitality), F823.3 (Saint rewards benefactor),

N815 (Treasure found as reward), N815.1 (Treasure uncovered by plough). In hagiopraphy subtype: "Nicholas rewards generosity" / "Гостеприимство вознаграждено Николаем"

[7] A dash before the tale type number in SUS (the East Slavic tale-type index) indicates that this plot type is known only among the East Slavs.

[8] Although the tale of Saint Nicholaus and Saint Cassianus does not appear as an independent type in the international ATU index, it corresponds thematically to several groups of religious and etiological legends: ATU 756A ("The Feast Days of Saints"), ATU 758 ("The Punishment of the Saint"), ATU 804 ("Why the Saint Has This Feast Day"), ATU 921C ("The Saint Refuses to Help"), and to the broader category of moral contrast tales (ATU 960–970). These parallels help position the East Slavic and Seto versions within the wider European tradition of hagiographic–folkloric narrative patterns.

[9] This type is absent from the ATU index; the SUS notes that it is found only among Belarusians (SUS 1979, 199).

[10] Cornelius's trick of cutting an ox hide into strips to encircle a larger monastery precinct belongs to a classical and medieval legend stratum known from Queen Dido's founding of Carthage (Byrsa) and was recycled widely in European monastic foundation legends. The tale is a durable migration motif that marks clever sacral appropriation of space (Thompson 1955–1958 (motif "enclosing land with hide thongs"); Oxford Classical Dictionary; Simpson & Roud 2000.

[11] Cornelius returning to the monastery with his severed head echoes the pan European hagiographic theme of cephalophoric saints. Notable parallels include Saint Denis of Paris, who carries his head after decapitation, and Saint Edmund the Martyr, whose severed head is miraculously retrieved and borne. The image recurs in heroic land Giant legend as well (e.g., the Estonian giant Suur Tõll). (More details cf. Voragine 19931995, Legenda Aurea; Laugaste et al. 1963; Simpson & Roud 2000).

[12] The pattern in which a ruler is supernaturally punished (blindness) and then restored after penance is a hagiographic schema: saints admonish kings, who undergo a visible affliction before reconciliation. The famous motifs include confrontations of Ambrose and Theodosius (penitential model), while Eastern hagiography frequently stages eyesight loss/restoration as a sign of divine judgment and mercy (Delehaye 1905/1998; Tolstaja & Belova 2009).

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ERA, Russian – Russian collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives, 1920–1945

BFELA – Belarusian Folklore, Research Centre for Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus

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