

# **WATER SPITRITS 1**

**PHAROS WARRIORS, MER CATTLE, WATER  
HORSES, FISH FATHER, KOTERMANN**



## FOREWORD

Beliefs, rituals and religious characters related to water have an important place in every culture. The self-description of Finland and Karelia includes the name Land of A Thousand Lakes. Estonia's long sea border, thousands of natural and artificial water bodies, ponds built near farms and manors, and ditch systems that drain marshes and bogs were related to livelihood, way of life, and the relationship between man and water. The sea border of the Estonians and other Baltic Finns, and the large number of water bodies, are the basis for the complexes of traditions related to water.

The knowledge–practice–belief complex describes both traditional knowledge and vernacular ecology, along with their outcomes. There are abundant records relating to the water world, from the use of water during rituals (birth, marriage and funeral customs), healing with water and its use in magic, water bodies as a source of livelihood, to water bodies as carriers of holiness and the miraculous powers of water. Some texts tell tales of everyday fishing, the behaviour of fish, fishing tips, the lifestyle of fishermen or net menders and life as a member of a fishing family. These stories reflect history, and social, economic and cultural relations and their changes. Through these stories we also see the transformations caused by both politics and technical development.

A significant part of the beliefs and belief narratives represent intangible culture. These talk about experiences and incidents beside springs, or on the shores of rivers, lakes and the sea; they are stories about meetings with mythical water inhabitants and other similar creatures that have their own way of life and character, their own will and goals. In the world of stories, the inhabitants of water influence human life, can intervene in it and change it fundamentally. Narrative and make-believe experiences sometimes touch the boundary between reality and fantasy. These cultural representations of the perception of the world include concepts of force and the re-actualised concept of the soul – the driving force of human existence and nature. In this book we look at mythical characters and how they operate, how they interact with people and how people interact with them through fantasy and ritual, and through the senses and the emotions.

In addition to the mythical characters that are generally known and have become symbols in culture, there are rarer water creatures in Estonian folklore that have been left out of the text samples so far and have not been of interest to researchers for a long time. In recent decades, interest in older types of story has increased in various cultural regions, which has prompted the publication of new folklore approaches, story catalogues and systematic text samples, which in turn broadens the possibilities for comparison. Today, the relations between and across cultures are much clearer, which, together with the findings of the monuments of pre-Christian,

ancient, medieval and modern written culture, make it possible to reconstruct the development lines of permanence and interruption.

Based on folklore data, it is possible to observe the folklore of water and water creatures of the last couple of centuries, starting from the early decades of the 19th century. As the material and spiritual environment around us has changed, so have the uses and content of folklore, related customs, media outlets and other aspects. Because of the extraordinary adaptability of mythologies, mythical creatures are still relevant today, although the functions have transformed. I know people who have searched for and met water fairies, who have become them, or experimented with being a mermaid and swimming with a mermaid's tail, who can write in fairy language or have water fairy experiences through computer games and online media, who are familiar with them through books. But more on that in the next book about water creatures.

In the 19th century, the stories of mythical water creatures were not only cautionary tales, but also exciting and satisfying stories about life outside the human world, encounters with other worlds and their creatures. Considering the total number of texts, this edition of folktales is divided into several parts. In the first, narratives and beliefs of different origin and age appear, for example the protector of fish, a herd of water horses, sea shepherds, the pharaoh's warriors and the ship spirit. Parallels to the protector of fish, who is among the older mythical characters, are found across a very wide geographical area, as are seahorses and water horses and herds of sea and water cattle, which are related to specific regions of northern Europe such as Scandinavia, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Ireland, Scotland, Finland, and the Livonians and Latvian areas, and with regard to some motifs more broadly within the Germanic cultural space.

The influential biblical and parabiblical tradition of the pharaohs represents a motif known in wider Eurasian areas, the special features of which in relation to seals and the seal people again bear the hallmark of northern Europe. The later stratum includes folklore about the ship spirit Kotermann, or Klabautermann, spread across a narrow area of northern Europe and around the Atlantic Ocean. This is one of the younger representatives of the earlier ship spirit, who in Estonia also appears in the roles of a house spirit and building spirit. Analysis of legends and beliefs with distribution maps are presented by creature and phenomenon, followed by text corpora in which the texts and recordings available today are gathered.

# INTRODUCTION

The study of the terminology and characters of mythology has been on the rise for decades. Quite a number of studies and dictionaries have been published on the Finno-Ugric and Slavic linguistic and cultural spaces, student papers and PhD theses have been defended, and the topic is again on the agenda in other cultural spaces. Taken in conjunction with the treatises published in the first half of the 20th century, as well as earlier contributions and theoretical approaches, they provide a basis for a comparative study of Baltic Finnic and, more broadly, Finno-Ugric mythology, mythological vocabulary and beliefs from the point of view of folk mythology and folklore studies. This volume continues to explore Estonian folklore material through the example of a single group, in order to contribute to the formulation of a general overview. As far as possible, all currently available archival texts are included, which in turn highlights the state of the tradition, the temporal and geographical scope of folklore collection fieldwork, and the impact of the methodology on the data. It should be noted that, since the end of the 19th century, folklore collectors have been native speakers of Estonian – scholars and local correspondents, as well as the recipients of research awards and university students –, proficiency in the Estonian language becoming an important prerequisite and quality in the formation of Estonian collections. While the dialectal proficiency of university students and those from outside the community varied (people from regions where standard Estonian is spoken may not be able to pick up all the nuances (Kõiva & Vesik 2004)), and the demands for accuracy in recording dialects have changed over time, the way has been paved by links between the university town of Tartu and the Estonian Folklore Archives. This has guaranteed that knowledge ends up in good hands.

Jakob Hurt (1839–1907) proposed collecting the knowledge of the people and formulating the unwritten history of our nation on the basis of the contributions, and the same sentiment has, to a greater or lesser extent, inspired correspondents and folklore collectors ever since. The initiators of the folklore collection and their correspondents in different parts of Estonia worked hard to document traditions, both at the initiation of the collection and since. Biologists, geographers, pharmacists, medics, veterinarians, mathematicians, physicists and representatives of other disciplines also contributed significantly to the collection of folklore, ensuring a broad range of folk knowledge.

Hence, the need to collect data for one's own history (the importance of this in the self-determination of many peoples with 'unwritten histories' in Europe and in the rest of the world has been reflected by Bruce Lincoln (2000), Joel Halpern and David Kideckel (1983), John Eidson (2019), and Aleksandar Boškovič (2008)

among others) was and has remained an important framework. The new context was charged with the process of creating an identity and a dignified history, to name just a couple of influential aspects.

At the time of the formation of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1927), the consequences of urbanisation had not yet undermined older cultural patterns and beliefs. Even with their different approaches and the narrower scope of the collection, the texts received through different initiatives add dimensions to mythical characters, as well as perspectives on the texture and nature of phenomena.

How the different campaigns complemented each other can be seen in the motifs of the forest spirit, and getting lost in a forest. A total of three thousand texts have been recorded about the forest spirit and over four hundred about getting lost, but it is the latter motif that is still relevant today, sometimes associated with the supernatural, while at other times other explanations have been given. The archival collections of folklore are divided into a number of series, based on the institutions and major collectors that organised the fieldwork, forming a collection of 1.5 million pages, including four large manuscript collections. The analysis below highlights the importance of specific surveys and how the corpus of knowledge was formed.

The themes of the forest spirit and getting lost in a forest are covered in the following collections: H – Jakob Hurt’s collection (1860–1906) – 114,696 pages; E – Matthias Johann Eisen’s collection (1880–1934) – 90,100 pages; ERA – manuscripts collected during the pre-World War II period of the Republic of Estonia by correspondents of the Estonian Folklore Archives, professional folklorists and student research award recipients (1927–1944) – 265,098 pages; RKM – manuscripts of the Folklore Department of the Estonian State Literary Museum (1945–1996) – 450,868 pages.

Each collection was compiled using different methodology. Jakob Hurt’s list of collection categories (Tedre 1989) included the living and non-living world in the broadest possible sense, and he also emphasised the importance of the local vernacular, i.e. he expected the entries to be recorded in local dialects. He stressed the great value of certain genres for the future history of the nation, which is why he was sent considerably more old songs than stories, although it was considered essential to record fairy tales. Over fourteen hundred correspondents were involved in the fieldwork.

Matthias Johann Eisen’s (1857–1934) collection campaign collected data in many categories (Kikas 2013; Saukas 2003; Tedre 2015), and his networking activities and collection questions introduced new perspectives, for example, the recording of place names, student collections, the folk calendar, etc., and folk mythology surveys. During his seminars Eisen also encouraged students to record folklore as a course assignment. As he regularly wrote thematic journal articles and books on

the basis of the contributions received, and also used them to write an overview of Estonian mythology (Eisen 1919), some of the reports and stories were immediately recycled. Eisen's interest in Estonian folklore led him to compile *The Estonian Mythology* to satisfy the interest of the education system and the wider audience on the subject of mythology.

Founded in 1927, the Estonian Folklore Archives immediately began, on the initiative of Oskar Loorits (1900–1961), to monitor the occurrence of mythological motifs and characters, mythological tales and bogeyman stories for children. One of the important topics was whether, and how widely, these creatures were known, and what their functions were. The contribution by the correspondents of this period to the recording of mythological material and the validation of characters was considerable. The urbanisation that took off in the 1930s was driven by changing economic conditions, but also by the opportunities for Estonian-language general and university education, which also created the basis for the training of professional folklorists. The intensification of collecting was inevitable in one way or another in order to record the folklore and folk customs associated with the themes, characters, regions and minorities, as well as the inhabitants of the areas newly incorporated into Estonia. The wide-ranging scope of the collecting fieldwork undertaken created a favourable basis for mapping phenomena and outlining regional specificities.

The folklore department of the Estonian State Literary Museum and the folklore department of the Institute of Estonian Language and Literature (now the Estonian Language Institute), which was established in 1949, continued the earlier traditions with gaps purposefully filled and the collection of folklore continuing in peripheral regions. The collection work of the 1960s and 1970s was a resounding success: while archaic folklore was still in existence, it had begun to give way to playful new types of expression, imitation, etc. The closed borders of the Soviet Union contributed to the preservation of older folklore in the border zone and the peripheral regions.

The systematic academic study of the structure of Estonian beliefs and the creation of a classification began in the 20th century, when Matthias Johann Eisen (1919) presented a systematic overview of mythological material. In his *The Estonian Mythology*, the main features were generalised and, as far as possible, comparisons were made with close linguistic relatives and contact peoples. Eisen was the first scholar to grow up surrounded by the Estonian culture and language, and he created the first view of folk mythology, the results of which found their way into European handbooks and treatises (Hoffmann-Krayer & Stäubli 1927–1941).

On the basis of the Livonian material, Oskar Loorits wrote a treatise on Livonian folk mythology (*Livonian Folk Belief I–III*, 1926–1928; parts IV and V were first published in 1995–1997). He presented the characters, the main features of folk my-

thology, and parallels between Latvian and Estonian folklore (including, in particular, the mythological folklore of the island of Saaremaa). The general mythological concepts (soul, sage, priest) are followed by a section on nature and spirits/fairies, which presents Livonian views through *stoicheia*, starting with the Heavenly Father, a character influenced by the Christian image of God, and continuing with the sons and daughters of the god. This is followed by celestial and meteorological mythological creatures, and then, somewhat unexpectedly, by an observation of the spirits/fairies inhabiting man-made buildings (house, threshing barn, sauna), continuing with those associated with earth, sand, field and flax as well as the spirits/fairies related to pastoral life and to the tending of night grazing animals. The tradition of the forest spirit is followed by the institution of the road spirit and spirits inhabiting the water world – the sea, rivers, lakes and wells. The chapter on sea spirits includes subsections on mermaids, blue cows (mythical cows living at the bottom of the sea) and sea horses, seals and the ship the Kobold (Loorits 1926, S29). The volume continues with the fairies of fate and the dream fairies, and ends with the Mary complex, which fascinates the scholar of mythology in the way it replaces the ancient fairy godmothers with the figure of Mary, who is central to Christianity. Discussions on the Livonian and Latvian spirits/fairies follow.

In Loorits's first volume, nature, its animation and nature's spirits alternate systematically with the spirits inhabiting man-made buildings, while wild areas alternate with domestic and domesticated territories, and in some cases the creatures that determine man's fate are also mentioned. As these are intertwined concepts and characters, all spirit-like creatures are grouped under this category. Systematisation was easier in the subsequent volumes, the second volume dealing with the culture of death, and the third with witchcraft and sorcery, as well as related topics such as the tools of sorcery and magical creatures (the whirlwind, werewolf, incubus, ague), which have a common denominator with witchcraft and sorcery and links with sub-mythologies.

In addition to his collection work, Loorits draws on information from a wide range of sources and is interested in their influence on Livonian mythology, including his fascinating views on the theme of natural life and his search for traces of it in various texts, as well as the links between vernacular views and sociological and ethical perspectives, to which the last volume of the treatise is devoted (Loorits 1997). *The Livonian Folk Belief* has remained the only comprehensive survey of the spiritual tradition of this tiny people, and a new version, updated with more recent material, would be appropriate for monitoring further developments.

The treatment of Livonian mythology was influenced by Antti Aarne's catalogue of Estonian fairy tales and folk tales published in 1918. In parallel with his overview of Estonian folk mythology, Loorits completed a catalogue of Livonian fairy tales

and folk tales (1926), which was published in the FF Communication series. All in all, *Livonian Folk Belief I–V*, contain the main features of folk mythology and give an overview of the realisation of mythological folk tales.

Oskar Loorits's style involves corroborating claims with as many typologically numbered examples as possible. Following the example of the trends in research into tales, fables and stories at the time, Loorits has highlighted the motifs and ways of structuring the text (Loorits 1926: 166, etc.) that were used primarily to characterise runic songs and incantations (in the Tampere manuscript), while in the case of folk tales this remained an exceptional experiment.

Loorits's scientific way of describing folklore were formed between the 1920s and 1940s. Remaining within the paradigm of a comparative approach, his research is linked to the work of researchers of Finno-Ugric material and to approaches adopted in Europe (by Scandinavian, German, and Russian folkloristics). He lists the names of the mythological characters (he was a linguist by training) and maps the distribution of the names, as well as plotting each character's attributes and distinctive features. (Mapping was more widely used in the humanities and has proved to be sustainable in Estonian folklore studies to this day, for example in the works of Arvo Krikmann, Eduard Laugaste, Mare Kõiva, Mari Sarv, etc.)

Loorits presents parallels with Livonian mythological creatures from other peoples, offering possible major influences, including publications (from periodicals to fiction) and works of art. In longer articles, he highlights how mythical characters (in this case, the Pharaoh's people, the ship kobold) are reflected in other genres of folklore. In order to find parallels, he maintains, where necessary, an extensive correspondence with European scholars and draws connections with the social aspects and rituals (if they exist) that have influenced folklore, i.e. he extends the boundaries of folklore by linking it with other sciences.

His description of the main features of Estonian mythology (Loorits 1949–1952), which was completed in exile and covers the whole country, takes into account material from Estonian-language islands as well as Seto material, using material from Estonian minorities as a reference point. From this, Loorits points to parallels with contact and neighbouring peoples. He bases his classification on a concept of the soul, includes the institution of the saints, makes references to aetiologies and parabiblical material at the level of knowledge of his time, highlights mythonyms and demononyms and their main areas of occurrence, and begins with ethno-psychological observations and generalisations. As far as influences and parallels are concerned, he sees Byzantine as well as Slavic, Germanic, Baltic, etc., areas as important contact areas. For Loorits they are predominant, and, as in earlier works on mythology, he contributes to the mapping of mythical characters in order to define areas of power, thus continuing the style of Livonian folk mythology and producing



a multi-level, branching network of concepts. Drawing on the concept of the soul opens up new points of view, but makes it difficult to get an overview of the system, and it is probably difficult for AI to create an overview of such a network. Within the branching framework, reference has been made to the presence of mythical characters in other folklore genres and publications (fiction, translation, folk tales, apocrypha, etc.).

*The Estonian Mythology* (Masing 1995), a collection of pre-war lectures by the theologian Uku Masing (1909–1985), who was an expert on fairy tales, is essentially a short treatise on Estonian folk mythology, which (like Ivar Paulson's) is based on printed texts and contains parallels with mythical characters from Finnish runic songs and mythology.

Ivar Paulson's (1922–1966) *The Old Estonian Folk Religion: Essays on Mythology* (1966) (and its English translation (1971)) is based on a phenomenological approach. A shorter characterisation of older phenomena, broken down by worlds and environments, creates a kind of system, and is also linked to changes in the historical, social and economic practices that have influenced mythology. Both authors present a selection of the main features of a chosen mythical character.

A new approach was used by Aino Laagus (1944–2004) to analyse stories about the forest spirit. In her survey *The Structure and Semantics of Estonian Forest Spirit Texts* (Laagus 1990), Laagus excluded all texts that did not explicitly mention the forest spirit. (This resembles the experiments by Tim Tangherlini and his team (Tangherlini & Broadwell 2016; Broadwell & Tangherlini 2017; etc.) in which they used an automatic folk tale analyser.) Since the forest spirit (*metshaldjas*) is known in northern Estonia, in some parts of western Estonia and on the islands, and other names were used elsewhere, the folklore of southern Estonia was left out of the survey. Aino Laagus's situational analysis is in many ways similar to the comparative methodology, i.e. most of the distinguishing elements are the same. However, newer concepts have been added, and a distinctive feature is the precise numerical overview of the corpus of texts, broken down by forms of occurrence, action, dialogues, definitions of place and time, addressees and addressers, and accompanied by distribution maps. This is the first study that is numerically accurate and includes as much material as possible that meets the criteria.

In the present treatise, the approach of previous researchers has been complemented in order to arrive at as accurate a description of the mythological character as possible. Therefore, the texts have been used to highlight the components that characterise the occurrence of the character: terminology, forms of occurrence, descriptions of appearance, attributes, actions, types of contact (visual, auditory, tactile, other sensory), time and place, types of communication, and exclusion. The occurrence of colours and emotions and, as far as possible, the links with other

species and intermedial uses are taken into account, the latter being an intrinsically multifaceted theme in its own right. This merging of folklore and cultural linguistics helps to trace the interrelations between linguistic and folklore concepts, as well as characterising the approach of Estonian folkloristics to mythological narratives throughout the 20th century. The numerical data allow for more precise definitions of mythical creatures, and in a broader sense help to define the relationship between the personal and the universal in mythological tales, as well as other important aspects, as well as complementing existing approaches to myths and other mythical stories as a genre of folklore.

Folklore studies are characterised by starting from a language group and region. The system developed by Nikita Tolstoy's school of Slavic ethnolinguistics marks in the text the distinguishing motifs, with a closer look at terminology, descriptions of appearance, actions (harmful, neutral, helpful, etc.), types of contact (visual, auditory, tactile, sensory) and specific features of communication, also parameters of place and time, etc. Parallels are found in the Slavic cultural space, while commonalities with any other cultural or linguistic space are not discussed. Although manuscript fieldwork data are used, the articles are mainly based on printed material (Tolstoy 1995; Tolstoy 1995–2012; Vinogradova & Levkievskaya 2007, 2017 and others).

The results of systematising mythical characters of the Finnic-Ugric peoples are represented in encyclopaedic descriptions and reviews. The volumes of the mythology of Finno-Ugric peoples, the publication of which in the native languages and in Estonian was supported by the Estonian Kindred Peoples' Programme, form a unique whole. *The Komi Mythology* by Nikolai Konakov and a group of Komi scholars (in Russian 1999, in English 2003, in Estonian 2015) integrates data from parabiblical and aetiological literature, i.e. it also includes topics that intersect with mythology. The systematics separately highlight cosmogonic and aetiological myths, anthropogonic and ethnogonic myths, socio-normative mythology, ecological principles in Komi mythology, the legends of the Chuds, the mythological structure of the world, ideas of the soul and death, Christian symbols, 'borrowed' mythical characters and plots, witchcraft epics and the mythological figure of the witch, as well as the main features of mythology and folklore, including magical healing and the transmission of mythological material into children's folklore. The systematics developed by Konakov and his team are as multifaceted as those of Oskar Loorits and includes as many themes as possible.

Irina Vinokurova's *The Vepsian Mythology* (2015), Tatiana Devyatkina's *The Mordvin Mythology* (in Russian 1998 and 2002, in English 2004, in Estonian 2008), Nikolai Mokshin's *The Mordvin Mythology* (Mokshin 2004), Niina Yurchenkova's review of Mordvin mythology (2009), Lidia Toidybek-Mustonen's *The Mari*

*Mythology* (in Russian 1997 and 2007, in Estonian abridged 1998), and Irina Rusinova & Aleksandr Chernyh (2019) present reports on for example the folk calendar, while aetiologies are left aside. The systematising of the deities together with the most important mythical characters is presented, for example, in the Mansi and Khanty mythologies (Gemuev and Sagalaev *et al.* 2001, 2006; Kulemzin & Lukina & the Moldanovs 2000, 2006), where soul images, shape-shifting, aspects related to shamanism, and epic motifs in the Selkup mythology play an important role (Tuchakova & Kuznetsova *et al.* 2010). A number of subsequent publications look at mythological characters, and folklore phenomena, as well as at biographies of folklorist theorists and folklore collectors (Yurchenkov *et al.* 2013 and 2020), and are characterised by the use of artworks on national and mythological themes as illustrations. The combining of many themes, including the interweaving of a biographical lexicon alternating with substantive keywords, increases the complexity of the system and makes it difficult to follow specific phenomena, while at the same time linking the themes to Orthodoxy whenever possible. 2018 also saw the publication of the latest treatise on Sami mythology by Juha Pentikäinen and Risto Pulkkinen.

In addition to the similarity in classification of material on the Finno-Ugric peoples the above non-exhaustive list also reveals the high degree of organisation and dedicated work of folklorists and ethnologists in finding theoretical and practical solutions, as well as the attempt to preserve the most diverse and multifaceted connections. Although a myriad of articles and monographs on mythological creatures were published in the 20th century, there is still a need for more source-critical generalisations.

It is clear from the foregoing that a number of new takes on mythology were published in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, in addition to which cross-references to the typology of folk mythology were made in early 20th century reviews of mythology. At the time, the typology of folk tales was an innovation the feasibility and necessity of which was debated, but which remained in circulation as a general option. By the end of the 20th century, typologies had emerged as normative in folklore, while folk tales proved to be a changeable, abundant, tough, motif-rich and resistant type of narrative, for which the creation of a typology is complicated. This has resulted in a limited number of ethnic catalogues, including Simonsuuri's *Catalogue of Finnish Folk Tales* (1961) reprinted in 1987 and supplemented by Marjatta Jauhiainen (1998), which is now the best tool for finding Finnish material. With some important innovations (descriptive introductions, links to fairy tales, etc.), Bengt af Klintberg's *Catalogue of Swedish Folk Tales* (2010) was published, and new Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian typologies are in preparation. Among international catalogues, Reidar Th. Christiansen's *Migratory Legends* (FFC 175, 1958/1992) is the most widely used.

Having said this, bottlenecks in the thematic classification of mythical characters have become apparent as it is difficult to establish a common classification of phenomena: names vary, sometimes the main functions and activities change, the appearance of creatures can vary widely as can their origin, and the structure and length of the texts vary. For the most part, the classification continues to emphasise the domain with which a creature is associated, or its identifying traits, including the name of the mythological character (Vinogradova & Tolstaya 1994; Vinogradova & Levkieskaya 2016; Klimova 2023; Valentsova 2018). Alongside the clearly defined classes, there are numerous characters with vague or variable traits that have a generic name (forest spirits, water spirits, earth spirits) in common. Just how changeable the explanation of mythological characters can be is illustrated by the character Meluzína (‘wind spirit’), a strong whirlwind that makes a loud howling sound, known among the Slavs and Ukrainians of Moravia. Meluzína cries, i.e. the wind howls, when a person hangs himself/herself. This mythonym was originally used to refer to the two-tailed mermaid (*Mélusine* in French) (see Valentsova 2018), known in the folklore of many peoples. For example, the character was introduced to the folklore of the Livonians through fiction (Loorits 1926).

One of the ways of classifying mythological creatures is based on the stability or changeability of the mythological character. Ksenia Klimova proposes a classification, based on Greek mythology, which distinguishes between:

1. Mythological characters with specific characteristics that have a generic name and a set of basic features (appearance, time and place of appearance, function, etc.) in common. This category includes, for example, creatures that foretell the fate of a new-born (Μοίρες ‘the Moirai’) and characters close to them; half-women-half-fish characters living in the sea (Γοργόνες ‘the Gorgons’); and disease spirits (Πανούκλα ‘the Plague’, Χολέρα ‘the Cholera’, Βλογιά ‘the Smallpox’).
2. Mythological characters with a lower degree of stability that have a common name but which vary in different locations, i.e. they may either coincide or differ significantly according to local tradition. This category includes the Greek spirits of holidays (Καλλικάντζαροι ‘the Kallikantzaros’), female guardian spirits (Νεράιδες ‘the Nereids’) and others. Spirits in this category can bear the same name, but differ greatly in other characteristics (looks, time of appearance, origin, etc.).
3. This category is made up of characters with a similar name and a vague appearance but a strictly defined function. This category includes mainly children’s bogeymen (Μπουμπούλας ‘Baboulas’), and creatures with many

dialect names whose appearance, characteristic occupations or features are unknown.

4. Unspecified mythological characters represented by a collective name, for example evil spirits (φαντάσματα <ghosts>, δαιμόνια <demons>, αποκορωμένα <the cursed>).

A quite different classification of motifs has been adopted by Lena Neuland (1981) for Latvian material, by Bronislava Kerbelite (2001) for Lithuanian folk tales and aetiologies, and by Yuri Berezkin (2004) for global material. Berezkin's system allows us to trace the regional distribution and global behaviour of motifs.

Taking into account the total number of texts, the first volume on water spirits includes creatures with an independent development history, as well as the origins of water spirits, although the topics are quite intertwined. The origins and ages of these creatures vary: the guardian of fish, the water herd, water horses, and sea shepherds are among the older mythological creatures but are genetically close mainly to the northern European region, i.e. Scandinavia, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Ireland, Scotland, and England, as well as parts of Germany. The biblical and parabiblical folklore about the Pharaoh's people is more widely known in Eurasia; it has particular features that relate to the seal people and again point to similarities with northern European folklore. This layer includes texts about the ship the Kobold, which are widespread in a narrow area in northern Europe and around the Atlantic.

This publication is primarily aimed at characterising mythical characters as they appear through narratives, followed by an analysis of the corpus of texts available to date, with methodology summarised in the second part.