

## 5. ESTONIAN WATERHORSES: APPEARANCE AND THE PRAGMATICS OF THE IMAGE

### WATER HORSES IN ESTONIAN FOLK RELIGION

The Estonian vernacular name for water horse is simply horse, or compound words indicating where the horse lives: river horse, lake horse, sea horse. In most cases the background of the terms in other languages is quite diverse. For example, the etymology of *kelpie* has been proposed as the Gaelic *cailpeach*, *colpach*, ‘bull’, ‘foal’ (Kilfeater 1988). The names of water horses in Shetland are *nuggle*, *njuggle*, or *neugle*, and *shoepultie*, *shoopiltee*, coming from old English *nicor*, the Old Norse *nykr*, the Middle Low German or the Middle Dutch water demon, *necker*; *shoepultie* as the Old Norse sea boy (The Dictionary of the Scots Language). *Noggelvi* or *nuggle* in Orkney (Towerie 1996-2023), *cabbyl-ushtey* on the Isle of Man (Gill 1925; Briggs 1976), *ceffyl dŵr* in Wales (Trevelyan 1973), *each-uisge* (Briggs 1973) in Scotland are connected with the water horse, also the Norwegian name *nykor* originally meant horse. Etymologies point to fascinating connections and developments of the character, although these questions still need further investigation.

Carl von Sydow (1922), Britta Egardt (1944), Dag Strömbäck (1970) and Bo Almquist (1991, 1990) tried to reconstruct the conceivable distribution of stories based on the water horse traditions of Scandinavia and other regions. They connected the tradition with the history of vikings, but later studies have shown that when the archive materials are considered, rather than just material published in print, the picture is more diverse and varied. National corpora contain more motifs and details, which emphasizes the need to apply new research on full corpora.

This chapter deals with the water horses in Estonian tradition using close reading (Broadwell; Tangerlini 2017) method, to find out the variability of mythopoetic features, mythemes and details. I hope that all these details help to find the common models, and using comparison with other data allows to expand research significantly. The topic of water dwellers is described in the works of Oskar Loorits (1926a, 1926, 1949, 1952); Matthias Johann Eisen (1897, 1919, 1922), Mare Kõiva (2020, 2023), Mare Kõiva and Elena Boganeva (2020), Valk 1999). In belief narratives, water horses – be they sea, lake, or river horses – resemble common animals, sometimes distinguished by their larger size or by colour. Both freshwater horses (river, lake, spring) and seahorses were known.

Among Estonian data we can distinguish:

a) Horses are the main shapeshifting form of the water spirits both in Estonia and in the European cultural space. For example, in the German culture, their demonic nature is unambiguously clear. They disappear upon the sign of the cross or Christian conversion (cf Bächthold-Stäubli & Hoffmann-Krayer 2000 [1941]: 131). In the North European tradition Christian formulas are one of the ways of repelling water horses.

b) Horses living in water bodies as independent creatures, or the animals of the water spirit, In belief narratives water spirits have horses and love to ride, sometimes appearing in the form of a man driving a carriage or sleigh. Gift of mermaids include dog or horse (Finnish parallels Jauhiainen 1998). The gift is received unexpectedly: you do not need to do the mermaids favours, although the person's fate may be associated with the gift, something that becomes clear only in the light of specific events.

In the following story, given as an example, a mermaid's horse smells a man, a fateful event and a sign of death:

*Vanasti veeti mune Soome. Kord tulnud üks noormees maalt munakoormaga. Sai koduküla ligidale, kuid äkki kuulnud hobusekapjade plaginat. Siis näinud ta üht ratsanikku hirmsa kiirusega järele tulevat. Mees lasknud siis enese pikali vankrisse ja surus enese vastu vankrit, et kas läheb mööda. Kuid ratsanik mööda ei läinud, kui hobune vankri juure jõudis ja nuusutas vankris olevat meest, siis kadunud mõlemad ära. Mees rääkinud kodus seda juhtumit teistele ega teadnud midagi paha aimata.*

*Ta kasvas suureks ja võttis naise. Sellest juhtumist oli möödunud kümme aastat. Kord seesama mees läinud munalastiga Soome ja tulnud koos lapsega tagasi. Jõudnud Haldi sadamasse. Sealt tulnud laps koju ja rääkinud, et isa tuleb ka. Oodatud isa, kuid isa ei ole tulnud. Teisel hommikul leiti, et isa oli uppunud.*

In the past, eggs were shipped to Finland. Once upon a time, a young man came from the land with a load of eggs. He got close to his home village, but suddenly heard the clatter of horses' hoofs. Then he saw one of the horsemen coming at a terrible speed. The man got out of the carriage and pressed himself against the side to see if he would pass. But the rider did not pass when the horse reached the cart and smelled the man, then both disappeared. At home the man told others about this incident and did not think anything bad had happened.

He grew older and took a wife. Ten years passed after that incident. Once, the same man went to Finland with his son and a cargo of eggs. He reached the Port of Haldi. The child came home and told them that his father was coming.

They expected the father, but he did not come. The next morning, the father was found drowned. (ERA I 5, 171 (1) < Kuusalu (1935)

c) Metamorphoses are a small group of influential stories that are already indicated by a list of motifs and figures of appearance: a half-horse, a creature with a horse's head, a mermaid in the form of a hare turns into a horse, a horse jumps into the water and turns into a mermaid (taking on human form), or a mermaid in the form of a human suddenly turns into a horse. The last two cases are close to the *kelpie* tradition of the Celts, which will be discussed below. In a legend based on metamorphosis, a dog becomes a horse, a three-legged horse becomes a four-legged horse, a haystack turns into a horse, and in an influential story a mermaid who attracts a person as a ring turns into a horse; mermaids are seen at night racing horses along the lake until the entire herd of horses rushes into the depths. Horses can also be out of the water and rush back in while playing.

d) Ghost Animals. Animals drowned in a distant foreign land or during events that happened long ago, and their ghosts come to haunt the living. Peculiar accounts:

In the countryside has cows in the sea. They drowned there, so they haunt people. The fire erupted, the sea poured there to replace it, it is in the ancient stories. They show up sometimes, the ghosts of their spirit; we don't have that. (ERA II 114, 388 (55) < Kuusalu, 1935).

e) Creatures seen in distant lands, thought to be sea horses.

Let us consider what water horses are and whether they are independent mythical creatures. What is the ratio of water horses to cattle and horses belonging to water fairies? What is the connection with mermaids?

## CATEGORISING TEXTS ABOUT WATER HORSES

Bo Almqist, who compared Scandinavian and British legends, found the earliest written stories of water horses in 13th century manuscripts, but by analysing characters and other details dated their origin at least to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Almqist 1990). For example, in the Book of Icelandic settlements, *Landnamabok*, there is a legend about a captured horse that was used as a work horse until it disappeared into the water again.

*Audun the Stutterer, son of Vali the Strong, took possession of the whole of Hraunsfjord above Hraun, between Svinawater and Tro Ila Bridge. He was a big powerful man and lived at Hraunsfjord. He married Myrun, daughter of King Maddad of Ireland. One autumn, Audun saw a dapple-grey horse come racing down from Hjardarwater, make straight for his herd of horses*

*and floor the stallion. Audun went and caught the grey horse, hitched him to a two-ox sledge and hauled home all the hay from his home-meadow. The horse was quite manageable till noon, but later in the day he began stamping into the ground right up to the fetlocks. After sunset he tore the harness apart, galloped back to the lake, and that was the last anyone ever saw of him.* (Kilfeater 1988: 39).

Researchers of northern European folklore divide the water horse tradition into a workhorse with exceptional endurance, and a riding horse. In the German cultural space, workhorses are tenacious, hardworking and have great traction (cf. Bächthold-Stäubli & Hoffmann-Krayer 2000 [1941]: 131).

According to analysis by Annaba Kilfeater (1988), the main motif in the texts of the Irish folklore archive is the workhorse (90 texts), with fewer riding horse motifs (50 texts), while other developments contain more than 100 texts. This analysis shows that the corpus is significantly more diverse than the binary division. A significant and important special feature is the presence of place names associated with water horses. Let us also note that the Irish know sea horses also as lake and river horses, although there are fewer records of this.

The texts of the Irish workhorse motif are not similar to the Estonian stories, although we can see the overlap in detail. For example, the farmer at Ladies Bray sees a beautiful coal-black mare by the lake. The man throws a bridle on the horse's head and takes it to his stable. The horse diligently does farm work and gives numerous offspring which, by selling, makes the farmer wealthy. The farmer has never hit his horse, but one day, when he is watering his horse at the lake, he hits it with a bridle. The mare nods her head and neighs three times. All the foals she gave birth to gather around her and the horse goes with them into the lake, the farmer on her withers. The next day, a man's heart appears on the lake surface (Kilfeater 1988: 41).

Kilfeater notes that death is not typical to local plots but rather is an exception, and he considers the appearance of the farmer's heart on the surface of the water a storyline typical of Scandinavia.

Looking for matches in Estonian folklore, we see that drowning the master is completely absent, significant property damage through leaving is enough. We find the Irish story's counterpart for merhorses among Estonian sea cattle legends. The cow overhears the family's plan to sell her and disappears with her descendants into the water, leaving the farmer impoverished. In fact, over time, the man, fascinated by the milk yield of the sea cow, replaced his other cows leaving only the descendants of the water cow.

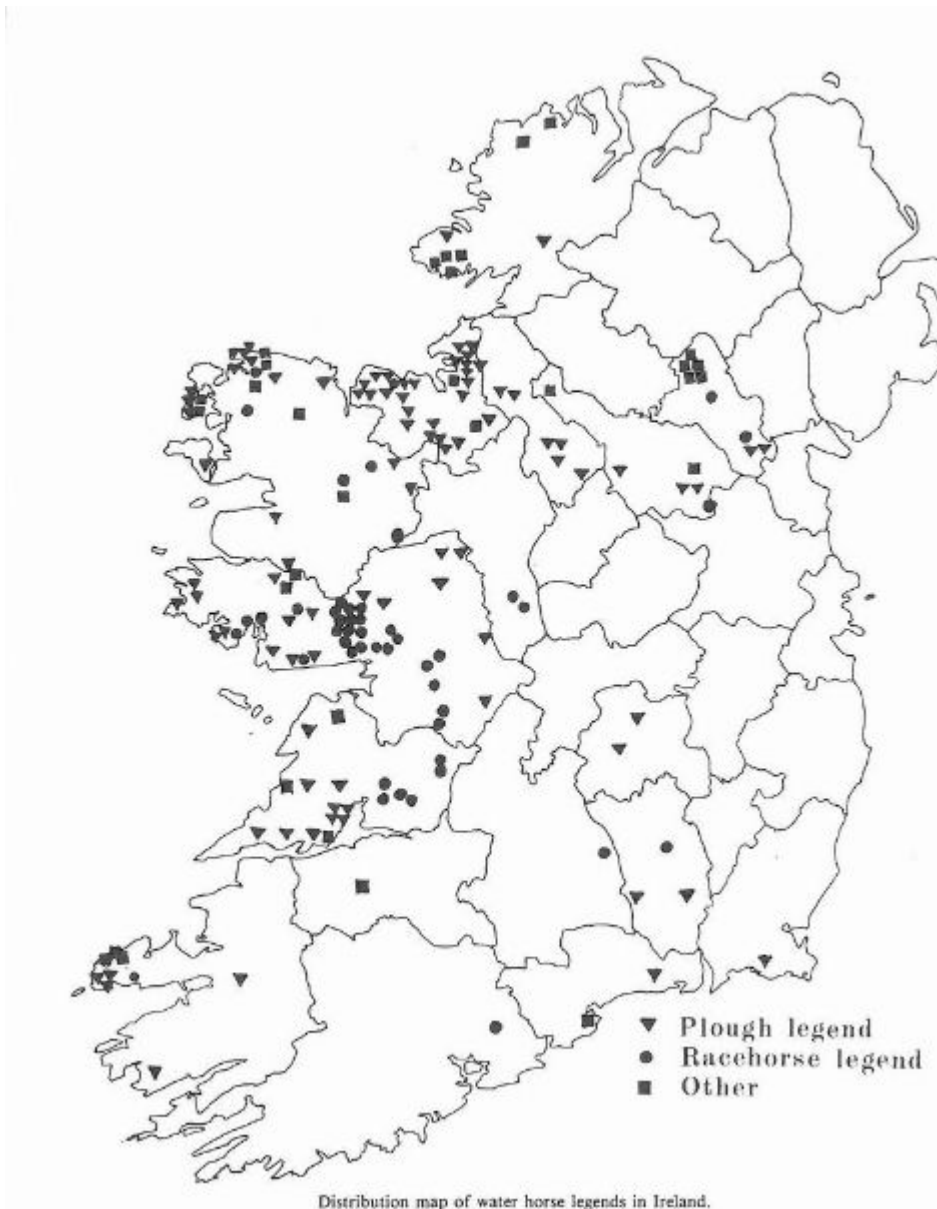


Illustration 1. Distribution of Irish water horse legends. Annaba Kilfeater 1988.  
Ploughing horses, riding horses and other motifs.

From the foregoing, prohibitions were revealed that could not be violated – a mythic animal should not be hit, insulted, threatened with death, sworn at or cursed; and if there is a limit to other behaviour then it must be observed. According to Kilfeater, in the Irish tradition the reason for drowning the owner is hitting, ignoring recom-

mendations, not shoeing or adorning, and other transgressions. Variants of the Irish racehorse are more common around Munster, and legends place importance on the offence of prohibition as the cause of death. For example, in one legend the owner is forbidden to go riding before a certain length of time has elapsed. However, De Barra rides to the races after a year when, according to the story, one year and one day were necessary, and although he wins all races, the story has a fatal ending as the horse rushes into the depths of the lake with the man. Since the tale has no analogues in Scandinavia, the author classifies the legend as an Irish development (Kilfeater 1988: 42).

Swedish water horse legends (Klintberg 2010; F101–107) contain both the motif of riding horses (the motif of drowning the rider (F101) and several workhorse motifs (F104–F107)). In some story types (F108–F109) the water man assumes the form of a girl's groom or appears as a calf, who in our context are a typical homewanderer / revenant figure, and the devil.

In individual Estonian and Livonian stories, we also see the motifs of punishment. If for the most part a legend is limited to a reference to horses seen at sea or on the shore, then in one of the stories, sea horses rush at a man who hit one of them: "Where all the horses immediately rushed at him, so that he could hardly escape into the boat. The men rowed with all their might, and it was only with great difficulty that they managed to escape from the horses." Finally, the horses disappear to the seabed. Here we find a parallel with Celtic folklore, where any blow leads to a person's death (Loorits 1926).

## KELPIE, MERMAID /NÄKK AND WATERHORSE

Scholars of the Scottish tradition have debated the origin of the water horse and *kelpie* for a long time (Le Borne 2002: 121 et seq.), with most scholars considering them to be different beings of different origins. Both live in fresh water, *kelpie* can take human form and inhabits the rivers of Scotland as well as lakes in the Lowlands, while the water horse occurs in Highland water bodies. The Scottish *kelpie* is a shape-shifter: it can transform into a handsome young man, a beautiful horse or pony, and sometimes into a bird, goat or dog. In the Estonian tradition, these appearances exist but in the figure of the water fairy, also known as the mermaid.

Whatever shape the *kelpie* takes, at the end of the story it dives back into the lake or river from which it came as a water horse. Mythical characters behave in different ways with people of different ages and sexes. Aude Le Borgne (2002: 134- 135) characterises their behaviour as follows:

*When interacting with men, the water horse initially seems to be an ordinary horse, although it retains some supernatural attributes that are discovered at*

*the beginning or end of the narration. A water horse can kill or leave the man involved alive.*

*When communicating with children, it takes on the form of a beautiful pony or horse grazing by a lake. It lets as many children climb on its withers as try to climb up, before moving to the shore of the lake and diving back into the water with them.*

*When dealing with women, it usually takes the form of a very handsome young foreign man who is often somewhat sloppy and impatient in demeanour, before turning into a horse again (via Le Borgne 2002: 123).*

*Roughly the same motifs are found elsewhere on the northern islands. For example, in Faroese legend a water horse (nykor, nix) lives in fresh water, for example at the bottom of a lake, and appears as a beautiful horse or young man to attract people (Jørgensen 1999: 89).*



Illustration 4. Created in 2014 by Andy Scott, the 20-metre-high sculpture The Kelpies is located in Falkirk and Grangemouth, Scotland.

## LIVONIAN AND ESTONIAN SEAHORSES

Oskar Loorits has written more about the Livonian merhorses living in the sea (*mjer-ibbist*, *mjer-õbbõst*). The horses of the sea people are blue and gold and can belong to the Lord or King of the Sea (Loorits S31). Usually in Livonian legends, however, sea horses are blue or grey, or red with a white forehead, black-greyish with a white forehead or, rarely, golden.

In most cases, seahorses are seen on the shore, swimming in the water, or chasing a boat. Even more often they swim out to sea away from captors. In the story published by Oskar Loorits (1926a: 147) in the first volume of *The Religion of the Livonian People*, the narrator summarizes his brother's experience with blue water horses, saying that they are God's creation, like domestic horses.

*Kaks suurt sinist hobust merel (Loorits S31)*

*Jutustaja enda vend olnud poisikesena kord rannas hobuseid karjatamas. Sää! tõusnud veest välja kaks suurt-suurt hobust, läind mööda merd edelasse, nii suured sinised, milliseid keegi polnud näind. Vend kaaslasega joosnud kolledas hirmus koju, et pole oma hobuseid enam näindki. Siis arvatud, et need muud midagi pole olnud kui merehobused. Need olevat muidu samasugused kui koduhobusedki, aga sinised. Eks nad jumala loodud puha ole.*

Two large blue horses at sea (Loorits S31).

The narrator's own brother had once been grazing horses on the beach when he was a boy. Two very large horses emerged from the water and went southwest along the shore, bigger and bluer than anyone had ever seen. My brother and his companion drove home in terrible fear that they would never see their horses again. Then they thought that they were nothing but sea horses. They were the same as domestic horses, only blue. They were all created by God.

It is also interesting that, if possible, they try to find rational explanations, for example that the horses jumped from a ship on a trip from a Livonian beach to Estonia. We mentioned above that the workhorse motif is not common in Estonia, although stories do report encounters with water horses whose size may be gigantic compared to an ordinary horse. No closer contact follows:

*Minu ema rääkis: kari söönud ranna peal ja läinud jälle merre. Olnud sellised hallid lehmad. Ühekorra tulnud hallid hobused merest välja, mehed seljas ja läinud jälle tagasi.*

My mother said the herd ate on the beach and again went to the sea. There were grey cows. Once, grey horses came out of the sea, men on their backs, and went back again. (ERA II 33, 184/5 (6) < Pühalepa parish, 1931)



As in the Livonian variants, a person runs away from a frightening meeting leaving the water horse behind:

*Ühekorra meie nägime Kiveslao-otsas vee peal nõnda suurt hobust kui meie kamber. Nõnda suur oli küll! Meie kartsimõ, et neelab meid alla. Katsusime, et saime eemale sõuda. See oli käinud korra Seliste juures mäe peal ka.*

Once, we saw a horse as big as our room on the water at Kiveslao. It was so big! We were afraid that it would swallow us. We tried to row away. It was on the top of a hill at Seliste too. (ERA II 59, 495 (4) < Kihnu, 1933)

There is a widespread motive for improving the local horse breed with the help of sea horses, we find the same motive in Livonians (Loorits 1926). Of primary importance in horses are their endurance and good offspring:

*Üks Hiiumaa mies rääkis. Tal olnud kaks hobust öösel metsas. Läänud kanges-ti tormiks. Hommikul ta hakkas tüdrukule ütlema, et vaja hobuseid vaatama minna. No saanud nad sinna, siis kaks ütlemata ilusat sinihalli täkku hoidnud nende mära. Aga kohe läinud meresse ja sinna nad kadunud. Teisel aastal mära sünnitas varsa. Siis see hiidlane ütles, et nüüd on see juba 50-aastane, ja et nüüd ei ole enam nii kiire sõitja.*

One Hiiumaa man spoke. He had two horses in the woods at night. A heavy storm began. In the morning, he began to tell his daughter that they needed to go and check the horses. Well, they got there, then two exceptionally beautiful blue-grey stallions held their mares. But they immediately went to the sea and there they disappeared. In the second year the mare gave birth to a foal. Then man of Hiiumaa said that now the horse is already 50 years old, and that now it is no longer such a fast rider. (ERA II 164, 397 (10a) < Kihelkonna, 1937)

An interesting special feature that has also been noted in the story catalogues is the magical connections between the Estonian water horse (water fairy) and man. Supernatural characters are credited with the ability to understand human speech, which characterises aquatic inhabitants more widely. In Väike-Maarja in 1890 a black cow came from a pond and joined the cattle. She gave the most milk, but the master spoiled everything by calling the cow a mermaid. The cow disappeared, leaving blue smoke behind. (H II 12, 842/3 (4B) < Väike-Maarja, 1895). Blue smoke implies a demonic creature and marks their departure.

In Estonia aquatic animals and creatures leaves when hearing the naming näkk. In Sweden, the water horse leaves when hearing the naming nixie, neck, or the Christian formula, or a name of the lake, the habitat of an aquatic creature (Klintberg 2010, F103A,B,C). A special feature of Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Scandinavian; Baltic Finnic and Baltic folklore, the seahorse leaves when hearing

the naming of Christ, or Christian formulas (cf in Finnish legends Jauhiainen 1998: Supranormal being runs away, disappears when its name is mentioned, L 212, L 235).

Livonian sea horses appear on the shore with a herder, generally a boy (Loorits 1926: 148): In one of the Livonian texts, the herd says that these are the king's horses, and even warns people not to touch them with their hands, otherwise they may be trampled. "Then the boy who grazed these horses jumped on the back of one, very beautiful horses they were, and rode into the sea, all the herd dancing, leaping and screaming in pursuit. However, the other boys were sorry that they had not asked which of the king's horses they were (Loorits 1926).

Once again we can draw parallels with Estonian sea cattle, who find themselves on the shore with a cowherd whose age ranges from young to old and who can be of either sex; sometimes there are several herders.

In the Latvian version, horses are seen swimming and have mermaids as the riders:

*The boy had four horses, which he took to swim. He swam three brown horses, and then the fourth, a white horse. Ten golden mermaids sat on a horse in the river. The mermaids and horses rode away. (LFK 917, 65)*

## CHILDREN RIDING WATER HORSE (AARNE S58)

The most popular relevant motif in Estonia relates to children sitting on a horse, which on hearing its name disappears into the water leaving the children on the shore Aarne S58, same Christiansen F68, Jauhiainen L211, 212).

In Estonia, 132 variants of this legend are known describing a fairy horse that suddenly appears to children and lures them to ride with him. Since not all the children fit on the horse, the child left behind asks if he should sit on a mermaid's face (näki näsa (nägara)), the horse thinks it has been found out and rushes into the water.

Wherever there is a river or lake there are also mermaids who try to lure people into the water and drown them. They come out of the water in a variety of ways, the way they think best to benefit them on this occasion, and they suddenly disappear again if you name them.

*[--] Kord mänginud viis poisikest jõe ääres, korraga aga siginenud ilus, pisi-kene hobune nende juure. Poisikesed hakkand temaga mängima ja roninud viimaks tema selga. Tema teinud ennast hästi madalaks ja pikaks ja hakanud vähehaaval jõe poole venima. Üks poisike, kes teistest vanem olnud, hakanud aru saama, et see kellegi hobune niisukene ei ole ja tulnud kohe näkk meel-*

*de, keda ta isa käest on kuulnud. Kui nad jõekaldale saanud, öelnud vanem pois: „Meie oleme vist näki nägara pial.“*

*Kohe kadunud ta poiste alt ära ja poisid jäänud aga jõekaldale maha.*

[--] Once five boys played by the river, and at once a beautiful, tiny horse sprang to their feet. The boys started playing with it and finally climbed on its back. It became low and long and gradually began to stretch towards the river. One boy, who was older than the others, began to realise that this was not someone's horse, and immediately remembered what he had heard from his father. When they reached the bank of the river, the elder boy said, “We must be on a mermaid's back/backside [nägar].” Immediately it disappeared from under the boys, and they were left on the riverbank. (H II 9, 567 (1) < H

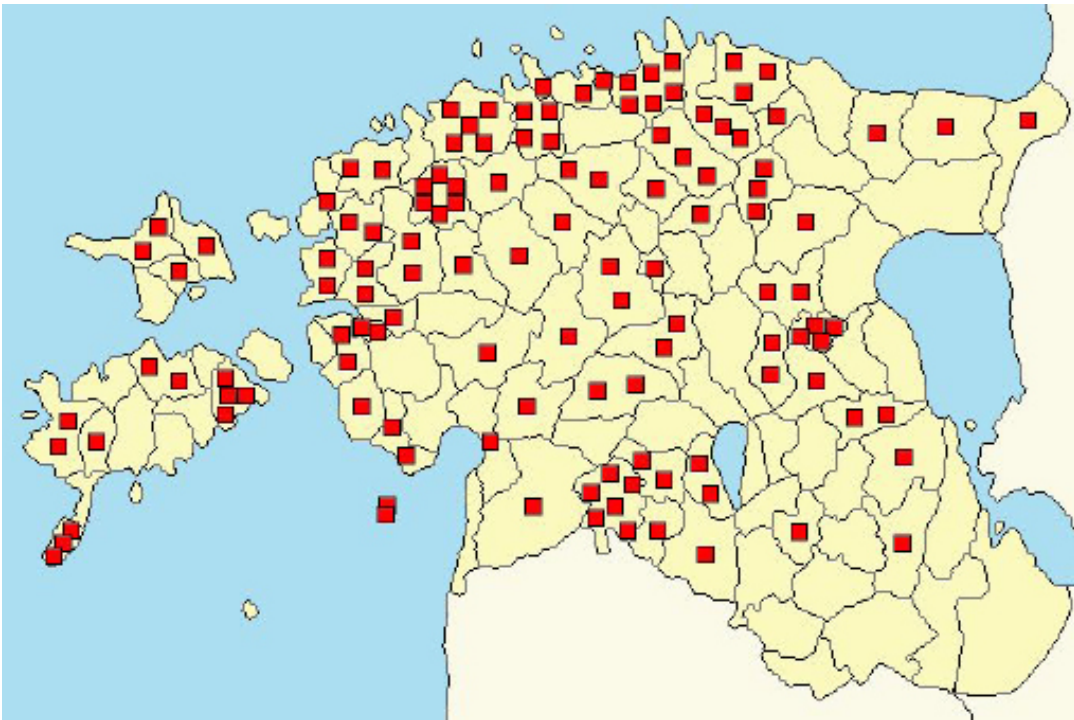


Illustration 3. Children on a fairy horse (Aarne S58). Map by M. Kõiva 2022.

aljala, 1891)

The Latvian version speaks of a horse that becomes longer as more children ride on it.

Nine boys sat on the horse, which grew longer with each rider. The horse was a mermaid. When they called Jesus for help, the boys escaped drowning in the river. (LFK 1652.99)

The motif of the elongating horse is found in Scandinavian, Irish and Scottish stories, and is also noted in a few Estonian stories (7 texts), the transcription of which range from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1930s. In other variants, the variable size of the horse is as if naturally encoded into the story. Paul Ariste recorded a variant from Kursi Parish in which the horse becomes longer and also makes itself lower. According to the narrator, the action takes place on the shore of Lake Peipus in a Russian village:

*[--] Kord tulnud valge hobene laste sekka. Kutsus lapsi oma seljas sõitma. Kõik lapsed läksivad selga. Hobene venitas pikemast ja tegi madalast, et kõik saaks selga. [--]*

Once a white horse came among the children. Invited children to ride on its back. All the kids went up. The horse stretched longer and became lower to get everyone on his back. (E, StK 34, 91 (7) < Kursi, 1926)

In Oskar Loorits' (1926a) opinion, sea horses often played the role of creatures used to frighten children. The same was thought of the corresponding Scottish legend, for example in Le Borne (2002: 160). In Livonia, children were forbidden to go to the beach because a seahorse would hit or trample on them, or take them into the sea.

For a better overview of the sub-motifs, mythemes and details of the legend, let us take a closer look at the Estonian versions.

### **a) Characters**

The main characters of the “Children riding water horses/mermaids” legend are children (68 texts), shepherd children (38 texts), nocturnal horse herds (2 texts), girls (2 texts), boys (10 texts), men (1 text), in the rest of the texts the human character is undefined. The proportion of adults in a particular legend is non-existent, and only sometimes are parents mentioned as background characters. At the heart of the whole story is the unusual experience of the children.

#### **a1) The age of children**

The age of children (based on ethnographic data, Viires 2007) in the story can vary from 9 to 15. A separate interesting topic is the relationship between girls and boys in the story, although the Estonian definitions of ‘herd children’ and even ‘children’ leave the question of gender open, except for two variants in which girl shepherds

are mentioned, and 2 texts with a lamb herder, which are suitable for smaller children and girls. For the most part it is obviously a daring adventure, more for boys, the agent is the youngest child (boy) who is too small to sit on a horse and triggers a solution with the question of whether he has to sit on the backside of a nixie.

### **b) Horse**

The appearance of the mythical character is a horse that comes to shore. A horse (14 texts) appears on the shore or, more precisely, a beautiful horse (7 texts), but predominantly a white horse (56 texts), or a grey horse (18 texts, 12 of which specify that it was a beautiful grey horse or a large grey horse). In 14 cases it is noted that it is a young horse or a foal or an old white horse (3). All other colours are rare, including a beautiful blue or grey stallion, a large black stallion or a golden horse; in addition there is more precise gender definition: a grey stallion in five tales, a mare in one tale.

Only one story mentions that it was a foreign horse, although the choice of colour – white, grey – indicates that these were not ordinary rural horses. In the seventh story, the horse is assumed, it is not described or mentioned explicitly.

#### **b1) other animals or objects in the position of horse**

As a different character, a grey goat (one of the hypostases of the devil? (cf. Valk 1998; Velius 1998) and in a couple of stories a beast (in older Estonian this just means animal) or a large, tall man are mentioned.

Of the other character developments, we may highlight the log, the stone and the boat, which suddenly appear before people's eyes but act according to the same story logic as water horse. Children sitting on a log near lake Viljandi are doomed to drown. A child escapes after promising: "I will sit on the beak of niki-näki [the mermaid]." A log with three children on it is lost in the lake. (ERA II 38, 202/3 (7) < Väike-Maarja, 1931). The log is also the hypostasis of the water fairy, for example, in the Komi folk religion (Konakov 2015) and in the German cultural space (Bächtold-Stäubli & Hoffmann-Krayer 2000 [1941]: 131).

### **c) Landscape and places**

The places of activity are, accordingly, the home landscape and the closest Waterbodies: a lake (19 texts, 13 of which have a specific place name), a river (65 texts, 19 of which have a specific place name), the sea (24 texts, 5 of which have a specific place name), a spring (1 text), a puddle (3 texts), a bog (1 text, 1 specification), a whirlpool (3 texts), by the water (3 texts). Or, for example, children play on the banks of a river in Lähtru. Other places are given as between Kiideva and Puise, there under the forest; at the edge of a pond; at the bottom of a meadow near Vangu, or, pointing to the past, on the pasture on Oriku farm in Voidu parish

there used to be a puddle from a bygone age, the name of which was Pimelomp. References such as behind the Ruuna family grave point to ghostly events at the site of the death of horses, the past event being associated with a new supernatural event. We can conclude that the location of the action is specified in about a third of the stories. A larger body of water is suitable for this purpose, the association of which with the appearance of a horse seems logical. Examples are Lake Endla near Kärde Manor, the Russian village on shore of Lake Peipus, at Lake Põrsu, on the shore of Lake Sinijärve, in the vicinity of the Emajõgi River below Kantsi Tavern, near the Emajõgi River weir, on the Pedja river running through Mõra swamp, on the Priguldi river meadow behind the Kangru family gate, on the shore at Hara. In summary, we can generalize that the place names are not too precise.

#### **d) Temporal markers**

There are no temporal details, the action takes place while the children are playing in the middle of the day. One story notes midsummer, the temporal middle of magical events and visions. The event fits into the period of short nights from spring to autumn and during the swimming period, which lasts from June to August and could be the main period of concern for parents and therefore reason to warn children.

In about a fifth of Scottish stories, the action takes place on a Sunday, suggesting a time of worship and a very important day (Le Borne 2002: 163) when entertainment was condemnable. Equivalents in Estonian belief narratives are picking berries, fishing or hunting on Sunday during the time of the sermon.

#### **e) A solution, name magic and Christian formulas**

The legend presents the relationship between children dynamically, the unexpected appearance of a white horse providing interest with the development of simple activities. The smaller child, of course, will be the last, and yet he will become the accidental saviour of the group by speaking a phrase that is reminiscent of the word mermaid. The content of the saying is the same in Estonian texts, only with differences in wording. Naming a creature gives control over it, and this is a decisive factor in the liberation of the children, only in one text the naming of God offers a solution while in two others there is a liberating Christian conventional form, the expression of wonder ‘oh, Lord’. However, these are the local correspondents of the archives who changed and reworked the plots for the sake of a greater number of records (in this case, J. Kala and E. Kriitmäe).

The comic element is also important here: the words *näkk*, ‘water fairy’, and *näkk*, ‘back, backside, buttocks’, are close, which gives the utterance an ambiguous dimension. The speaker obviously thinks of the horse’s backside, where he must fit himself, the water horse hears his name and has to leave.

### f) Structure of the story

Usually there is no exposition in the legend, generally the location of the action are highlighted in the first (couple of) sentence(s), and this is sufficient background for the course of the action. As a special feature of the fairy horse legend, at the end of the story there is *no* didactic or moralising summary (despite the story being oriented towards teaching children, this is not explicitly stated) and the action is skilfully placed in the local landscape.

In Estonian we find:

Generally happy end (109 texts; the fairy horse disappeared into the water; the horse disappeared and the shepherds sat on the hill; or the horse disappeared and the children were all left staring between their feet; all at once the stallion disappeared from under the children, the children remained in the lake and survived (83%; B2).

A child who could not fit onto the horse's back survives while others drown (14 texts, 11%,B1): the horse went into the river, this child was left alone on the shore, the other children drowned.

There are fewer texts in which all the children drown (7 texts, 5%, A): together the children disappeared under the water, then the horse immediately started to go into the river and disappeared under the water with the boys.

There are 1% of texts there the plot remains unfinished.

In Swedish stories, the riders of adult and water or work horses do not usually perish, while in Scotland death is a more common resolution in all types of legend. In Sweden and Estonia, there is no need to injure yourself to escape a dire situation.

Le Borgne (2002: 151) gives the following breakdown about the water horse legend: (A) everyone ultimately drowns, (B) one person escapes in the following circumstances: (B1) by cutting off his own fingers or hand, (B2) by using a Christian protection formula, (B3) other possibilities. In most variants the child cuts off his own finger or asks the last child not to drown – sometimes his brother – to do it for him. Le Borgne considers the motif of cutting off the finger to be specific to Scotland. In conclusion, he distinguishes two different endings in Scottish legends of narrative type Christiansen F68: F68A a water horse drowns or swallows the children, while in Christiansen F68B one child manages to escape death (Christiansen 1958).

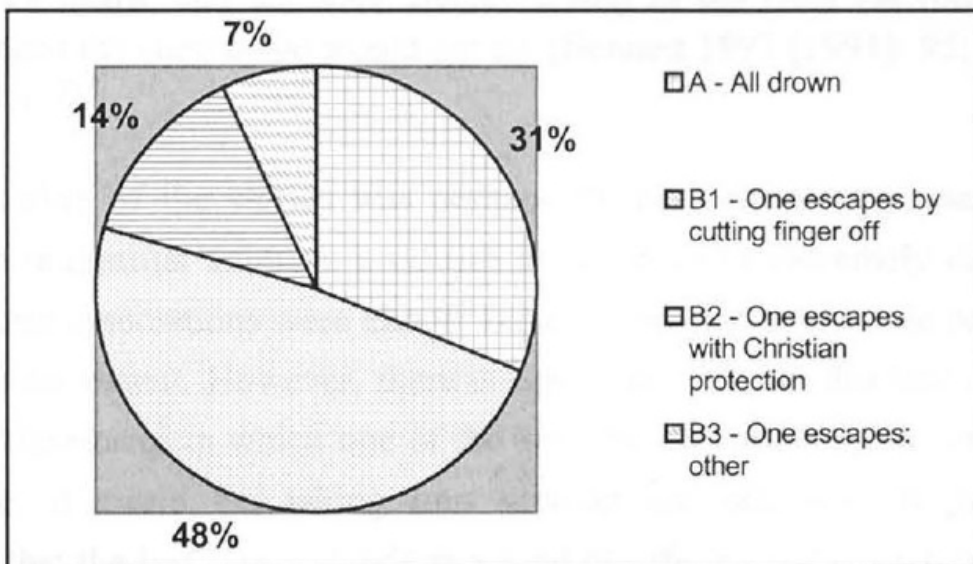


Illustration 4. Kilfeater F68. Children on a water horse. A all drown (48%), B1 one escapes by cutting off a finger (31%), B2 one escapes using Christian protection (14%), B3 one escapes (other means of escape) (7%).

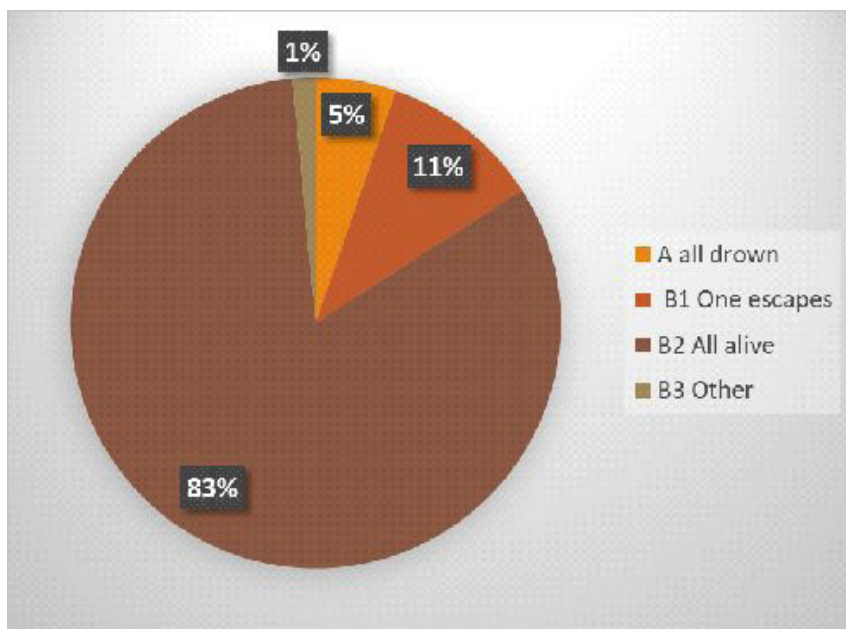


Illustration 5. Division of Estonian Aarne S58 tale type. A everyone drowns (5%), B1 one child escapes by naming the mermaid (11%), B2 all children survive (83%), B3 other, mainly unresolved (1%).





Illustration 6. *Philip Longson's illustration from the book by Lari Don & Philip Longson "The secret of the Kelpie".*

We see differences between the Celtic and Estonian traditions. For example, the Estonian tradition has the horse attracting the children in the first place, there are no adult characters, the final resolution is predominantly happy with the children escaping. There are few drownings in the Estonian tradition at 5% of stories; taking into account stories with one child escaping, this amounts to only 16%.

However, the problems and mythical aspect of fairy horses living in water are more complex. From mythology we know of solar horses, a frequent motif in Nomadic culture, we know of heavenly horses as a motif in Estonian epic runic songs, and horses of the gods and saints from the ancient myths and rock art. The Horseman is an integral sign used in grave monuments of the Etruscans, Thracians, and antiquity in general. The horses associated with the heavens and with the gods, mythology also knows water horses as a broad mythopoetic complex. Latvian songs introduces peculiar poetically beautiful symbols, horses swimming in the sea, which could have a connection with the water horses and with heavenly horses of the gods. In Latvian songs we find seahorses covered by a starry blanket or with golden bridles.

*No jūriņas izpeldēja  
Div' dzeltani kumeliņ';  
Vienam bija zvaigžņu deķis,  
Otram zelta iemauktiņi.*

*Es aiz prieka nezināju,  
Kuram lēkti mugurā.  
Tam es lēcu mugurā,  
Kuram bija zvaigžņu deķis;  
To pie rokas dancināju,  
Kuram zelta iemauktiņi.  
Bij manam kumeļam  
Zvaigžņu deķis mugurā,  
Es varēju nakti jāt  
Kā pie dienas saulītē. (LD 33772-8)*

There swam out of the sea  
Two yellow horses;  
One had a blanket of stars,  
The other one a golden bridle.  
I was so happy that I did not know  
Onto which one's back I should jump.  
I jumped on his back,  
Who had a blanket of stars;  
I led the one to dance by my hand,  
Who had the golden bridle.  
My horse had  
A blanket of stars on his back,  
I could ride it at night  
Like the sun was shining during the day. (LD 33772-8)

## SUMMARY

Among Estonian and Livonian legends, stories prevail in which water horses are allegedly seen in real life in the water or on the shore. They are fast swimmers who chase boats or improve the breed of country horses. The connection with fairies is indicated by their extraordinary power and longevity. In tales about fantastic encounters, horses have several roles as both the livestock of water fairies and representatives of mythical water dwellers themselves.

Narrators of these legends from different regions associate them with the local landscape. According to Estonian lore they take place on the sea shore or on the banks of lakes and rivers, while in 20 to 30% of the tales a more specific place

is given. Ethical tensions and norms of behaviour related to the supernatural are associated with the cultural background, for example the prohibition against hitting or offending an animal. Non-expository stories in dialect mediate views on the possibility of connecting different worlds. A significant number of the stories have realistic explanations.

Some stories have hidden didactic messages, although there are no direct moralisations in the tales. Inside the story a lesson is coded on how to behave with alien animals and creatures, because both horses, cattle, bulls pose a real danger to children. The question is whether this is the main message of the legend, or whether it is the connection of humans with luck, salvation from disaster, or something else entirely. Certainly, the messages of legends cannot be reduced to simple modern meanings. Certainly, these legends also represent forms of communication between humans and non-humans. Although they take place in the form of legend and vernacular beliefs, they contain important cultural symbols. Everything is seen in a web of life, and the relations of people to non-humans are constructed in context and in complex and dynamic ways.

In the best-known Estonian legend (but also in many others) the solution depends on an unambiguously successful utterance that fights magic by using a name. In a specific narrative where children climb on the back of a fairy horse, the way out comes from the ambiguous meaning of words: the speaker thinks one thing, and the water horse instead hears his name. We see the same in Swedish legends when the water horse disappears because he hears the name of the mermaid or because of a related word or comment.

Children's gender issues are not foremost in our variants, and words like children and herd children do not allow us to accurately determine the gender of the children. However, boys are named more often and they are in a more central role – and the survivor is always a boy. Christian formulas also do not play an important role in the Estonian context.

The divisions or exchanges of motifs between Estonian water horses and water cattle are fascinating, and they, along with other details, makes the lore distinctive.