

A WOODEN GOD OF ESTONIANS FROM BEFORE 1800?

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Abstract. Little is known of the ancient Estonian pantheon. The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia (13th century) contains references to Taarapita, the great god of Saaremaa. However, reports of the cult of Peko as the fertility god of the Seto people living in South-East of Estonia are relatively recent. Of material images only one of Peko and two of the household guardian Tõnn have survived. While studying Brotze’s collection in Riga, the author has discovered a drawing dating from 1800, depicting a wooden figure that could possibly be a god of heathen Estonians, once kept at the library of St. Olaf’s Church in Tallinn. The next reference to the figure comes from the Provincial Museum of Estonia (registered in 1875). No later records have been found. Most likely, the figure got lost in the turmoil of the 20th-century world wars.

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1. Introduction

Not much is known of the ancient Estonian (heathen) gods or their pantheon. The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia mentions Taarapita as the great god worshipped on the Isle of Saaremaa (Oesel) (Sutrop 2004). Relatively recent reports, however, tell of the cult of Peko practised by the Seto people in the South-East of Estonia and in the Pskov region, Russia. As for material images of the Estonian gods we have but one figure of the South-East Estonian fertility god Peko and two effigies of Tõnn, the household brownie. The only genuine figure of Peko is kept at the Estonian National Museum in Tartu (Ränk 1934, Hagu 1975). Its copies are widespread particularly in Setomaa in South-East Estonia.

The present report has been inspired by a drawing from year 1800, discovered by the author at the Latvian Academic Library. The figure that is known to have been kept at the library of St. Olaf’s Church in Tallinn, has been assumed to depict a wooden god of heathen Estonians. The author of the drawing (or copy) contained in Part 8 of the collection “Sammlung verschiedener Liefländischer Monumente ...” done by Johann Christoph Brotze (1742–1823) is Eduard Philipp Körber (1770–1859).

The picture at once inspires a lot of questions. First, has the figure survived? Second, if so, then where could it be now? Third, are there any other records of the figure? Fourth, was the figure really an Estonian wooden god?

The first two questions have, at least for the time being, to be set aside unanswered. St. Olaf's Church was burnt down on the night of June 16, 1820 as its spire was set ablaze by lightning. Miraculously the books survived, having been transferred to a vaulted room adjoining the sacristy (Robert 2002: 32). Regrettably, no treatise on St. Olaf's Church or its library mentions the little figure (Hansen 1885, Neumann 1904, Robert 2002).

2. Records of a wooden Estonian god

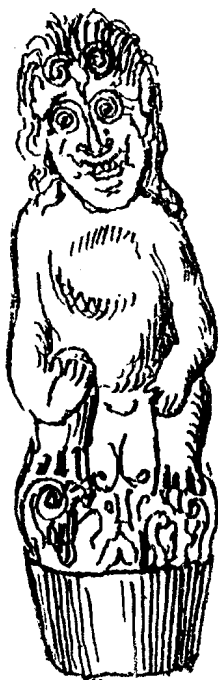


Figure 1. Presumable Estonian wooden god in the catalogue of the Provincial Museum of Estonia (Hansen 1875).

To my knowledge the earliest written record of a wooden god kept at St. Olaf's Church library was made by August Wilhelm Hupel (1737–1819) who wrote in 1774 that St. Olaf's Church has a "special room for a rather peculiar library consisting, for the most part, of old books ... Visitors are also shown a couple of little curiosities such as *an old Estonians' idol carved out of wood* [my italics – US], an old letter of indulgence, a letter from the hand of Dr. Luther and the like" (Hupel 1774: 330). Later, Hupel's curiosity list has been referred to here and there without going into detail, for example, in the exhibition catalogue of St. Olaf's Church library, published on the occasion of the library's 450th anniversary (chapter August Wilhelm Hupel on the library of St. Olaf's Church in the late 18th century) (Kõiv et al. 2002: 173), or in a historical survey of the first Estonian freemasons (Hakman 2000).

In 1842 St. Olaf's library passed into the possession of the Estonian Literary Society. During 1863–1864 the books were registered and rearranged among other books. About the same time, in 1864 the Provincial Museum of Estonia was founded, while its collections also belonged to the Literary Society. Evidently the god of heathen Estonians was exhibited separately from the books, as in 1875 Gotthard v. Hansen (1821–1900) describes the wooden figure as one of the local antiquities belonging to the Provincial Museum, under the title "Idolatry and Church" as follows:

A possible Estonian idol, formerly kept at the sacristy of St. Olaf's Church in Tallinn. Plate V. 22 [see Figure 1]. Carved out of a birch gnarl with care, it depicts a hocking human figure with long hair falling back, a grimaced face and long earrings, with his hands and knees interlaced; the lower part of the feet are

*misshapen and end in five pointed extremities. The total height [of the figure] is 90 mm (Hansen 1875: 72–73, Plate V).*¹

In one of his articles the book historian Hans Treumann (1905–1974) makes reference to both Hupel and Hansen, combining their data in the following way: “Attention should be paid to a small collection of museum pieces exhibited in the library [of St. Olaf’s Church, Tallinn] ... an Estonian idol carved from curly birch ...” (Treumann 1970: 538–539).

3. The image of a wooden god of Estonians in Brotze’s collection

Like the earlier written reports, the drawing by Eduard Philipp Körber, depicting the possible Estonian wooden god and contained in Brotze’s collection in Riga, has hitherto missed the attention of Estonian as well as Finnic religious historians. Nevertheless, the assumed Estonian god must have stricken some fear, as Körber has drawn the crook of the abbess of the Pirita (St. Bridget) Convent² right over the image. This way, Christianity stands higher than the Estonian pagans and is ready to enforce its authority whenever necessary (Plate 1).

The picture of the crook ascribed to the abbess of the Pirita Convent, and the pagan Estonian wooden god is provided with the following text in German.

Fig. 1. Der Stab der Aebtißin von St. Brigitten – den eine³ am Altar Blatt dieses Klosters – so im Schwarzen Haupter Hause zu Reval befindlich – abgemahlte Vorsteherin derselbe in der Hand trägt.

Fig. 2. Der in der St. Olai Kirchen Bibliothek – zu Reval aufbewahrte und vorgebliche Götze der heydnischen Ehstländer – von einer Art von Masern Holz fein ausgeschnitzt.

Körber ad vivum 1800

Fig. 1. Crook of the abbess of St. Bridget’s Convent, that can be seen in the hand of a superior depicted on a flank of the altar belonging to that convent, now housed at the House of the Blackheads in Tallinn.

¹ Hansen mentions yet another, presumably Estonian, stone idol, found at Lasnamäe in 1856. The remnants of the figure consisted of a breast part and a head with a broken face. The width of the figure was 55 cm, height 71 cm.

² The historian Jüri Kuuskemaa (personal e-mail of 25.02.2004) has called my attention to an error of the old authors concerning “the crook of the abbess of the Pirita Convent”. According to Kuuskemaa it is pure bluff originating in a traditional tale of “Mary’s altar” of the Brotherhood of Blackheads once having belonged to the Pirita Convent, then dug in the ground and later “saved” to the House of the Blackheads. By now, the altar has been recognized as a piece by an anonymous master of the Legend of St. Lucy. Shipped down from Bruges in 1495, the altar was stationed in St. Catherine’s Church of the Dominicans, wherefrom it was transferred to the House of the Blackheads on the eve of the iconoclasm of 1524. The figure wearing an abbess’s gown and crook on the right-hand inner flank of the altar is St. Gertrude of Nivelles, not St. Bridget. The crook is thus an abstract and anonymous one, painted from an unknown model back in Bruges.

³ Legible with difficulty, the word could perhaps be read not only as *eine* ‘one’, but also as *nur* ‘only’ or *nun* ‘now’.

Fig. 2. A fine carving of a kind of gnarled wood depicting a possible idol of pagan Estonians, kept in the library of St. Olaf's Church in Tallinn.

Körper ad vivum 1800

Brotze has added a brief comment (Plate 2) on the pagan Estonian wooden god in Fig. 2 of Plate 1, while on the reverse page of the comment he describes the altar ascribed to St. Bridget's Convent, kept at the House of the Blackheads, as the source of Fig. 1 of Plate 1 – see Note 2:

Auch zeigt Fig 2 das auf der S. Olai Kirchen Bibliothek befindliche Götzenbild, so man für einen Götzen der alten heidnischen Ehsten hält. Es ist noch unerwiesen, ob die Ehsten Götzenbilder gehabt haben, auch verräth das Schnitzwerk dieses Stückes eine gewisse Kultur des Geistes, deren wohl die damalige rohe ehstnische Nation nicht fähig war. Vielleicht ist es ein morgenländisches und zwar indianisches Götzenbild; vielleicht blos ein Stockknopf den ein müßiger Knopf⁴ aus Masernholz nach den Einfällen seiner Phantasie, und wie die Figur des Holzes zuließ, schnitzte.

In addition, Fig. 2 demonstrates an idol found in St. Olaf's Church library, which is considered to be an idol of old pagan Estonians. There is as yet no proof if Estonians have ever had idols, moreover, the art of the carving reveals a certain level of spiritual culture hardly characteristic of the rough Estonian people of that time. Maybe it is an oriental idol, namely a Red Indian one; or maybe just a stick knob carved from a gnarled wood by an idle mind as prompted by a whiff of imagination or the shape of the piece of wood at hand.

4. Conclusion

According to Hansen the Estonian wooden god wore a grimace, looking like a caricature with its apish face (*mit fratzenhaftem Gesicht*). Comparing, however, Hansen's drawing (Figure 1) with Körper's (Plate 1) one can see that the former is a caricature all over. The grimaced face drawn by Hansen is much more rustic and less exotic than the earlier image by Körper. At the same time Hansen does not seem to share Brotze's scepticism (with which he was hardly even familiar anyway) about the Estonians' capability for making idols.

Yet, even if the carving depicted by Körper was not a wooden god of ancient Estonians but belonged to some other people, or was, indeed, nothing else but a stick knob, it is important for us Estonians that in the 18th-19th centuries it was regarded as Estonian and looked upon with a little fear. Brotze's suspicion that the "rough" spiritual culture of ancient Estonians might not have been capable of idol-making should not be taken too seriously. The opposite has been proved, after all, by the existence of material images of Peko and the household brownie Tönn, let alone the more numerous reports of possible images of Peko and some other deities.

⁴ The first version of the original has *Knopf* 'knob' just like in *Stockknopf* 'stick knob' a couple of words earlier. Here, however, the *n* has been run through, thus resulting in *Kopf* 'head'.

The argument that the idea of material images of gods was not unfamiliar in Estonia is also supported by a passage from the Livonian Chronicle.

After Bishop Bertold had been killed in 1198 a mission was sent to Germany to find a new pastor. Before leaving, however, the Germans had carved something like a human head in a bough. The Livonians believed it was an alien god that would bring them flood and diseases. The chronicler writes that on this occasion the Livonians made mead, as custom required, and took counsel, after which they took the head down from the tree, tied some tree-trunks together to make a raft and sent the god down by the stream to Gothland, right after the mission, together with the Christianity washed off in the river (cf. Brundage 2003: 34).

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Documents

The Collection of Johann Christoph Brotze: "Sammlung verschiedener Lief-ländischer Monumente, Prospective, Wapen etc etc zusammen getragen von Joh. Christoph Brotze. Achter Theil" in the Latvian Academic Library, Riga, Latvia. Cf. <http://159.148.58.74/broce/>, especially link: 8. *sējuma 1. daļa*.

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