Abstract

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Historical layers of Finnic oral poetry

Finding the original places and times of creation of oral poems was a major goal of folklorists in the early 20th century. Since then, it has become clear that the processes of variation and dissemination of oral cultures are so complex and unpredictable that it seems impossible to trace them in detail far beyond the actual sources. Nevertheless, some hypotheses about the historical strata of Finnic oral poetry (runosongs, *regilaul*, *runolaulu*, Kalevalaic poetry) are possible or evident.

For example, poems about iron could not have been used until there was knowledge of how to work it. Clear borrowings from Old Norse traditions must have occurred at the time when these traditions were still in use in Nordic cultures. Christian motifs were not adopted until enough Christian influences had arrived in the Finnic area. Medieval Christian themes that were rejected by the Lutheran Reformation probably originated in oral poetry before the Reformation if these are common in later folklore collections from Lutheran areas – but the themes shared by medieval Eastern and Western Church may have also spread later from the Russian Orthodox regions. The Finnish song about coffee did not emerge until there it was possible to drink coffee in the region.

However, all new motifs and stories can make use of older poetic patterns. It is typical of oral poetry to create new themes and motifs by building on or referring to earlier elements, such as formulae, motifs, plots, or worldviews. Thus, a Christian motif may make use of earlier pre-Christian elements, and later users may develop the motif further and make new combinations and interpretations or use it in new contexts.

The same is true of the poetic meter. Based on linguistic and poetic characteristics, cultural centrality and wide genre distributions, it seems clear that the meter and the whole poetic system of runosongs emerged at a time when most of the Finnic languages had not yet diverged. However, it is also likely that the new poetic system was building on earlier traditions and styles of singing, and that it may have incorporated stories and songs from the pre-runosong periods. Since then, with the cultural contacts and changes in local languages, dialects and singing styles, the meter has adapted to new versions.

As a result of assimilations, bilingual settings, and language shifts, trade and collaboration, songs may have been translated or re-interpreted. In different Finnic settings, poems and whole poetic and singing cultures have developed in different directions in relation to historical, cultural, political, religious etc. developments, and contacts with other language groups. At the same time, influences

– singing styles, formulae, motifs, song types – may have spread from one Finnic area to another at any time from the divergence of the languages to the intense documentation of the tradition in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Methodologically, no single type of feature, data, or method can provide all the answers. The models developed across different features, data types, and the triangulation of different methods must be evaluated in terms of probabilities. Although the relative dating of individual formulae, images, motifs, narrative patterns, melodies, etc. may be highly uncertain, modelling of a periodization of these may have a much higher probability insofar as it idoes not depend on any individual element.

In this presentation, we combine two strands of research to discuss the analysis of historical layers of Finnic oral poetry. In the multidisciplinary research on retrospective methods, there has been a lively discussion on comparisons between different time periods, and on characteristics of cultural continua. At the same time, digital humanities create opportunities to analyse larger folklore corpora than would be feasible manually. Due to the work in the FILTER project (see https://blogs.helsinki.fi/filter-project/), we are now able to analyse, visualise and project onto maps different features of a corpus of some 250,000 texts relating to the Finnic runosong tradition. More detailed work, taking into account the linguistic and ethnic settings at the time of the recording, may help us to think about the varying relationships of different features of the poetic tradition to ethnic and linguistic histories.