THE CATEGORY OF TIME IN FAIRY TALES: SEARCHING FOR FOLK CALENDAR TIME IN THE ESTONIAN FAIRY TALE CORPUS

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how folk calendar holidays are represented in Estonian fairy tales. It introduces some views presented in folklore studies about the concept of time in fairy tales and finds parallels with them in the Estonian context. The analysis relies on the digital corpus of Estonian fairy tales (5400 variants), created from the texts found in the Estonian Folklore Archives by the Fairy Tale Project of the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu. Folk calendar holidays occur in Estonian fairy tales relatively seldom; most often these are holidays that occupy a significant place in the Estonian folk calendar (Christmas, St. John's Day, Easter, St. George's Day). Calendar holidays are notably mentioned more often in tale types which remain on the borderline between the fairy tale and the legend or the fairy tale and the religious tale. In Estonian fairy tales, calendar holidays are used on three levels of meaning: (1) the holiday is organically associated with the tale type; it has an essential role in the plot of the tale; (2) to a certain extent, the holiday could be replaced by another holiday having an analogous meaning; (3) the holiday forms an unimportant or occasional addition to the tale.

KEYWORDS: fairy tale • category of time • relativity of time • folk calendar holidays • Estonian fairy tale corpus

Most probably, all people have experienced differently a flow of time in their everyday lives. Sometimes time seems to pass at lightning speed; on some other occasions, it seems to have come to a standstill. In the fairy tale *Friends in Life and Death* (ATU 470¹) a bridegroom happens to visit his dead friend in the after-world; when coming back, he turns out to have been away for three hundred years instead of three hours. A similar idea of relativity of time is expressed in the tale "Becoming Rich" (*The Stone of the Snake*, ATU 672D), collected in the Vaivara parish in the late 19th century.

Once there lived a man and a woman, the man was a hunter by trade. Once the man went hunting, but his wife remained home to cook pea soup. The man roamed in the forest for a long time, hunting without success. Finally, he sat down on a thick, moss-covered log, lying on the ground. Little by little, the log he was sitting on started moving and said, "Don't be afraid! I'm the king of snakes and I'm at loggerheads with another king. Please come to my help and we'll defeat him." The man went along and they overpowered him, and then the snake took the man to his

home and put him to bed in his chamber. The man slept until the snake woke him up and said, "I'll give you this box as a reward for the trouble you took, but don't open it before you get home." When the man reached home, his wife was cooking pea soup again. The man said, "Why have you been cooking it so long and haven't got it ready yet?" The wife started crying and said that the man had been away for three years. When they opened the box, they found gold there and became rich immediately.²

Moreover, in the tale type *Relativity of Time* (ATU 681), which combines various plots and is known primarily in China and elsewhere in East Asia, the king experiences in a dream, being under the influence of drugs or keeping his head under water, that a short moment was like eternity.

In fairy tales, two contrary perceptions of time can be found, which can be illustrated by the following examples. In the tale *The Kind and the Unkind Girls* (ATU 480), from Pilistvere parish, an orphan girl is sent to the forest in winter to pick strawberries. The girl finds herself in a fabulous fairy tale world where a horse, a cow and a sheep ask for her help. Finally, she helps an old woman to bathe in the sauna. The old woman miraculously becomes young and, as a token of gratitude, gives the orphan a mug full of strawberries and a small box.

The orphan humbly took the simple little wooden box, gave thanks and ran home. At home it turned out that she had been away only for a little while; the others were not expecting her back yet.³

When the farmer's daughter sets out on a similar trip and reaches the cottage, the woman is old again and in the same miserable situation as in the earlier scene with the orphan. Time seems to have been wound back to the original situation.

In another tale, *The Magic Ring* (ATU 560), a merchant's son saves a dog, a cat and a snake from torturers (Viidalepp 1980: 224–227). The snake turns into a young maiden who takes the boy to see his father and teaches him that the young man should take only a magic ring as a present.

The man took his ring and went home. In a magical way, however, the time that only seemed a few hours for him, had lasted the whole three years. His father had already died at home; his mother had become blind, and their shop had fallen into ruin.⁴

In the first case, less time had been spent at home than it seemed to the heroine wandering in the fairy tale world, i.e.: human time < fairy tale time.

In the second case, on the contrary, it seems to the protagonist that he has been away from home for a few hours only; in reality, however, his absence has lasted for several years, i.e.: human time > fairy tale time.

TIME IN FAIRY TALES

Many researchers of tales have argued that history and time are of no significance in fairy tales. Lutz Röhrich emphasises that "time has no function in the folktale" (Röhrich 1991: 12). In Max Lüthi's words the fairy tale portrays a timeless world, "The fairytale

contains components which are of timeless relevance" (Lüthi 1964: 16) and "the fairy-tale conquers time by ignoring it" (ibid.: 28). Anna Bihari-Andersson (1987: 100), who has discussed the category of time in Hungarian fairy tales, aptly notes that the statements above do not concern the essential timelessness of the narrative itself but the style of the fairy tale. The fairy tale, as a narrative, conveys the chronological sequence of events, which in its essence, consists of time.

Bihari-Andersson, relying on Lubomír Doležel's analytical model of narrative time, distinguishes between different time structures in the plot of the fairy tale. Story time is the amount of physical time, which is taken up by the whole range of story events. It is contrasted with action time, which denotes only the narrated events. Action time will be the sign time of the action, as opposed to the original physical time of the story. Plot time is subjectively segmented, artistic time. The plot time often emerges through the great tension between the story time and the action time (Bihari-Andersson 1987: 101-110). Only a small part of the protagonist's life and adventures is narrated. Thus, the fairy tale's story time consists of narrated and un-narrated parts. The narrated "chunks", which correspond to the episodes of the international catalogue of tale types, take up a proportionally smaller amount of time than the un-narrated parts. Therefore, in the words of the British folklorist Wilhelm F. H. Nicolaisen (1991: 3) the fairy tale is characterised by "paradoxical lopsidedness towards silence, towards the redundance of the unsaid." In several studies, Nicolaisen concentrates on time in folk tales and, among everything else, describes the structure of narrated time in fairy tales (Nicolaisen 1984). In its essence, narrated time is equal to action time. In the meaning of story time, he uses the term recounted time.

The events of a fairy tale take place in the distant and indefinite fictional past (in the olden times, once upon a time, etc.). In a number of cases, however, it is not even emphasised that the events happened "back in the olden times", but without a longer introduction, the listener is presented with the initial situation and the plot starts immediately:

The farmer's wife and her daughter went to the sauna and the orphan was left doing chores in the house. Afterwards the orphan went to the sauna.⁵

The fairy tale avoids concreteness and detailed descriptions. The time and the space of the narrative in the fairy tale mainly serve the function of creating a distance, by which the characters and plots are separated from the reality surrounding us (Nicolaisen 1991: 6). Still, the events of a fairy tale take place in a well-defined chronological microcosm, where the audience can easily orient themselves (Bihari-Andersson 1987: 6). The time structure of the fairy tale is based on the time structure of events in a person's life. The principal unit of time in fairy tales – the day with its parts – originates in our everyday normal chronology. In a study of time in Finnish folktales, Henni Ilomäki (2001: 23) notes that daytime and night-time are perceived differently. The night forms a whole, while the day is divided into several parts. The night can begin after midnight and end when the cock cries for the first (or third) time.

A particular meaning in the chronological microcosm of the fairy tale belongs to the opposition between day and night. This is used as stylistic device to express the main changes happening in the plot (Bihari-Andersson 1987: 105). If night is important for the plot, midnight becomes a notable division line in the story (Nicolaisen 1984: 424).

The night has a mysterious, dangerous, even cruel connotation. The protagonist, who is awake and alert at night, hears important messages, finds a solution to difficult problems and saves his own life or his companions (*The Danced-out Shoes*, ATU 306; *The Two Travellers*, ATU 613). Only at the nightly hour the spouse, who has been turned into an animal, takes a human shape (*The Animal as Bridegroom*, ATU 425A). Magical objects are often stolen or exchanged at night when their owner is asleep (*Bird, Horse and Princess*, ATU 550; *The Table, the Donkey and the Stick*, ATU 563).

Heda Jason has systematically described different dimensions of time in folklore (Jason 1977: 204–219). She distinguishes between three main categories of time.

- 1) *Human time* flows evenly in one direction only, it is historical, i.e. it has its starting and closing point.
- 2) *Mythic time* is cyclical. In the course of the mythic epoch, time is in the process of formation. Cycles of mythic time give historical time its regular rhythm.
- 3) *Fabulous time* stands still or at the most flows very slowly in comparison with human time.

In the case of fabulous time, Jason differentiates between four sub-categories: miraculous time, eschatologic time, demonic time and marvellous time. Miraculous time is effective in the after-world (Paradise, Hell, Hades), which is inhabited by saints, angels, devils and souls of the dead. Demonic time prevails in the world of demonic beings or in the non-canonical system of folk religion. As proposed by Jason, the criterion for differentiation between miraculous time and demonic time is whether they belong to the official system of religion or not. In my opinion, these two types of time might form a single category, as both are related to religious reality and in both of them time is static. If the inhabitants of other spheres come to the earth, the laws of human time do not apply to them; but humans who find themselves in the after-world will feel the severity of supernatural time.

The world of the fairy tale is set in the realm of marvellous time. In their essence, fairy tale beings are ageless; nothing is said about their birth or aging; they are at a fixed age (an old woman, a grey old man) (Jason 1988: 142). The princess is forever at a marriageable age, no matter how long she has been waiting for a suitor, like Little Brier Rose (*Sleeping Beauty*, ATU 410) is as young after a hundred-year-long sleep as she was when she fell asleep (Jason 1977: 210).

There are folklore genres that are set in a single type of time, and others where several types of time exist, side by side (Jason 1977: 217–218). Fairy tales apply two types of time: human time and marvellous time. The story begins in the human world, in regularly flowing human time. The protagonist of human descent and his brothers grow up; his parents become old and die. When the protagonist (the prince, the youngest brother, etc.) leaves home and meets helpers or opponents on his way, he finds himself in the fairy tale world and time. The human world and the fairy tale world are often separated by an enormous distance (Jason 1977: 222). This long journey and temporal distance are symbolised in two ways: (1) during his journey, the protagonist experiences superhuman labour (e.g., has to wear out several pairs of iron shoes) or (2) uses magical implements (e.g., seven-league boots, a horse moving at the speed of the wind).

In fairy tale time most events happen immediately. A young man eats magic apples and immediately grows horns (*The Three Magic Objects and the Wonderful Fruits*, ATU 566). An old soldier strikes fire from a flint and dogs instantly appear from the under-

ground and immediately fulfil all his wishes (*The Spirit in the Blue Light*, ATU 562). A grain of sand, thrown to the ground, instantly grows into a high mountain that stops the devil chasing the runaways (*The Magic Flight*, ATU 313).

Sometimes a magic deed may take more than a moment, but it still takes less time than possible according to the laws of the human world. For example, in hell the young man is given the task of cutting down the forest, sow the seed and harvest the grain in one night, and brew beer from this by the morning (ATU 313).

Bengt Holbek in his monograph *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* specifies seven rules to which fairy tales are subordinated (1987: 444). According to the seventh rule – contraction – the events, happening in space and time, are presented as instant, often three-stage changes. Fairy tales never describe a slow change, a long or boring journey or routine work.

According to Jason (1977: 210; 1988: 83–84), too, the instantaneous happening of events is one of the characteristics of fairy tale time. One situation turns into another without the process developing in time. At that, the temporal indefiniteness of the fairy tale is shown by words like *suddenly*, *immediately* and *abruptly* (Jason 1988: 23).

In Heda Jason's opinion, the adverbials *immediately* and *suddenly* express different time concepts in the fairy tale and in the legend. *Immediately* expresses the connection of actions characteristic of the fairy tale. As the characters expect, event "a" is immediately followed by event "b". *Suddenly* refers to the unexpectedness and extraordinariness of the event and, as such, belongs to the time concept of the legend (Jason 1988: 83–84). Naturally, such words as *suddenly*, *abruptly*, *all of a sudden* are not entirely missing in fairy tales. For example:

Once, a brother and a sister had gone to the forest to pick berries. But far away in the forest they got lost and started crying as they were also terribly hungry. *Suddenly* an old man appeared and said, "Go along this road!"⁶

Still, such expressions appear more often in tale types that are on the borderline between the legend and the fairy tale:

Suddenly the bridegroom turned himself into a white horse and ordered the bride to sit on his back /---/. *All of a sudden* the horse disappeared from under the girl.⁷

FOLK CALENDAR HOLIDAYS IN ESTONIAN FAIRY TALES

Allegedly, fairy tale time cannot be fitted into any framework of historical or calendar time or time of day; it is determined by the narrative time of the story itself (Nicolaisen 1991: 3). Still, references at pragmatic human time exist in fairy tales (the exact hour or time of day, days of the week, folk calendar holidays).⁸

By analysing 5400 texts of the Estonian fairy tale corpus (for details, see Järv 2003: 49–50), I attempted to find, using the search engine of the computer, the names of folk calendar holidays appearing in the texts. When searching, I took into consideration the dialect forms appearing in the anthologies of the Estonian folk calendar (Lätt 1970; Hiiemäe 1981, 1984, 1985, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999). The names of holidays were found only in a small number of Estonian fairy tales (2–3 per cent, approximately 150 texts). More often those holidays mentioned occupy an important place in folk calen-

dar. The following holidays can be found in the Estonian fairy tale corpus: Christmas (jõulud, in 60 texts), St. John's Day (jaanipäev, 21), Easter (lihavõtted, 17), St. George's Day (jüripäev, 16), Pentecost (suvisted, nelipühad, 9), St. Nicholas' Day (nigulapäev, 8), Michaelmas (mihklipäev, 8), St. Matthew's Day (madisepäev, 7). Only a few texts mention Candlemas (küünlapäev), St. Gertrude's Day (käädripäev), Lady Day (paastumaarjapäev), St. Bartholomew's Day (pärtlipäev), Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (viissenja) and Martinmas (mardipäev), nearly all of which appear in the legend-like fairy tale type *The Stone of the Snake* (ATU 672D).

Usually, calendar holidays are scattered between many tale types. For example, in a fairy tale from Vändra parish (*Three Hairs from the Devil's Beard*, ATU 461) the merchant asks the orphan to fetch three feathers from the head of *Vana Kaju* (Old Kaju, i.e. devil) as he wanted to attach them to his hat on New Year's Eve. ¹⁰ In a story from Valjala parish (*The Pig with the Golden Bristles*, ATU 530A), three sons have to keep vigil on their father's grave, the youngest on Christmas Eve, the middle one on New Year's Eve and the oldest on Twelfth Night. ¹¹ Sometimes the holiday is mentioned only by way of comparison and does not characterise the time narrated in the plot. For example, an imprisoned young man can eat his fill with the help of a magic tablecloth:

Now Christmas had come even for the fool – nut cores and fresh milk were his everyday food.¹²

Christmas time and St. John's Day often form the starting point for the story in so-called reward-and-punishment fairy tales (Jason 1988) with two opposite protagonists (ATU 563; *The Magic Mill* ATU 565; ATU 480; ATU 613). A distinctive, expressive and rather widely spread (at least 11 fairy tales) plot can be found at the beginning of some variants of ATU 563 and ATU 565. In many cases, it is related to Christmas.

One brother was rich; the other was very poor. Christmas came and the poor brother went to ask the rich one for charity: "Give me also some meat, the holidays are coming." That brother didn't want to give anything much, although the other pleaded urgently. Brought the pig's head, gave it to him and said – go to hell with it all.¹³

In hell, the poor brother gets a magic mill that grinds out all kinds of good things for him. When the rich brother demands the mill for himself, he is not able to maintain it and suffers damage.

St. John's Day occurs in several variants of ATU 613 where the rich brother stabs the poor brother's eyes out. The blind brother overhears spirits talking and learns that the dew of St. John's Night will heal his eyes. When the rich brother attempts to learn the secrets of the spirits, just like the poor brother did, he is killed.

Concerning the calendar holidays mentioned in Estonian fairy tales, three levels of meaning could be specified.

1) The concrete holiday forms an organic part of the tale and the type it represents. It has an essential role in the plot of the story. It cannot be replaced by any other holiday. For example, the fairy tale *Dragon Killer* (ATU 300) is closely related to the legend about St. George, which is applied in several tales to explain the origin of St. George's Day. ¹⁴ In these texts St. George's Day cannot be replaced, for example, by St. Michael's or St. John's Day.

In one of the stories from the Setu region (*The Brothers and the Ogre*, ATU 327B + *The Clever Horse*, ATU 531), a general cannot get children with his wife. As taught by a witch, they buy twenty hen's eggs from a beggar at Easter and hatch their sons out of them.¹⁵ There is an obvious connection with the egg as the central symbol of the Easter.

- 2) To a certain extent, the holiday is replaceable with another holiday carrying an analogous meaning. The folk calendar holiday in these texts denotes a special or holy time in general. In one of the variants of *Magic Flight* (ATU 313), the boy and the girl decide to flee from hell namely on Christmas Eve as at that time "the Evil One (*vanakuri*) tended to harass people" and was not at home. ¹⁶ In another variant, however, the prince and the princess flee from hell at Pentecost "as on the first morning of Pentecost Old Nick (*vanasarvik*) slept longer than on any other morning." ¹⁷ In both cases, the texts reflect certain folk beliefs about the Devil's habits during holidays.
- 3) The holiday is an occasional addition to the plot. It can be replaced by any other day or left out altogether. In such a function, holidays occur only in a few tale types. In a distinctive tale from Vändra parish (*Thumbling*, ATU 700 + *The Substituted Bride*, ATU 403C + *The Girl as Wolf*, ATU 409), "a hedgehog-sized boy", using a magic horn, helps the king who had got lost in the forest to get back home. The king promises to make him his son-in-law: "Christmas arrived and the little boy, riding a black cock, travelled to ask for the princess's hand."¹⁸ In another fairy tale, a crayfish is found in a puddle on the Saturday before Easter, and at night it turns into a young man.¹⁹

In some of the fairy tales, the calendar holiday is related to everyday life, being in concrete connection with the peasants' economic calendar. For example, the protagonist serves the lord of the manor (or sometimes the Devil) until St. George's Day²⁰ or from one St. Nicholas' Day to another.²¹

Mainly in the Setu region there is known a story "The Sun's Son-in-Law" belonging to the tale type *The Man Persecuted Because of his Beautiful Wife* (ATU 465, previously AT 465C): the man serves as a farmhand from St. George's Day to St. George's Day and is given a bull as his pay. While he is in church, lighting a candle in honour of the saint, wolves kill his bull. Next he becomes a herdsman, from St. Nicholas' Day to St. Nicholas' Day. The horse that he gets as his pay is again killed by wolves. Then he goes to see God to seek for justice and beats up St. George and St. Nicholas as punishment. There is a clear connection between the saint's feast day and the domestic animals protected by him. Partly, "The Sun's Son-in-Law" can be classified under religious tales, as its essential characters are Christian saints and God.

The analysed Estonian fairy tale corpus contains a number of tale types, which are recorded in ATU catalogue as fairy tales (ATU 300–749), but rather display characteristic features of legends. These stories are shorter than usual, have an unhappy ending for the protagonist, and are related to folk belief. They lack magic helpers and other characters only typical of fairy tales. Namely these tale types include frequent references to folk calendar time.

In the tale type *Who Will Be her Future Husband?* (ATU 737) a girl, in front of a mirror, attempts to predict who her future husband will be. A warrior appears and leaves behind his sword. The girl really marries the man, but when the man finds his sword, he kills his wife. In ten out of the twelve variants of the story, fortune telling happens on New Year's or Christmas Eve as this was the time for fortune telling in the Estonian folk calendar.

In the tale type *The Offended Skull* (ATU 470A) a man finds a skull in a graveyard at Christmas Eve and jokingly invites it to visit him. The skull comes indeed, and invites the man to its place in return. There the man hears three magic songs. When he returns home, three hundred years have passed. Christmas occurs in nearly half of the variants of this tale type.

In the tale *Man from Gallows* (ATU 366), which is rare in Estonia, a man goes to the church at Christmas time, finds a man who had hanged himself, and eats his lungs and liver. Later the dead comes to claim his own and kills the man.²²

CONCLUSION

The fairy tale takes its listener from reality to the fabulous fairy tale time where different laws of time rule. The main units of time in fairy tales – day, night, year, etc. – originate in our earthly chronology. Still they do not measure time in its direct meaning but are its symbolic expressions. At the same time, a small number of Estonian fairy tales include references to the folk calendar. These are more frequent in tale types that are on the borderline between the fairy tale and the legend (ATU 470, ATU 672D, ATU 737) or the religious tale (ATU 465). More often are folk calendar holidays mentioned in fairy tale types ATU 565, ATU 563 and ATU 613. The most often mentioned holidays in Estonian fairy tales are Christmas and St. John's Day. These are also the holidays that have had an essential place in Estonian folk calendar throughout times.

SOURCES

Manuscript collections at the Estonian Folklore Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum:

E – Folklore collection of Matthias Johann Eisen (1880–1934).

EKRK – Folklore collection of the Chair of Estonian Literature and Folklore, University of Tartu (1950–1992).

ERA – Folklore collection of the Estonian Folklore Archives (1927–1944).

H – Folklore collection of Jakob Hurt (1960–1906).

RKM – Folklore collection of the Department of Folklore at the Estonian Literary Museum (1945–1994).

S – Setu folklore collection of Samuel Sommer (1922–1936).

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NOTES

- **1** Here and henceforth, tales are referred to by their type name and number in the ATU catalogue.
 - **2** H II 36, 549/50 (21) < Vaivara parish K. Kitsas (1893).
- **3** RKM II 436, 841/5 (3) < Pilistvere parish, Kõo commune, Venevere village L. Kolk < from father (1990). Here and henceforth emphasis made by the author.
 - 4 H I 7, 679/82 (2) < Sangaste parish, Kuigatsi commune J. Orgusaar (1887).
- **5** Tale type *Girl and Devil in a Strange House*, ATU 480A, ERA II 57, 269/71 (1) < Kuusalu parish, Kolga commune, Virve village < Tapurla village K. Biider < Maria Tamberg (nee Saltström), born in 1856 (1932).

6 Tale type *Hansel and Gretel*, ATU 327A, E 23862/4 (23) < Lääne-Nigula parish, Oru commune – J. Prooses (1896).

7 Tale type *The Dead Bridegroom Carries Off his Bride*, ATU 365, E 34327/8 < Helme parish, Kärstna commune – J. Puusepp (1897).

8 About real and concrete place names in Estonian fairy tales see in Järv 2007.

9 My analysis has been earlier published in Estonian (see Kaasik 2006).

10 H II 47, 685/7 (1) < Vändra parish – E. Tetsmann (1894).

11 H II 45, 649/60 (32) < Valjala parish – M. Kustavsohn and A. V. (1875).

12 E 23328/37 (2) < Halliste parish – K. A. Sinka (1896).

13 RKM II 14, 232/6 (13) < Setumaa, Meremäe commune, Obinitsa village – Liis Pedajas < Anna Järv (1946)

14 ERA II 173, 545/54 (2) < Setumaa, Vilo commune, Tagamäe village – A. Tammeorg < Maria Sootalu, born in 1885 (1938); ERA II 175, 520/4 (1) < Setumaa, Mäe commune, Suure-Rõsna village – F. Ilvik < Praskofja Ravva, born in 1874 (1938). In more detail about the beliefs related to St. George's Day and its connection with the legend of St. George the Dragonkiller, see Hiiemäe 1996.

15 S 82797/857 (8) < Setumaa, Vilo commune, Saputje village – F. Paloots < Hökla Sepamägi (1934).

16 EKRK I 40, 309/18 (1) < Maarja-Magdaleena parish, Kaiavere village, Jakobi farm < Alatskivi commune – K. Kõivumägi and I. Varik < Aleksander Tuustik, 58 years old (1962).

17 H II 31, 13/30 (2) < Otepää parish, Vana-Otepää commune – V. Vaher (1889).

18 H III 27, 339/44 (1) < Vändra parish – E. Tetsmann (1896).

19 S 101816/40 (14) < Setumaa, Vilo commune, Mäe village – A. Jänessoo < Marija Kahar, born in 1872 (1935).

20 H II 68, 825/8 (6) < Vastseliina parish – O. Jõgeva < P. Kiirop (1904). Tale type *Strong John*, ATU 650A.

21 H II 3, 276/80 (100) < Vastseliina parish – H. Prants (1887).

22 H III 13, 117/9 (6) < Tõstamaa parish, Pootsi commune – G. Anniko (1893).