

## ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE ESTONIAN PLACE NAMES *KIRNA* AND *KERNU*

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**Abstract.** This article will give a review of the disquisitions so far published on the place names *Kirna* and *Kernu* and will propose a new etymology for them.

**Keywords:** place names, etymology, Estonian

### 1. Introduction

Researchers who deal with place names often find names with homonymous variants and have to make decisions based on their own subjective thinking and based on probability. In one of my previous articles (Kallasmaa 1988: 431-432), I tried to show that *Kuldi*, which primarily is an Estonian croft name, does not originate from the Estonian word *kult* : *kuldi* ‘boar, male swine’, but probably from the Low German word *schulte*, *schult*, which means ‘village mayor’ (dorfmeister, idem quod bauersmeister, judex paganus, alias schulze etc.) and is semantically connected to the names *Sulsi* and *Sultsi*: the Low German *sch* was carried over to Estonian as a *k*, but the High German *sch* was usually carried over as an *s*. Researchers often have to choose between the most suitable phonetic equivalent and the most suitable semantic equivalent. These two do not always coincide or there might be more than one concurrence. It is probably folk etymology that helps to preserve old name shapes, because it connects names to homonymous common nouns. The main question is whether there are some German loanwords in Estonian place names that are unfamiliar to the modern Estonian common noun vocabulary.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Kirna

There are officially three places in Estonia that are called Kirna:

1) A village in Järva County, in the parish of Türi (Tür), a manor house, 1564 *Kirna*. (The manor house was founded in the 17th century and was built at the site of the village; mentioned in 1627) (KNAB, BHO: 229–230);

2) A village in Lääne County, in the parish of Martna (Mar), 1539 *Henno Kirno* (a peasant), 1597/98 *Kirnw*, 1689 *Kirnb*, 1798 *Kirno* (KNAB, Stackelberg 1928: 133, EAA: 1.2.937:72, L 71p; EAA: 1.2.941:1633, L 1623p; Mellin);

3) A village in Rapla County, in the parish of Märjamaa (Mär); *Kirna* in the second half of the 19th century, 1923 *Kirna* (KNAB, EAA: 3724.4.791; ÜAN).

The croft name *Kirna* has been registered in Koeru and Kursi. In Kursi there is also *Kirna-Jaago* (and *Kerna*, *Kerna-Tooma*) and in Simuna the swamp name *Kirnassoo*. There are similar croft names in SJn *Kirneri*, Amb, Hls, Juu, Käi, MMg, Pha, VJg *Kirnu* (KN). *Kirneri* actually comes from a surname and *Kirnmanni* (the name of a sauna in Ambla) comes from the croft name *Kirnu* through the surname. Some of the croft names are late alternative names that come from surnames. However, in the 18th century in Kursi, *Kirna* was a common cognomen in several villages (Pall 1969: 64).

Lauri Kettunen (1955: 148) has constructed the underlying form of *Kirna* as *\*Kiruna*, and he compares the stem *kiru* with the name *Kiruvere*, and *Kiruvere* with the words *kirju* ‘many-coloured, mottled, dappled’ and *kiruma* ‘to swear, to bless’. When Valdek Pall (op cit) pointed out the assumptions of Kettunen, he remarked that the cognomen Kursi could have originated from a name of a village and mentions a phonetically similar common noun – *kirn*, *-u* (~ *kern*, *-u*, VII *kirn*, *-a*) ‘churn, churn-like wooden vessel for keeping milk’, Fin *kirnu*, Est *kirn* < Old Swedish, Old Norwegian *kirna*; Estonian *kern*,

*kärn*, Livonian *kārna* < Middle Low German (Pall op cit, SKES I: 199). In this case, the name of the village would originate from the name of the object through the cognomen of the peasants. In Martna, *Kirna* was initially a *u*-stem word, as *kirn* generally is nowadays in dialects. It still seems that as a source of a village name it is semantically unlikely; perhaps its association with a churn is folk etymology. The folk etymological semantic reformulation affects the phonetic shape of place names as well as their semasiological understanding. I have shown previously how borrowed personal names as cognomens have become homonymous with Estonian common nouns (Kallasmaa 1998: 228-232, 2001: 30-33). In connection with this, I will expand the thesis to a few common names and suggest another explanation for *Kirna*. With old *Kirna* names, there should also be taken into account the Old High German *quirn* and Middle High German *kürn* ‘mill’ (Heintze 1908: 188, Heintze-Cascorbi 1933: 304), which is thought to have originated from the Old Gothic *quairnus/quairnu-s* (Lithuanian *girmos* – plural, Prussian *girnoywis*, in Latvian the plosive has changed into an affricate: *dzirnavas* – plural) (Buck 1988: 363). In the German linguistic area, there are such personal names as *Kirn(er)*, *Kerner* ‘miller’ (Heintze-Cascorbi 1933: 304) and, according to other data, *Kirn*, *Kirner*. The former is thought to have originated from an identical place name and the latter is thought to be a derivative from the German place name *Kirn* or from the Middle High German verb *kirnen* ‘to press out cores’ or the Middle Low German word *kernen*, *kirnen* ‘to churn’ (Familiennamen 372). In the German linguistic area, the common name for the mill is outdated and has been replaced by the newer word *Mühle*, but it still occurs as a place and a personal name. The common name is still used in reference to grinding stones and millstones, which seems to be the word’s original meaning. In Estonia, the word might have started spreading from the manor houses. “Mill” would, semantically, be a better solution for a source of a village name than the name of the object *kirn*: *kirnu* ‘churn, churn-like wooden vessel for milk’. However, we can see that the verbs were homonymous already in German.

## 2.2. Kernu

Here I will refer to Peeter Päll, who is the author of the article *Kernu* in the manuscript of the book of Estonian place names. Kernu village is in Harju County, in the parish of Hageri (Hag) and its name originates from the Kernu manor house (Ger *Kirna*, 1689 *Halfwa Godzet Kohat eller Kirna*, 1732 *Kirno*, 1765 *Kirna*) (EAA 1.2.940:726, L 712, Päll, Kernu, BHO 230). There was a mill in Kernu as early as the 17th century. Päll mentions that Kernu is connected to the name *Kirna*. He agrees with Ket-tunen's etymology, but not with what Valdek Pall added. It is obvious that the *i*-stem name shape was the older one. As Päll mentions, there has occurred the *i*-vowel's lowering in front of the *r*. Based on older documentation, it could probably be assumed that the source is the Old High German *quirn* 'mill'.

## 3. Conclusion

The Middle High German *quirn* 'mill' is semantically the best solution for the source of the place names *Kirna* and *Kernu*. The answer to the question of whether there are some German loanwords in Estonian place names that are unfamiliar to the modern Estonian common noun vocabulary is: yes, there are a few. They may have been preserved thanks to folk etymology, which has connected names of foreign origin to familiar Estonian words.

## Acknowledgements

The work was supported by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research project SF0050037s10 and the Estonian Science Foundation grant no 9367.

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**Abbreviations**

EAA = Eesti Ajalooarhiiv

KN = Murdearhiivi kohanimkartoteek Eesti Keele Instituudis.

Amb – Ambla, Hls – Halliste, Juu – Juuru, Käi – Käina, Mar – Martna, MMg – Maarja-Magdaleena, Mär – Märjamaa, Pha – Püha, SJn – Suure-Jaani, Tür – Türi, VJg – Viru-Jaagupi, VII – Valjala

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**Kokkuvõte. Marja Kallasmaa: Eesti kohanimed *Kirna* ja *Kernu* etümoloogias.** Kirjutises antakse kohanimed *Kirna* ja *Kernu* seniste käsitluste ülevaade ja pakutakse neile nimedele välja uus etümoloogia.

**Märksõnad:** kohanimed, etümoloogia, eesti keel