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Tuomas Heikkilä

Chapter 2
The National Murderer and the Shifting Sands of Finnish Historical Identity

Introduction

The central figure of this article is Lalli, a semi-legendary figure in Finnish history.[1] According to a tradition traceable to the 13th century, he was the murderer of the Apostle of Finland, Bishop Henry, in mid-12th century. While the historical authenticity of Lalli, Henry, and the events surrounding them remains uncertain, the bishop and his murderer have been the dynamic duo of Finnish self-understanding for more than seven centuries.

Today, Lalli is far more important for the historical identity of Finns than his alleged victim. The fascination with Lalli transcends historical precision, as evidenced by the extensive discourse surrounding him in various online communities and social media discussions. A glance at the most popular Finnish online platforms reveals the most important features and ideas associated with him.

Firstly, Lalli is viewed as the earliest known defender of his homeland against foreign invaders, symbolizing a deep-seated sense of territoriality and resistance to external influences. Secondly, the narrative about Lalli is used to challenge the accounts of academic historians, particularly those that portray the arrival of Christianity in Finland as a benevolent process with a positive outcome or downplay the alleged existence of a pre-Christian proto-state in Finland.[2] Here, Lalli represents the voice of dissent and resistance against religious conversion. Thirdly, Lalli has been elevated to the status of a cultural icon and national hero. He embodies qualities of patriotism, resilience, and independence, traits that traditionally resonate with many Finns.[3]

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1 For practical reasons and for simplicity, the term 'Finland' will be used in medieval context for the eastern part of the Swedish realm otherwise known as 'Österlandet'.

2 On the historical construction of a medieval proto-state, see, e.g., Jalmari Jaakkola: Suomen varhaiskeskiaika, Helsinki 1938, *passim*.

3 See Tuomas Heikkilä: Lalli. Kansallismurhaajan muotokuva, Helsinki 2022, pp. 13–18; Miikka Hujanen: »Suomen kuuluisin murha nosti piispa Henrikin suojelupyhimykseksi – mutta onko liki 900-vuotiaassa legendassa perää?«, in: Ilta-Sanomat, 19.01.2021, is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000007748533.html (03.06.2024). The latter reference is to a telling example com-

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The enduring appeal of Lalli raises important questions about the fluidity of historical memory and identity construction. In this chapter, we shall follow Lalli's transformation from a shadowy historical figure described in negative tones to an important national symbol of Finnish resistance and independence. His evolution from a villain to a counter-hero in his own right demonstrates how history can be selectively interpreted and reimagined to serve contemporary purposes through the centuries.

In the following, I will explore the multifaceted nature of Lalli's role in Finnish identity. How was the murderer of the national saint canonized to be a vital part of the nationalistic narrative of the birth of Finland and Finnishness? What role did scholars, authors, artists, and politicians play in re-negotiating the morally ambiguous positions of Henry and Lalli? The topic of Lalli's change from a cursed villain to a respected counter-hero, and finally to an idolized and ridiculed anti-hero, is elucidated from three intertwined viewpoints: the visual arts, the belles-lettres, and the scholarly study of Lalli and Henry. This 3D-view then leads to a comparative analysis of the phenomenon of constructing layers of heroism around a disputed historical figure to serve varying societal needs.

Historical Background and the Sources

The area of present-day Finland was among the very last parts of Europe to be Christianized during the Middle Ages. There is archaeological evidence of Christian burial practices from the early 11th century onwards, but the adoption of the new faith was gradual, with the southern and coastal areas adopting Christianity first. In the most peripheral areas of the inland the Christianization took place later, partially even after the Middle Ages.[4]

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bining the mentioned three aspects and can be found among the comments to an article about Henry and Lalli in *Ilta-Sanomat,* one of the leading Finnish tabloid newspapers on January 19, 2021: »Lalli puolusti omaansa. Oikein. Ei paljoa historiantunneilla kerrota, kuinka ristiretkeläiset hävittivät Suomenkin kansaa ja pyhiä paikkoja. Takaisin välimeren [!] rannalle, kuunsirpin seuraksi.« (»Lalli defended what was his. Rightfully so. Not much is taught in history classes about how the crusaders devastated the people of Finland and their sacred places. Back to the shores of the Mediterranean, in the company of the crescent moon.«)

4 In general, see Tuomas Heikkilä: The Christianization of Finland, in: Jens Peter Schjødt/John Lindow/Anders Andrén (eds.): The Pre-Christian Religions of the North. History and Structures. Volume IV: The Christianization Process, Turnhout 2020, pp. 1729–1744; Markus Hiekkanen: Burial practices in Finland, in: Bertil Nilsson (ed.): Från hedniskt till kristet.

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The scarcity of sources has led scholars to formulate various hypotheses, ranging from nationalistic interpretations of a pagan Finnish proto-state prior to the arrival of Christianity to acceptance of the medieval view of Christianization through three Swedish crusades to Finland. The so-called »first crusade« in the 1150s is particularly historically questionable, but persistently regarded as a pivotal moment in Finnish history.[5]

The first crusade, attributed in medieval sources to the 1150s and led by St. Eric (d. 1160), the King of Sweden, and St. Henry, the Bishop of Uppsala, poses historiographical challenges. The suggested dates conflict with known aspects of Eric's life, and references to Henry in the episcopal see of Uppsala arise several generations later. The medieval legends of Eric and Henry describe the raid as a battle between pagans and Christians, although archaeological evidence testifies to the existence of Christian communities in Finland prior to the alleged date of the crusade.[6]

While the idea of connecting Finland to Sweden through three consecutive crusades is a construct of both medieval and post-medieval identity-building, the concept of a significant change taking place in the process of Christianization in mid-12th century aligns well with the overall picture outlined in Scandinavia. In the mid-12th century, the principles of Gregorian reform reached Scandinavia, leading to the reorganization of existing Christian communities. Within this context, the idea of a raid to Finland serving both ecclesiastical and secular goals is fitting.[7] If one objective of such a raid was to organize the pre-existing Christian communities in Finland into parishes, there would probably have been an eminent cleric involved. Perhaps this is the historical core of the later character of Henry.

The ecclesiastical main source of Henry and Lalli is the Latin legend of the saint, composed in the commission of the Bishop of Turku in the late 13th century. It constituted the medieval, »official« tradition, according to which Henry and the Swedish King Eric led a crusade to Finland in the 1150s. The

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Förändringar i begravningsbruk och gravskick i Sverige c:a 800–1200, Stockholm 2010, pp. 271–379.

5 On the historiographical importance of the »first crusade«, see Tuomas Heikkilä: Sankt Henrikslegenden, Helsinki 2009; Thomas Lindkvist: Die schwedischen Kreuzzüge nach Finnland in der Geschichtsschreibung, in: F. Petrick/Dörte Putensen (eds.): Pro Finlandia, Reinbek 2001, pp. 49–66.

6 Heikkilä: Henrikslegenden, pp. 43–52; Lindkvist: Kreuzzüge.

7 Heikkilä: Christianization; Christian Krötzl: Pietarin ja Paavalin nimissä. Paavit, lähetystyö ja Euroopan muotoutuminen (500–1250), Helsinki 2004.

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legend tells that Henry was killed not long after the successful crusade.[8] Consequently, he became a martyr saint and the heavenly patron of the diocese of Turku (Sw. Åbo), which covered the whole of *Österlandet*, the eastern half of the medieval Swedish realm. The narrative of the Finnish national saint and his assailant is elucidated through two primary sources: the Latin *Legenda s. Henrici*, written in Turku probably at the request of the local bishop in the late 13th century, and the Finnish orally-transmitted epic poem *Piispa Henrikin surmavirsi* (Death Psalm of Bishop Henry), likely of medieval origin but apparently younger than the legend.[9]

The Latin legend, motivated by church politics, provides an official account from the Christian perspective. It tactfully omits the assailant's identity, narrating how the blameless bishop sought to discipline a murderer, leading to the assailant brutally killing bishop Henry. The legend was written for religious veneration and ecclesiastical propaganda, providing its readers and listeners with the official answers to questions about the Christianization of the area and its annexation into the Swedish realm. Thus, it has been described as a creation story of Finland.[10]

In contrast to the legend, the vernacular Death Psalm offers a grassroots perspective, introducing specific details absent in the Latin legend, like the name of the killer, Lalli,[11] and that of his wife, Kerttu. Composed in the Kalevala meter, the epic poem was transmitted orally and recorded in writing only in the late 17th century, more than 500 years after the alleged events. The origin, dating, and trustworthiness of the poem have divided the opinions of scholars of history, literature, Finnish language, and folklore studies. The poem is generally dated to the Middle Ages, but it remains an open question how much historical information the inevitably very modified contents of the Death Psalm can offer to the study of Christianization of Finland or the authenticity of Henry and Lalli.[12]

8 Legenda s. Henrici, in: Tuomas Heikkilä (ed.): Sankt Henrikslegenden, Helsinki 2009, lectio 4.

9 Legenda s. Henrici; Piispa Henrikin surmavirsi, in: Martti Haavio (ed.): Piispa Henrik ja Lalli, Helsinki 1948, pp. 195–197.

10 On the legend, see Heikkilä, Henrikslegenden.

11 The first datable mentioning of his name can be found in a Finnish psalm in 1616: Vanhain Suomen maan Pijspain ja Kircon Esimiesten Latinan kielised laulud … Nyt Suomex käätyd Hemmingild Mascun kirckoherralda, Stockholm 1616.

12 A summary of various opinions: Heikkilä: Lalli, *pp.* 55–66; cf. hypotheses in: Mikko K. Heikkilä: Heinien herrat. Suomen historian pisin perinne, Sastamala 2022.

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The Death Psalm, probably of medieval origin, remains in roughly a dozen written copies from the late 17th to the 19th century. Their contents vary, and, e.g., none of the versions contains a scene describing the actual killing of the bishop. It was long thought by scholars that the whole range of the surviving versions had their origins in one superb initial form, repeated with such enthusiasm that the contents of the poem changed. According to this theory, the differences in content and form between the various versions reflect the popularity of the Lalli and Henry tradition and the evolution from one form to another. In the romanticized view of many scholars, the poem had originally been a magnificently artistic work, a fine example of how artistic poetry would have been created in Finland centuries before the first books were printed. In the words of the folklore scholar and a poet Martti Haavio, the Death Psalm is »magnificent, lively, colourful, impeccable in its overall design, rich in detail, refined in style and Kalevalaic in its poetic form«.[13]

The encounter between Henry and his murderer, portrayed differently in the legend and the Death Psalm, reflects the complexity of historical narrative construction. The legend, a polished and ecclesiastically-motivated account, contrasts with the varied and vivid expressions found in the Finnish Death Psalm, revealing a nuanced interplay between official history and grassroots perspectives. The challenges in interpreting the psalm emphasize the multi-faceted nature of the dynamic duo of Henry and Lalli in Finnish cultural memory and historical identity.

Depicting the Embodiment of Evil and a National Hero

The late 13th-century Legend of St. Henry portrays the saint and his killer in stark contrasts, which are arguably more significant than the details of the bishop's martyrdom:

> In ministrum itaque iusticie et in sue salutis zelatorem funestus insiluit, ipsumque crudeliter trucidavit. Sic sacerdos domini, acceptabilis hostia divinis oblata conspectibus, occumbens pro iusticia, templum superne Iherusalem cum gloriosi palma triumphi feliciter introivit. Postmodum ille scelestus occisor … letabatur cum male fecisset, et exultabat in rebus pessimis.[14]
>
> The wretched man therefore attacked the servant of justice and the guardian of his own salvation, and cruelly murdered him. Thus the priest of the Lord, offered as an acceptable sacrifice to the divine gaze, fell for the sake of justice and happily entered

13 Haavio: Henrik ja Lalli, p. 214. In general, see Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 53–74.
14 Legenda s. Henrici, lect. 4–5, p. 264.

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> the temple of the heavenly Jerusalem with the glorious palm of triumph. Afterwards, that wicked murderer … rejoiced in his evil deeds and exulted in his wickedness.

Originally, Bishop Henry and his alleged murderer Lalli represented the dichotomy of good and evil. Over time, the way they are viewed has evolved, always reflecting changes in Finnish society and identity. Originally, and from the viewpoint of the church and the faithful, the portrayal of Henry and Lalli was clear-cut. In a deliberately black-and-white world, Henry was depicted as a saintly figure, while Lalli was cast as the embodiment of evil.

Most of the inhabitants of Finland were illiterate until the late 1700s.[15] Throughout the history, but especially prior to widespread literacy, images served as the primary accessible medium for most individuals, fostering a tangible connection to their beliefs. A medieval churchgoer encountered images everywhere—in wall frescoes, altar carvings, paintings, and standalone statues—prompting the question: how was Lalli portrayed, and what did personified evil look like?

Medieval art described the martyr bishop as a celestial saint, contrasted with Lalli as a wretched wrongdoer, chastened by divine retribution. While there are some geographical differences in depictions of the two, medieval painters and sculptors typically depicted a small Lalli beneath the feet of magnificent St. Henry, thus emphasizing Henry's majestic stature over Lalli's pitiful smallness. There are dozens and dozens of such typical medieval examples, the earliest being from the early 1300s in Tuna church in Uppland, Sweden.[16]

In most medieval images, Lalli is wearing or showing a striking cap, usually bright red.[17] The original idea of the iconography may have been to remind the audience of the divine punishment meted out to the murderer. Legend has it that Lalli put the headdress of the killed bishop on his head, but when he tried to remove it, his scalp and hair came off with the cap.[18] Still, the red cap is linked to interesting cultural and historical contexts. In ancient Rome, a red Phrygian cap was the symbol of freed slaves, and, in fact, throughout

15 E.g., Esko M. Laine/Tuija Laine: Kirkollinen kansanopetus, in: Jussi Hanska/ Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen: Huoneentaulun maailma. Kasvatus ja koulutus Suomessa keskiajalta 1860-luvulle, Helsinki 2010, pp. 262–267.

16 On the medieval imagery of Henry and Lalli in general, see Tuomas Heikkilä: Vördnaden av Sankt Henrik i Svenska riket, in Edgren, Helena/Talvio, Tuukka/Ahl, Eva (eds.): Sankt Henrik och Finlands kristnande, Finskt Museum 2006 (2007), pp. 101–126. On Tuna sculpture, see Stockholm, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet, Ikonografiska registret: »S. Henrik, Tuna«.

17 See Heikkilä: Vördnaden av Sankt Henrik, pp. 116–118.

18 Legenda s. Henrici, lect. 5.

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the Middle Ages and beyond, the red cap was symbolically associated with resistance to slavery. Perhaps the most famous examples of the cap can be found in the French Revolution of 1789, during which the republicans wore it as a symbol.[19] The red *Make America Great Again* cap of the US Trumpists, is a modern-day example. Thus, Lalli's medieval red cap symbolically links him to a millennial continuum of red-necked freedom fighters.

In addition to highlighting the victory of the good over the evil, and to give the audience a concrete idea of the protagonists of the Finnish creation story, the images were direct symbols of power. In the 1400s, Lalli became part of the symbolism associated with the Bishop of Turku, the symbolic successor of St. Henry himself. For example, the seals of bishops Magnus II Olai Tavast (1412–1450) and Magnus III Nilsson Stjernkors (1489–1500) featured elaborate depictions of Lalli and Henry, and the printed *Missale Aboense* (1488) boasted a colourfully printed frontispiece with bishop Konrad Bitz and St. Henry in identical robes, with a very mean-looking Lalli underneath the saint's feet.[20]

With the 16th-century Reformation, the official veneration of saints declined gradually. The traditional balance of power between Henry and Lalli was not really contested by the Reformation of the 16th century: the Bishop remained the saintly victim, and Lalli the murderer. Still, the Reformation played a pivotal role in altering the perceptions of the two. As there was no official place for saints in the Lutheran faith, Henry's halo began to slowly dim.

Even the episcopal seals representing the saint and his murderer were abandoned for simpler designs, emphasizing the incumbent officeholder rather than the continuity from St. Henry. Despite this, Lalli's bloody legacy persisted in Finnish ecclesiastical symbolism. The Turku Cathedral Chapter adopted a seal depicting the saint's severed finger, complete with the bishop's ring, after the Reformation. Even today, St. Henry's relic is still used in the Turku Cathedral Chapter's PowerPoint templates, notebooks, official papers etc., thus highlighting the endurance of the tale through centuries and religious reforms.[21]

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19 See Niko Noponen: Vapausmyssy ja tasavaltalaisuus, tai huomioita tonttulakin poliittisesta historiasta, in: Niin & näin (2016), No. 4, pp. 145–167, netn.fi/sites/www.netn.fi/files/netn164-34.pdf (8.1.2025)

20 Reinhold Hausen (ed.): Finlands medeltidssigill, Helsinki 1900, Nr. 18–21, Nr. 23, Nr. 27; Missale Aboense, Lübeck 1488.

21 Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 106–107; Martti Parvio: Turun tuomiokapitulin sinetti. Eripainos juhlakirjasta *In arce et vigilia* (1963): Seal of Turun tuomiokapituli, heraldica.narc.fi/aineisto.html?id=1372&lang=en (3.6.2024).

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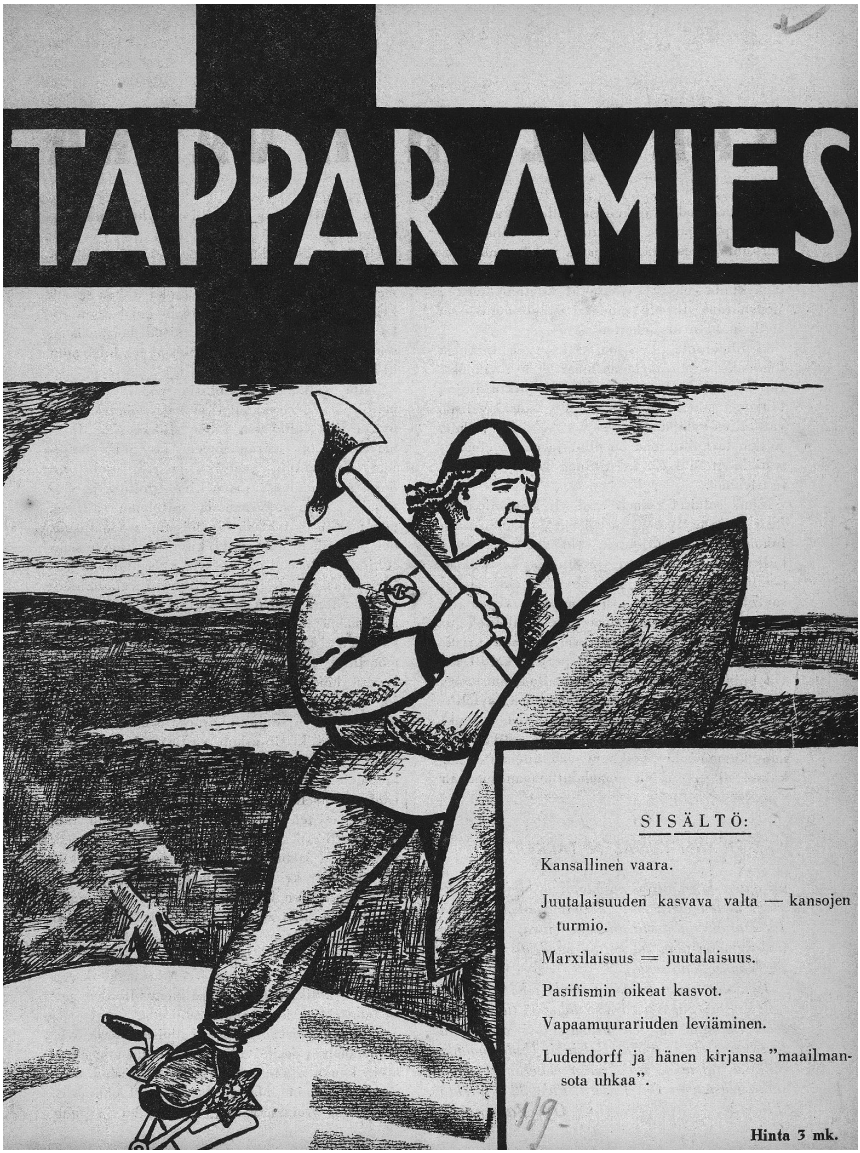

Figure 2: During the interwar period, Lalli was a widely embraced symbol of the far right. On the cover of *Tapparamies* magazine, a heroic figure guarding Finland from its enemies tramples upon the symbols of Judaism, and Freemasonry.

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The area of present-day Finland had been a part of the Swedish realm since the 12th–13th centuries, but this changed in 1809, as Finland was annexed to Russia as an autonomous Grand Duchy. Although the political context was new, Finns were allowed to keep their old (Swedish) laws, and Western (Lutheran protestant) religion. Consequently, the Grand Duchy was a curious creation that was on one hand a part of the Russian empire but also differed from it significantly. The status quo was an excellent breeding ground for nationalistic ideas that were much *en vogue* in early- and mid-19th-century Europe. Finns were inspired to emphasize their language and to seek their own unique history and historical identity.

With the rise of nationalism in the 19th century, cultural interest in the past began to shift, and Lalli began to be depicted in a new way. When the sculptor Erik Cainberg (1771–1816) decorated the ceremonial hall of the Turku Academy with reliefs depicting Finnish history in 1813–1816, he put Lalli on an equal footing with Henry, the two being equal players in the imagery describing the creation story of Finland. The same setting was repeated in the huge mural painted by Robert Wilhelm Ekman (1808–1873) in the choir of Turku Cathedral in 1854, showing the saint baptising Finns. Even Lalli is present in the background, in a handsome suit looking suspiciously at the saint.[22]

There was more to come. Robert Wilhelm Ekman's nephew, the young painter Karl Anders Ekman (1833–1855), depicted Lalli as a dynamic peasant hero in his 1854 watercolour. His pale hair falling handsomely, he lunges at the fearful bishop with his axe. The dynamic action of the work has appealed to generations: in the National Museum's current permanent exhibition a copy of Ekman's work greets visitors in the very first room, thus giving the bishop-murderer the symbolical ownership to the oldest layer of Finnish history.

The most celebrated Finnish artist of the 19th century, Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), painted his own Lalli in 1878, when he was living in Paris, but was enthusiastic about the inspiring themes emerging from Finland's history. The artist's original idea was to depict Lalli's dumbfounded horror after his deed, but the finished work was ultimately more of an expression of

22 Derek Fewster: Visions of Past Glory. Nationalism and the Construction of Early Finnish History, Helsinki 2006, pp. 64–91; Fredric Ekman: Beskrifning om Al-Fresco-Målningen i Åbo Domkyrkas Högchor, Åbo 1854.

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proud self-esteem. A wild and mischievous-looking Lalli, dressed in peasant's clothes, is depicted at the moment when he has just killed his opponent.[23]

The paintings of the national romantic artists of the 19th century foreshadowed the future. The cultural circles and scholars of the emerging independent nation in the early 20th century wanted early role models, going as far back in history as possible. The foreign bishop Henry was no match for the proto-Finn Lalli. One of the most important illustrators in the history of young independent Finland was Aarno Karimo (1886–1952), a painter who had tried his hand at an officer's career. In the 1920s and 1930s, he wrote and illustrated the thoroughly nationalistic *Kumpujen yöstä* book series, explaining the Finnish history through the centuries, which deeply influenced several generations' understanding of Finland's past.[24] The Lalli depicted by Karimo is sturdy and upright, a blond Viking-like swordsman who does not hesitate to defend the inviolability of his home. He no longer has any trace of the wretchedness or ridiculousness of the murderer depicted in the medieval ecclesiastical art. He is a man you would not want to meet on a frozen lake in January, but who was a handsome figure to lead the history of his people.

According to the medieval tradition, Köyliö, a small community in Satakunta in southwestern Finland, was the home of Lalli.[25] Nowhere is he as important a historical figure as there. Since 1950, coat of arms of Köyliö municipality was adorned with a bishop's mitre and an axe, an obvious reminder of the local big bang. A statue of the municipality's most famous son was a long time in the making in Köyliö, but the project repeatedly ran up against a moral dilemma: is it appropriate to honour a murderer? As the official municipality pondered the statue project decade after decade, the local bank took action and finally commissioned a statue of Lalli. The work was entrusted to Aimo Tukiainen (1917–1996), who had already sculpted several national greats, and was unveiled in 1989. Tukiainen cleverly solved the problem of honouring the posthumous memory of the murderer: Henry

23 Edelfelt's brief to his mother Alexandra Edelfelt 17.11.1877: Albert Edelfelt: LÖRDAG D. 17 NOVEMBER 1877, in: Maria Vainio-Kurtakko/Henrika Tandefelt/Elisabeth Stubb (eds.): Albert Edelfelts brev. Elektronisk brev- och konstutgåva, Helsinki 2014–, edelfelt.sls.fi/brev/298/lordag-d-17-november-1877/ (06.03.2024). The first sketch of the work: Albert Edelfelt: Luonnos maalaukseen Piispa Henrikin kuolema, 1877, kansallisgalleria.fi/fi/object/437253 (06.03.2024).

24 Fewster, Visions of Past Glory, pp. 338–345.

25 See Aarno Maliniemi: Suomen keskiajan piispainkronikan n.s. Palmsköldin [sic!] katkelma. Uudelleen julkaissut Aarno Maliniemi, in: *Xenia Ruuthiana.* Suomen kirkkohistoriallisen seuran toimituksia XLVII., Helsinki 1945, p. 387.

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was omitted from the sculpture altogether, drawing attention away from the murder to the strong person of Lalli. The national hero holds a spear in one hand, and in the other he holds a broken lock as a sign of the wrongs he has faced. On his belt hangs an iconic axe.[26]

In the 2000s, artists' perception of the national murderer Lalli has received new, softer tones. When the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland celebrated, somewhat unhistorically, its 850th anniversary in Finland in 2005, Lalli was there, but treated humorously. The celebrations included the publication of paper dolls of Henry and Lalli. In the drawings by Erkki Kiiski (b. 1961), the paper assassin if far from fierce, and can be dressed in a variety of funny outfits, including a Finland jersey from the imaginary 1155 World Ice Hockey Championships. His paper-thin arsenal includes an axe, a spear, a bow and arrow, a shovel, a bottle of vodka, traditional mustard, and a sneaker.[27]

Lalli on the Pages of Fiction

Fictional literature is a mirror of the thinking and ideas of its time. Not surprisingly, Lalli has been present in Finnish literature since its very beginnings. He killed bishop Henry in the oldest literary work written on Finnish soil, the Latin legend of St. Henry, in the late 13th century. However, for a long time, Finland's most famous murderer was only a minor character in his own story: in the Middle Ages, his role was to martyr bishop Henry. As was the case in the visual arts, it was only with the advent of the 19th century that literature began to take on new forms and audiences, and Lalli stepped out of the shadows and into the limelight.

The very first wave of fiction in Finland in the mid and late 19th century attempted to understand why Lalli killed the bishop. In 1854, Axel Gabriel Ingelius (1822–1868) brought Lalli onto the stage in a play, where Lalli is met with understanding. Ingelius' portrayal features Lalli, who is blinded by grief as his daughters become estranged from him due to their conversion from paganism to Christianity.[28] Consequently, Lalli ends up slaying the bishop preaching the new faith. In 1859, historian Georg Zachris Forsman's

26 On the discussion, see Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 122–124.

27 Helena Rummukainen (ed.): Kirkko Suomessa 850 vuotta. Kristillisten kirkkojen juhlavuosi 2005, Helsinki 2006, p. 49, attachment 7.

28 Jukka Sarjala: Poeettinen elämä. Biedermeierin säveltäjä-kirjailija Axel Gabriel Ingelius, Helsinki 2005.

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(1830–1903) novella *Pohjan-piltti* aimed to introduce a broad audience to Finland's grand—and invented—medieval past. Forsman crafted the narrative around the understanding of Lalli's actions within a nationalistic context, emphasizing Finnishness and independence. Curiously enough, Forsman's work also features a Finnish-born 15th-century bishop, Magnus (II Olai Tavast 1412–1450), who absolves Lalli of his evil deeds posthumously.[29] Following suit, Evald Jahnsson's (1844–1895) 1873 play *Lalli* continued the nationalistic theme, portraying Lalli as the leader of Finnish troops against an overwhelmingly Christian enemy. Ultimately, Lalli dies as a victim of treachery, yet before his demise, he manages to envision a bright and free future for the Finnish people, an obvious message to the audience.[30]

The traditionally cursed figure of Lalli was molded from a villain into a counter-hero to correspond with the needs of nationalistic thinking as early as the mid-1800s. More was to come in the early decades of the 20th century, as independent Finland eagerly searched for its history. The Christianisation of the country, and in particular Henry and Lalli, were enduring themes in Finnish literature. Lalli was seen as living through a period of transition between the old and the new in the 12th century, similar to that of the writers and the general public of the early 1900s. But whereas Lalli's »Finnishness« was defeated in the struggle against foreign powers, it would now flourish in independent Finland. Alongside the general interest, the contradictory personality of Lalli, familiar from folklore, also provided an opportunity for psychologising. What was going on in the mind of the murderer? Was he thinking of the interests of his people or just personal revenge?

These were some of the topics relevant to the most celebrated Finnish playwright of his time, Eino Leino (1878–1926), in his version of *Lalli*. In his play, Leino wrote of the righteous and modest Lalli. The rest of his family converted to Christianity without much trouble, but Lalli just wanted to live in seclusion and peace, according to the customs of his ancestors. His neutrality annoyed both the pagans and the Christians led by the hard-hearted Henry. According to the bishop, »this people is a bully and a stubborn people, whose head must be trampled on like the head of a snake.«[31] Finally, Lalli, possessed by conflicting nationalistic expectations and personal motifs, ends up killing the bishop.

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29 Y. K. [Yrjö Koskinen = Georg Zachris Forsman]: Pohjan-piltti, Helsinki 1859.

30 Evald Ferdinand Jahnsson: Lalli. Murhenäytelmä viidessä näytöksessä, Helsinki 1873.

31 Eino Leino: Lalli. 4-näytöksinen näytelmä, in: Eino Leino: Naamioita. Toinen sarja, Helsinki 1907, p. 108.

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While it was first and foremost the Finnish-speaking and -loving political and cultural circles who were keen to highlight Lalli as an early national hero, there were literary contributions from the side of the Swedish-speaking authors in Finland, as well. For socially-aware Arvid Mörne (1876–1946), writing in 1914, both the bishop and his killer represented a ruthless ruling class. Lalli was a sinister big-shot who led the Finnish armies. Henry, on the other hand, was anything but saintly, a knight rather than a bishop, and he had no hesitation in tempting his opponent's wife Kerttu to commit adultery with him. In the end, both Kerttu and Henry were killed by Lalli.[32]

The encounter between Lalli and Henry, national and international, has been a recurring theme in Finnish literature since the mid-19th century, and it would be easy to list one example after another. Still, for the inter-war period it suffice to highlight the spirit of the time through the fates of one work, Arvid Järnefelt's (1861–1932) *Lalli,* published posthumously in 1933. Interestingly, the book is based on the idea of the transmigration of souls. Järnefelt, in real life an aristocrat embracing the ideas of Leo Tolstoy (1844–1910), describes himself in the book as the reincarnation of Lalli, through whose eyes the author recalls the past struggle between Christianity and paganism in the 12th century. As a whole, the work emphasises Christianity and pacifism, but also opposition to the institution of the Church. No wonder that the public, which had expected a national heroic story, was stunned by the work. The political left praised Lalli's anti-religiousness, while the right was puzzled by his treatment of the national hero.[33]

When Järnefelt's *Lalli* was adapted into a play, corrective measures were taken. Now the protagonist was more in tune with the audience's wishes than in the original. The Finnish Playwrights' Union and Eino Krohn (1902–1987), a professor of aesthetics, praised the play, saying that »[as a] protagonist, Lalli corresponds to the image of a Finnish strongman«, that »the author ... has portrayed Lalli as strong, ambitious and ideological« and that »the basic idea is ... Lalli's national aspirations«.[34] Much according to the general tone of time, the play ends with a vision of a pagan follower of Lalli:

32 Arvid Mörne: Den helige Henricus, Borgå 1914.

33 Arvid Järnefelt: Lalli, Porvoo 1933; Merja Ragell: »Oikeata Lallin historiaa ei ole vielä kirjoitettu«. Suomen ensimmäisen ristiretken hahmot aatteellisten ambitioiden taistelutantereilla 1907–1934, Helsinki 2020, pp. 183–197.

34 Toivo Hovi [Lauri Kettunen]: Lalli Lallonpoika. Pakanuuden ja kristinuskon murroskautta esittävä 6-näytöksinen lukudraama, Lohja 1960, pp. 5–6.

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> Hän [Lalli] palaa takaisin vielä. Mutta jollei palaa, hänen henkensä elää sukupolvesta sukupolveen. Se leimahtaa liekkiin, konsa sorto ja kurjuus uhkaa, ja sen johtamana käy kansan tie kärsimysten kautta suuruuteen.[35]
>
> He [Lalli] will come back again. But if he doesn't, his spirit will live on from generation to generation. It flames into a flame, threatened by oppression and misery, and leads the people through suffering to greatness.

After the defeat of the Second World war against the Soviet Union, the substantial changes taking place in Finnish society began to affect the popularity of Lalli. Politically, the traditional right-wing nationalism was considered improper, and urbanization undermined the significance of an invented peasant hero. Just like in the visual arts, for the authors of the post-war generations the counter-heroic figure of the national murderer has become an anti-hero that is mostly described in a humorous tone.

Regardless of his declining status, Lalli is still a well-known character for almost all Finns in the 2020s. As the audience has a certain pre-understanding of his figure, he is an easy-to-use anti-heroic figure to characterize villains and losers in books and films alike. E.g., in Aku Louhimies' (b. 1968) 2013 movie *8-pallo*, Lalli is a small-time criminal gang boss and drug dealer, capable of extreme violence and terrorizing everyone close to him. On the other hand, in the 2021 movie *Peruna* (director Joona Tena, b. 1965), giving a satirical picture of a small Finnish village in the late Middle Ages, Lalli is a working man with below-average intellect, performing his everyday work duties as—the local hangman.

Scholars and a Hero in the Making

As a historian, it would be easy enough to let the cultural circles take the blame for creating Lalli a hero. However, in Lalli's case, the scholarly contribution to this change from killer to admired figure has been equally significant. Scholars of national sciences often pick their subjects from the currents of ideas of their own time, and societal nationalistic enthusiasm and researchers' interest in historical Lalli have gone hand in hand.

Zachris Topelius (1818–1898), professor of history at the only university of Finland, Helsinki, and an influential author, played a significant role in shaping the image of Lalli. In his extensive popularizing works *Finland framställdt i teckningar* (1845) and *Maamme kirja* (1875), he drew upon folklore and

35 ibid., p. 101.

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religious legends to depict Lalli in a dark and mythical, but not necessarily negative light.[36] His writings contributed to the enduring image of Lalli as a central figure in Finnish historical consciousness, and some of them were used in school education until mid-20th century. Consequently, many present-day Finns still share the essentially Topelian 19th-century nationalistic and romantic view of the oldest history of Finland.

The construction of Finnishness by Topelius and his colleagues was deeply rooted in research but filtered through the nationalist lens of the era. It is important to note that this was not a deliberate distortion of history, but rather an interpretation guided by the prevailing nationalist spirit. Scholars, driven by national fervor, sought and found cultural elements and figures from the past that were incorporated into the national narrative. These selections often included semi-historical figures, local folklore, and poetry, which were generalized into a shared cultural heritage.

The circles of Finland were small, and many scholars were also politically active. Thus, research results were directly transferred to nation-building—or politics led the researcher to seek certain answers to certain questions. It is not surprising that most of Finland's leading scholars of history, archaeology, and folklore in the early 20th century wanted to unravel the mysteries of Lalli and Henry. For example, folklorists Kaarle Krohn (1863–1933), Väinö Salminen (1880–1947), and Martti Haavio (1899–1973), linguist Heikki Ojansuu (1873–1923), historian Jalmari Jaakkola (1885–1964), and archaeologist Juhani Rinne (1872–1950) were keen to study Lalli.[37] What they all had in common—in addition of them all being leading figures in their fields—was their belief in the historicity of bishop Henry and his murderer, and their hopeful desire to prove it beyond any doubt. Thus, while conducting research, they were simultaneously building a nationalist myth of Lalli, making him a counter-hero. The beginning of the nation's history yearned for the drama that the confrontation between the pair provided. If Lalli had not existed, he would have had to be invented.

Typical of the research tendency of the time, the scholars of the young independent Finland paid special attention to just one of the two main sources describing the encounter between the bishop and his killer: the vernacular Death Psalm. The scholarly interest in the vernacular poem was a continu-

36 Zacharias Topelius: Boken om vårt land, Helsinki 1875; Zacharias Topelius: Finland framställdt i teckningar, in: Rainer Knapas/Jens Grandell (eds.): Zacharias Topelius Skrifter 12, Helsinki 2011 [1845].

37 Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 67–72.

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ation of the 19th century fascination with *Kalevala*, the vernacular Finnish national epic put together and published in the 1830s. Despite *Kalevala* fulfilling the need of the nation to have its own mythology, the world of *Kalevala* with its supernatural events was too fairy-tale-like to be placed directly on the timeline of history. Lalli and Henry, set in the 12th century, were better suited to the historical dawn of Finnishness.

Since the tale of Lalli and Henry was supposed to be true, and since the Death Psalm was imagined as an expression of the ancient wisdom of the people, it was all the more important for scholars to try to determine the original, magnificent contents of the Death Psalm. Heikki Ojansuu, writing in the early 20th century, thought to identify the introductory part of the poem to represent its oldest layer. Seppo Suvanto (1918–2008) believed at the end of the century that this section was a later addition, and that the scenes leading towards the death of the bishop were the most original content. Martti Haavio argued that it was impossible to reconstruct the original version in detail, but that the poem was originally a narratively-complete work. Contrary to the current consensus of folklore scholars, linguist Mikko K. Heikkilä followed Haavio's contextual reconstruction and the old idea of a single grand original form as late as 2016 and 2022. All the mentioned scholars dated the poem to the 13th century, most preferring a date older than that of the Latin legend of St. Henry, written between late 1270s and early 1290s.[38]

Recent Finnish research into folk poetry has distanced itself from the nationalistic ideas that have clearly guided research on the Death Psalm in the past. Most current folklorists no longer believe that folk poetry like the Death Psalm would originally have been a flawless work of art that deteriorated over centuries. The changes within the tradition are thought to be so diverse that it is practically impossible to make definitive conclusions about their age or what has been added, removed, combined, or changed based solely on the content of the poems. Thus, the traditional goal of researchers of the Death Psalm loses its foundation. According to the current best understanding, the known verses of the Death Psalm may have been forged collectively over a long period of time.[39] Dating a supposed original version of the Death Psalm

38 Haavio: Henrik ja Lalli, p. 209, pp. 220–223; Seppo Suvanto: Ensimmäinen ristiretki – tarua vai totta?, in: Linna, Martti (ed.): Muinaisrunot ja todellisuus, Helsinki 1987, p. 151; Heikkilä: Heinien herrat, pp. 125–151; Heikki Ojansuu: Piispa Henrikin surmavirren historiaa, in: Suomi IV: 19, Helsinki 1917, p. 56.

39 Kati Kallio/Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen/Senni Timonen/Irma-Riitta Järvinen/Ilkka Leskelä: Laulut ja kirjoitukset. Suullinen ja kirjallinen kulttuuri uuden ajan alun Suomessa, Helsinki 2017, pp. 49–50; Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen: Spoken, Written, and Performed in Latin and

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is, ultimately, an impossible task. On one hand, all remaining versions date from more than half a millennium after the supposed events. On the other hand, it is impossible to reconstruct a logical, complete narrative based on the surviving late excerpts, and the ravages of time have eroded key parts of the poem beyond the reach of scholars.

Figure 3: By the early 2000s, Lalli had evolved into a carnivalised national icon. The Lalli paper doll, created for the 850th anniversary of the Finnish Church, could be customised according to individual preferences.

The notion that the Death Psalm is a counter-narrative, i.e., that the vernacular source would be particularly pro-Lalli, became firmly established among scholars in the 19th and early 20th centuries, projecting the idea into the past to serve the needs of their own time. In reality, this is not the case: no matter how deliberately one reads the various versions of the Death Psalm, they are

vernacular Cultures from the Middle Ages to the Early Seventeenth Century: Ramus virens olivarum, in: Lars Boje Mortensen/Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen: The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds. Non-Canonical Chapters of the History of Nordic Medieval Literature, Turnhout 2013, p. 131; Pertti Anttonen: Myytin ja todennäköisyyden historiaa: Piispa Henrikin surma viimeaikaisen suomalaisen historiankirjoituksen valossa, in: Sami Louekari/Anna Sivula (eds.): Historioita ja historiallisia keskusteluja, Turku 2004, p. 124.

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merciless to Lalli. The vernacular tradition gives an understandable reason for the evil deed, but at the same time condemns the guilty to punishments many times more severe than the ecclesiastical legend. It doesn't contain the social criticism that many later scholars searched for in it.[40] It does not stand up against ecclesiastical taxation or anything else. It is simply a folk tradition that emphasises the punishment for murder. Everything else is a colouring added to the narrative by the scholars from their own point of view.

For 19th-century scholars, the murder of Henry did not pose a moral dilemma but was easily justified within a nationalistic framework. Hence, despite his evil deeds, Lalli himself became a hero. Although nationalist scholarly and cultural circles did not consider the murder itself acceptable, Lalli's dark heroism was—from a nationalist perspective—emphasized by the fact that he committed the grave sin of murder to defend his own people.

National Murderer and the Body Politic

In a certain sense, Lalli was already a political figure in the Middle Ages, as he symbolized the conquered paganism laying at the feet of triumphant bishop Henry. But it was only with the rise of national awareness in the 19th century that he gained political importance of his own.

As we have already seen in the fields of culture and scholarship, 19th century Finland experienced an interesting transformation of historical identity that was marked by the active construction of a national past and the utilization of history as a tool for nation-building. Since the 1850s, we can follow a development that transformed Lalli from a mere bishop's murderer to a symbol of ancient Finnish wisdom. Finnish scholarship and culture as a whole romanticized Lalli's paganism, and started to represent it as the untouched essence of Finnish original and inalienable identity. This was very much in line with the wider European scholarly circles of the time, which wanted to see pagan beliefs as authentic expressions of the people's collective consciousness.[41]

In the case of Finland, the construction of the past during the 19th century finally resulted in the retelling of Lalli's story as a national hero. Abstract

40 Kimmo Katajala: Suomalainen kapina. Talonpoikaislevottomuudet ja poliittisen kulttuurin muutos Ruotsin ajalla (n. 1150–1800), Helsinki 2002, pp. 93–99.

41 See, e.g., Linas Eriksonas: National Heroes and National Identities: Scotland, Norway and Lithuania, Frankfurt 2004; Stefan Berger: The Power of National Pasts: Writing National History in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe, in: Stefan Berger (ed.): Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective, London 2016, pp. 30–62.

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national concepts require symbols, and the personification of Finland began in tandem with the reshaping of Lalli's image. By the late 19th century, »Finland« was increasingly depicted anthropomorphically, as a beautiful young maiden in visual arts, literature, and discourse.[42] Initially, this maiden had clear international influences in her clothing and appearance, reflecting Western connections. However, as Finnish nationalism gained momentum, she started wearing national costumes. With Russia's tightening grip on Finland's autonomy in the 1890s, the once-confident maiden transformed into a vulnerable girl.[43] Who better to protect this damsel in distress than the national heroes from the past, with Lalli leading the way?

Finland gained its independence from Russia in 1917. It was after the Finnish Civil War (1918) that Lalli's significance reached its zenith. The Civil War was won by the »Whites« representing right-wing bourgeoisie values. They were mostly of peasant background, and the nationalistic idea of Lalli as a free, wealthy peasant leader defending his own beliefs and property fit the new rulers' agenda. Thus, the early years of Finnish independence saw Lalli being celebrated as a national symbol. White Finland's national poet, V. A. Koskenniemi (1885–1962), composed a poem titled *Leijonalippu* (»The Lion Flag«, the lion can be found in the Finnish coat of arms), in which Finnish heroes safeguarded the nation's flag throughout the centuries. In the forefront of these heroes stood Lalli who was positioned as part of the gallery of national greats, alongside other militant figures from the past.[44]

By this point, the traditional power dynamics between Henry and Lalli had been upended, as exemplified by a satirical article in *Ampiainen* journal from 1920. The article humorously suggested that Lalli should receive a medal for his merits, be promoted to at least the rank of reserve major of the Finnish army, and have a monument erected in his honour.[45]

In the late 1920s, an extreme right-wing organization called the *Suomen Lalli-liitto* (Lalli League of Finland) emerged, drawing inspiration from Lalli's name. This choice of name symbolized the league's agenda, which was rooted

42 Cf. Kristina Jõekalda: Mothers of the Land: Baltic German and Estonian Personifications of Virgin Mary to the Epic Linda, in: Cordelia Heß/Gustavs Strenga (eds.): Doing Memory: Medieval Saints and Heroes and Their Afterlives in the Baltic Sea Region (19th–20th Centuries), Berlin 2024, pp. 43–80.

43 Aimo Reitala: Suomi-neito. Suomen kuvallisen henkilöitymän vaiheet, Helsinki 1983, pp. 86–105.

44 V. A. Koskenniemi: Elegioja, Porvoo 1917; Martti Häikiö: V. A. Koskenniemi. Suomalainen klassikko, 1, Helsinki 2010, pp. 138–139.

45 Klio: Kunnia sille, jolle kunnia tulee!, in: Ampiainen 17.1.1920, pp. 4–5.

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in the romanticized ancient history of Finland. They aimed to replace the non-Finnish lion in Finland's coat of arms with a Finnish bear and change the capital's name to Sampola, after the miracle machine *sampo* mentioned in the national epic *Kalevala*. The league's political stance was anti-communist, promoting genuine Finnishness, and even contemplated a coup d'état.[46]

Although the league dissolved after just one year, Lalli has been a favorite of nationalist right-wing movements from decade to decade. Many recent, short-lived political parties of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, like *Suomi—Isänmaa*, *Suomi nousee—kansa yhdistyy*, *Isänmaallinen Oikeisto,* and *Isänmaallinen kansanliike*, have emphasized a grand Finnish past rooted in *Kalevala*-like narratives. In more recent years, similar organizations such as *Suomen Sisu* and the *Kansallinen Vastarintaliike* have emphasized Finland's great national past. In this company, Lalli is an admired idol.[47]

The concept of Lalli as an ancient Finnish hero and the notion of the righteousness of his deeds are deeply ingrained and are often used without much further consideration. *Suomalaisuuden liitto* (Finnish Association)*,* a cultural organisation aiming to awaken and strengthen national awareness and mindset, received negative attention in the summer of 2001 when its magazine, *Suomen Mieli,* declared in an article that »...A free Finn does not submit to injustices: he does as Lalli did and kills his oppressors.« The article was critically discussed even in the parliament. The association, in turn, objected to *Aamulehti* newspaper's interpretation, which claimed that »The Finnish Association thirsts for blood! Fresh blood of Swedish-speaking Finns.« As a result, the association drafted a response attempting to demonstrate that Lalli was not a murderer but rather a defender of his freedom and property. The response was not published, and the Finnish Association also lost its complaint to the Council for Mass Media in Finland.[48]

In the 2020s, none of the organizations that pledge allegiance to national fervor mention Lalli as a direct inspiration. Instead, they idealize the »great Finnishness« constructed in the late 1800s and projected onto the Middle Ages. Longing for past glory is typical of nostalgic populism, which simplifies society and politics into a battlefield between the virtuous people and the evil elite.[49] In this black-and-white imagery, Lalli naturally represents the eternal

46 Oula Silvennoinen/Marko Tikka/Aapo Roselius: Suomalaiset fasistit. Mustan sarastuksen airuet, Helsinki 2016, pp. 131–137.
47 See Anttonen: Myytin historiaa, p. 119.
48 Heikkilä: Lalli, p. 34, with further references.
49 Antto Vihma: Nostalgia. Teoria ja käytäntö, Helsinki 2021, pp. 178–180, pp. 185–191.

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voice of the people. He is easily placed in the nostalgic, lost Finnish national paradise of imagination.

In recent decades, the slogans of parties such as the Finnish Rural Party and the True Finns Party have expressed a yearning to return to the lost everyday paradise. Still, it seems that Lalli has lost his previous significance as a political symbol.[50] Although the nostalgic themes associated with Lalli are present in Finnish politics and populism, in 2020s globalized and urbanized Finland, Lalli is no longer a figure whose name is necessarily influential. The once-powerful Lalli has aged and been sidelined from everyday politics.

Evolution from Villain to Counter-Hero to Anti-Hero

Finnish scholars, writers, and artists have traditionally focused on constructing national history and local culture, and consequently considered the story of the encounter of Henry and his killer Lalli as both national and unique. On a closer look, it is neither. When the focus is shifted from Finnishness and local history, direct international comparisons are easy to find. While Finnish medieval history has only one murdered bishop, there were nearly ten examples in other parts of the medieval Swedish realm, and thousands of bishops were killed during the Middle Ages in whole western Europe.[51] Although Lalli's evil deed was a locally unprecedented event, the murder of the bishop was by no means exceptional in the broader European context.

The same story repeated itself in other areas converted to or influenced by Christianity during the High Middle Ages. The newly converted regions had a particular need for martyr saints: the new faith required exemplars and symbols. In recently-Christianized areas, a local martyr saint could easily be elevated to a national symbol. Martyrs were among the most venerated saints —so why settle for less? Consequently, e.g., Bishop Gellert of Hungary (d. 1046) and Bishop Adalbert of Bohemia and Poland (956–997) were brutally

50 Cf. Pertti Anttonen: The Finns Party and the Killing of a 12th-Century Bishop: The Heritage of a Political Myth, in: Traditiones (41) (2012), No. 2, pp. 137–149.

51 See Nils Blomkvist/Stefan Brink/Thomas Lindkvist: The kingdom of Sweden, in: Nora Berend (ed.): Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200, Cambridge 2007, p. 188; Natalie Fryde/Dirk Reitz (eds.): Bischofsmord im Mittelalter – Murder of Bishops, Göttingen 2003; cf. Sini Kangas: The Image of 'Warrior-Bishops' in the Northern Tradition of the Crusades, in: Carsten Selch Jensen/Stephen Bennett/Radosław Kotecki (eds.): Christianity and War in Medieval East Central Europe and Scandinavia, Amsterdam 2021, pp. 57–74.

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killed and became, first, local Christian heroes, and later figures of nationalistic importance. Both are widely known examples across Europe.

When considering celebrated killers of local bishops, points of comparison relevant to the Finnish Lalli can also be found closer than Hungary, Bohemia, or Poland. Not only Finns, but also Latvians and Estonians lacked a distinct history at the outset of their »national awakening« in the late 19th century, and it was in these areas that the figures who fought against Christianization in the Middle Ages became national heroes with the rise of nationalism. While the Finns had their cherished Lalli, the Estonians honoured Lembitu, and the Latvians idolized Imanta.[52]

Substituting a traditional hero with a counter-hero is an age-old way of recounting a familiar tale from an alternative angle, shedding light on the opposing faction in a conflict and challenging the conventional dichotomy of hero and villain. The counter-hero serves as a voice for the marginalised or overlooked, who are often sidelined by dominant historical narratives, aiming to shift the narrative paradigm and bring visibility to previously silenced voices and perspectives. This is why nationalism in various countries brought forth medieval counter-heroes.

In Latvia, intellectuals of the late 18th and 19th centuries faced the task of identifying or claiming a medieval figure as a hero for their nascent nation, seeking someone who had undertaken symbolic and heroic deeds. Imanta, a pagan warrior, emerged as a candidate for this role. The *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia* recounts the death of the second Livonian bishop, Berthold, at the hands of Imanta during a battle in 1198.[53] Imanta does not feature in any other medieval records, and his presence in collective memory prior to the modern era is virtually non-existent. Imanta's elevation as a hero occurred slightly earlier than in Finland, during the Enlightenment period, through theatre plays and literary works first authored by Baltic German intellectuals—and later embraced by the Latvian national movement *against* the local Baltic German elite. He came to embody the Latvian struggle for freedom in the Middle Ages, representing the people's resistance against foreign conquest,

52 Gustavs Strenga: From Bishop-Killer to Latvian National Hero: Imanta's Transformations from the Middle Ages to Nation-Building, in: Heß/Strenga (eds.): Doing Memory, pp. 81–112; Anti Selart: Lembitu: A Medieval Warlord in Estonian Culture, in: Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana 29 (2021), No. 1, pp. 3–14.

53 Leonid Arbusow/Albert Bauer: Heinrichs Livländische Chronik, Hannover 1955, II, 6, p. 10.

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much like Lalli in Finland. As in Lalli's case, culture played a pivotal role in Imanta's elevation as a national hero.[54]

The same pattern was repeated in 19th century Estonia. Even here, it was the *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia* that offered the building blocks for a hero symbolizing an emerging national awareness in the 19th century. The chronicle mentions Lembitu, an Estonian chieftain who killed Catholic priests in 1212.[55] From the 19th century nationalistic viewpoint, ancient Estonians of the early 13th century heroically defended their freedom and native religion, but unfortunately had to surrender to German invaders and the Catholic Church. Thus, Lembitu was a freedom fighter whose role gained even more importance during and after the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920). Exactly like Lalli and Imanta, Lembitu has been celebrated through various artistic media including literature, opera, and visual arts, thus establishing a deep-rooted connection between Lembitu and Estonian cultural and historical identity.[56]

In all three cases—Lalli, Imanta, and Lembitu—the counter-heroism of a bishop-killer emerged as a nationalistic response to the longstanding tradition wherein the ecclesiastical and temporal elites initially wrote and subsequently claimed ownership of medieval sources and historical narratives. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the emergence of the indigenous Finnish hero Lalli held symbolic significance both in ancient history and in the modern era. He claimed a place in history and the national narrative for the non-elite majority that needed heroes of their own.

When the non-elite Finnish people was, quite non-historically, projected into the obscurity of Middle Ages, they naturally needed a leader. Although medieval sources provide no information about Lalli's social status, since the 17th century, there has been a desire to perceive him initially as a local magnate and later as some sort of leader of a Finnish proto-state. Chroniclers and later scholars, authors, and journalists claimed to know that Lalli was a nobleman, knight, count, or otherwise highly respected figure.[57] Again, the same pattern repeats itself with the nationalistic construction of Imanta and

54 On Imanta's creation as a national hero, see esp. Strenga: Imanta.

55 Heinrichs Livländische Chronik, XV, 9, p. 99.

56 Selart: Lembitu, p. 5.

57 U. Örnhielm: Historia Sveonum Gothorumque ecclesiastica, Stockholm 1689, p. 462; Harry Lönnroth/Martti Linna (eds.): Johannes Messenius: Suomen riimikronikka, Helsinki 2004, [28], p. 52, p. 176; Johannes Peringskiöld (ed.): Johannes Messenius: Scondia illustrata, Stockholm 1700-1705, X, p. 4. See Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 38–39 for a summary of the discussion and further sources.

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Lembitu. Imanta was portrayed as an elder, i.e. a leader of his people by Latvian authors and poets, and Lembitu, who was mentioned as a leader of Estonians in the *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia,* became a king-like figure in the works of 19th and early 20th century Estonian culture.[58]

Interestingly, the fate of Lalli also follows the same pattern as Imanta and Lembitu in the latter part of the 20th and early 21st centuries. During the last generations, all three heroes have witnessed their heroism dimming, and their idolized counter-heroism has slowly turned into anti-heroism. Lately, Imanta and Lembitu are treated playfully in their respective homelands,[59] and Lalli—in addition to still being an idol to some—is certainly a figure with carnevalistic traits in today's Finland. Lalli can be bought as a doll or a paper doll, there are TV sketches, comics, and whimsical songs about him, even schoolchildren have the tradition of celebrating the arrival of spring around his statue in Köyliö.

In fact, the arc of the story of all three priest-killing heroes has descended to the point that their historicity has been questioned, although there are differences in this regard between countries. In Latvia, researchers have considered Imanta a fictional character since the 1920s.[60] In Estonia, Lembitu has been regarded as a historical figure, to the extent that the state funded a research project to search for his relics (his skull) in the Polish museums and archives where, according to the the 20th century legend, they were once spotted.[61]

In Finland, questioning the historical validity of Lalli has sparked considerable controversy since 2005, when I mentioned in passing in my study on the Latin *Legend of St. Henry* the obvious fact that we cannot be entirely certain about the historical existence of the saint.[62] The public backlash was strong. If Henry were not real, then his killer, Lalli, would also need to be erased from the ranks of national heroes. The media portrayed a tantalizing confrontation: the deep knowledge of the people versus the fantasizing ideas of scholars in their ivory towers. The sentiment among the people was clear: while few would mourn Henry's disappearance from the pages of history, there was a strong desire to hold onto Lalli until the end. An editorial in

58 Strenga: Imanta, pp. 83–88; Selart: Lembitu, p. 5.
59 Strenga: Imanta, pp. 104–105; Selart: Lembitu, pp. 6–8.
60 Strenga: Imanta, pp. 102–103; Per Bolin: Between National and Academic Agendas: Ethnic Policies and 'National Disciplines' at the University of Latvia, 1919–1940, Huddinge 2012.
61 Selart: Lembitu, pp. 7–10; Anti Selart/Mihkel Mäesalu: Die estnischen Kopfjäger in Polen. Eine Archivreise, in: Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte 14 (2019), pp. 197–205.
62 Tuomas Heikkilä: Pyhän Henrikin legenda, Helsinki 2005, p. 9, pp. 53–54.

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Helsingin Sanomat—the biggest Finnish newspaper—succinctly captured the emotions: »Do not take Lalli away from us.«[63] Leading figures of the Evangelical Lutheran and Catholic churches also rushed to affirm their belief in both Henry and Lalli.[64] Their response, like many others, was characterized more by emotion than historical expertise.

Many historians also opposed the idea of Henry and Lalli as mythical constructs. Typically, these were scholars focused on entirely different topics, often from distant disciplines, relying mainly on tradition as their argument.[65] The insistence on clinging to the bishop and his murderer speaks to the forces of tradition and nationalism that still influence the supposedly objective world of academia.

Does Lalli have a Future?

Today, most Finnish historians believe that there is some historical basis behind the figure of Lalli, which has been molded to fit various narratives over time, making it practically impossible to discern the historical truth beneath these layers. Despite the doubts and reservations of the scholars, 71% of Finns stated that they still consider Lalli a historical figure in a poll in 2020.[66] What insights does the enduring faith of Finns in Lalli, juxtaposed with his humorous portrayal in contemporary culture, offer regarding the significance of the national murderer in the historical consciousness of Finns in the 2020s?

The narrative tradition surrounding the murder of a clergyman often provides a folk perspective on the clash between secular and ecclesiastical elites and their power struggles.[67] These tales typically depict a confrontation between a local magnate and a priest, and similarly, Lalli has for centuries been interpreted as a representative of the Finnish upper class. In practice, all source materials related to Lalli—Latin legends and ecclesiastical art, folklore, and other folk traditions—fit into a narrative where he represents an older, fading way of life, while Henry embodies a new, foreign, and triumphant elite. Likewise, the folk accounts of Lalli's death at the hands of a swarm of mice are

63 Helsingin Sanomat 23.4.2005, A2.
64 E.g., Turun Sanomat 22.4.2005, 11; Ilta-Sanomat 22.4.2005; Kaleva 28.5.2005.
65 See Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 46–47.
66 Ibid., p. 43.
67 Ulf Palmenfelt: Prästdråpssägnen – ett tittrör ned i Kalmarunionens sociala strider, in: Tradisjon 15 (1985), pp. 38–40.

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a local variant of a pan-European narrative explaining periods of transition in power.[68]

In a broader context, Ulrich Bröckling has aptly described heroes, counter-heroes, and anti-heroes as indicators of problems within a society, and stories about them as tools of historical crisis management of a community.[69] Just like in the case of Lalli—or Imanta or Lembitu, for that matter—a simplistic heroic narrative reduces complex conflicts to an easily-understandable binary clash between good and evil, white and black, light and dark, light and shadow, that are represented by polarized single persons. In a binary story, it is us and our hero against ›them‹. In Lalli's case, the juxtaposition of the good and familiar traditions on the one hand, and the strange, unfamiliar ideas on the other, have been of special significance. This is a red thread that can be seen in the whole tradition of Lalli and Henry, since the earliest remaining sources in the 13th century until the latest social media posts. Whereas the original ecclesiastical tradition saw the murderer and his values as bad, it is now the murderer who safeguards the Finnish traditions.

An over-simplification of a conflict into a heroic story facilitates taking a stance and choosing one's side in a clash. The need for a hero is especially pronounced during times of turbulent transitions, and they are particularly taken up by groups under stress. In the oldest, religious version of Lalli's story, written during the transition to Christian values, he was a villain, needed in order to create a background for the Christianization of Finland and its annexation to the Swedish realm. Later, in the context of 19th century nationalistic awakening and in the young, right-leaning, and violent independent Finland, he became a freedom fighter, a counter-hero.

What is the role of Lalli today? Despite being celebrated for his defiance against external authority and perceived as a champion of the common people, the murder of Henry challenges conventional notions of heroism. Thus, he can certainly be understood as an anti-hero due to the morally ambiguous nature of his actions. On the other hand, in addition to Lalli, the heroes of Finnish history include several other violent young men who found themselves at odds with the law but aligned with moral righteousness, as understood by the non-elite.

Of these nationalistic heroes known to the majority of Finns even today, we may mention Jaakko Ilkka (d. 1597), a late 16th century leader of a peasant

68 Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 172–177; Jacek Banaszkiewicz: Die Mäusethurmsage, in: The Symbolism of Annihilation of an Evil Ruler, Acta Poloniae Historica 51 (1985), pp. 5–32.

69 Ulrich Bröckling: Postheroische Helden. Ein Zeitbild, Frankfurt 2020, 17, pp. 78–87.

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uprising triggered by heavy taxation and social injustices. Eugen Schauman (1875–1904), in turn, assassinated the Russian governor-general of Finland in 1904, as a protest against the oppressive policies during Russian rule in Finland. Bobi Sivén (1899–1921) served as the chief of police in Repola municipality after Finland's independence. When Finland was forced to cede Repola to Soviet Russia in the Treaty of Tartu in 1921, Sivén committed suicide in protest. Vilho Koskela was a fictional Finnish model soldier in the novels *Täällä pohjantähden alla* (»Under the North Star«) and *Tuntematon sotilas* (»The Unknown Soldier«) by the author Väinö Linna (1920–1992). The lives of these anti-heroes ended violently and miserably: Lalli died due to a divine punishment; Ilkka was beheaded; Schauman committed suicide; Sivén followed his example; Koskela was shot by Soviet invaders.[70]

Many Finns still consider these dead men martyrs of the national cause today, and they are both counter-heroes due to their actions and anti-heroes because they broke the law and morals of their society. This goes to show how even the role of an anti-hero can be important for the collective historical identity. In contrast to the clear-cut moral distinctions often associated with traditional heroes and villains, anti-heroes challenge and subvert these norms for a greater cause. They might operate outside the boundaries of the law or exhibit traits that defy societal expectations, yet their narratives often explore the complexity of human nature and the blurred line between good and evil.[71]

One recurring topic in the novels and plays written about Lalli in the 19th and 20th centuries was his return, or even resurrection, when the country needs him again. The same idea is still alive and well in the social media debates of the 2020s, where Lalli's symbolic return is frequently vowed to redress various national grievances.[72] The return of a medieval hero when they are needed is a familiar idea all over Europe. In Latvia, Imanta lay dormant under a Blue Mountain, French folklore waits for the return of Charlemagne (d. 814), the English for the reappearance of King Arthur. In Germany, the belief persists that Frederick Barbarossa (d. 1190) sleeps beneath the Kyffhäuser mountain, and the Danes believe that Holger Danske, a medieval knight, lies dormant beneath Kronborg castle, awaiting a new era. The Finnish epic *Kalevala*, put together from folklore, concludes with similar themes: the local hero Väinämöinen departs from modern life feeling disheartened, yet he

70 Heikkilä: Lalli, p. 31, p. 74.

71 Ulrich Bröckling: Antihelden, in: Ronald G. Asch/Achim Aurnhammer/Georg Feitscher/Anna Schreurs-Morét (eds.): Compendium heroicum, Freiburg 2019.

72 Heikkilä: Lalli, p. 137, pp. 140–142.

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promises to return when he is needed once again. In religious ideologies, the anticipation of a messiah often forms an integral part of the overarching belief system.[73]

Today, Lalli has been tamed. However, for most Finns he is still among us, lurking behind the scenes. While he no longer serves as a suitable political role model officially, he is an idol and symbol, and serves as a convenient historical weapon in polarized social media discussions. In the realms of visual arts and literature, Lalli's life, choices, and death remain rather popular subjects, albeit often approached with gentle humour rather than seriousness. To follow Ulrich Bröckling's idea of national heroes as indicators of societal problems, does the current status quo of Lalli reflect a society without very serious, polarizing conflicts?

The dichotomous mindset of ›us‹ versus them, rooted in confrontation, has always existed, and will continue to do so. As debates emerge in the forthcoming decades regarding the authentic Finnish identity and way of life, or a yearning for a monocultural Finland, Lalli will surely raise his axe once again. The character and story of Lalli, symbolizing the encounter between the new and the old, innovation and tradition, familiar and foreign, is well-suited to simplify collisions and cultural conflicts in the future. As long as the new is perceived as a threat and foreign cultures as competitors, future generations will have their own Lallis.

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