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THE BEAR AND THE YEAR: ON THE ORIGIN OF THE FINNISH LATE IRON AGE FOLK CALENDAR AND ITS CONNECTION TO THE BEAR CULT

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ABSTRACT

The role of the bear as a calendric deity among the Finnic and Finno-Ugric peoples echoes it general importance in all aspects of the northern cultures. The Finnic peoples divided their year into four parts by two Bear Days in January and July, and the Summer and Winter Nights between those. In the earliest wooden folk calendars in Finland that can be traced to the 13th century, those calendric marker days had already been fixed into the Julian year, but in earlier times, they would have been determined by a lunisolar or lunar calendar. The calendric system of the late Iron Age Finns and other Finnic peoples was lunisolar with intercalation, and its structure and main marker days indicate that it had several layers of different age: the 'Bear Year' seasonal division, the idea of the eight-divided solar year -probably of Indo-European origin-, and a basic lunisolar intercalation calendar with twelve or thirteen months. The Finnish celestial lore related to the bear can also be connected to the seasonal positions of the Big Dipper asterism. While the seasonal calendric significance of the bear in Eurasian cultures is probably very ancient, possibly even Paleolithic, the connection of the Finnic Bear Year seasonal division and lunisolar calendars can be traced at least to the late Neolithic period.

KEYWORDS: Calendars, Bear Year, Ursa Major, bear cult, Finnic religion.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of the bear as an important deity in the ancient Finnic and Finno-Ugric religion is well known, but the calendric connection of the bear has not been that widely researched a subject. In this paper, the origin of the Finnish 'Bear Year', i.e. the ancient Finnic seasonal calendric division governed by the bear and its connection to what is known of the Finnish late Iron Age bear cult are discussed.

2. THE BEAR CULT IN ANCIENT FINLAND

The ancient Finnish bear cult can be best traced through the folklore and poetry recorded in Finland from the late 17th century to the early 20th century. In analysing the information, one must note that the details of the cult are those it had among the Finns of historical times. The cult must have had somewhat different forms in the different regions where people speaking various Finnic languages and dialects lived in the late Iron Age and before that (e.g., Tavastia, Karelia, Estonia). Remarkably, however, the known details of the bear cult show great similarities: not only in different regions in Finland and Karelia, but also the bear cult of the Saami and other Finno-Ugric peoples have much in common with the Finnic variations of the bear cult. In fact, most of the peoples living in the northern latitudes have similarities in their bear cult. While the similarities in ecological conditions often lead to similar cultural practices, there are indications that some widely spread religious beliefs concerning the bear may have their origin as far back in time as in the Palaeolithic bear worship (e.g., Frank, 2008).

The Finns believed that the bear originated in the sky, in the stellar realm, as it is revealed by the following Kalevala-metric poem on the birth of the bear, recorded in Eastern Finland in the early 19th century (SKVR VI2: 5405; transl. by the present author; see also SKVR XII2: 6858):

Miss' on otso synnytetty,
mesikämmen käännytetty?
Luona kuun, tykönä päivän,
Otavaisen olkapäillä.
Sielt' on maahan laskettuna
kultasessa kätkyessä,
vitjoilla hopeisilla.

Where's the bear been given birth to,
the honey-paw turned around?
With the moon, with the sun,
on the shoulders of the Big Dipper.
From there he's been lowered onto the earth
in a golden cradle
with silver chains.

It can be seen in the poem above that the Finns believed that the bear was from Ursa Major, Otava in Finnish. *Otava* means a sort of fish net, but the resemblance of the word to the probable original name of the bear in Finnish, *otso* or *ohto*, is remarkable. The original name of the bear is not known for certain, since the name of the bear was a sacred and partly taboo-like and thus also the modern word for 'bear' in Finnish, *karhu* originally was a term of endearment. Other common names of the bear were, e.g. *kouko*, an old man or an ancestor; *mesikämmen*, honey-paw; *lintunen*, birdy; *metsän ukko*, the old man of the forest; *metsän omena*, the apple of the forest; *metsän (kultainen) kuningas*, the (golden) king of the forest; or *metsä*, the forest itself (see, e.g. Pentikäinen, 2005). The name for the celestial home of the bear may have been subject to similar circumventions, and the name of the fish net may thus have become selected for its similarity to the name *ohto*, *ohtava* (the shape of the fish net in question was rectangular, so the 'tail' of Otava also seems to have no function in that explanation). Indeed, in some occasions the bear is called not only *Otavanpoika*, the son of Otava, but even Otava itself (Pentikäinen, 2005).

In other variants of the verses, it is told that the bear was born "on the back of the seven stars" and also "on the top of *honka*", a pine tree, namely *Pinus sylvestris* (SKVR VI2: 5411; I4: 1419). The latter verse echoes the belief that the *emuu*, the ultimate female ancestor and creator deity of the bear was Hongotar (cf. *honka*). For example, in the well-known ritual text from Viitasaari, it is mentioned that "Hongikosta sinun sukusi, Hongotar sinun sukusi", "From the pine forest [is] your family, Hongotar [is] your family" (SKVR IX4: 1096).

A poem from Piippola tells us that the bear was born and raised "päällä pienen pilven naulan", "on the top of a small cloud's nail" (SKVR XII2: 6464). This is interesting as the pole star was seen by the Finns as the nail of the sky, located on the top of the sky-supporting world pillar *sammas* (Harva, 1943; Siikala, 2012: 188). The ancient Finns may also have obtained from the Indo-Europeans the belief that the sun was located at the top of the sky pillar (Parpola 2005: 50-51; Ridderstad 2014). Thus, the Bear, like the Sun, was a deity who could be seen as sitting on the topmost position of the sky-vault.

As can be seen in the poem, the bear was lowered onto the earth and the human realm in a golden cradle, using silver chains. Gold and silver are epithets commonly related to the Sun, the Moon and the stars in the Finnish poetry (Ridderstad 2014); the special materials emphasize the fact that the bear was divine. The cradle of the bear may have been Otava itself, which has some definite resemblance to the ancient cradles which were little more than small

boxes supported by one or two cords by which they were tied to, e.g. a tree branch (see also Figure 1 and Section 3 below).

The already above-mentioned poem from Viitasaari (SKVR IX4: 1096) is the most complete ritual corpus consisting of the songs and rites of a bear hunting ceremony in the 17th century Finland. Only traces of other similar ritual poems have been preserved (e.g., SKVR I4: 1095, 1220). The Viitasaari text describes how a bear is hunted singing certain songs that legitimate its killing, how it is taken to the village and how a feast of *peijaiset* is celebrated in its honor, all parts of the ritual accompanied with the ritual Kalevala-metric songs. Peijaiset was both the wedding and the funeral of the bear, who was addressed as *kouko*, the grandfather, and revered like a human ancestor or a bridegroom. The end part of the ritual consisted of the returning of the soul of the bear to the sky, which was accomplished by taking the skull of the bear to a bear skull pine. The skull of the bear was hung on the branches of the tree and its other bones were buried at the foot of the tree. Some of its teeth and claws may also have been distributed among the hunters. As late as the 17th century there were bear furs hung in the churches of Northern Finland – a practice which can be seen as a continuation of the bear skull tree rite. The bear graves of the Saami also echo the same basic belief of the returning of the soul of the bear back to the otherworld.

Many northern peoples share the belief that the bear was their ancestor, and traces of the myth about the marriage of a human female and the celestial bear are wide-spread in Eurasia (see, e.g. Frank, this Volume). Among the Finno-Ugric peoples for example the Khanty believed that the bear was the son of Numi-Torum, the sky god, and that he was lowered to the earth in a cradle and married a woman, thus becoming the ancestor of humans (see, e.g. Sarmela, 2006). The *koltta* Saami people shared a similar origin myth and it seems that a similar belief once exists among the Finnish tribes, too, based on the way the bear is addressed in the ritual hunting texts and also the belief that women have a special relationship with the bear: a bear would not attack a woman.

In the Viitasaari ritual, the bear is called *Pyhäjoen putaan miesi*, the man of the *pudas*, an anabranch of the Pyhäjoki river, which probably refers to the bear as a master fisherman. Among the rapids of the fast-flowing Pyhäjoki river, the anabranches often formed quieter stream pools. Those were good places for fishing for both bears and humans. Perhaps Pyhäjoki, the Sacred River, was sacred precisely because it attracted so many bears? In this context, it is interesting to note that Väinämöinen, the main male shamanistic deity of the Iron Age Finns also received his name from a quieter part or a stream pool of a river, *väinä*. Perhaps Väinämöinen at some point came to receive some of the properties of an earlier bear deity? Even Orion, the asterism related to Väinämöinen in the Finnish folklore, could have originally been a bear as well an anthropomorphic deity. This would explain why Ursa Major may have been seen as part of an elk or, as mentioned above, a cradle or a fish net, but not a bear. Unfortunately, connections like these may be impossible to prove.

In Finland, bear tooth pendants have been found in many inhumation graves of the late Iron Age (the burials of the earlier periods were usually cremations, which does not preserve small organic objects). Interestingly, most of the pendants seem to have belonged to women (see, e.g. Lehtosalo-Hilander, 1969-1972). The bear tooth and claw pendants can be seen as powerful protective elements. They may have also been connected to fertility, since the bear was also one of the governors of the seasonal cycle (see the next Section).

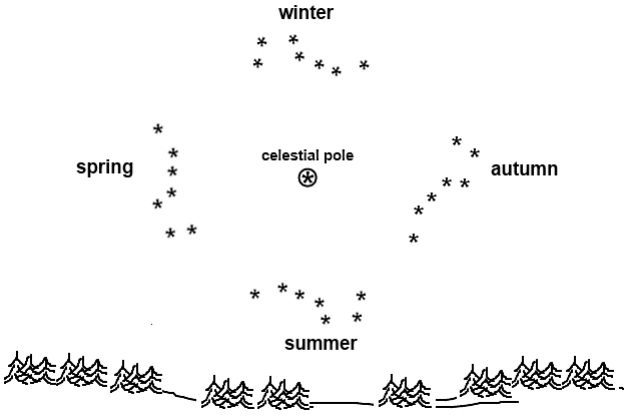


Figure 1. In Southern Finland in the Viking Age, the position of the Big Dipper in the early hours of the morning could be connected to the lifecycle of the celestial bear as presented in the Bear Year seasonal division: in the midsummer, the 'cradle' seemed to come closer to the ground, while in the midwinter it was at its highest position, farthest from the human realm. In the autumn, the cradle carried the bear upwards, and in the spring downwards. Note also that the asterism has been circumpolar for most of Europe for a very long time.

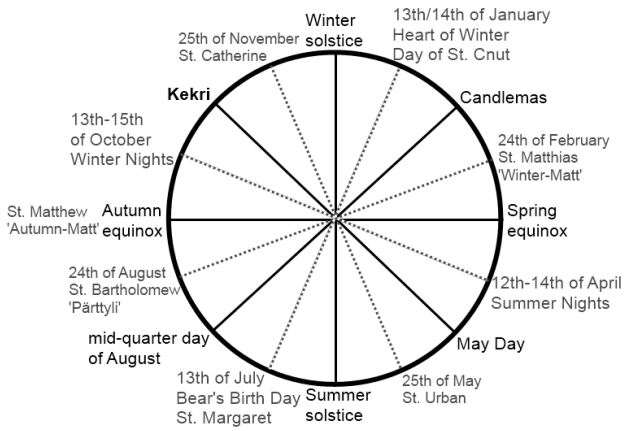


Figure 2. The eight-divided 'Bear Year' and its relation to the eight-divided solar year.

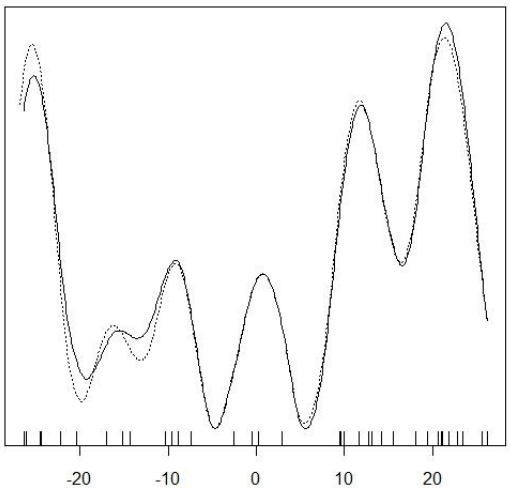


Figure 3. Many of the orientations of the axes and the doorway openings of Giants' Churches of Ostrobothnia, built 3000-1800 BCE, were towards the sunrises about one month after the equinoxes (the declinations of ca. +/-10 degrees) or the solstices (the declinations of ca. +/-20 degrees) . In the figure, the orientations of the western doorways of the enclosures are shown. According to Ridderstad (2015).

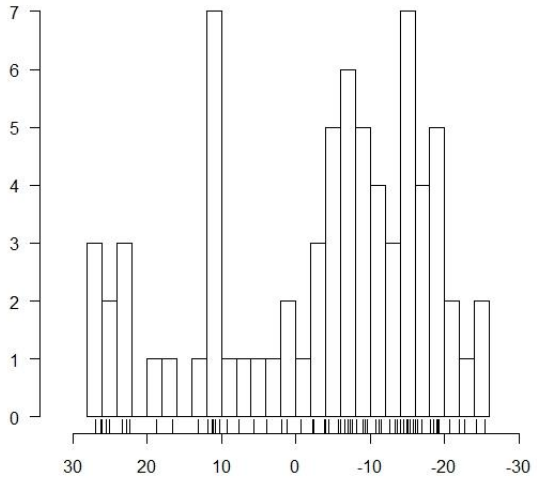


Figure 4. The Neolithic terraced houses or 'longhouses' of Ostrobothnia, Finland, most of which were built 3200-2500 BCE, also had many axis orientations towards the sunrises of mid-April. The doorways were placed at the ends of the house and thus faced the sunrises indicated by the axial orientations. According to Ridderstad (2016a).

3. THE BEAR AS THE GOVERNOR OF SEASONS

It is usually assumed that the earliest calendars of the Finno-Ugric hunter-gatherers were based on the lunar cycle. However, in addition to the solar Julian-Gregorian calendar, there is only evidence of an indigenous Finnic lunisolar calendric system(s) that can be traced back to the Iron Age.

From folklore it is know that the Finns had twelve or thirteen months in their year, which indicates that the folk calendar was a lunisolar calendar with an intercalation system: occasionally, an extra month called *vaahtokuu* was inserted after the month *helmikuu* in winter (Vilkuna, 1950: 55). In the present Gregorian system, helmikuu is the Finnish name for February.

On the other hand, the ancient Finnish year started on the festival *kekri* in late autumn, close to the present All Saints' Day. Kekri was preceded (or in some regions apparently followed) by a period of eleven or twelve days called *jakoaika*, a 'division time' (Vilkuna, 1950: 293). Obviously, the twelve days correspond to the difference between the lengths of one solar year and twelve synodic lunar months. It thus seems that kekri was originally a festival determined by a lunisolar calendar and that it was meant to be celebrated always on the same day of the solar year. Thus, kekri may have originally been a solar festival, and may even have been attached to the mid-quarter day of November, the

Celtic Samhain. However, kekri probably precedes any Celtic influence by thousands of years: the word *kekri* comes from *kekräj*, which is an Indo-European loan word from around 2000 BCE meaning a wheel or a cycle (Koivulehto, 2000; Parpola, 2005; note that around the same period, also the Indo-European word *sammas* meaning the world pillar was loaned). The Finnish word *kehrä*, the disk of the sun, is of the same root as *kekri* (Koivulehto, 2000). Kekri was thus the festival where the wheel of the solar year had turned and the cycle was to start anew.

Both folklore and the oldest preserved Finnish wooden calendar staffs reveal that the Finnic peoples had yet another ancient division of the year: the year was divided into two halves by two 'Bear Days'. The Midwinter or the Turning Day of the Bear on the 13th of January, and the Midsummer or the Birthday of the Bear on the 13th of July. It was believed that the bear, who went to its winter sleep on the St. Matthew's Day on the autumn equinox and woke up on the feast day of St. Matthias, 'Winter-Matt' on the 24th of February, turned from one side to another on the Midwinter (or in Christian times, on the feast day of St Henry) and said "Yö puolessa", "Half of the night has passed" (Vilkuna, 1950: 33, 266). It is interesting to note that during the long northern midwinter nights, the Big Dipper could be seen to move almost a full circle around the celestial pole, turning from one side to another.

The two Bear Days, which in the Gregorian system happen only some weeks after the shortest and longest nights of the year, coincide with the times of the annual temperature minimum and maximum in Finland (Vilkuna, 1950: 183-184). In the Julian folk calendar staffs, the Bear Days were fixed, but originally they would have been lunarly or lunisolarly determined.

The two halves of the Bear Year can be seen to have been further divided into two by the Summer Nights (Finn. *suviyöt*) on the 12th-14th of April and the Winter Nights (Finn. *talviyöt*) on the 13th-15th of October. The fact that both of these calendric marker days lasted three days probably points to their lunar calendric origin: the fullest phase of the moon can be seen to last about three nights.

In Figure 2, the relation of the Bear Year to the eight-divided solar year can be seen. This ancient Indo-European concept of an eight-divided solar year was in use for example among the Celts and the Balts. Interestingly, the many folk beliefs related to the bear that were connected to the days that coincided with the mid-points of the two Bear Days and the Summer and Winter Nights indicate that the idea of the eight-divided year had been applied also to the Bear Year in Finland (Ridderstad 2013). It is difficult to say, however, how old this system was compared to the Indo-European year that started on kekri. It could be as recent as the fixing of the Bear Days into the Julian solar year, or as old as the idea of the wheel of the year among the Finnic peoples.

A calendric system corresponding to the Finnic Bear Year was also in use in Scandinavia, but without any known connection to the bear – however, that is not to say that a connection like that could never have existed. On the contrary: for example the Danish royal house seems to have embraced a legend that traced the origin of the Danish kings to the bloodline of bears (e.g., Shepard & Sanders, 1985: 129). Similar stories, the so-called Bear's Son Tales, as well as the bear as the central character of an important annual festival can be found all around Europe (Frank, 2008; Frank, this Volume).

An annual seasonal division, where a bear was connected to both or one of the main seasons, usually to the summer half of the year (cf. the Finnic Birthday of the Bear) existed among many other Northern Eurasian peoples, too (Konakov, 1994). For example, for the Komi the period from the 22nd of March to the 27th of April, i.e. the period around the Finnish Summer Nights, was the Bear month. For some of the Finno-Ugric peoples, the elk seems to have governed the winter half of the year and the Big Dipper was seen as an elk (Konakov, 1994). There is some indication that the Big Dipper may have been seen as part of a celestial elk among the Finns, too, in addition to the other possible interpretations discussed above. Therefore, it is curious that for the Finnic peoples, the Midwinter was also a Bear Day and not, for example, an Elk Day. Perhaps the relative importance of the bear was the result of interaction between the ancestors of the Finnic peoples and some earlier inhabitants of the area of Finland and the nearby regions.

4. THE ORIGINS OF THE BEAR YEAR TYPE OF SEASONAL CALENDAR IN FINLAND

The origin and age of the Bear Year seasonal calendric system is difficult to trace, but some observations can be made. Before the fixing of the locations of the Summer and Winter Nights in the Julian calendar, they would have corresponded to the full moons of the first summer and first winter months around the present April and May, and October and November in a lunar or lunisolar calendar. In a lunisolar calendar, the Winter Nights could have been for example the time of the first full moon or the full moon of the first full month after the autumn equinox. Similarly, the Summer Nights could have been determined in relation to the spring equinox. The Bear Days were also likely originally determined by the occurrence of a certain phase of the moon in the lunisolar calendar that was used by the Finnic peo-

ples before the introduction of the Julian system. For example the Midwinter or the Turning Day of the Bear could have been determined as the time of the full moon of the first full month after the winter solstice. It is difficult to say which one of the main solar days could have been used as the annual starter day in the above type of system. For the Scandinavians, the winter solstice seems to have been the starter; perhaps the Finnic peoples used kekri, if it indeed was a fixed solar day (as it seems based on the fixed annual preceding period of twelve days). In even earlier times, the Bear Days and the Summer and Winter Nights could have been determined using both the seasonal changes in the appearance of the asterism of the Big Dipper and the lunar phases.

As seen above, the idea of the bear as the governor of the seasons is wide-spread among the Finno-Ugric and other Northern Eurasian peoples, which may indicate that it is very old. However, considering the great age of the loan word kekri, also the interest in the solar year and the use of a lunisolar calendar must have a long history among the Finnic and Finno-Ugric peoples. Thus, if we wish to look for the origin of the Bear Year system, we should probably start in around 2000 BCE, which in Finland corresponds to the end of the Neolithic period.

Due to the ecological similarities experienced by the Northern cultures and the great antiquity of bear worship in Eurasian cultures (see Frank in this volume), the interest in the Big Dipper, and its connection to the Bear deity and the change of seasons in the said cultures can probably be traced to the Mesolithic or even to the Palaeolithic period (see Antonello in this Volume). Therefore, we may assume that when the word kekri and the concept of the wheel of the year were transmitted from the Indo-European cultures to the ancestors of the Finnic peoples in ca. 2000 BCE in the region between the Ural mountains and Finland, the bear was probably already worshiped and revered as the governor of the seasons in the cultures in this area and around it. Then, the concept of the Bear Days as they emerge in the context of the solar year and in a lunisolar calendric system of the kind described above could have been developed among the ancestors of the Finnic peoples. Or, when the Finno-Ugric peoples moved towards the area of Finland between ca. 2000 and 500 BCE, they could have adopted a Bear Year lunisolar calendric system from an earlier Paleoeuropean culture living in Finland. In the latter case, the connection of the Bear and the lunisolar year would likely be even older than ca. 4000 years.

It is very difficult to investigate the possible developments of the Bear Year suggested above. No written sources exist that would tell about the calendric history of the early Finno-Ugric peoples or the Paleoeuropean inhabitants of Finland. The latter, however, have left monuments that can be measured and their orientations investigated: the orientations of the houses, the long cairns and the huge stone enclosures known as Giants' Churches of the late Neolithic culture of Ostrobothnia can be examined to find traces of the calendric practices of their builders. Indeed, it turns out that both the houses and the Giants' Churches had many orientations towards the sunrises about one month after the solstices and/or the equinoxes (Ridderstad, 2015; 2016a; 2016b). In Figures 3 and 4, examples of these types of orientations are shown. The Bronze Age may have seen a massive depopulation of Finland, but interestingly, after that in the Early Roman Iron Age in Southern Finland, the orientations of the early Finno-Ugric graves show orientations towards the sunrises of mid-October (Ridderstad, 2016c). Unfortunately, most of the Iron Age burials in Finland were cremations, which have not left individual graves or monuments to be measured. It can be noted that some of the earliest Christian inhumation graves in Southern Finland show orientations towards the sunrises of mid-April, but these are problematic as that time of year also falls inside the Easter period (Ridderstad, 2016c).

It can be observed that especially orientations to the sunrises about one month after the equinoxes can also be observed in many other European Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments, for example megalithic graves (see, e.g. Hoskin, 2001; 2007; González-García and Costa-Ferrer, 2007; González-García, 2009) and Minoan palaces (Henriksson and Blomberg, 2013). The possible connections of these to the orientations of the Finnish monuments and to the seasonal significance of the calendric marker days related to bear cults remain an open question.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that the role of the bear as a calendric deity echoes its general importance among the Finnic and Finno-Ugric peoples. The Finnic calendric system of the late Iron Age had several layers of different ages; the Bear Year seasonal system was one of these. The connection of the Bear Days and lunisolar calendars can be traced at least to the Neolithic period, while the seasonal calendric significance of the bear is probably much older and may originally have been based on the seasonal positions of the Big Dipper.

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