

Ex Ovo Omnia: Where Does the Balto-Finnic Cosmogony Originate? The Etiology of an Etiology

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The idea that the cosmos was born from several eggs laid by a bird is found in the oldest Balto-Finnic myths that have been preserved thanks to the conservative form of *runo* song. Different versions of the Balto-Finnic creation song were known among the Estonians, the Finns of Ingria, the Votes, and the Karelians.¹ The Karelian songs were used by Elias Lönnrot in devising his redaction of the myth in the beginning of the epic *Kalevala*.

Mythical thinking is concerned with questions about the origin of the world and its phenomena; etiologies provide the means to discover and transmit these secrets and to hold magical power over everything. The “quest for origins” has also determined the research interests of generations of scholars employing a diachronic approach. The evolutionist school has tried to reconstruct the primary forms of religion, while the structuralist school of folklore has attempted to discover the basic structures that lie latent behind the narrative surface. The etymologies of Max Müller were aimed at explaining the origin of myths; the geographic-historical or Finnish school once aimed at establishing the archetypes of different items of folklore. That endeavor to elucidate the primary forms and origins of phenomena as the main focus of scholarship can be seen as an expression of neo-mythical thinking. It has become clear that the etiological approach provides too narrow a frame for scholarship, since it cannot explain the meanings of folklore for tradition-bearers themselves, the processes of its transmission in a society, and other aspects that require synchronic interpretation.

Thanks to long traditions of research, a large body of knowledge has been accumulated about the prehistory of Balto-Finnic *runo* songs and their relationship with the oral traditions of other peoples. In this article, I ask

¹ For a survey of Balto-Finnic redactions of the song, see M. Puhvel 1971.

what we know about the origin of the cosmogonic myth of the “Creation song.” Some previous research is also reconsidered.

The corresponding Estonian creation song has been recorded in more than 150 variants. One of the shortest among them is the following text, which presents no more than the fragmentary core of the myth:

Päasukeine, päevalindu	Swallow, the sun-bird
Tei ta pesa söödu pääle,	Built a nest in the field,
Munne kolmi muna sisse.	Laid three eggs in it.
Üits sai aoss alla ilma	One became dawn to the nether world,
Teine päevas pääle ilma,	The second became sun to the upper world,
Kolmas sai kuusse taevasse. ²	The third became moon into the sky.

In versions from western Estonian coastal parishes the bird comes from the sea, flies to “our” paddock, and builds a nest in the bush or a tree. Sometimes the creation begins from an apple tree and an apple that has dropped into the waters. It is probable that the sea here designates the same primordial ocean as in Karelian songs, and we cannot exclude the possibility that the apple tree is a reflection of the cosmic world tree (which can be found in the imagery of some other Estonian mythical songs). The following is a fairly typical example of Estonian *runo* songs in which the epic plot is presented through lyrical elaboration:

Mõistke mehed, mõistke naesed,—	Guess men, guess women—
Meri meie õue all,	The sea is near our yard,
Õunapuu saare keskeel.	An apple-tree in the middle of the island.
Tuli aga tuul ja tõstis tormi,	The wind came and brought the storm,
Akkas õuna õõtsutama,	It started shaking the apple,
Õõtsutas õuna meresse.	Until it shook it into the sea.
Merest aga tõusis kirju lindu;	A many-colored bird rose from the sea,
Lendas meie kopelisse,	It flew to our paddock,
Meie kopli kuuse otsa	To the fir-tree growing in our paddock
Akkas pesa tegema	It started to build a nest
Riegudest ja raagudest,	Of branches and twigs,
Maa murusta, puu purusta,	Of grass and pieces of wood,

² H I 2, 129 (3). Recorded in Halliste parish, North Estonia in 1889. Reference is to the collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives in Tartu.

Meie metsa lehtedest. Tegi kuu ja tegi kaks,	Of leaves of our forest. It built the nest for a month, for two months,
Paari päeva kolmat kuud. Siis akkas mune munema; Munes kuu ja munes kaks, Siis akkas poegi auduma; Audus kuu ja audus kaks. Siis akkas poegi jägama;	A couple of days of the third month. Then it started to lay eggs, For a month, for two months, Then it started to hatch young birds For a month, for two months. Then it started to give the young birds away,
Jägas kuu ja jägas kaks, Ühe andis armuss alla ilma,	For a month, for two months. It gave one graciously (?) to the nether world,
Teise pilvess peale ilma,	The second became a cloud above the sky,
Kolmas koidu tähesse, Nel'las põhja naelasse, Viies vankriss vaatama, Kuies kuuss kumama,	The third became the Morning Star, The fourth the North Star, The fifth became the Great Bear, The sixth started to shine as the moon,
Seitsmes sõelas seisema. Sest me ajad arvame Ja omad tunnid tunneme. ³	The seventh to stand as the Pleiades. Thus can we tell the time And know the hours.

The number three is very common in Estonian songs: often three bushes (blue, red, and golden) are mentioned, the bird lays three eggs, the hatching lasts for three months. Besides this song, there are only a few traces of the myth in Estonian folklore. There was a traditional saying about the period between the old and the new moon, when no moon is visible; people observed that “the moon is in the nest” (*kuu on pesas*), expressing the idea that the moon is born in a nest, time and again. The sun was also said to be in the nest during solstices. A couple of prose redactions of the myth of cosmic eggs in the Estonian Folklore Archives originate from folklore collectors who were, most probably, acquainted with *Kalevala* and inspired by this epic.

On the basis of different versions of the Balto-Finnic songs, Matti Kuusi has restored the common mythical story: “A heavenly bird (an eagle?) flies above the sea and looks for a place to build a nest. Having found it (a piece of sod?) the bird lays one or three eggs. The wind rolls them into the water and the sun, the moon and the stars (and heaven and earth?) are born of them” (Kuusi 1963:68). Also found in Karelian songs is a motif of the

³ H II 2, 200. Recorded in Karuse parish, West Estonia in 1889.

demiurge Väinämöinen uttering the words of creation that makes the earth and the sky from the shells of that egg.

The Balto-Finnic cosmogonic myth has many international parallels. They are so numerous that it may initially seem that myths about cosmic egg(s) belong to the common traditions of mankind. An egg is a symbol of latent life force, fertility, and resurrection in many cultures, and the word denoting an egg often has sexual connotations. **Muna* (“egg”) already had the parallel meaning “testicle” in the Proto-Uralic language (Rédei 1986:285). The Vedic and Sanskrit word *aṇḍa* is also ambiguous, denoting egg, testicle, and sperm (Böhtlingk and Roth 1855:86). In the dream omens of Estonian folklore the egg is also connected with fertility: if a young wife dreams of finding a bird’s nest, it foretells pregnancy.⁴ However, belief in the cosmogonic function of an egg has not been found everywhere; there are, rather, four broad areas where myths about cosmic egg(s) belong to indigenous oral traditions: 1) the Balto-Finnic region; 2) the Eastern Mediterranean lands; 3) South Asia (China, Tibet, Indo-China, India); and 4) the Malay Archipelago, Oceania, and Australia.⁵

Geographically, the closest parallels to the Balto-Finnic cosmogonic myth can be found in the folklore of other Finno-Ugric peoples. In a Lappish creation story, a duck lays five eggs upon a blade of grass on the ocean; vegetation, fish, birds, a man, and a woman hatch out of these eggs (Ajkhenvald et al. 1989:157). In Zyrjan (Komi) mythology the two dualistic demiurges Jen and Omol are born of two eggs laid by a bird. They break the four additional eggs and thus create sun and moon together with good and evil spirits. In Mordvinian folklore three goddesses or mother-spirits are born of three eggs laid by a bird on the cosmic birch-tree (Napolskikh 1991:29). The Uralic origin of these myths is doubtful because parallels in the Ob-Ugrian and Samoyed mythology have not been found.

The Balto-Finnic creation myth is strikingly unique in Europe, with the above-mentioned Finno-Ugric parallels the only clear traces of the egg cosmogony in recent European folklore. Vladimir Toporov has discussed the hypothetical Russian parallels in his reconstruction of the myth of the world egg (1967). He relies upon some motifs in magic tales that describe the transformations of kingdoms of copper, silver, and bronze into eggs (balls, apples) (Aarne and Thompson 1961:no. 301). Eggs and round objects

⁴ E 42182 (18). Recorded in Rakvere parish, North Estonia.

⁵ Such an overall picture can be drawn on the basis of previous research and the personal knowledge of the author of this article; it is possible, however, that more “core areas” should be added to this list in the future.

are universal symbols in tales of magic, and contraction is one of the basic rules applied in their artistic language (Holbek 1987:444-46). Attempts to draw conclusions about Proto-Indo-European mythology on such a basis cannot be convincing. As Toporov states (1967:82), explicit formulations of the myth of the cosmic egg have not been found in Slavic folklore. The Latvian version has turned out to be the falsification of a folklore collector, and the myth of the cosmic egg cannot be found in Lithuanian folklore either. The closest Lithuanian parallels are some dualistic legends in which the world is created from an apple floating in the primordial ocean.⁶

Different versions of the myth of the world egg occur in the mythology of ancient Egypt. According to the priests of Hermopolis, Thoth, the god of wisdom and the moon-god, was the true demiurge who hatched the world-egg on the primordial ocean in the shape of the divine ibis-bird. The sun-god Ra was born of the primeval egg (Viaud 1989:27). A few traces of the myth of the cosmic egg can be found in the Phoenician traditions described by the Jewish philosopher Philo and some Greek authors (see Delaporte 1989:82). The oldest Greek cosmogony, Hesiod's *Theogony*, does not mention the cosmic egg; it seems to be a rather specific trait of the Orphic tradition. The speculations of the Orphics about the origin of the world include the motif of the cosmic egg, expressing the notion of implicit totality. The demiurge Eros, Phanes, or Protogonos was said to be born from it.⁷ The Orphic cosmogony has been preserved only in fragments and is a metaphysical system rather than a primitive or popular mythology. It is noteworthy that this system has some parallels with the Vedic and epic cosmogonies of India, for example the motif that the world emerges from sexual desire, or passion (*kāma* in India).⁸ But it is probable that the concept of cosmic egg was borrowed from the traditions of other peoples just like many other pieces of Greek mythology, and that it did not emerge from the Indo-European heritage.

To emphasize the Indo-European origin of the myth, many authors have cited ancient Indian texts (*upaniṣads*, *purāṇas*, *Manu-Smṛti*, *Mahābhārata*). However, the oldest source, the *Rig Veda Samhitā*, does not prove that the myth about the cosmic egg was known among the Aryan tribes who invaded India. This collection of 1028 hymns introduces diverse

⁶ Kuusi 1956:56; personal communication with the Lithuanian folklorist Dr. Lina Būgienė.

⁷ Lebedev 1989:38-39, Bianchi 1987, Paladino 1987.

⁸ Rig Veda (= RV) X, 129. See O'Flaherty 1981.

cosmogonic myths, most of them collected in the last and most recent (tenth) mandala, and several presented as fragments of knowledge that lie hidden behind the verses. Two passages formulate the idea of a golden germ, womb, seed, or embryo (*hiranyagarbha*) floating in the primeval water:

That which is beyond the sky and beyond this earth, beyond the gods and the Asuras—what was that first embryo that the waters received, where all the gods together saw it?

He was the one whom the waters received as the first embryo, when all the gods came together. On the navel of the Unborn was set the One on whom all the creatures rest.
(RV X, 82, 5-6; O’Flaherty 1981:36)

In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and this sky. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
(RV X, 121, 1; O’Flaherty 1981:27)

The idea of the golden embryo that conceals cosmic potency precedes the later notion of *Brahmāṇḍa* (“Brahma-egg”), meaning the implicit primeval existence of the world and the whole universe as totality. The demiurge Prajapati, who was later replaced by Brahma, was said to be born of this primordial egg. The fact that it is the abstract god Brahma who is connected with the cosmic egg gives evidence of new developments in mythology in the period of the decline of the Vedic gods and the ascent of the gods of Brahmanism and epic mythology.

An explicit formulation of belief in the cosmic egg can be found in later commentaries to the Samhitas of the Vedas. In *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* (XI, 1, 6, 1-11) the primordial golden germ is replaced by the golden egg (*hiraṇmaya aṇḍa*) floating on the ocean and giving birth to the demiurge Prajapati (Weber 1964:831-32). The cosmogony of *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* (III, 19, 1-3) also relies upon the concept of an egg (Radhakrishnan 1994: 399): “In the beginning this (world) was non-existent. It became existent. It grew. It turned into an egg. It lay for the period of a year. It burst open. Then came out of the egg-shells two parts, one of silver, the other of gold. That which was of silver is this earth; that which was of gold is the sky.” These texts probably date from between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE and are about five hundred years later than the Rig Veda Samhita.

Mārtāṇḍa (“dead egg”) is an occasional parallel name of the Vedic sun-god Vivasvant. Sometimes the expression is rendered as “born of a dead egg” or “egg’s son,” but these are not literal translations. The dead egg

probably denotes a bird-egg as opposed to a living egg, a testicle (Böhtlingk and Roth 1868:880). Indian sources do not assert *Mārtāṇḍa* to be born of an egg but rather to be as the last son of the goddess Aditi. Karl Hoffmann interprets *Mārtāṇḍa* as an abortion or miscarriage of Aditi (1957:92-93). *Mārtāṇḍa* as an appellation of the egg can also be understood as a metaphor. The sun resembles an egg, but such a comparison does not prove the existence of a myth that the sun has been born of an egg. Metaphors of that kind referring to the sun (day-egg, sky-egg, and so forth) can occur in the folklore of peoples who do not share the belief in the cosmic egg. Nevertheless, stories about the sun's birth from an egg-yolk can be inspired by the objects' apparent similarity, and metaphors can sometimes be seen as potential or latent myths.

W. B. Henning (1954) has written about the reflection of the cosmic egg and a hatching bird in Avesta (Yasht 13, 2-3). However, his rendering is based on a single obscure expression and does not derive from the Gathas, the oldest Iranian sources. This piece of evidence is too doubtful to claim the proto-Aryan origin of the myth and to connect it with Finnish folklore, as has been done by Pentti Aalto, who regards the figure of the bird as an exclusive parallel between the two traditions (1987). (As we saw, the bird is common in the creation myths of the Eastern Mediterranean lands as well.) It is probable that the Aryan tribes who invaded India did not know the myth of the cosmic egg. The later myths of Brahmanda are based on the RigVedic concept of *hiranyagarbha* that Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty calls "a truly pregnant term" with complex connotations. She explains that the second element of the compound means "womb," "seed," "embryo," or "child" in the Rig Veda and later comes to mean "egg" (1981:26-27). It is possible that the myth of the world egg, and other cosmogonic myths that are expounded in the Sanskrit sources, have been influenced by the indigenous oral traditions of India.⁹ During the period when the Aryan invaders settled in the basin of the Ganges river, they adopted several non-Aryan ideas and religious observances.

The myth of the cosmic egg is found in the folklore of several peoples of eastern Asia and Indo-China. The basic motifs of the Indian and Chinese myths coincide: the demiurge is asserted to be born of the primeval egg. In China this divine being P'an-ku was said to be the forefather of all creatures, just like Prajapati in India (Yuan Ke 1965:41-42). P'an-ku was the primeval giant whose body-parts make up the material world, an origin that connects

⁹ For the Proto-Indo-European cosmogonies, see Mallory and Adams 1997:129-30 and J. Puhvel 1987.

him with Purusha, the primeval man of the Vedic mythology (RV X, 90) and with other proto-men of Indo-European anatomical cosmologies.

There are also essentially different versions of the myth of the cosmic egg in Asia. In the folklore of some of the peoples, the number of primeval eggs is more than one (as in Balto-Finnic songs). In the epic songs of the Miaos who live in China, two gigantic birds are born of eggs and hatch out earth and sky (Jia Zhi 1987:374). Several egg cosmogonies are known among the tribal communities of Assam. According to a Bodo-Kachari myth, the Great Lord created two birds whose three eggs gave birth to spirits, trees, and procreators of mankind. In Karbi folklore the mythical bird *wo plakpi* laid several eggs out of which were born the progenitors of different peoples and tribes of Assam. In Dimasa creation myth gods, spirits, and ghosts are born out of the seven primordial eggs (Datta et al. 1994:39). Complex and elaborately detailed cosmogonic myths can be found in the sacred texts of the Bon religion in Tibet. An offshoot of the ethnic shamanistic religion, Bon competed with and confronted Buddhism for centuries. The two religious traditions share many common elements, and in philosophy the Buddhist influence on Bon is remarkable; however, Bon also has its own special features such as its cosmogonic lore. Bon literary sources relate diverse myths about the origin of gods, demons, humans, and the realms of the world. Sometimes the number of cosmic eggs varies within the same text, the most common numbers being “two,” “five,” and “nine” (Karmay 1975). The cosmogonic doctrines of Bon seem to be genuinely Tibetan; only the dualistic tendency in myths—the oppositions light vs. darkness, good vs. evil, gods vs. demons, and the like—refers to the probable influence of Iranian religious sources.

Different myths about cosmic egg(s) were known in the Malay Archipelago, Australia, and the islands of the South Seas as far as the Americas. There are etiological legends about the birth of heavenly bodies, earth, and the first human beings from eggs. The motif that seems to be most well-known—the birth of the demiurge (Tangaroa, Tangaloo, Ta’arua) from the primeval egg—corresponds to the traditions of Asia.¹⁰

Finally, let us return to the Balto-Finnic cosmogonic myth that has often been regarded as an ancient borrowing of Oriental origin. There are, however, several points that contradict this theory. The Balto-Finnic songs do not include the motif of the birth of the demiurge from an egg that is central in India and in some Chinese myths; rather, they present a very different version of a bird whose eggs are transformed into heavenly bodies. There seems to be some kind of affinity between the Balto-Finnic myths and

¹⁰ Luquet 1989:449, 457, 464, 469; Alpers 1970:51-54.

those of Tibet, Assam, and some regions of China, while the Indo-European (Indian) version differs widely from them. All of this makes the possible dynamics of borrowing quite mysterious.

Such a central myth as the one explaining the origin of the whole cosmos could hardly be adopted through some occasional folklore contact. If the Balto-Finnic myth about the marvelous bird and its eggs is a borrowing, it should have been borrowed from some ethnic group with whom the Baltic Finns had lasting historical contacts. Who could they be? They probably were not the Indo-Europeans, as the Indo-European origin of the myth cannot be definitively established. Cosmic eggs are known in both the Greek (Orphic) and in Indian traditions, but both cases could have been inspired by the myths of neighboring peoples or the local mythological substratum. We cannot refer to the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European heritage and assert that the Baltic, Slavic, Celtic, and Germanic peoples must have known the myth about the cosmic eggs as well. No reliable data in folklore or literary traditions have been discovered to support such a claim.

The Balto-Finnic cosmogonic myth can be dated to the period antedating contact between Asia and Europe via the Silk Road. The common form of the *runo*-song enables us to date it to the first millennium BCE. The prose versions of the myth must have been generally known even before the songs were composed. The scope of variation of different redactions of the Balto-Finnic songs is so remarkable that there is no need to look for one common archetype, a single original form. Martin Puhvel understands the Estonian swallow-song as a basically independent creation, contending that the Estonian and Finnish songs “have fundamentally nothing in common beyond the basic concept of creation of cosmic bodies from bird-eggs” (1971:23). True, there are similarities in the composition of the Balto-Finnic songs as shown by Matti Kuusi (1956:83). However, we can suggest that singers of different tribes and localities created their own versions of the songs now and again, as they transformed the sacred etiological lore into the poetic language of *runo*-song.

Among the numerous petroglyphs near Lake Äänisjärvi in Karelia are some images that can be connected with the Balto-Finnic cosmogonic myth, an interpretation arrived at by the leading expert on the petroglyphs, K. D. Laushkin. One petroglyph depicts a bird who lays an egg that gives birth to the sun and constellations. These pieces of art have been dated to sometime in the period between the middle of the third millennium and 1850 BCE (Laushkin 1962:277-80; Sawwateyev 1984:119). Likewise, it cannot be mere coincidence that some Lappish, Mordvinian, and Komi cosmogonies are based on motifs associated with cosmic eggs. These traditions should be connected with the mythic lore of the Estonian, Finnish, and Karelian

“Creation Song.” The Finno-Ugric myths most probably derive from a common heritage and can thus be dated to the third millennium BCE at the latest. Birds and waterfowl are among the most recurrent mythological motifs of Finno-Ugrians and in Northern Eurasia in general (Antanaitis 1998:63). There is another widespread Uralic cosmogonic myth about a water-bird who dives to the bottom of the primordial ocean and brings back some soil to make the earth (Napolskikh 1989).

The Balto-Finnic cosmogonic myth can thus be regarded as an indigenous oral tradition of the region where it has been preserved. The possibility cannot be excluded that the myth is a borrowing from the Proto-European tribes who were later assimilated by the Baltic Finns. The belief in the cosmic egg was probably part of the mythology of Europe before the Indo-European invasion, as shown by Marija Gimbutas (1982:101-7). Works by Uku Masing (1985) and Vladimir Napolskikh (1991) point in the same direction: a possible substratum of the folklore of Proto-European peoples that can be recognized in the Balto-Finnic oral traditions. Thus we are dealing with a remnant of the mythology of the European Stone Age, cosmogonic knowledge that has been transmitted through the millennia.¹¹

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