

The Skiing groom

Skiing in Finland's national Epics "the Kalevala" and in the poem collection "the Kanteletar"

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The Kalevala

The Kalevala is Finland's national Epics. The Kalevala and the poems of the Kanteletar were collected mostly in the district of Karelia during 1830's-1840's by Elias Lönnroth.

The happenings in the Kalevala date back to the Stone Age (in Finland 500 BC – 1300 AD). It handles the mythological life in Finland - full of adventures!

Characters of Kalevala

The masculine main characters of Kalevala are Väinämöinen, Joukahainen, Ilmarinen and Lemminkäinen. Northern Finland was ruled by a woman: Louhi (flogh), the dame of North Farm. She had beautiful daughters, who men came to propose even from southern Finland. The most famous skiing poem, Lemminkäinen skiing an elk, describes this event (poems XIII and partially XIV)

Ahti Lieto Lemminkäinen was

"lad of the Island, that reckless son of Lempi

grew up in a grand home

at his dear mother's

at the head of a very large bay,

in a cove in Faraway Headland"

(X:2-7)

Lemminkäinen grew up in a good, rather wealthy, solicitous home. In the beginning of the poem, he's called "veitikkä", which is a gentle expression of a young prankster. Despite the good basis, the development of his character could have gone better:

"But he went a little astray,

got into trouble because of his ways:

he was always around the women,

visiting all night to the delight of those virgins,

dancing with girls with luxuriant hair."

(X:15-19)

Quite a womanizer. About his looks is said: "the handsome man with a far-roving mind". He was already married when he went to his wooing trip to the North. He had a gorgeous wife of high repute from his own village, Kyllikki, who had been proposed from as far as Estonia and Ingria. Lemminkäinen had stolen Kyllikki to himself. Kyllikki's family was great, so without stealing, Lemminkäinen wouldn't have had a change to marry her.

The marriage was peaceable at first.

"spent all his time

with the young maiden

he himself did not go to the wars
nor did Kyllikki gad about"
(XI:4-6)

Lemminkäinen even extended his house after his mother's advice. The quarrel erupted when Kyllikki once gad about when Lemminkäinen was lingering over night on his fishing trip. Lemminkäinen "got angry at that, got irked at that, was furious at that for a long time". Finally, pleading to marital dissidence, he decided to get himself a new wife, one of the daughters of the dame of North Farm.

*"I am setting out for the houses of North Farm
for the fields of the children of Lapland
to ask for gold pieces,
to demand silver pieces"
(XI:73-75)*

Lemminkäinen's mother tried to convince her boy from leaving, but when he finally took off, he managed to reach the houses of the North Farm despite all obstacles. A demon helped Lemminkäinen by closing the watchdogs' mouths, so that Lemminkäinen got past them. He demanded the dame of the North Farm:

*"Now bring your daughter here,
the loveliest of the bevy of virgins,
the fairest of those with luxuriant hair"
(XIII:18-20)*

Dame of the North Farm wasn't going to give her daughter to frivolous Lemminkäinen. She knew about his marriage and pointed it out, but Lemminkäinen told he'd get "a better woman here". Dame of North Farm put strict conditions to the marriage to get rid of the suitor. First she demanded Lemminkäinen to ski down a demon's (Hiisi) elk. The elk was bewitched, so the task was extremely demanding:

"The mistress of North Farm said:
I am certainly not giving my girl
to good-for-nothing men
to do-nothing fellows.
Only sue for my girls
Inquire about the ones with flowers in their hair
After you have skied down the Demon's elk
Beyond the Demon's fields"
(XIII:21-28)

So off to skiing he goes. But with what skis? "There is no left ski for pushing with, no right ski to stamp the heel on", he thought. Soon he found a smith in his mansion nearby. To hunt down the elk, he had at least a spear, crossbow and bolts with him:

*"Now though the spear is tipped,
all the bolts in order,
the crossbow strung"
(XIII:36-39)*

Construction of skis

Lemminkäinen's skis were made by Lyylikki Kauppi, a smith who lived in Lapland. "Make me nice skis, shape me fine right-hand skis", bade Lemminkäinen, and Lyylikki started working. Lemminkäinen had to wait for the next year, maybe late winter, until he got to carry out the first assigned mission.

*"Lyylikki, a shaper of left skis,
Kauppi, maker of right skis,
Fashioned the left ski during the autumn,
Shaped the right ski during the winter"
(XIII:69-70)*

Ancient skis were built by separating wood from "Lyly"-pine. Opening was struck with an axe, and the hole was stretched with various tools. According to Hugo Sandberg, a suitable pine was found between wet and dry terrain, at the edge of so-called "vesivalo-jänkä". "Lyly" is the convex lower side of a curved pine, where the tree's grains are more stiff and thoroughly resinous and hard. When separated, the grains were left intact, glasslike and hard (Nikkilä s.41).

Treatment of the ski's bottom side

A ski made in such a way had a basic slide created by the smooth surface of the grains. More slide was added by greasing the bottom of the ski. One of the best substances for that was the grease from a bear's paw ("pättäre"). Other animal fat was also used. Pig's fat is mentioned in Kanteletar. (II:330:18)

Grip has usually been generated by attaching a piece of animal's skin on the bottom. In some ancient skis, there are holes on the sides for attaching the skin. A favoured material was the skin from reindeer's or elk's leg. Nahka on kiinnitetty pohjaan myötäkarvaan siten, että potkaistaessa syntyy vastakarvaan pito ja suksea luistatettaessa myötäkarvaan luisto. Usein kiinnityskohta lovettiin, jolloin nahka painui suksenpohjan tasalle (Nikkilä s.41)

Lemminkäinen's skis were greased with reindeer's fat:

*"He greases the skis with fat,
greased them thickly with reindeer fat"
(XIII:71-72)*

So there wasn't leather on the bottom of Lemminkäinen's right ski, because it was also greased. There isn't reference about the possible groove on his left ski in Kalevala.

Odd skis

Lemminkäinen skied with odd skis. Odd skis are regarded as a special form of [botnic (?)] skis (Hanki kantaa kulkijaa). The other, typically the left ski, is a long "gliding ski", and the other a short "kicking ski". Gliding ski is called "Lyly" (also "lylysuksi", "paljakka"), and the kicking ski is called "kalhu" (also "kalhutin", "koipipotka", "sivakka", "potakka", "potaska", "potasma", "koipisivakka", "savek"). The variety of names in Finnish language is the result of regional differences. The gliding ski was particularly curvy and tail-heavy. It was between 280 and 350

centimetres long. The length of the kicking ski was usually about two thirds of that of the gliding ski.

The creation of odd skis was probably inspired by the desire to take advantage of both the good glide of a grooved ski and the grip of a leather-covered ski. The conventional way to ski with odd skis was to glide on the left ski while kicking with the right. It stressed the legs unevenly, but it's said that odd skis were especially good while climbing hills or skiing on a hard surface, for example on the tracks of a sleigh. Turning was easy on open country, but not so easy for example in a forest. The right leg had to be lifted high so that the end of the right ski didn't touch the ground when it was turned around. After that it was easy to turn the left ski next to the right.

There is no clear prehistorical evidence of the time when odd skis were developed. The increase of ornaments in Viking Age (800 – 1025AD) skis may be a proof of decoration of the gliding ski. Ornamented skis have almost always been found without a pair. The ski was not only a tool, but also an object of value. To find the right wooden material was challenging, and constructing the ski took its time. The price was relatively high, because Lyylikki Kauppi was a reasonably wealthy man judging by the fact that he lived in a mansion in an otherwise poor area. Odd skis were commonly used in reindeer hunting in northern parts of Finland in the 1850's. At that time, a good pair of skis was considered as valuable as a productive milk cow while dividing inheritance (Nikkilä p.37).

ski poles

Ancient ski poles were made of wood. The discs were carved from wooden discs or twigs. In Karelia and also other parts of Finland, one pole with a spear tip in its other end was widely used in hunting during the Iron Age. The pole was used on the left side, next to the gliding ski, and on the right side there was the kicking ski moving diagonally back and forth. A bow was hanging on the right shoulder. Karelian hunters used a pole made of rowan. The pole had a gnarly "porkka" instead of the disc. Rowan was a durable material that was needed when hunting a lynx or a wolf.

Lemminkäinen was on his wooing trip in Northland, and there it was a habit to ski using two poles. But the poem about the construction of poles gives an impression that only one pole was made for Lemminkäinen.

*"One day he carved a ski pole,
the next he carved a disk."
(XIII:70)*

However, in the later poems it's clear that Lemminkäinen used two poles. The spear he was carrying, the Karelian hunting tool, served as another pole. It's unravelled when Lemminkäinen loses his skis and poles (XIII:52-56). The pole had a price too: to order a pole from a smith, one had to first hunt down an otter and a fox. The price for Lemminkäinen's skis isn't told.

*"He made the left ski for pushing,
the right ski for stamping the heel on.
He got the shafts of the ski poles ready,
the disks fitted
The shaft of the pole cost an otterskin,
The disk a reddish foxskin."
(XIII:69-70)*

Lemminkäinen skiing the elk

Lemminkäinen was very temperamental, as was his skiing style.

*"Then the ruddy-cheeked rascal, that reckless Lemminkäinen,
pushed his left ski on the snow
like an adder in last year's withered grass,
shoved the bog-pine ski along
like a live snake."
(XIII:196-200)*

According to Hugo Sandberg, Lemminkäinen's skis were particularly good. When Lemminkäinen got to ski, his speed was incredible:

*"Fire spurted from the skis,
smoke from the tips of the poles"
(XIII:145-146)*

That speed was necessary, since a demon had given the elk the following advice:

*"Ski a man into a sweat,
especially Lemminkäinen!"
(XIII:82-83)*

The terrain was variable and demanding, occasionally even life-threatening:

*"He glided over hills, glided over dills,
he glided over the regions beyond the sea;
he skied over all the Demon's backwoods,
all the Grave Spirit's heaths, too,
skied along in front of the jaws of Death,
behind the Grave Spirit's farmstead."
(XIII:150-152)*

Lemminkäinen, of course, encountered numerous misfortunes on his journey. Sometimes the elk was totally lost from sight. After wandering for several days, he heard giggling of ladies. The elk had ran past and knocked down all kitchen utensils on the way. Following the women's advice, Lemminkäinen found the elk again and managed to catch it. He fastened the elk inside an oakwood pen, and praised himself, thinking of his future wife. The elk got mad, tore itself free and ran away.

*"Then the ruddy-cheeked rascal
now indeed grew angry and lost his temper,
got very angry and mad.
He skied after the elk"
(XIII:247-250)*

Now it was Lemminkäinen's turn to get mad. He started skiing after the elk again, but the skis broke as he kicked.

*"the left ski cracked at the strap,
the ski broke by the footplate,
the right ski broke off at the heel,
the spearlike pole broke off at the spike"
(XIII:52-56)*

And so the elk got away. Loss of the wonderful maid hurt at the same time. Lemminkäinen lost his skis and poles, and in a huff decided that he'll never again try to ski an elk or get a daughter of the North Farm for his wife. In these bitter feelings ends the 13th poem.

The skiing story still continues in the 14th poem, though. Time has passed, and Lemminkäinen has composed himself. He thinks of returning home, but also seriously considers continuing on his task. After pondering for a while, he makes up his mind and discouragement gives way to wholesome realism:

"whether he should give up the Demon's elks, go home
or keep on trying further,
should ski in leisurely fashion,
as a pleasure for the mistress of the forest"
(XIV:5-9)

But Lemminkäinen lost his skiing equipment on his previous journey. This time the skis come from Ukko, the supreme god himself.

"O ukko, god on high
or heavenly father!
Make me now reliable skis,
light skis"
(XIV:15-16)

The poem about begging skis is a long one. Several ancient forest spirits are mentioned, as well as gods and goddesses. He eventually wins their favour, and in the seventh skiing day, the elk is in sight again. The construction of skis isn't mentioned in this context.

"He pleased the mistress of the forest,
the master of the forest himself, too,
delighted all the virgins,
persuaded Tapio's maidens,
They made it run,
Drove the Demon's elk from its hiding place"
(XIV:236-243)

Lemminkäinen set the Demon's elk on his shoulders like a victorious hero. The skiing trip ended triumphantly – but the proposal didn't. The dame of the North Farm had more conditions for the marriage: Lemminkäinen was supposed to harness a demon's colt and fetch a swan from Death's river. That mission was his demise:

"That was the end of Lemminkäinen,
the death of the brave suitor,
in Death's dark river,
in the lower reaches below the Adobe of the Dead"
(XIV:456-460)

In the following poems, Lemminkäinen's mother manages to save his son from Death's Domain and Lemminkäinen escapes from the North. The hero wants to do battle, but his mother prevents it and sends her son abroad for three years.

More light from Kanteletar

The skiing story in Kalevala leaves a few things mysterious: Did Lemminkäinen's skis have a groove, and what was the price for the skis? Did he have competing suitors, and what was the Demon's elk actually like?

Kanteletar is a collection of folklore from the same region and time as Kalevala. The poems in Kanteletar describe mostly women's life, but it also has about 90 poems that describe men's environment. The following are examples related to skis or skiing.

In the second part of Kanteletar, there's a poem that describes a ski

"A ski is foot-kin"

(III:332)

At the same context, ski's maneuverability is praised:

"Great the ski that points"

(III:332)

There was a groove on the bottom of the "gliding ski". Tools made in the Iron Age made it possible. At least an axe, "tarvoin" and "tuura" were available. The price for the ski doesn't become clear in Kanteletar, either. In the third book, there's a poem 2 called "Lyylikin hiihdäntä". It gives more information about the groove:

*"Lykkäsi lyllyn lumelle,
olaspohjan ottamahan"*

(III:2,15-16)

This poem brings an interesting addition to the skiing events. In Kalevala, Lyylikki Kauppi is mentioned as a smith who made Lemminkäinen's first pair of skis. Kanteletar describes skiing the elk so that it's main character was the smith Lyylikki Kauppi himself. Lyylikki proves to be a good skier and manages to catch the elk. There are a few same verses in Lemminkäinen's skiing poem.

But Lyylikki Kauppi gets disappointed too: When he reaches the elk, he feels the bark of a spruce in his hand:

*"pää oli pantu mättähästä,
silvät lammin pulpukoista,
korvat lammin lumpehista,
sarvet raian haarukasta,
suonet kuivista kuloista,
sääret aian seipähjhistä,
selkä aian aiaksista,
muu runko lahosta puusta,
talja kuusen koskuesta"*

(KANT III:2, 93-102)

The whole "elk" had been made of wood and a magic spell had made it run. But what else could you expect from a Demon's elk? No wonder Lemminkäinen tied the moose with a maple tether. Hitting such an elk would surely have ruined a spear.

Who got the desired daughter of the North?

Kalevala describes numerous other suitors for the daughter of the North. Maidens of the North were beautiful and obviously good at housekeeping – or at least discipline, because the daughter of the North is asked to discipline the lazy:

*"Jok on jäykkä juoksullansa,
eli laiska laukullahan
sitä siimalla sivalla
rautaruoskalla ravahuta."
(II:337, 19-22)*

The other proposal trips don't include skiing. Daughters of the North were desired by the god Väinämöinen himself (who helped creating the world with Ukko), and his sparring partner Joukahainen. Dame of the North Farm asked these two for the Sampo. Forging of the Sampo is one of the most famous poems in Kalevala. Sampo was forged by Seppo Ilmarinen (XXIX), who eventually became the groom in the great wedding in the North. Lemminkäinen wasn't invited even as a guest:

*"You are not inviting the man with a far-roving mind,
that reckless Lemminkäinen,
because he is always quarrelsome,
a very skillful fighter;
he has done shameful things at weddings,
wrought great havoc at feasts"
(XVIII:190-194)*

Big parties like that can't be concealed, and uninvited guests arrived at the wedding. Lemminkäinen made an appearance and killed the host. Dame of the North took revenge on Lemminkäinen by burning his home. He set forth to retaliate, but Dame of the North made the temperature so cold that Lemminkäinen almost got frozen and had to return home.

In the end

Skiing is brought up once more in the final poem of Kalevala – though only figuratively. The narrator explains how he had learned this story at home and tells how he "skied" the song to his listeners.

*"But be that as it may,
I blazed a trail for singers,
blazed a trail, broke off tree tops,
broke branches, showed the way"
(XV:55-60)*

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