

# The Kalevala is The National Epic of Finland

Elias Lönnrot and his colleagues recorded these poetic songs of characters from myths and ancient tales. Steeped in magic, by turns dreamlike and dramatic, the Kalevala recounts a mythic history of the ancient Finns. Its heroes are the wise shaman, Vainamoinen, the skillful smith, Ilmarinen, and the feisty warrior, Lemminkäinen. Elias Lönnrot was a physician, teacher and the compiler of both Swedish and Finnish dictionaries.

But The Kalevala is not a typical epic of kings, knights and castles – its songs are a portrait of rural peasant life played out on a small pastoral stage of farmers, fishermen, and housewives in the marshes of Eastern Finland, stories of their interactions with one another, the spirit world, the natural world, and with their northern neighbors, the tribe of Pohjola.

Its narratives and wedding lays offer glimpses of an ordinary way of life that soon would vanish. It is an “epic” of individual quests resolved by impossible deeds, folk charms and magic spells, often in seeking wives, either by arrangement, by suit or by force. While much attention is given to the heroes – the women of the Kalevala are fascinating, often tragic characters as well. They don’t always want to be carried off or married – and some of the songs offer advice to new wives – how to not seem lazy and get along with In-Laws – and to husbands – to not be overly harsh and not leave visible marks for the neighbors to talk about! There are instructions for making beer, milking cows, hunting bears and many other ordinary tasks.



There are many fantastic beasts to be fought and a spirit world – the realm of Tuoni – the land of the dead, and the evil spirits of Hiisi. The shamanic witch, Louhi, is as evil and treacherous as anything Disney has produced – though she has lovely daughters which attract plenty of trouble.

*The Kalevala* transitioned from oral to written much more recently than the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic mythologies, such as Beowulf and the Edda. Because it was orally transmitted until the songs were recorded in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the stories themselves are generally distinct from other major cycles of mythology, but now and then a familiar element pops up. Lönnrot gathered and artificially wove together many Finnish oral folk songs to form an epic of several cycles. The first edition (1834) was composed of 32 Songs (Runes) and 12,078 lines. With the collection of more songs in the 1840’s, the final edition had 50 poems and 22,795 lines. The Finnish poetry is not of rhyme or rhythm, but of much alliteration, parallelism and repetition in four beat, eight syllable lines with every second line repeating the thought preceding.

Finland for much of its history was a part of either Sweden or Russia. The Kalevala is credited for supporting the Finnish national awakening that ultimately led to Finland’s independence from Russia in 1917. The annual celebration of Kalevala Day on February 28<sup>th</sup> is an official flag-raising day in Finland, and simultaneously the Day of Finnish culture.

Since the first edition in 1835, the Kalevala has now been translated into more than 50 languages and has been influential on the works of major authors from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* – It was the Kalevala that inspired him to create his own English epic, *The Lord of the Rings*. The Kalevala’s stories have inspired many artists; and composers, in particular, Johan Sibelius. In more recent years, the Kalevala has even inspired a number of Heavy Metal Bands in the Baltic regions.

## St Hans Cross

The symbol on our banners is often associated with the Kalevala. It is called **St. Hans's Cross**. The Scandinavian and north European name Hans (or Hannes) comes from the Swedish, Danish and Finnish names for John The Baptist in Scandinavia, Mid-summer's Eve or St. John's Eve has long been considered the greatest festival of the year.



The symbol is an ancient Scandinavian design – a square with loops at each edge, often called a *Shieldknot*—a form of knotted and intertwined design representing the notion that that everything in this world is intertwined, and that its course depends on fate—but the shape is actually not a knot, but an “unknot”: if you pulled at it you would discover that it is a twisted torus. The symbol is said to represent endlessly flowing water or infinity.

In Finland, the symbol was painted or carved on houses and barns, and domestic utensils such as tableware, to protect them and their owners from endless evil spirits and bad luck. Although especially common in Finland, the Saint John's arms can currently be found blazoned upon signs for cultural attractions through-out the Scandinavian/Baltic world marking sights of interest and Apple used the symbol on one of its command keys as well.



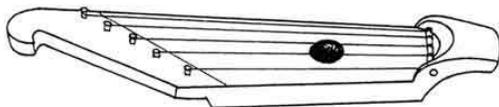
## Singing The Kalevala



The stories in *The Kalevala* were and still are sung and sometimes a zither called a Kantele accompanies. A pair of men would sit across from each other, fingers intertwined, or touching knees, swaying as they sang, singing sometimes in unison, sometimes call-and-response.

This enabled the main singer to spontaneously compose the next verses. A woman's song would be accompanied by a group.

Singing is also one of two methods of magic in *The Kalevala*, the other being a sort of built-in elemental, natural magic (generally used by female characters). Sorcerers *sing* their magic (“en-*chant*-ments”) and the Kalevala has many charms.



## A Kalevala Glossary:

### The three “champions” pursuing wives and the Sampo:

“Lusty Old, Steadfast” *Vainamoinen* – A wise shaman and singer of magical songs, who builds a magical red ship from a weavers shuttle, but is repeatedly unsuccessful in finding a wife.

“Mighty Smith, Craftsman” *Ilmarinen* – A metal worker who fashions many things including the wondrous Sampo who woos but loses his wives.

“Reckless Ahti, Lover boy” *Lemminkäinen* – A handsome, but bumbling ladies man, party crasher and adventurer who thinks he is a great warrior.

“Young” *Joukahainen* who lost his sister *Aino* for a wife to *Vainamoinen* in a contest, but she drowned herself in a lake rather than marry him.

“Gap-Toothed, Old” *Louhi*, “Crafty Mistress of North Farm” A shamanistic witch and the mother of beautiful daughters: the Maid of the North, “dazzling as the sun and cold as the snow” sitting on a rainbow spinning gold and silver fabric; and her sister, who is kidnapped, faithless then changed into a moaning sea-mew.

“Maiden, Flower of the Island” *Kylliki* was wooed by many; taken by force by *Lemminkäinen* as a wife, then abandoned as unsatisfactory because she loved dancing.

“Wicked ugly” *Kullervo* – a treacherous slave.

### Dieties:

*Ukko* – the Thunder God – Creator who is frequently evoked to help the heroes or change the weather.

*Tuoni* – Death, master of the Abode of the Dead

*Hiisi* – Demon Spirit with monstrous beasts.

### Places:

*Kalevala* – The Land of Heroes – home of the three “Heroes” a fictional place in the Karelia district of Finland.

*Pohjola* – the North Farm, “a cold and misty place” located three days journey North of Kalevala across a bay – probably Lapland, home of the Artic Sami people.

### Objects:

*Sampo* – a magical three sided “mill”, fashioned by *Ilmarinen*, but hidden away by *Louhi* – a “prosperity machine” constantly grinding out Salt, Grain and Money.

*Kantele* – A five stringed Finnish Zither – first made by *Vainamoinen* from the jaw of an enormous Pike, later fashioned from Birch.