

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

Günther Weber, Benjamin Sass and Eduard Philipp Körber, Lutheran Pastors of Võnnu: Sacred Trees, Felling of a Sacred Oak and Planting of an Oak to Herald Freedom for the Estonian People

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Introduction

This year marked the passing of 100 years from the birth of the Republic of Estonia on 24 February 1918. After the times of turbulence in between, we, the Estonians, are now able to celebrate this event for the 27th year since the regaining of independence. If we also count in the past decades of sovereignty (1918–1940), it appears that we have been able to sustain our independence for about half the time. The other 50 years of deprivation did not mean that we ceased to exist: the land, the culture and the faith of the people in restoring the independence and national continuity did not fail even under occupation.

The formation of the Estonian nation, unity and statehood have been expounded by many a person in numerous writings. The entire fabric of our modern educational and cultural world on this tiny piece of land has been woven by many bright minds of various nationalities. One subgroup of such people was Lutheran pastors, who proved to be prominent promoters of our faith and education, issuers of publications on school education, theology and belles-lettres, researchers of nature and culture and compilers of numerous scientific articles. It is thanks to them that we have become who we are. Even though their number undoubtedly included reactionary characters, who sided with the ruling elite of the day, the destroyed sites deemed sacred by the Estonians and scorned by the latter's aspirations, we actually cannot regard the Lutheran clergy as antagonists, as their lives and activities were multifarious. In fact, a viable culture can only develop through hardships, and ethnic processes entail divergent views and power levels as well as controversial interpretations. The integration of this land into European Christian culture prompted us to become

Europeans aspiring to education. And that turned out to be a decisive factor in our embryonic independence and the development of our nation and statehood.

In the following, I will describe a local story involving concrete events related to three Lutheran pastors of Võnnu (Germ. Wendau) parish in South Estonia. My approach is a narrow one, presenting a story of oak felling from literature on the one hand, and a second one of establishing an English garden and planting an oak as a herald of freedom for the Estonians on the other. The prediction was made in 1808 and was entered in the church records. I will also analyse the climatic conditions over the half-century, when the oak tree was in danger of perishing in its tender years, and explore the renown of the tree-planting story and the survival of the oak tree to our day. Finally, I will examine it in the wider context of the local circumstances.

Pastors of Võnnu Church Günther Weber and Benjamin Sass and the felling of the sacred oak

The building of Võnnu Church was commenced in 1232 on the order of Bishop Herman I (1224–1247) of the Tartu Bishopric. On St. James's Day 1236 the church was consecrated as well as dedicated to and named after Apostle James. Pertinent to our subject of study are the minutes of a 1680 church court case. As the local landlords did not like Günther Weber, the then pastor of Võnnu Church, they were plotting to depose him, and litigated against him throughout his whole tenure as a pastor. Thus, the then owner of Ahja (Germ. Aya) manorial estate seized the parcel of land (Papisaare) donated to the church by the former owner Count Gabriel Bengtsson Oxenstierna (1586–1656) (who also owned the manorial estates of Kastre and Haaslava) on the pretext of building a leprosarium there, which later, however, was found to have metamorphosed into a pub. The pastor brought this case to the ecclesiastical court, which decided to give Papisaare back to the church. The local landlords, in turn, accused the pastor of a number of offenses (Lillo, 1932, pp. 4–5; Meerits, 2003, p. 26). One such accusation was that on St. James's Day fair, early in the morning, semi-heathen women had run around the church stark naked and set up wax figurines of beasts on the church wall, with sacrifices brought thereto, whereas Pastor Günther Weber in person had done nothing all the while but looked intently on out the window. Based on the landlords' complaint, the ecclesiastical court decided in 1680 to ban holding St. James's Day fair near the church so as to prevent naked

women from desecrating the sanctuary with their dancing. Further grounds for the ban were the inappropriateness in the vicinity of the church of the noise, excessive drinking and strife on the day of the fair. Additionally, the sidesmen were tasked with destroying the pagan places of sacrifice in the villages of Kärša, Terikeste and Kiidjarve (Rumma *et al.*, 1925, p. 497; Lillo, 1931, p. 2a; Meerits, 2003, pp. 19, 26–27).

However, back then the religious convictions and restrictions as well as sentiments against sacrificial sites and sacred trees were not as extensive and aggressive, as direct conflicts with the peasants were unappetising. Several authors have made the general observation that the provinces of Estonia and Livonia were characterised by a high degree of religious tolerance. Such attitudes may have lingered to this day, as in the 1920s a large old lime tree was still growing on the ancient burial or sacrificial site on the lands of the erstwhile Mäesuitsu ('Hill smoke') farm in Võnnu (now Terikeste) village (Rumma *et al.*, 1925, p. 487). The site around the lime tree has been considered the most prominent sacred grove, where sacrifices were brought to pagan gods (Lillo, 1931, p. 4). According to literature, the breast height perimeter (PBH) of the tree was 4.5 m (Vilberg, 1931, p. 16). In 1999, its height was 14 m and PBH 479 cm (Relve, 2000, p. 58). Another well-known sacrificial site was in Hammaste village, Võnnu parish, where two lime trees were growing in the 1920s (Rumma *et al.*, 1925, p. 500). Even a third natural sacred site in Võnnu parish, a clump of soft-leaved elms at Koke village (Kiigeoru Sacred Grove), has been mentioned as of today.

The prevailing views of the 17th and 18th centuries were still very different from those of today. Thus, the minutes of a 1651 ecclesiastical court case state:

People seldom go to church; a number of communes have left their church fees unpaid. The populace secretly worship the images and statuettes of the Roman Catholic religion, and, apart from that, still go to worship the sacred sites of the period of their pagan religion and to offer sacrifices to the idols; they bury their dead secretly without God's Word, and do not have their children properly baptised. (Lillo, 1931, p. 2a)

The circumstances back then were certainly very varied. Vello Helk (2003, p. 204) has also suggested the possible aftereffect of the doctrine of the Jesuits, who operated during the Polish power: "Apparently, the peasants remembered the Jesuits fairly long after and therefore did not have their children baptised and circumvented the Lord's Supper."

Next, let us have a look at Benjamin Sass (1764–1791), a later Lutheran pastor at Võnnu. He was born in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), studied at the local university, and naturally adopted the views and understandings of the locality. Nevertheless, he was an effective pastor, among other things organising the recasting of a broken church bell in Riga in 1766. When in 1772 by the decree of the Empress of Russia Catherine II internment in and near churches was banned, a cemetery was established at Võnnu in 1773. Pastor Sass stood up for a good educational system and the schooling of children. In 1777, there were 15 schools in the parish, and 23 students at Võnnu Elementary School. As the population of the parish increased, an extension was built to one end of the church in 1784–1789, as was a new tower, plus the windows of the church were expanded and its interior refurbished (Lillo, 1931, p. 2b; 1932, p. 5; Ein, 1932, p. 24). Sass also took interest in local history; he was a correspondent for the most prominent local lore researcher and literary man of Livonia (now parts of Estonia and Latvia) August Wilhelm Hupel (1777). Two parish clerks, Hindrik Tätte and Johann Reudolph, served at Võnnu during Sass' tenure (Meerits, 2003, p. 32), and the pastor also cared about the faith and views of the local people.

Ed. Ph. Körber has written:

How slow to recede was the faith of the predecessors in the soul of the Estonian is demonstrated by the fact that the people of Tammeküla village in Mäksa parish made sacrifices to a sacred oak as late as in the time of provost Sass. There was nothing else for provost Sass to do than to go to Mäksa together with parish clerk Reudolph and fell the sacred tree. (Lillo, 1931, p. 2b; Meerits, 2003, p. 33)

The oak cutting is dated to 1787 (Eisen, 1922, p. 42; 1923, p. 4). Despite the demise of the sacred tree, the village retained the name of Tammeküla (Est. 'Oak village') long thereafter. The village and its name only disappeared in 1977, following an administrative reform.

The cutting of the Tammeküla oak by Sass and the parish clerk Johann Reudolph (Reudolf, Reudorls) has gone down in history and entered into the chronicles. This information may have reached Ed. Ph. Körber via the parish clerk Reudolph (his variant: Reudolf), who died in November 1817 (Meerits, 2003, p. 45). Hence, it is highly likely a true story.

What happened at Tammeküla according to Matthias Johann Eisen?

Let us now refer to the belletristic work by a clergyman, folklore researcher, historian and cultural historian M. J. Eisen. Eisen provides a fairly authentic account of Pastor Sass's visit to Tammeküla and of the felling of the oak:

On a fair spring day in 1798 a droshky stood in front of Võnnu pastorate, hitched to two horses, with the driver and parish clerk Juhan Reudolph in the box seat. [...] “Are you ready to go?” [...] “But do you have an axe with you, parish clerk?” [...] “Why an axe? [...] I told you that [there is] a nest of paganism at Tammeküla: they worship the oak, sacrifice to the oak. A hundred years ago the same happened in Germany. Boniface, a good man, took an axe, cut down their sacred oak. Paganism disappeared since then. History ranks Boniface among great men. The story of oak felling is known to every school child. At Võnnu [there is] an oak similar to that in Geismar. Why shouldn't I fell the oak? This is why we need an axe!”—“I do not believe them! They're probably no better than the Hessen men. Surely they don't want to bring out axes. They are probably afraid that the oak will punish them for that! Better then to have our own cutting tool with us!” (Eisen, 1923, p. 4)

And off they headed from Võnnu pastorate towards Tammeküla in Mäksa. Having reached the oak, the pastor and the parish clerk went straight to the tree to have a look. They noticed that the tree was worshipped: ribbons were flying in its branches, and some copper coins and eggs, salt, grains, fluffs and threads of wool wrapped in a rag as well as other items were lying on the ground under it. Sass straightaway scoffed: “Didn't I tell you they were pagans.” And a dozen men and women of Tammeküla had gathered to the oak. The church minister pitched into the peasants and barked: “Pagans, that's what you are!” The locals tried hard to explain that they were not, that they went to church as appropriate, but to no avail.

The church father Sass continued undaunted:

“I, man, will indeed undo this kind of sacrificing. Go [Hindrek], fetch the axe and cut down the oak!”—“Dear church father, I cannot! My axe handle broke yesterday. I couldn't yet find the time to make a new one!”—“Rubbish! I don't believe that!” chided Pastor Sass angrily. He then turned to another

man: “Andres, go home, fetch your axe and cut down the oak!” Andres stared at the pastor with his mouth open, as if he didn’t comprehend the command. “What are you waiting here? Go fetch the axe!” Andres started for home, scratching the back of his neck. The pastor again turned to the bystanders. “Juhan, you too go fetch your axe!”—“I’ll go as you say!”

The pastor is waiting and waiting, but nobody is turning up with an axe. At last, Andres is coming, hands empty. “Where’s the axe?”—“Dear church father, please forgive me, the axe is lost! I searched and searched, but couldn’t find it!”

So there was nothing left but to tell the parish clerk: “Now you go and fetch the axe!” Sass himself took hold of it and said: “Wait! Now I want to destroy their oak god!” And so he stepped onto the oak tree, deliberated for a while and hit the axe against the oak. Then something within the pastor held him back; at any rate he was sapped of his strength, and the axe was extended to the parish clerk. There was nothing left for Reudolph but to start cutting. Yet the work was not appealing to him, and the pastor told a man standing nearby:

“Mikk, take the axe from the parish clerk and continue cutting!” Mikk jumps back a step or two, as if frightened by a snake. “Now, Mikk, come and cut!” Mikk [starts] to groan: “Dear church father, I cannot help! My hand is sorely ill! It cannot hold the axe!” The pastor looks around: “Now, you then, Peet, to cut!” Peet [starts] to scratch his cheek: “Good church father, I would cut if I had time, but I must hurry home for a meal. The broth was left on the table, will cool down!”

There was nothing left for the pastor but to threaten that he would complain at Mäksa manor, and if the men did not obey they would receive their 50 lashes there. This had an effect, and there was nothing left for the men but to cut the oak down. The women standing in the distance were worried:

“Good heavens, what will happen now to our men! The heaven will surely punish them for such a crime! They will either fall ill, or our cattle will breathe their last, or some other misfortune will befall them. Let us flee further afield, or the oak will fall upon us and kill us all!”

At any rate, the sacred oak fell down with a loud crash; no fatal lightning from heaven or any disease appeared to strike the cutters. Nothing changed at Tammeküla. For a while, copper coins, salt and eggs continued to be sacrificed to the stump of the sacred tree, but that tradition shortly faded away as the level of

education among the population rose. The belletristic approach aside, a number of sources report that while the peasants were indeed pressed to cut down sacred trees, they could never be forced into compliance, either by admonition or by threats.

The Võnnu Pastor Benjamin Sass was familiar with the historical account of oak cutting by St. Boniface (Robinson, 1916, pp. 62–64). He was apparently a man of high self-esteem and ambition. In 1781–1784, Sass was provost of the Tartu district (County), and in 1784–1791 provost of the Tartu provostry (Ottow & Lenz, 1977, p. 402). When heading to Tammeküla to cut the oak, Sass might indeed have been driven by the aspiration of boosting his reputation and motivated by the Geismar episode. This is the only known instance from the then provinces of Estonia and Livonia of St. Boniface likely having found a follower to emulate his act 1,000 years before.

Eduard Philipp Körber and his tree planting

After Benjamin Sass died, pastorship at Võnnu was offered to Paul Johann Körber (1735–1795), who had been shepherding the flock of Tori Church in 1764–1792. Unfortunately, he was able to hold the office for a fleeting three-year period. He was succeeded by his son Eduard Philipp Körber (1770–1850). Ed. Ph. Körber studied at the universities of Königsberg (1789–1792) and Jena (1792–1793). After returning home in 1793, he was a private teacher at Ahja (Aya) manor, Võnnu parish, for a year and a half, and was ordained pastor on 22 June 1796. At the said universities, Körber took interest in geology and collected minerals and rocks. He was also inspired by history, local lore and art, and published prominent studies on various fields, primarily history. He was honorary member of Jena Mineralogy Society (*Die Societät für die Gesammte Mineralogie zu Jena*) since 1803, of the Imperial Naturalists' Society of Moscow (*Kaiserliche Naturforschende Gesellschaft, Moskau*) since 1806 and of the Learned Estonian Society (*Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft*) since 1846, and was also involved in other societies. Körber bequeathed his collection of manuscripts to the Learned Estonian Society, thus laying the foundation to the Society's museum and archive (von Recke & Napiersky, 1829, pp. 487–488; 'Der Consistorialrath...', 1850, p. 448; 'Kurzer Lebensabriß...', 1850, pp. 631–634; BBLd, n.d., p. 400; Vinkel, 1994, pp. 18–24; Meerits, 2003, p. 34). He served as pastor at Võnnu church for 50 years (1796–1846). Thus, Võnnu

was the place where this man of wide-ranging talents spent most of his life. The celebration of the 50th anniversary of his service was a monumental event at Võnnu ('Pastorat Wendau. Am 2. August...', 1846, p. 757; 'Am 3. Aug. fand in Wendau Pastorat...', 1846, pp. 900–902), and its description has made it into church records (RA, EAA.3172.2.6, l. 287–292). Körber had a rich library at home, which contained an abundance of ecclesiastical books, as well as many others, including chronicles (Iwask, 1911, pp. 171–199). Among other things, he also wrote in the Tartu dialect of the Estonian language a manuscript on the history of Võnnu parish, which ends with the year 1835 and has not been published. The manuscript has been used by a number of people in their work, and artist Gustav Mooste made a transcript of the original in 1905, which was later published (Meerits, 2003, pp. 10–53).

Thanks to him, Võnnu has a church park, which is still there. He wrote about it as follows: "In 1798, I, Eduard Philipp Körber, pastor of Võnnu, established an English park behind my orchard, to which I added all sorts of trees until 1800 to provide a shade for myself and my descendants." (RA, EAA.3172.2.6, l. 368). Thus, he opted for the park style already established in our country, which reportedly emerged in the 1770s (Hein, 2007, p. 36) or already in the 1760s (Hein, 2016, p. 12). That is, around the same time than in Germany, where the creation of the Dessau-Wörlitz Garden Realm, the most representative English park landscape, was started in 1764 (Hein, 2016, p. 12). Previously, in a 1756 manuscript, Johann Georg Eisen (Eisen von Schwarzenburg) was able to write that in Livonia not much is known of gardeners and that there was scarcely 12 beautiful gardens in the whole country (Hiimets, 2014, p. 140). A report from 1781, however, read: "The art of gardening has turned into a true passion over the recent years, and is increasingly inclined towards the English taste." (*Die Gartenkunst scheint seit wenig Jahren theure Liebhaberey geworden zu senn, und richtet sich nach englischem Geschmack*) (Jannau, 1781, p. 65; Hein, 2010, p. 18) After a year, at least three English-style gardens were referred to: those at the manorial estates of Kukulinna (Kuckulin), Kabala (Kabbala) and Ōisu (Euseküll) (Hupel, 1782, pp. 245, 311, 326). Five years later a fair number of manorial gardens were mentioned, with observable trends towards English-style horticulture (*man sieht auf schön angelegte Gärten, hin und wies nach der englischer Art.*) (Hupel, 1787, p. 481). Thus, the garden established by Körber was one of the many to be encountered back then. At the same time, he himself has written that in 1798 he had an entertainment building erected and a grove planted behind the garden, allowing doubts about the Englishness of the park or garden (Meerits, 2003, p. 36).

Körper was an enthusiastic tree planter. A Võnnu-born artist, Gustav Mootse (1885–1957), wrote, evidently in the 1920s, that Körper had planted all the old trees around the church, as well as the orchard, the park, the hazelnut alleyway, the long line of willows alongside the main drain, and others. The line of willows with their gnarled trunks survived for a long time, until Pastor August Eduard Varres (pastor in 1892–1912) *had these 100-year-old trees sawn down* (Meerits, 2003, p. 83).

A sequel to the English garden was the transplantation of an oak by Körper's wife Christine Gerdruta (born Mickwitz). This tree has gone down in history as Körper's oak or the Oak of Freedom or Liberty. Ed. Ph. Körper wrote on the last page of Võnnu church book in German:

On 23 April 1808—St. George's Day—my wife transplanted a young, 8-year-old oak that I had grown from seed in front of the English garden. Our happier and more joyful offspring may sometime, when the suffocating heat of the day has forced them to sit under the 100-year tree trunk, remember with gratitude my good wife and me. Then the heavy yoke of our oppressed brothers—the Estonians—will have been broken long before. They will again be a free, independent, happy nation—*quod Deus bene vertat!* [Lat. 'May God grant success!']. (RA, EAA.3172.2.6, l. 368)

The establishment of an English garden and the transplanting of the oak by the Körper's happened at the time that a scholar of literature, Aarne Vinkel, describes as follows:

The Baltic German motherland's fuel-filled age of enlightenment would suffocate for lack of air—the border was closed for newcomers. The great Baltic German leaders in politics and scholastics had died out whereas new ones were sluggish and far from the personages developed in the light of the life-giving enlightenment spirit. The impetus of the early century would subside. (Vinkel, 1994, p. 13)

The reality turned out different, however; the early decades of the 19th century saw the rise of an academic offspring educated at the universities of Halle, Jena, Königsberg, etc. And it saw the founding of the University of Tartu, which grew into a new landmark of education, or, as an art critic, Epi Tohvri has written: “the influence of the Enlightenment on the Baltic provinces stretched into the second decade of the 19th century, with the reopened University of Tartu becoming a major institution” (Tohvri, 2014, p. 108). And from among the individuals who

had received academic education in Germany and at the new university emerged new talents and leaders, including Eduard Philipp Körber.

The account of Körber's oak planting in the church book was first published in Estonian in 1898 (Lipp, 1898, p. 134). Martin Lipp (1854–1923) was a well-known clergyman of comprehensive grasp, a figure of the national awakening and an amateur historian as well as a genealogist, etc. He has published two studies on ecclesiastical education (Lipp, 1898; 1899). Whether Lipp indeed went to Võnnu and was the first to read the story of oak planting and of the prediction from the Võnnu church book is not certain. Possibly, the story had been published somewhere prior to that; however, it has not been found in the local German literature. Next, it was published in Estonian in 1933 by two of our prominent but different dignitaries—Konstantin Konik and Karl Eduard Sööt (K. K-k & K. E. S., 1933, p. 194; Vinkel, 1994, p. 21). Konik was a medical doctor, politician and public figure as well as a member of Estonia's governmental body, the three-member Estonian Salvation Committee. Sööt, however, was a poet, journalist and public figure. The said brief publication demonstrates the cooperation and kindred spirit between the two great personages; whence they took the citation by Körber is unknown, but hardly did they read it from the Võnnu church book. The information presented by Konik and Sööt was published by the scholar of literature Arne Vinkel (1994, p. 21) in 1994 and the art critic Ants Hein (2007, p. 51) in 2007. Thereafter, it was posted on the internet with a reference to the original source (Kalmer, 2009), and again in 2018 from the original source (Sander, 2018, pp. 24–27). Thus, the repeatedly published account of Körber's oak planting has become well known as a reliable story. At the same time, we actually do not know what Körber meant by his prediction; it may have stood for the abolition of serfdom. Historian Küлло Arjakas wrote:

As far as the prophetic prediction is concerned, we do not know what was meant by it in 1808. I would rather tend to think it concerned the abolition of serfdom (a heavy yoke, if abolished, would make the people free, independent and happy). On account of the Napoleonic wars, serfdom was abolished in several parts of Central Europe, and reports thereof also reached the educated circles of Estonia. (Arjakas, 2018)

On the other hand, 50 years before, in 1756, Johann Georg Eisen, deemed to be the first champion of Russia for the abolition of serfdom, had written: “Slavery shall be abolished. Yet the land shall not be given out on lease but as a freehold, for a tenant is of benefit neither for the people nor the state.” (Hiimets, 2014, p. 144). Thus, Körber probably meant something more than the abolition of serfdom, as

the 100 years was a period long enough for great changes. Furthermore, by the end of the 19th century it was still unclear what the phrase “a free, independent and happy people” denoted for the Estonians in these three provinces as they had Latvians, Germans and Russians living here side by side with them. Two hundred years after Körber’s prediction, it has been assumed that this particular tree proved to be our first monument to liberty (Hein, 2007, p. 51). Yet, we still do not know what exactly the author bore in mind.

How did the climate favour the growth of the young oak?

At Võnnu, efforts have also been made to register various meteorological phenomena. Thus, on the 20th day of the summer month (June), 1704, “a great ball of fire was reported to have flown over the sky from the west, making many people fear that it was not a good omen” (Ein, 1932, p. 29). Also, Ed. Ph. Körber performed weather observations. It appears that the time of oak seeding and transplantation was tough for a number of reasons. The year 1799 was severely cold, with the thermometer (back then called “weather glass”) showing below 30 notches (that is, below 30° Ré, thus below –38° C); it was freezing for 5 consecutive months, with birds dropping down dead and the ice on Lake Peipsi reaching one Russian fathom or 7 feet (*ca.* 2.1 m) in thickness (Meerits, 2003, p. 36; Lillo, 1931, p. 2b). This implies that Körber had a thermometer and performed weather observations, yet the existence of the data set is unconfirmed. The severe cold is corroborated by an observation made south of us, at Angermünde (now Angerციems) in the Ventspils region, northern Kurland: “This winter was one of the most severe and biting, perhaps even the most severe for the entire century, as already 14 days before Christmas (on 21 December 1798 N.S.) there was a terrible frost, with the thermometer showing 20° (–24°C).” Freezing temperatures within the range of –24 and –28,8° C continued without any thaw all through January, February and March, and ice thickness reached 5–6 feet (*ca.* 1.5–1.9 m) (Tarand *et al.*, 2013, p. 188). Before St. John’s Day 1799 it started to thunder and pour with rain, and the Võnnu church garden (yard) was deluged. At the village of Hammaste the water lifted up parts of a hayfield and wreaked other havoc (Meerits, 2003, p. 36).

Severe was also the winter of 1800, when freezing temperatures endured until March. The frost destroyed old fruit trees that had managed to survive the previous winter. Wilhelm Christian Friebe, who had worked as a tutor at Alüksne (Marienburg) manor in 1784–1801, had apparently measured -36°C there on 4 February 1800, and someone at Laiuse, presumably the Lutheran Pastor Heinrich Johann von Jannau (who was pastor in 1779–1821), even -37.5° (Tarand *et al.*, 2013, pp. 188, 189). Probably, Körber collected the seed in 1800 from oaks somewhere in the vicinity of Võnnu Church, and the indirect impact of severe winters may have affected these oaks, although this has been very rare in Estonia. Neither were the weather conditions favourable during the 1800 vegetation period, when the oak seeds were ripening. According to data from Porkuni, the June of that year was cool, cloudy and rainy; in July, the weather was especially unpleasant: 2, 8 and 16 July (14 and 20 July and 7 August N.S.) saw night frosts, and it was constantly raining; the August was warmer, but the last decade of the month experienced five spells of night frost (Tarand *et al.*, 2013, p. 189).

In Võnnu parish, there was a lot of thunder in the summer of 1801; the lightning ignited an old residential house and a cowshed at Ahja manor and the farm of Mart Kurg in Võnnu village. On the first day of the winter month (November) there was a heavy snowstorm which blew down many barn roofs and haystacks (Meerits, 2003, p. 37).

In the summer of 1807 there was a scorching drought, and not a raindrop fell down for four months. It destroyed the crops in the fields, sending the price of grain soaring. In 1808, the famine was followed by plague, causing many deaths among people and cattle. In that year of hunger and pestilence (1808), 830 people died in Võnnu parish. Even in 1809, the fatality rate was exorbitant at Võnnu—657 souls, as against 227 on average (Ein, 1932, p. 22; Meerits, 2003, pp. 40–41; Lillo, 1931, p. 2b). The year 1808 brought a mild but long winter, a late but fertile spring, a beautiful summer and a gentle autumn (Tarand *et al.*, 2013, p. 195).

The above reveals the circumstances surrounding the transplantation of the oak and the documenting of the prediction. Probably, the vegetation period was perfectly favourable for the transplanted oak to grow into a centuries-old tree, which came to pass indeed. Neither did the subsequent decades and centuries pose any danger to the oak.

One day in July 1817 brought severe weather damage at Võnnu, as at about four

in the afternoon a fierce thunderstorm pelted the church with thick hailstones, some the size of a pigeon's egg. The hail destroyed fences and crops in a number of places and broke about 150 windowpanes in the church (RA, EAA.3172.2.6, l. 368). Körber notes that 19 October 1817 was the 300th anniversary of the doctrine of the blessed Martin Luther, with great thanksgiving feasts being held in his memory all across the provinces of Livonia and Estonia on that day, and that he planted birches around the church to celebrate the occasion (Ein, 1932, p. 22; Lillo, 1931, p. 2b; Meerits, 2003, p. 45).

In 1826, there was a severe drought and forest conflagration, creating a canopy of thick smoke for days on end, so that cereal crops and vegetables perished (Meerits, 2003, p. 50). Elsewhere, it has been mentioned that the year 1827 had been extraordinarily droughty in East Estonia, with the sun shining blood-red on the firmament. Massive conflagrations developed at Tarakvere, Kõnnu and Avinurme in Torma parish and at Laius-Tähkvere in Laiuse parish (Hiimets, 2014, p. 144). In 1828, fruit trees once again failed owing to a severe drought (Meerits, 2003, p. 49). In 1831, there were fierce flashes of lightning and rolls of thunder, and the church of Haljala in North Estonia and that of Kanepi in South Estonia caught fire (Meerits, 2003, p. 50). Nonetheless, the birches outside the Võnnu pastorate sprouted, and by the 1930s they were still there and had grown into large trees (Ein, 1932, p. 22; Lillo, 1931, p. 2b).

In the years 1800–1850 there were very fluctuating weather conditions on the territory of Estonia, with eight very cold winters (average winter temperatures between -7.2 and -11.3° C) and six very mild winters (average temperatures between 0.1 and -2.3° C) (Tarand *et al.*, 2013, p. 610). It appears from the Võnnu pastorate hail damage dossier of the Mutual Hail Insurance Society of the Province of Livonia that according to Pastor Gustav Oskar Oehr (pastor in 1820–1877/78), the extent of the damage at Võnnu pastorate on 9 May 1852 was 36 “*vakamaa*” (equals to 10 ha) (RA, EAA.627.1.95. l. 1).

The Võnnu Church oak survived, however. When Körber died in Tartu in 1850, he was buried next to Võnnu Church near the oak:

A dear friend of the Estonian people, who handed this friendship down in his family, as we know, was laid to rest in Võnnu churchyard on 10 May 1850 near the “freedom oak”, which he had planted approximately half a century before as a sign of happiness for the Estonian people. (Lipp, 1899, p. 83)

Did the Võnnu oak truly survive to our day?

On 24 February 1918 the Republic of Estonia was born, but the survival of the oak tree is not clear. The planting of trees by Võnnu Church was mentioned again in 1925. It has been written, however, that there are two large trees in Võnnu churchyard (an oak and a lime tree), which Pastor Ed. Ph. Körber had planted on the day of the emancipation of the peasantry [i.e. on 23 March] in 1819 to commemorate the same (Rumma *et al.*, 1925, p. 487). That year the Livonian Peasantry Law took effect, under which serfdom was abolished and peasants were able to acquire real estate; money rent was introduced as a form of peasant rent.

The 1925 report has also been referred to in 1931 (Vilberg, 1931, p. 10) as well as in the caption of a photo of 1960 (Sander, 2018, p. 26). Unfortunately, neither Ed. Ph. Körber nor his sons Martin Georg Emil and Carl Eduard Anton Körber have ever mentioned the planting of the trees in their writings (Körber, 1808; 1872; 1873; [Körber], 1859; Meerits, 2003), thus the only pieces of information based on the primary source are the data recorded in the church book in 1808 (RA, EAA.3172.2.6, l. 368) and, regarding 1819, a literary source (Rumma *et al.*, 1925, p. 487). This is evident from the collection *Tartumaa* ('Tartu County') published in 1925, which presents the history, nature, culture, economy, etc. of that county of Estonia. It was compiled by scientists of the University of Tartu, with data gathered and recorded by the more active and talented students. A scrutiny of the sources of the collection did not reveal which of them served as a basis for the account of the 1819 tree planting. Consequently, the report may have originated from a student correspondent who visited the then Võnnu pastorate and obtained information from the then Pastor August Eduard Ein (who was pastor in 1923–1944). That said, Ein had studied medicine and history at the University of Tartu in 1916–1917 and theology in 1918 and 1920–1922. In addition, he published a history of Võnnu St. James's congregation, which does not mention the tree planting (Ein, 1932). Thus, it is questionable that he was the source of the incorrect data. These might be attributable to ignorance, mix-up with the 1817 tree planting or misapplication of information from elsewhere and instances from other sites, as tree plantings to commemorate the peasantry emancipation law are known to have occurred elsewhere, too. For instance, the existing oaks by Saarde Church in Pärnu County, West Estonia, were planted in 1820 to mark the very same law (Lekk, 2005, p. 15). It has also been noted that the three birches in the approximately one-kilometre long alleyway leading

to the said church were planted in 1820 for the same reason (Eestigiid.ee). The planter was probably Friedrich August Samuel Metzler. He was born in Urbach, Germany, studied theology at Wittenberg University, and, after moving to Estonia, was a Lutheran pastor in Võru (1804–1806), Pärnu (1806–1811) and in St. Catherine's congregation at Saarde (1811–1823). On Metzler's initiative, the 300th anniversary of Luther's reformation was also commemorated at Saarde (Tammekann *et al.*, 1930, p. 505).

Furthermore, it is known that to mark the aforementioned 1819 law, the establishment of a church park was started at Laiuse according to a resolution of 1820. The founding of the park was to commemorate the abolishment of serfdom, or, as Juhan Kõpp (1937, p. 304) writes: "In 1820, it was decided at Laiuse to plant a grove by the church and build a wall around the churchyard in memory of the liberation of the peasantry." The decision was adopted during the tenure of the local Lutheran Pastor Heinrich Johann von Jannau (serving from 1779 to 1821). The planting of the trees and the building of the wall, however, was commenced during the incumbency of his son Heinrich Georg von Jannau (1821–1863) in 1823 (Kõpp, 1937, pp. 310–311).

Whether the original oak tree planted by Körber has survived to our day was already dubious. Thus, in 1933, Konstantin Konik and Karl Eduard Sööt wrote:

As Pastor Ed. Ph. Körber was, apart from his main vocation, a reputable historian, we are interested particularly in such a man's vision reaching into the distant future to predict Estonia's independence. Secondly, we cannot but acknowledge his free-thinking mind and warmheartedness towards the Estonian people. Finally, it would be interesting to know the real story behind the so-called Freedom Oak planted in the English garden. [...] 125 years have passed from the planting of the oak, and in the meantime the axe blade and the saw tooth have cut sorely into the flesh of the beautiful trees of our homeland: it would be Destiny's miracle if the free Estonians of the Võnnu parish were actually able to still remember the prophetic pastor and his wife in the shade of their Freedom oak now. (K. K-k & K. E. S., 1933, p. 194)

According to indirect sources, however, there is a high probability that the oak tree planted by Körber survived.

In 1935, the surroundings of the monument (author Aleksander Eller) of the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1919), inaugurated a year before by

the church, were cleaned up, and additional 17 oaks were planted. The oak transplanted by Mrs. Körber perished in the storm of 2002 at the age of 194 years. In 2004, the Martin Körber Society operating on Saaremaa Island, West Estonia, planted two oaks by Võnnu Church, one to replace the perished Freedom Oak and the other in memory of Võnnu-born Martin Georg Emil Körber, the pastor of St. Mary's Church at Anseküla, Saaremaa Island (in 1845–1875) (Sander, 2018, p. 73).

Summary and discussion

It is generally accepted and also corroborated by the chronicles that an inherent feature of this region, not unlike many others across the globe, is worshipping sacred trees, groves and thickets and associating them with sites of sacrifice and burial. An example thereof comes from the chronicler Dionysus Fabricius of the early 17th century:

Some worship all kinds of oaks and other branchy and giant trees, which once mediated to them the predictions of the spirits. Others worship groves that they let grow close to villages and houses and that are considered so sacred that nobody is ever allowed to break a single twig from them; they even think that anyone who has committed such a sacrilege in their eyes will immediately meet a misfortune. (Fabricius, 2010[1610], pp. 57, 59; Metssalu, 2004, p. 58)

Elsewhere it has been reported that with their ridiculous rituals of idolatry the people are worshipping trees, and if those are cut, they will not hesitate to offer resistance thereto, being rather willing to die than to surrender (Helk, 2003, p. 203). By the same token, there have been reports of cutting such trees by the landlords and Lutheran pastors. Not in all places did the Lutheran pastors exhibit enough zeal to destroy sacred trees. Yet the cutting of the oak at Tammeküla, Võnnu parish, was not exceptional. It has proved to be a positive fact and attracted the belletristic attention of Matthias Johann Eisen. There are reports of cutting sacrificial trees as late as from the latter part of the 19th century. Thus, the Lutheran pastor of Karula (1870–1900) [Heinrich Ewald] Paslack had a large pine tree cut in the field of the Karula pastorate (Eisen, 1920, p. 42).

In the Baltic provinces, the most significant and notable horticultural trend in pastorate gardens was connected with the development of manor economy in the

18th century following the Great Northern War. In the first half of that century, a number of manors were built. It has even been maintained that the Italian architect Domentico Giovanni Trezzini operated in Narva from the late summer of 1704 to the early autumn the next year. Allegedly, he has also designed the residence at Joaoru, Narva, of the local Governor General Aleksander Menshikov in 1710–1719 (Hein, 2007, p. 33). The Danish ambassador Just Juel visited Menshikov's garden at Joaoru on 10 October 1709 and wrote that it had been fashioned "after the local taste"; it accommodated a glasshouse and beautiful vaulted alleyways (walkways under bent deciduous trees) (Just, 1892, p. 290; 1893, p. 84; Hein, 2007, p. 33). Next came the reconstruction of Lagedi manor (originally built in 1694–1695) owned by Menshikov since 1714 near Tallinn, the Kadrioru (Catharinenthal) Palace—a residential manor of Peter the Great—, the establishment of a Baroque garden and an English-style landscape park beginning from 1718 in Tallinn and a number of other manors (Hein, 2007, pp. 30–36). In parallel, the horticultural trend spread to the gardens and parks of larger pastorates. As a result, an extensive network of gardens and parks, including alleyways and nurseries, evolved in manors and pastorates of various forms of ownership. In the final decades of the 18th century, trees began to be planted in cemeteries situated around churches, after burials in them were banned. For instance, near Rapla Church in Central Estonia, Pastor Otto Wilhelm Eberhard (pastor in 1768–1795) planted trees together with the local people for adornment and shade after the old graveyard was abandoned and a new one founded (1780). In this connection, the later Lutheran Pastor Carl Eduard Malm (served in 1864–1901) has written:

These trees have been planted there for adornment and shade by the old provost Eberhard and some other people from the manor and the rural municipality after the burial place was abandoned and a new one at Laadamäe introduced. So when you sit in the shade of the trees remember at times with gratitude those upright men who had wished this benefit to the following generations of the people, and also take care that you, too, would neither damage the young, planted trees, nor tolerate that being done by others. Alas, the people are so reckless and silly; they think the young trees have been planted for them to be able to tie their horses to them, to chew and harm them. (Malm, 2001, p. 9)

As a consequence, manor graveyards with ornamental plants and new church cemeteries emerged, which all moulded our cultural landscape and impacted the cultivation of ornamental plants and the spread of natural broadleaved tree species

and avifauna. In conjunction with that, gardeners were employed in a number of places. One of the first mentions thereof was someone by the name of Striff from Ungru manor near Haapsalu, West Estonia, in 1715 (Hein, 2007, p. 30). At the same time, gardener Wilhelm Stäff was operating at Viimsi manor near Tallinn, as well as in the city itself, and in connection with the founding of Kadrioru Park several gardeners from St. Petersburg were employed in Tallinn (Lumiste, 1988, p. 21). An important person from the era of Peter the Great, the owner of Adavere (Addafer) manor Heinrich von Fick, also invited a gardener from St. Petersburg sometime around 1740 (Hein, 2007, pp. 30, 35); some sources, however, indicate that Fick was arrested in 1731 and his manors were confiscated. In 1758, a contract was concluded between Christian Anders, gardener of Adila (Addila) manor (owner Carl Friedrich von Huene), and B. J. [Berend Johann] von Üxküll (1706–1761), the owner of the manors of Vana-Vigala (Alt-Fickel), Pikavere (Pickfer), Palvere (Palfere) and Meeksi (Meeks), for the purpose of establishing new gardens and renovating the old ones (AM.28.1.128).

One of the first Lutheran pastors to pay attention to gardening was Johann Georg Eisen (1717–1779). He was born in Polsinger, Germany, and went on to study theological subjects at the University of Jena. Apart from these, he also attended lectures on medicine, herbal science, mathematics, physics and cameralistics. After arriving in Estonia, he was employed as a private teacher at Avinurme in 1741–1744. On 11 February 1746, he was ordained pastor of St. Mary's Church at Torma, where he ministered until 1775. Eisen was very active in his ministry and a prominent personage among the local Lutheran pastors (Bartlett & Donnert, 1998, pp. 1–107; Jürjo, 2012, pp. 26–32; Pärnik, 2012, pp. 9–26; Hiimets, 2014, pp. 91–177). At Torma he established an exemplary horticultural area and a nursery, which also proved profitable to him. It is deemed probable that Eisen also imparted his horticultural knowledge to the local people (Bartlett & Donnert, 1998, pp. 74–82; Pärnik, 2012, p. 15; Hiimets, 2014, p. 121). Torma nursery was evidently among the earliest ones in Estonia; at the same time, it is known that in 1718, in the autumn, 1,079 lime trees were brought to Tallinn from nearby Viimsi manor for the purpose of founding a park at Kadrioru (Lumiste, 1988, p. 21). The lime trees were highly likely cultivated in the local nursery. Apart from Torma, a nursery is known to have existed at Palmse manor, North Estonia, in 1779 (Hein, 2007, p. 35). Eisen penned and published a number of writings on gardening, forestry and tree planting. His book on gardening—the first of the kind in the Estonian language—written around 1750 was discovered in the archives of the Learned Estonian Society in Tartu in the 1930s on 18 loose sheets. In it, Eisen presents instructions on the

planting of trees and bushes, grafting, fertilisation, etc. This gardening book was not intended for the regular Estonian peasants but for those working in manor orchards. It appears that the book included descriptions of peach and apricot trees (Lipp-Nüggen, 1906, pp. 45–52; Hiimets, 1933, p. 121; Bartlett & Donnert, 1998, pp. 79–82, 365–402; Aarma, 2000, pp. 66–67; Jürjo, 2012, p. 28). Eisen also participated in the work (in 1772 he was member) of St. Petersburg's Free Oeconomical Society (established in 1765) (Jürjo, 2012, p. 31). Evidently by the mediation of the Society's contacts, his daughter Elisabeth married in 1771 one of the founders of the Society and of the then best-known chief gardeners of the Imperial gardens Heinrich Jacob Eckleben (Eckleben, 1767, p. 54; Donnert, 1978, p. 21). In the first publication of the Society in 1766 he published an overview of *Caragana arborescens*, a native of Asia, which was also grown in Estonia (Bartlett & Donnert, 1998, p. 305), in Russian in 1767 and in a German translation in 1767 (Eckleben, 1767, pp. 45–54). This species has been claimed to be a good and frost-tolerant one in our region (Hupel, 1777, p. 524)

Of Eisen's four surviving children, the second daughter Catharina followed in her father's footsteps to study gardening, and went on to become a teacher in St. Petersburg (Hiimets, 2014, p. 176).

In the 1770s, the garden of Laiuse Church gained in stature. Pastor Johann Heinrich Maximilian Mylius had worked hard and incurred great expenses to put it in order, and it attained particular acclaim among the church gardens of Livonia (Hupel, 1782, p. 229). Mylius (1721–1779) was born in Jena and studied at the local university. After arrival in Estonia, he was a private teacher at the manors of Saaremõisa (Germ. Saarenhof) and Ropka (Germ. Ropkoy), the province of Livonia, in 1745–1750. Following a subsequent stay in Germany, he was ordained here as pastor in 1753. In 1756–1779 Mylius pastored Laiuse St. George's congregation and in 1756–1758 also Palamuse St. George's congregation (Ottow & Lenz, 1977, p. 351). Like many Lutheran pastors, Eisen and Mylius were acquaintances, which is evident from the church records at Laiuse (RA, EAA.2434.2.2). And the establishment of gardens and planting of trees in both pastorates was likely linked too.

What stands out from all the above is the founding of an English-style park near, and the planting of trees around, the church at Võnnu by Eduard Philipp Körber in 1797. It was in a way a prominent project among the parks of Estonia at the end of the 18th century and as such has gone down in history. It has survived to this day along with the church garden at Torma, the pastorate and church garden at Laiuse and many other analogous parks.

The oldest and historically noteworthy initiative in tree planting near pastorates in Estonia that is traditionally considered a fact was taken at Laiuse. It is known that in the winter of 1700/1701 the Swedish King Charles XII sojourned at Laiuse with his troops. He repeatedly visited the elderly Lutheran pastor of Laiuse Reiner Brockmann II (Broockman, 1640–1704). Before his departure, the king planted three lime trees in the church garden. This information has been imparted by a later Lutheran pastor of Laiuse Heinrich Georg von Jannau (served in 1822–1864; J.—u, 1836, p. 218). The transplanting by Charles XII can be considered the beginning of the planting of the known trees for the purpose of memory perpetuation. By the time of Johan Köpp's pastorship at Laiuse (1909–1922), two of the three limes had already perished, one apparently in the summer of 1856, whereas the fate of the other was unknown (Köpp, 1937, p. 162). Although the third lime has been suggested to have survived to this day (Läänelaid & Vahtre 1976, p. 807), it is not entirely plausible based on Köpp's description of the tree and on the follow-up inspection.

Charles XII's lime planting was then followed by Eisen's oak planting in the church park of Torma. He is said to have planted two trees in honour of his two sons (Bartlett & Donnert, 1998, p. 75; Hiimets, 2014, p. 121). It is known that the trees are gone by now. Although there is no solid evidence thereof, it cannot be entirely excluded. It is actually quite probable that the trees might have been planted to mark the birth of his sons Karl (Carl) Christoph and Gottfried. And then came the oak planting by Mrs. Körber, which bore an entirely different meaning in the prediction.

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