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### THE FINNIC-MORDVINIC *lepp*\*

**Abstract.** The noun *leppä* (or one of its phonetic variants) is used as a name for 'alder (*Alnus*)' in Finnic, Mordvinic and Lapp. The same word denotes 'bleeding' as well as 'blood of a killed animal' or — as in some dialects — just 'fish or seal blood'. On the Western Estonian islands the word is also used to refer to a reddish colour. In addition, the stem has produced several names for 'ladybird' used in Finnish, Karelian, Ingrian, Votic and Estonian. Some linguists tend to consider 'alder' as the primary sense of the lexeme in Finnic, while some others hold that the original sense is 'blood'. With some hesitation the word has been suggested to be a Baltic loan. Here a new hypothesis is advanced: the Finnic *lepp(ä)* could possibly be an early Indo-European loan originally meaning 'paint'.

#### 1. 'Tree' and 'blood'

All Finnic and Mordvinic names for alder (*Alnus*) have a *lepp*-stem: Finnish, Karelian, Ingrian, Votic *leppä*, Lude *lep(pə)*, Veps *lep*, Estonian *lepp*, Livonian *l'epà*, Erzian *lepe*, Moksha *lepä* (SKES 288; SSA 2 : 64—65). The Lapp words *liepp*, *lei'be*, *læi'be*, etc. 'alder' sound close to them. The post-Ice-Age ground of the present-day Estonian territory has been growing alder since the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (EEA 33).

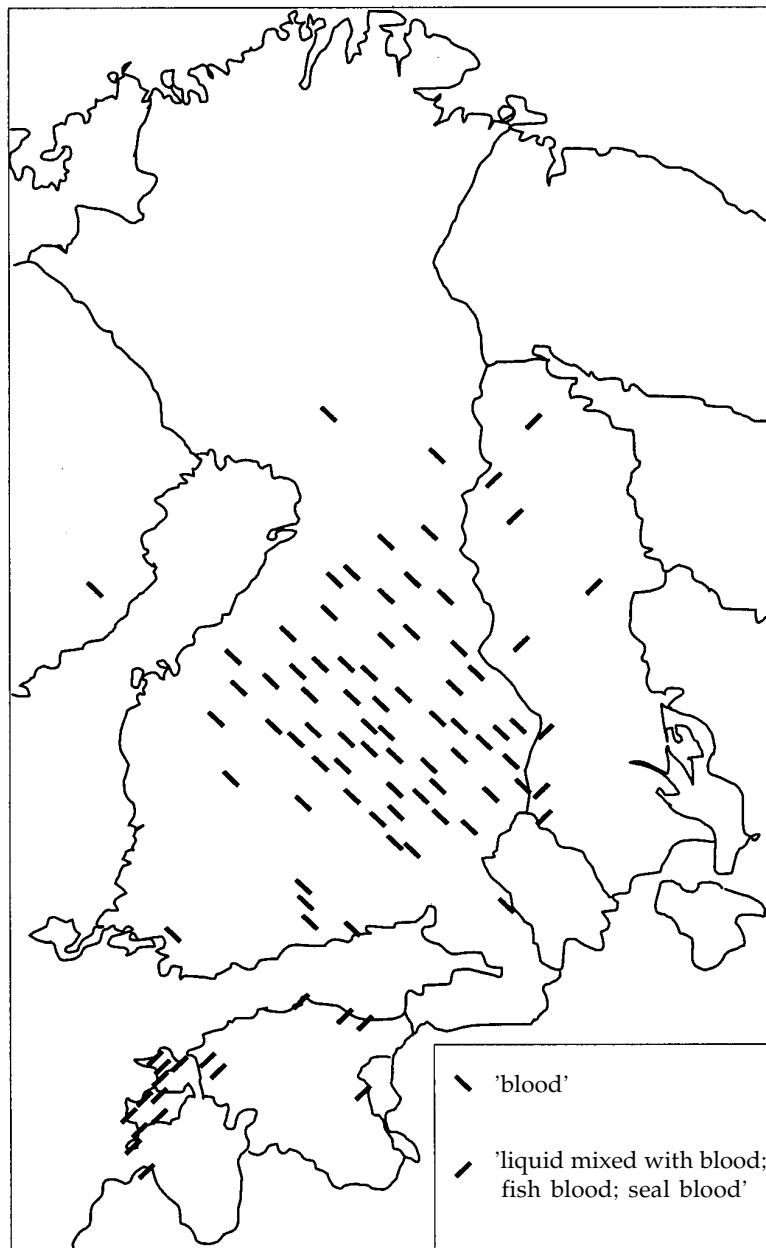
The same name as is used for alder refers in Finnic dialects also to the blood of a killed animal, as well as to the blood or liquid mixed with blood issuing from a living body (e.g. from a wound) (see map 1). In the Suistamo dialect of Karelian, for example, the case of a cow yielding milk with blood admixture is referred to as *lehmä leppiä lypsää*, lit. 'the cow is milking blood' (KKS III 65); bovine haematuria is described as *ni'emâ kuzüb leppâ* 'the cow is urinating blood' in the Irë Livonian (Kettunen 1938 : 199), and as *lehmä leppiä* by Finns of Korpilahti (SMSA), etc. The herb used to treat the illness has been called *leparoht* by an informant representing the Pärnu-Jaagupi dialect of Estonian (EM).

Part of Finnish dialect speakers call pure animal blood *veri*, whereas admixtures (e.g. flour) change the term into *leppä*, which is also the name for dough made with blood. Finnish, in particular the dialects of Savo, uses the *lepp*-stem in reference to various blood-containing foods, such as *lepee*, *leppäleipä* 'blood bread', *leppärieska* 'blood-containing bread of

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barley', *leppälettu* 'pancake made with blood', *lepäkäs*, *leppäkisko* 'blood dumpling', etc (Lönnrot 1874 : 917; Rapola 1922 : 112—113; Nirvi 1944b : 239—240; SMSA). In Karelian, Livonian and Estonian dialects, however, the *lepp*-stem refers to blood mainly in the vocabulary of fishermen and seal hunters.

There is hardly any doubt that in the above cases of *lepp(ä)* denoting both blood and alder, one and the same word is used. An association between alder and blood is revealed in the religious practices of several peoples. The Finno-Ugrians are known to have considered alder a soul-



Map 1. The Finnic *lepp(ä)* in the sense of 'blood'.

tree, i.e. the dwelling place of a soul after leaving the body, while the red sap was, indeed, believed to be blood (Lehtisalo 1934 : 76). There are several reports of the Finnic people to have used alder, its twigs, leaves and sap in magic rites and healing (Holmberg 1913 : 201; Lehtisalo 1934; Viires 1975 : 100–101). The North Lapp people called their hunting sprite, who was also the tutelary spirit of the bear, *leib-olmai*, lit. 'alder man'. To win the benevolence of that spirit the Lapp women were to sprinkle their men returning from a successful hunt with a liquid made red by means of alder crumbs (Holmberg 1915 : 85–86).

Which of the two meanings is primary is still an open question. Some scholars claim that the original name referred to the tree, later spreading on to its red sap and, further, to the pigment made from its bark. Blood, however, would be called 'alder sap' for euphemistic reasons (e.g. Toivonen 1943 : 159; Nirvi 1944b : 247–249). This opinion is supported by the association of blood with various taboos. It was believed, for example, that before killing an animal or catching fish, the common word for 'blood' should never be pronounced, or otherwise the game would be warned and escape (Nirvi 1944b : 253–254).

Another widespread point of view prefers 'blood' as the original meaning of *leppä*, later lending its name to alder for the red sap of the tree. According to August Ahlqvist the semantic development could have proceeded as follows: *leppä* 'blood' + *puu* 'tree' = *leppäpuu* 'alder', lit. 'blood tree', later shortened into *leppä* 'alder' by ellipsis (1871: 72). This viewpoint has been shared by many a later scholar, incl. Uno Holmberg (1913 : 201), Julius Mägiste (1928 : 25) and M. Airila (1940 : 139). Although the above etymology would account for the genesis of the name of alder, the weakness of the hypothesis is revealed as soon as the areal distributions of the two meanings are compared. Notably, the geographic argument seems to date *leppä* as a tree name of the Finnic-Mordvinic period, which was earlier than the time when the word is assumed to have been introduced in Proto-Finnic, meaning 'blood' (Nirvi 1944b : 247).

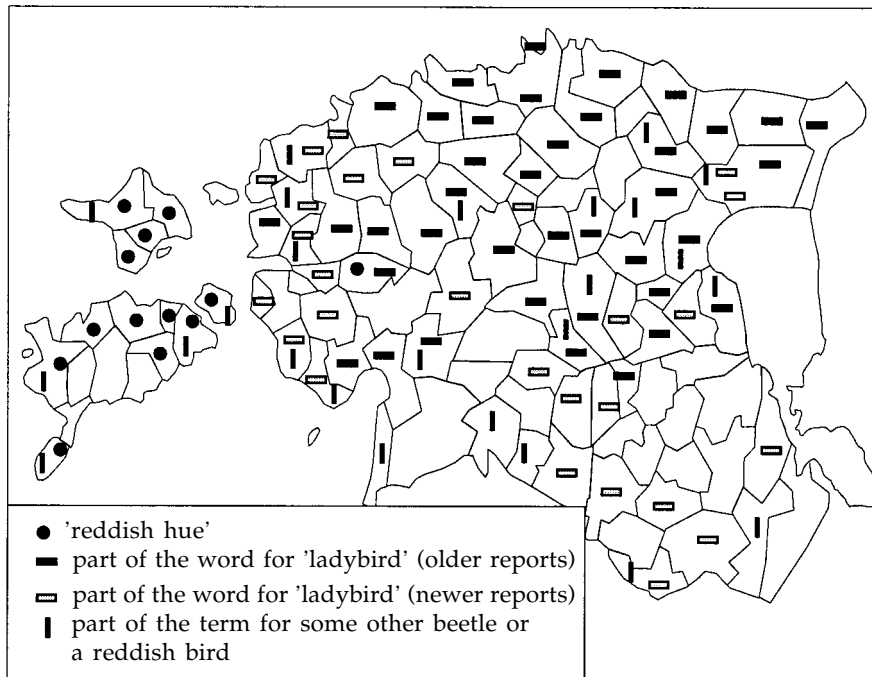
## 2. Colour term

A consideration of the common feature of the two notions suggests a third possibility for both — 'blood' and 'alder' — being secondary from the aspect of originality. In the Western Estonian islands *lepp* Gen. *lepu* (Saaremaa, Muhu) and Nom., Gen. *lepu* (Hiiumaa) are used as adjectives denoting a reddish colour, while the most frequent object of reference is a light yellowish-red horse. A report from Muhu claims quite resolutely that *leppu* 'lehma põle, obu oo lepp' 'there's no cow of a *lepp* colour, only horse'. In Hiiumaa the semantic field is less restricted. Older records contain, e.g. the following sentence: *lepo on roosa ja ponase vahe peel, õõlda tatt leheb lepogs, kut veri nenast välja toleb* 'lepo is somewhere between pink and red, snot is said to get that colour when the nose bleeds' (Emmaste, 1933). Later records (1957–1967) indicate that *lepu* has been used to describe a vague faded brown of cloth, yarn, or dead blossoms. The explanations for *lepu* as a colour term, found in the Estonian Dialect Archives are beige, orange, whitish red, yellowish red, and reddish yellow, in newer material also yellowish grey and greyish brown.

The above colour term has been analysed as a diminutive of the word for blood < *lepp(ä)* + *oi* (Mägiste 1928 : 24; Saareste 1962 : 235). On the other hand, as some informants have described the hue by comparing it to the colour of (barked) alder, the name of the tree has also been regarded as a plausible origin of the colour term (Koski 1983 : 99). Note that informant interpretations should be taken with some caution as those may easily be folk-etymologically biased.

Studies of the dialect material of cognate languages have not provided direct evidence of the *leppä*-lexeme being used there as a colour adjective. Widespread, however, is the use of *leppä-* (Estonian *lepa-*) as the first component in compound Finnic names for 'ladybird', e.g. Finnish *leppälkerthu*, *-pirkko*, Karelian *leppälintu*, Ingrian *leppätiira*, Votic *leppällintu*, *-tiiro* and Estonian *lepaltriin(u)*, *-lind*, lit. 'red bird', *-härg*, lit. 'red bull' (ALE 1990 : 162, map 44). A. Saareste surmises that such names may have been motivated by the red colour of the beetle, referring to *lepp* as a word meaning 'blood' (1924 : 83). Also, the *lepp*-component stands for colour in the names of several small red birds, e.g. Estonian *lepalind*, Finnish, Ingrian, Karelian *leppälintu* 'redstart (*Phoenicurus*)'; Finnish *lepinkäinen* 'red-backed shrike (*Lanius*)', etc. (SSA 2 : 64). According to linguists the names are motivated by the red or reddish-brown feathers of the birds, even though folk etymology sometimes associates them, erroneously, with the alder tree (Suolahti 1906 : 141–142; Mäger 1967 : 166–167).

A comparison of the areal distribution of the ladybird names with *lepa-* as an attributive component, with the old map compiled by A. Saareste (1924 : 82) reveals that the standard Estonian word *lepatrinu* has considerably expanded its territory, in particular in Southern and Western Estonia. This is illustrated by map 2, where the older material (collected by A. Saareste)



Map 2. *lepp*, *lepu* and *lepa-* in the sense of 'red' in Estonian dialects.

has been differentiated from the newer records available in the Estonian Dialect Archive now, yet missing from A. Saareste's map of 1924. The map demonstrates that the Estonian dialect terms for birds and the ladybird, having *lepa-* as their initial component, occur mainly inland, while the colour term *lepp/lepu* is characteristic of the Insular dialect. Most of the North Estonian dialects are thus familiar with the use of the *lepp*-stem in a colour-denoting function. According to map 1, the Estonian *lepp* may also mean fish or seal blood, or a liquid mixed with blood, but this use is much more restricted areally. The case may probably be interpreted as a euphemistic use of a colour noun.

Analogous euphemistic uses of words for 'red' when speaking of blood (esp. animal blood) are not infrequent in other languages, both Finnic and non-Finnic. Many such cases can be found in Finnish dialects, e.g. *puna*, *pune*, *punainen* (SMSA), or Karelian: *ruskie* (KKS V 196), etc (see Nirvi 1944a : 98—99). In Kiestinki North Karelian there is a word *punaisputro*, lit. 'red porridge' meaning a porridge cooked with blood (KKS IV 502). Bovine haematuria is called *punatauti* 'red disease' in Finnish, Karelian and Votic dialects (SKES 640; VKS 4 : 343). An analogous name *sarkana vaina*, lit. 'red disease' is used by the Latvian (Vidzeme) neighbours of Southern Estonians (report from the Vidzeme collection by Elga Kagaine). When a cow is taken ill with this disease a speaker of the Renko dialect of Finnish would say: *lehmät tulee punaselle*, lit. 'cows are taken ill with red' (SMSA), while an Estonian would say *lehm kuseb punast* 'the cow is urinating red' (EM), etc.

### 3. Origin

With some hesitation, the Finnic word *lepp(ä)* has been classified as a Baltic loan, while the Mordvinic and Kola-Lapp words could have been borrowed from Finnic (Sammallahti 1977 : 123—124; SSA 2 : 64—65). The North Lapp *læi'be*, *leib* etc., are developed from a separate Proto-Baltic loanword *\*leajpē* (Sammallahti 2001 : 410). In Baltic and Slavic languages there are phonetically close words denoting the lime tree, e.g. Lithuanian *liepa*, Latvian *liepa*, Russian *липа*. Other words of the same root refer to such notions as 'to stick; to glue; fish glue; friendly; beautiful', etc. (Fraenkel 1962 I 375—376). In some Russian dialects the adjectives *лeпый*, *-ая*, *-ое* means 'beautiful; good', e.g. in the Olonetsian and Pskovian dialects of Russian spoken in a Finnic neighbourhood the word has been used in reference to a horse: *лепая лошадь* 'fine horse' (СПНГ 368). Further back, the Baltic and Slavic lexeme has been associated with the Old Indian word *lēpas* 'grease, (sticky) paint' (ME II 410, 503; Фасмер 1967 : 484—485). Hence the belief that the lime-tree has earned its name for its sticky sap (Фасмер 1967 : 499). Phonetically, the earlier Baltic word *\*lipā* with its short first-syllable vowel could make a fine equivalent for the Finnic word, except for the semantic difference that calls the loan relation into question (Vaba 1992 : 574). Considering the importance of practical experience and purpose in any primitive culture, the notion 'sticky' serves well to motivate the name of a lime tree, but as far as alder is concerned, the staining property is more likely to attract attention.

Considering what has been said above, the Finnic-Mordvinic-Lapp word in question might perhaps be an early Indo-European or even Proto-Indo-

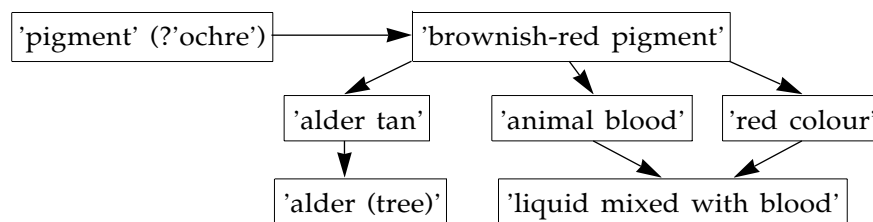
European loan originally denoting a pigment. The oldest paintings survived in the present-day area of the Finnic and Lapp populations are rock paintings of figures covered with yellowish-red or brownish-red ochre. A similar brownish-red colour can be achieved by means of alder bark and blood. The drum skins of Lapp shamans are decorated with paints made from alder bark and reindeer blood (Manninen 1929 : 275–276). The inner side of a Khanty shaman drum is also often painted with alder bark paint, whereas the Altaic people used to paint their drums with brown ochre (Holmberg 1933 : 353; Lehtisalo 1934 : 83).

The bark of the alders growing in the Finnic area has been known and used as a dyeing substance since very old times indeed. Both Finnish and Estonian dialect collections contain numerous descriptions of how yarn, cloth and various objects (wooden ones included) used to be dyed or painted red, yellow or brown by means of alder bark. The Estonian compound colour terms with the *lepa*-component usually refer to a reddish hue, e.g. *lepakoorepunane*, lit. 'alder bark red', *lepalehepunane*, lit. 'alder leaf red', *lepakoldne* 'reddish yellow', *lepakoorekollane* 'brownish yellow'. From the Länsipohja dialect area of Finnish (Täräntö, Northern Finland) there is a report of *pihlajasauvoja lepällä punattu* 'rowan sticks painted red with alder', while *leppä* is said to be 'a red pigment obtained from alder bark' (SMSA; Nirvi 1944b : 248). In Peräpohjala dialect (Kittilä, Northern Finland) Lapps are said to have coloured thin boot leather *lepällä* 'with alder' by chewing alder rubble and then letting the reddened saliva soak the inner side of the leather (SMSA). In Kiestinki North Karelian the red sap of some trees (mainly alder and aspen) is known to have been called *leppä* (KKS III 65).

Some Finnic people have used alder tan to obtain a vague greyish or greenish tone, as well as to act as fixative for other pigments. The Insular dialect of Estonian contains the verb *lepitama* in the sense 'to dye with bark'. Such dyeing could be applied to yarn, cloth and fishing nets, which were boiled in the infusion of alder or buckthorn, either in order to obtain a special hue or to prepare ground for the next dye to stick better. At Petsamo, Karelians are also known to have dyed their fishing nets *lepällä* 'with alder'.

As in spring the cambium of both black and white alder contains sweet red sap, children would chew fine alder twigs or pieces of cambium cut off a bigger tree; as a result of this their mouths became red (*suud lepa-sed*) (EM; Viires 1975 : 102). When used in smoking meat, both kinds of alder contribute not only to the good taste, but also to a nice colour of the smoked meat (Viires 1975 : 99–100).

If the Finnic-Mordvinic word with a *lepp*-stem should indeed originate in a Proto-Indo-European period, it is hardly worth while to attempt a phonetic reconstruction as there are several competing ways for it. As for the semantic aspect, it may have developed the following way.



Let us presume that the ancestors of the Finnic peoples borrowed a word denoting some colouring substance (maybe ochre) in a Proto-Indo-European dialect in order to refer to their own brownish-red colouring substances, which were alder bark and blood. From that substance the use of the word may have extended to the brownish and yellowish-red colour, which in turn, could serve as the basis for bird and ladybird names with a *lepp*-component. The term for the alder tree (*Alnus*), however, may have originated in the special feature and function of the tree as a colouring plant. In this case, neither the role of alder in folk religious and magic rites nor an association between alder sap and blood need have served as the true motive for the *lepp*-name of the tree.

#### Abbreviations

**ALE** — ALE. Atlas Linguarum Europae I 4, Maastricht 1990; **EEA** — L. Jaanits, S. Laul, V. Lõugas, E. Tõnison, Eesti esiajalugu, Tallinn 1982; **EM** — Eesti murdearhiiv (archives at the Institute of the Estonian Language, Tallinn); **KKS** — Karjalan kielen sanakirja III. L–N; IV. O–P; V. R–S, Helsinki 1983; 1993; 1997 (LSFU XVI. Kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisuja 25); **ME** — K. Mülenbacha Latviešu valodas vārdnīca I–IV. Rediģējis, papildinājis, turpinājis J. Endzelīns, Rīgā 1923–1932; **SMSA** — Suomen murteiden sanaarkisto (archives at the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland, Helsinki); **VKS** — Vadja keele sõnaraamat 4. Toimetanud E. Adler ja M. Leppik, Tallinn 2000; **СРПГ** — Словарь русских народных говоров 16, Ленинград 1980.

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ВИЛЬЯ ОЯ (Таллинн)

### ПРИБАЛТИЙСКО-ФИНСКОЕ И МОРДОВСКОЕ *lepp*

Название ольхи (*Alnus*) в прибалтийско-финских и мордовских языках имеет основу *lepp*. Этим словом в прибалтийско-финских диалектах обозначается кровь, которая течет из раны, и кровь убитого животного (в эстонских и карельских диалектах рыба и тюленья кровь), а также жидкость с примесью крови. Относительно того, какое из значений первично, существует два диаметрально противоположных мнения. Часть исследователей отдают пальму первенства наименованию дерева, которое позже стали использовать в качестве названия краски, изготавливаемой из красного сока и коры ольхи, и как эвфемизм — для обозначения крови. Согласно другой точки зрения, слово *leppä* изначально обозначало кровь и ольха получила свое название благодаря напоминающему кровь красному соку.

Исходя из общего свойства двух понятий 'ольха' и 'кровь' — красного цвета, можно обсудить и третий вариант, т. е. что и 'кровь', и 'дерево' могли быть вторичными значениями. На западных островах Эстонии *lepp* и *lepu* встречаются как прилагательные, обозначающие красный цвет. Более широко компонент *lepp-*, передающий окраску, обнаруживается в названиях маленьких красных птичек и букашек, например, во многих наименованиях божьих коровок в эстонском, водском, финском, ижорском и карельском языках.

Прибалтийско-финское *lepp(ä)* с определенной долей сомнений считается балтийским заимствованием, а мордовские слова — заимствованиями из прибалтийско-финских языков. Балтийско-славянские слова, произошедшие от того же корня, обозначают понятия 'клеить, клейкий', 'рыбий клей', 'дружелюбный', 'красивый' и т. д. Углубившись в более далекое прошлое, их связывают с древнеиндийским словом *lepās* 'жир; (клейкая) краска'.

Возможно, прибалтийско-финское и мордовское слово представляет собой раннее индоевропейское или протоевропейское заимствование, изначально обозначавшее красящее вещество. Семантика слова могла развиваться следующим образом. Предположим, что предки прибалтийско-финских народов заимствовали из какого-нибудь индоевропейского диалекта слово со значением красящего вещества (скажем, охра) и стали применять его, именуя так местные коричнево-красные красящие вещества — ольховый дубитель и кровь. Употребление слова расширилось на обозначение коричнево- и желто-красного цвета, что послужило предпосылкой для появления компонента *lepp-* в названиях божьей коровки и птиц.

Название ольхи (*Alnus*) обусловлено особыми свойствами и функцией этого дерева, ольха была красящим деревом. Тем самым роль ольхи в обрядах народных верований и магических действиях, а также ассоциирование сока ольхи с кровью совсем не обязательно должны были стать мотивом именования как дерева, так и крови.