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GIANT, DEVIL OR DEATH? THE FINNISH KOLJO IN MYTHOLOGY, TOPONYMS, FOLKLORE AND ARCHAEOLOGY

The giant

In the classic work *Mythologia Fennica*, published in 1789, the author Christfrid Ganander (1742–1790) tells a story based on oral tradition about two giants called *Koljo* and *Kiljo*, living in Rantsila in Osthrobothnia (Fig. 1). When engaged in fighting, they hurled large stones at each other, and now the stones are found in the River Siikajoki, half a kilometre away, known later as

Koljonkivi (gen. + kivi 'stone') and Kiljonkivi. The still waters between the rocks have been called Koljonsuvanto, and in the vicinity there are also other places named after the same tradition (Ganander, 1789, 42). Even today, on the west bank of the River Siikajoki there stands a farmhouse called Koljo, while Kiljo's farm stands on the east bank.

The fundamental features of these stone-throwing stories are universal and they can be found as early as in Ancient Greek folklore; along with adoption of Christianity the legends and supernatural beings obtained a new meaning (*Jauhiainen*, 1994, 177). Stories of huge rock-throwing giants are commonplace in Finland, and the above-mentioned story is similar to other giant-related stories. In particular, legends of giants threatening

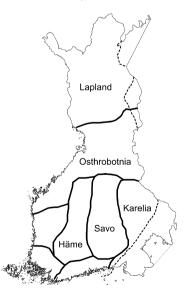


Fig. 1. Historical provinces of Finland mentioned in text.

the church are usual and widespread (*Jauhiainen*, 1994). Sometimes the giants are involved in building a shrine rather than destroying one, but certainly the ulterior motive is to steal the church silver and other valuables or do something else morally dubious. In South-West Finnish folklore, where the first written record is as early as 1656, the giants called *Killi* and *Nalli*, building the Raisio stone church, escape after their deceit comes to light, and in retaliation they try to destroy the church by throwing a large chunk of rock at it (*Haavio*, 1935, 290–291).

Particularly in the Baltic Sea region there are unusual terrain features and huge boulders moved by the ice sheet, which have been explained as results of giants' activities. In addition to the above-mentioned churches, some prehistoric monuments such as cairns (Fi. hiidenkiuas 'hiisi's stove'), giants' churches (Fi. jätinkirkko), stone labyrinths (Fi. jatulintarha 'giant's fence'), and some other large stone monuments are also considered the work of giants.

In the myths, the giants are usually seen as creatures resembling humans, but much larger and stronger. It is also common to interpret giants as stupid and violent creatures with a particular hatred of the various embodiments of Christianity, such as churches and belfries. These mythical giants have been called by various names. In addition to the names mentioned, the giants have being called *hiisi*, *jatuli*, nuns, monks and *metelinväki* ('meteli folk'), for example. Except for *hiisi*, many of these names appear in quite restricted geographical areas. For example, the proper name for a giant *Kalevanpoika* ('Kaleva's Son') has been found mostly in South-West Finland and Estonia (Fig. 2). However, many of the names have blurred in time, losing touch with the original meaning.

Koljo in personal names and toponyms

The name for the giant mentioned at the beginning of the article, *Koljo* and its numerous variations, has received little attention, because the word is ambiguous and in part also blurred. According to Gustav Renvall's dictionary, published in the 1820s, the word denoted a large person, gigantic as an adjective, *stature grandis*, *longurio*, *giganticus*, or a creature in the form of a mythical giant – *riesenhaft*. The derived proper name for Koljo is *Koljumi*, represented as a large beast, *gigas malus*, and mythic giant, *Riese* (*Renvall*, 1826, 208). *Koljumi* could also mean *Koljatti*, which is a folk version of the biblical *Goliath* (*Ganander*, 1789, 41). Also, according to an interpretation proffered already in the 18th



Fig. 2. In South-West Finland and Estonia, a stone-throwing giant is often called Kalevanpoika (Est. Kalevipoeg 'Kaleva's/Kalev's Son'). In the foreground is 'Kaleva's Son's whetstone for his scythe', over 2.5 m tall, in Untamala churchyard in Laitila, which has turned out to be a medieval tombstone (Kivikoski, 1955, 65).

century by C. Ganander, there is also a giant resembling Koljo called *Kole*, found in Swedish folklore.

In addition to the giant legends, the word *koljo* has remained in microtoponyms, where it and its variants are quite numerous. Based on contemporary topographical maps, there are over 150 place-names, usually binomial

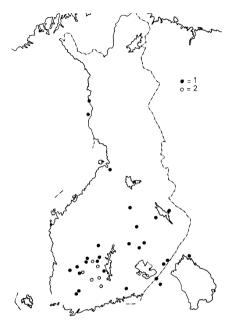


Fig. 3. The distribution of koljo names in Finland (after Vahtola, 1980, 149): 1– the koljo cluster; 2 – the appellative koljo.

compounds, with the beginning Koljo (basic form), Koljon (+ gen.) or its variants. A large proportion of the toponyms containing Koljo seem to be quite late and defined by personal or settlement names, because the name is still in use, for example, as the common surname Koljonen and Koljo. The oldest known occurrence of a related name in written documents dates from as long ago as 30 January 1486, when a person called Nicki Koljolainen appears as a defendant in the court sessions of Kangasala District (FMU, V 4068). In addition to settlement names, the word occurs in toponyms as a definition for various terrain locations, especially as an attribute for topographically distinguishable places, such as hills, rocks, promontories, islands and bays. Such places are often located by the shore of a lake.

According to Jouko Vahtola, who has studied the subject, the distribution of the name types is quite clear. In his research, toponyms associated with this group occur especially in the old Häme region (Fig. 3). The names are abundant in Eastern Finland, and according to Vahtola (1980, 149–150) many of these names were given based on the Häme tradition and would hark back to the settlers with Häme origins arriving at the waters of Savo, which were rich in fish. One should not consider the name as entirely Häme-based, as names connected with similar places occur in both the western and eastern cultural areas: near the coast in South-West Finland and at the shores of Lake Ladoga in the east.

The origin of the proper name *Koljo* has also been regarded as Karelian, and considered to have spread from Karelia to Savo and other parts of Eastern Finland (*Mikkonen, Paikkala*, 2000, 238). In the case of East Finnish names, the age

of the locations is not in question, since koljo occurs abundantly in both placenames and proper names as early as the 16th century. Due to the lack of an established orthography, there is considerable variation in the spelling of the names, but the word can still be easily recognized. For example, there are various forms in the surnames, such as Kolionen, Koliainen, Kåliå, Kolio(n), Kolia(n), Kolioin and Kålio, during the 16th and 17th century (Nissilä, 1975, 130; Mikkonen, Paikkala, 2000, 238). One of the earliest place-name occurrences is Kolionmäki (present-day Koljonmäki; mäki 'hill') in Pieksämäki, which is mentioned in the first land register of Savo in the 1560s. Hien- i.e. Hiidenmäki (1561 *Hijden mäkj*), which is of mythological interest (*hiisi* 'holy grove, cult place'), is situated on the southern side of Kolionmäki (NA asiakirjanimet Savo; Koski, 1967, 153). The 1560s place-names kolian nemi and kolion nemi in Särkilahti, Sääminki possibly mean the same piece of land, a craggy promontory now known as Koljon- i.e. Koljunniemi (niemi 'spit, promontory'), reaching to the southernmost inlet of Lake Pihlajavesi, Koljonlahti (lahti 'bay, inlet') in Punkaharju (NA Punkaharju Koljonniemi 1988).

Many of the previously mentioned forms, especially the basic elements of the word, *kolja* and *koljo*, and the dialectal *kolju*, are similar, although there are also some diverging and uncommon connotations. That the change of the suffix -*ia* to -*io* is commonplace was perceived already by A. V. Forsman (*Forsman*, 1894, 178–179): "Therefore in old sources one can find the name written sometimes one way and sometimes another, such as Toivia for Toivio, Tornia for Tornio etc." The various examples given by A. V. Forsman also include the root *Koljo* (**Kolio*) for *Kolja*. In other words, in the old written documents it is common to find a change of name suffix from -*o* to -*a*.

It is also considered possible that some toponyms are based on the Eastern personal name *Kolja* or *Koljo*, developed from the aphesis variations of the Russian name *Nikolai* and the Greek name *Nikolaos* (*Nissilä*, 1975, 130; *Vahtola*, 1980, 150, note 236; *Mikkonen*, *Paikkala*, 2000, 238). Nevertheless, the places named after these personal names would be quite late and would relate clearly to the settlements.

Koljo as a mythological and topographical attribute

Traditionally, the place names of significant terrain features, such as hills or water bodies, have been considered old. There is no reason to doubt the age of many strategically located natural sites visible from afar, known as



Fig. 4. Koljonvirta ('Koljo's Stream') in Iisalmi is a wide and fast-flowing stream connecting the Pikku-Ii and Porovesi lakes.

Koljonmäki (mäki 'hill'), Koljonvuori (vuori 'high hill, mountain') and Koljonvirta (virta 'stream'). In these toponyms the meaning of the root koljo most probably reflects the vast, even giant-like size of the site. These places also resemble each other across a wide geographical area. For example, the steep and rocky hill of Koljonvuori in Pusula, Uusimaa Province exhibits the same topographical elements as Koljonmäki hill, situated in Rautjärvi, Karelia, close to the present eastern border. Further examples include a high hill in Swedish Ylitornio, called Koljo or Koljovaara, and a large boulder in the River Tornio, Lapland, called Koljonen. Koljonvirta (virta 'stream') in Iisalmi, Northern Savo is a wide and fast-flowing river connecting together Pikku-Ii and Porovesi lakes (Fig. 4).

There are some archaeological sites at or near places having names with the word *Koljo*. Based on the toponyms, it is possible to link these ancient sites to the naming system that reflects the great size of the place or giant mythology. Of these places we shall mention an undated Lapp cairn (Fi. *lapinraunio*) at *Koljonsaari* (saari 'island') in Lake Näsijärvi at Tampere and the base of a possible Bronze Age cairn found between *Koljolankallio* (kallio 'rock, crag') and *Koljolanjärvi* (järvi 'lake') in the eastern part of Laitila Parish. The great cairn on

the cape Juminda in Kuusalu, Estonia, has been called *koljuvare* ('Kolju's Cairn') (*Eisen*, 1919, 159). Despite its name, *Koljonlinna* (*linna* 'castle') in Antrea, Karelian Isthmus, is not a fortified castle, but a ridge with a long cave inside, consisting of great blocks of rock. It is a natural formation, which, according to stories, has been used as a hiding place during an unspecified time of unrest (*Appelgren*, 1891, xxxviii, 106).

Lapp cairns, giants' stoves and other large stone structures made by man or nature have commonly been considered as graves built by the unknown previous population, which in many cases obtained a mythical status. Thus, in the above-mentioned cases the basis for naming the places could have been the giants, *Koljolaiset* (the *Koljo* People), regarded as the mythological builders and equated to other supranormal beings, such as *hiisi*'s, Lapps and devils. For example, it is said that there once was the home of a *Hiisi* giant in *Koljola* (the village of *Koljo*) in the parish of Antrea (*Setälä*, 1912, 172).

In relation to giant mythology, glacial potholes are called giants' kettles (Fi. hiidenkirnu, literally 'hiisi's churn') in modern language as well. They are natural formations in bedrock formed by water movement in tunnels beneath the ice masses. As an interesting example connected to a koljo-giant, it may be mentioned that there is a giant's pothole on Koljon- or Koljankallio (kallio 'rock') at Pankakoski, Lieksa in Karelia (Setälä, 1912, 172; NA Pielisjärvi Koljankallio 1965).

In modern usage the word *koljo* has lost its meaning as a term for a mythical giant, and the context of the word has become almost entirely blurred in other ways as well (SKES II 210-211). However, in the topographical attributes of the *koljo*-named places it is possible to distinguish a specific stratum meaning either huge, gigantic or a giant. The toponyms definitely based on personal or settlement names are left out of this category.

Unlike the above-mentioned words, *koljatti*, a derivative of *koljo*, has stayed in use. In all likelihood this has happened because the word resembles the biblical *Goliath*. In comparison to the word *koljo*, the meaning of the word *koljatti* is more limited: it denotes a huge human being, a hulk or a mythical giant (*Ganander*, 1789, 41; *Lönnrot*, 1880, 710). In the topographical attributes of these places, too, great size is emphasized. *Koljatti* sites are mainly rocky cliffs or high hills, sometimes also large bodies of water, distinguishable from the surrounding environment by their size. Vast rock formations and other great natural formations have also been explained as works of the mythical Koljatti. For example, there is a large natural rock formation *Koljatinrinne* (*rinne*

'hillside') in Puolanka, while Sysmä's *Koljatti* in Linkola is a flat-topped ridge steep on one side (NA Sysmä Koljaatti 1962). On the slope of the hill *Koljatti* in Finnish, or *Goljatberget* in Swedish, situated at the border of Teuva and Närpiö in Osthrobothnia, is large area of rocky ground. According to the legend, this 'field of stones' arose hundreds of years ago, when there lived ancient people oblivious to God, who buried their dead at this place and placed an enormous heap of similar-sized stones on top of the graves (SKS KRA. Teuva. Harjula, A. KRK 176. 21; NA Närpiö Goljatti 1978).

Places called *Koljatti* (Goliath) sometimes have nearby places called *Taavetti* or *Daavid/David* as a contrast. For example, in Posio, Southern Lapland, there is *Daavidinlampi* ('David's Pond'), a smaller body of water than the vast lake *Koljatti* (*Goliath*), beside which it is situated. Biblical connection is quite clear with these toponyms.

Etymological layers 'devil' and 'death'

Even though in the background there has been a model based on gigantic size or a personal name behind the naming process of many places, there is another possibility that is likely to apply to many *koljo*-type names. Ganander (1789, 41) already stated that in local folk-tales *Koljumi* has been associated with the Devil as well. Actually, many of the parallels to *Koljo* in folklore, such as *Koljumi*, *Kuljus* and *Koljolainen*, have been connected to the appellations of the Devil or a demon (*Setälä*, 1912, 172; *Krohn*, 1914, 249). *Koljakko*, too, might be included in this group of names, as according to legend, a devil once lived on the rocky *Koljakonmäki* (*mäki* 'hill') situated in the ceded area of Ladoga Karelia. The place has also been described as haunted (NA Lumivaara Koljakonmäki 1967).

The parallels mentioned are understandable, since in Finnish mythology giant figures have also been perceived as supernatural beings, such as devils. In folklore and oral tradition, too, it is usual for giant beings and devils to be intermingled, as is the case with *hiisi* and other mythical inhabitants. In addition, when naming similar kinds of rocky places, the parallel proper names *Jätti-* (Giant-) and *Piru-* (Devil-) have been used, for example (*Koskenheimo*, 2001, 32).

As with supernatural devils and giants, the semantic content of the word *koljo* has been connected with death and worship of the dead. The roots of the word have been associated early on with, among others, the old Germanic

words *halja* (**kolio*) and *hel* 'Hell, the underworld, the goddess of death' (*Setälä*, 1912, 182–183; *Krohn*, 1914, 41; *Güntert*, 1919, 52–53; also *Kemppinen*, 1960, 284).

According to Setälä (1912, 172), the Estonian equivalent for the word *koljo* is *koll*, which, along with its variants, is an old term for the dead. However, the word is ambiguous, and has also been used to refer to ghosts, trolls, fairies, devils and giants. In addition, in the old times it was also used to scare children (*Eisen*, 1919, 157–160; *Tommola*, 1955, 11, 26–27). In more remote Finno-Ugric languages, such as in Udmurt and Kom, and in the Khanty and Mansi languages, close equivalents have been found to the word *koljo*, meaning a serious disease, plague, devil and god of the underworld. According to studies by Setälä (1912, 173–177; see also SKES II 210–211), the word is considered one of the oldest common components of the ancient Finno-Ugric religions.

In the Finnish word *koljo*, the stratum of worship of dead is not recognizable any more. However, some places named on this basis, in addition to the examples already mentioned, might retain some memory and a faded reminiscence of death. According to stories, in the old times children born out of wedlock were drowned in *Koljonlampi (lampi 'pond')* situated in Liminka, for example (NA Liminka Koljonlampi 1976). *Koljonniemi (niemi 'spit*, promontory') on the west side of the vast Kalmakangas (*kalma 'death'*; *kangas 'forest'*) in the former parish of Kangaslampi might refer to an ancient burial site (*Ruohonen*, 2009).

Koljonsaari - Island of the Dead

However, clear connections between the mythical Koljo and concrete death are also known in many places. For example, in the mid-18th century parish maps of Ala-Kintaus, Petäjävesi, Central Finland there is an island called *Koliansaari*, also known as *Koljonsaari* (*Oja*, 1954, 267; KA MHA 41; Fig. 5). The island is fairly small, approximately 250 m north to south and 100 m east to west. The basis for the name is unclear, as there are no characteristics that might be linked to large size or giant mythology in the nature or the topography of the place. Also, in the settlement history of the nearby historical village of Kintaus, there is no indication of the family name *Koljo* or *Koljonen*.

The explanation for *Koljonsaari* island is to be found in the late 18th century map (MMLA Petäjävesi 1:1), in which the name of this place is written as *Cuolleten saari* (*cuolleten > kuolleitten* 'dead people'). Since the late 19th century the island has been called *Kuoliosaari* ('Island of the Dead'). A large cemetery



Fig. 5. Koljonsaari (Koliansari) Island in Lake Ala-Kintaus, parish of Petäjävesi on the 1750s map (MHA 41, KA).

dating from the turn of the 18th century has been discovered in research (*Ruohonen*, 2007, 15–20; see also *Tigerstedt* 1877, 40).

Were this a single case, the parallel between the modern names *Koljo* and *Kuolio* could be a mere coincidence, but closer study reveals more locations of a similar nature. Thus, in the comment part of the 1640s land register of Haukiniemi village in Sääminki, present day Savonlinna, the location *Kolia saarj* is mentioned, normalized or corrected as *Koljasaari* when the names were brought up to date in the modern catalogue (MHA c1 28, KA; *Alanen*, 2008, 39, 367). In the land register written as early as the 1560s, the same place-name appears in the written form as *kolija sari* (*Alanen*, 2006, 46). In its present form, the name can be interpreted as *Kuolo-, Kuolija-* or *Kuoliosaari* ('Island of the Dead').

Antero Pelkonen refers specifically to this place, using the name *Kuoliosaari*, based on the 1664 land register (*Pelkonen*, 1902, 183, 317). In the talk of the locals, this place, unnamed on contemporary maps, has been known as *Kuoliitsaari* (*kuoliit > kuolio* 'dead or dying person') in the 1960s, and Russian soldiers

fallen in a battle during the Russo-Swedish war in 1789 are believed to be buried there (NA Sääminki Kuoliitsaari 1967).

In the light of the mentioned case studies, several old toponyms including variants of the word *koljo* can be regarded as referring to death. Many of these names have been normalized to the present form *Kuolio*. The word is not to be connected with its present-day Finnish meaning, necrosis, gangrene or blockage of blood flow, but instead, as with the absolute majority of the examples with the Finnish word *kuolija*, originally meant dead and dying person – *mortuus*, *exanimus* (SKES II 239; *Renvall*, 1826, 233).

Toponyms belonging to this group are not very numerous: presently there are about 85 place-names with the beginning *Kuoli*-. When categorized by their topographical attributes, the majority of these names refer to islands or islets, but there are also some rocky cliffs and high hills among them. Geographically these places occur mainly in the area of the Eastern dialects in Finland. The islands are found particularly in provinces of modern Central Finland and Savo, but also at the east coast of the Gulf of Finland and in East Karelia (NA YK, Itä-Karjala). On the grounds of oral tradition, bone finds and archaeological research, we can say that the clear majority of the islands, especially in the lake area, have been used as local burial grounds in historic times.

There have been stories explaining the character of many forgotten burial sites. In most cases, Russian soldiers and Lapps are mentioned as having been buried there, but giants are a popular motif as well. As with the Koljo-named sites, so too in some places the name Kuolio and giant lore meet. For example, it is told of the Kuoliosaari island in Lake Tallus, in the parish of Tervo, that a giant died there (SKS KRA Pielavesi. Tiitinen, Martti P K 50: 9038. 1938). However, islands related to stories of buried supernatural beings more often have names with a different basis than Koljo or Kuolio. For example, it is told that giants were buried in Lehtosensaari in Lestijärvi, and that a giant called Simo, the first inhabitant of the region, was buried on Simosaari, Tervo (SKS KRA Perho. Samuli Paulaharju 29975. 1936; SKS KRA Tervo. A. Pekonen 98. 1938). It is also said that giants have been buried (among other places) on Isosaari in Lake Vahvanen in the parish of Karstula (Snellman, 1897, 43) and that giant bones have been found in Kalmasaari (kalma 'death') in Lake Kuttajärvi, Karttula (MV KTKA K27:78 Karttula). In addition to giants, devils and Lapps are mentioned as having been buried there, the latter turned more or less into mythic beings in the legends. Sometimes they are also reflected in the parallel names of the places. For example, Manalaissaari (*manala*, underworld) Island, situated in Lake Enijärvi, parish of Kemijärvi in Lapland is also known by its alternative name of *Pirunsaari* (*piru*, devil) (NA Kemijärvi Manalaissaari 1962; *Räisänen*, 2003:269).

The above-mentioned burial sites were not official cemeteries, but rather, based on current information from sites that have been researched, can be regarded as local burial grounds used by nearby villagers in historical times. When the use of the places ceased as a result of activities by the Lutheran Church during the latter part of 17th century or in the 1720s at the latest, their character slowly became blurred and later in some cases entirely forgotten. As a result, many burial sites and also those buried in them were turned into folklore, becoming mythical. Also, many new stories based on well-known folk-tale motifs could have developed because of bone finds at these forgotten burial sites. In a similar way, although on a wider time scale, cairns dating back to Bronze and Iron Ages have been regarded as constructed by a mythical population of the same kind.

The parallels between *koljo* and *kuolio* are hardly based on the unstable orthographies of historical documents and other sources. Especially in their dialectal form, the words and their variants are close to each other, which might have caused confusion. For example, one of the dialectal forms of the name *Koljo* is *Kolijo* (SKS KRA Rantsila, Kirkonkylä. Elsa Punkeri TK 77:88. 1961) and the latter in particular closely resembles the words *kuolija* and *kuolio* 'death, dying person'. In any case, the meaning of both words, *koljo* and *kuolio*, includes an element relating to death, as explained. It is also likely that the synonymous or closely related content of meaning in the words has contributed to the emergence of possible folk etymologies.

Attempts have also been made to explain the word *kuolio* as a loan from the Saami word *guolli* 'fish' (*Halonen*, 2004; *Korpela*, 2008, 222; Aikio 2002; see also *Räisänen*, 2005, 352), but considering the above-mentioned archaeological finds and other observations pointing to burial grounds, this seems impossible.

Conclusions

As described above, *koljo* and its variants have several different layers of meaning that have remained partly parallel and have partly changed. According to the traditional view, the meanings of many terms relating to the ancient world of belief changed with the adoption of Christianity to accom-

modate the needs of the new religion (*Koski*, 1967, 226). The Finnish *koljo*, a word originally meaning death and significant terrain features, changed to become predominantly a name for a mythical giant, with negative connotations attached. In many cases, words signifying the spirit of deceased have later acquired a negatively loaded content, now meaning an animal, evil spirit or devil (*Mikkola*, 1905, 9; see also *Krohn*, 1914, 249; *Tommola*, 1955, 27). In the case of the word *koljo* and its variants, the strong association to the biblical *Goliath* might have contributed to the strength of the negative component of meaning.

From the etymological and mythological point of view, places called *Koljo* are not unusual in their nature. Finnish *hiisi*-places and Estonian *hiis*-places are similar in their connection to giant mythology as well as sacrificial sites and burials (*Koski*, 1967, 225–226). *Koljo* and *hiisi* toponyms also have a close similarity in terms of their reference to topographical features associated with supranormal beings, and in terms of the stories and other elements. *Koljo* must also be attached, at least partially, to the rich tradition and group of names containing mythological elements. Names, in particular, have contributed to the spread of the *hiisi* tradition. The archaeological finds made on the basis of a *koljo* name and its possible derivatives make this word especially interesting. Through these names, the interpretation of places of the *hiisi* type and other sites with similar characteristics and topographical attributes awaits re-evaluation in the near future.

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