The Temporal Structure of Estonian Runic Songs

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1

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The Temporal Structure of Estonian Runic Songs

by

Jaan Ross
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Preface

This book sums up the collaboration of its two authors during more than ten years. Perhaps the very moment when this cooperation began was a day in 1988 or 1989 in Tallinn, Estonia. On that day Jaan Ross asked Ilse Lehiste, who was visiting his laboratory at the Institute of Language and Literature, to participate in an informal experiment. In this experiment, subjects had to notate (according to the best of their ability) a runic song melody on paper after having listened to it several times. Ilse Lehiste produced a notation that differed considerably from expectation – and that was proved correct by later measurements. Comparison of notations by different individuals yielded quite provoking results, which were later used in a paper by Jaan Ross about the timing in old Estonian folksong (Ross 1989).

The two authors have been initially separated by their research field, geographical location, and age, but united by their native language, Estonian. They have tried to treat separations between them as a virtue and to offer the reader a book from different perspectives: that of a linguist and that of a musicologist. The gap which this book intends to fill has perhaps been best described by the eminent French musicologist Jean Molino (2000: 172): "The relationship between music and language seems greater yet if one takes into account what one could call, although incorrectly, hybrid forms, participating in the two processes. The most significant example of this is poetry, in which linguists and musicologists are almost never interested."

The writing of this book has been made possible by two grants: one (No. 1661/1999) from the Research Support Scheme of the Open Society Support Foundation in Prague, and another (No. 7098/01-9L) from the Cultural Endowment of Estonia (*Eesti Kultuurkapital*) in Tallinn, both to Jaan Ross. Dr. Anders Friberg of the Department of Speech, Music and Hearing, Royal Institute of Technology (TMH KTH), Stockholm, has made a significant contribution to Chapter 4 in the book, which deals with generative rules of music performance.

Jaan Ross worked with Dr. Friberg during his short-term visits to Stockholm in 1999 and 2000, which were financed by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and by the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities. Obtaining relevant material from the Folklore Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum would never have been possible without generous help by ethnomusicologists working in the Archives, in particular, Janika Oras, Taive Särg, Mari Sarv, Dr. Vaike Sarv, and Jaan Tamm. In retrospect it seems that a discussion of Estonian folksongs with Professor Leonard B. Meyer in New York in 1995 has influenced Jaan Ross' way of thinking about the structure of these songs. Dr. Jaan Undusk of the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre in Tallinn has read Chapter 2 and contributed a number of useful suggestions. Maeve Leivo, Dr. Helmi Neetar, and Dr. Kristiina Ross, all three of the Institute of Estonian Language, Tallinn, have assisted us in checking the translations of the song and lament texts in the Appendix. The editorial assistance of Tiina Hallik, Indrek Hein and Katrin Leismann is gratefully acknowledged.

The two authors have contributed to different parts of this book in different ways. Jaan Ross is primarily responsible for Chapters 1, 2, 5 and 6, while Chapters 3, 4, 7, and 8 have been basically contributed by Ilse Lehiste. But as far as the overall shape of the book is concerned, the best way to specify the respective shares of the two authors seems to be to claim a nearly equal role for each of them.

The authors wish to stress once more that the approach adopted in this book is an interdisciplinary one. For this reason, many ethnomusicologists (and linguists) might find some of the views expressed below as being too schematic and simplified from their point of view. In response to them we would like to borrow a citation from a recent book by Bob Snyder (2000: xvi) who writes: “To make ... materials more comprehensible, [we] have had to generalize; no doubt at least minor exceptions could be raised to many statements in this book. Some of these generalizations may offend experts in the fields involved, and for this [we] apologize in advance.” *Sapienti sat.*

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Chapter 1
Introduction

The topic of the book is the structure of Estonian folksongs looked at from three aspects: the prosodic structure of the language, the metric structure of the verse, and the rhythmic and melodic structure of the songs. In particular, we are investigating the ways in which these three aspects interact: the way in which the language is adapted to the requirements of the metre (and, conversely, the way in which the metre reflects the prosodic structure of the language), and the way in which the metre interacts with the musical structure of the folksongs. The methodology employed consists of acoustic analysis of recorded spoken and sung texts exemplifying the interaction of the three systems.

Estonian old folksongs constitute a part of a larger Baltic-Finnic poetical tradition, also referred to as the Kalevala songs (according to the Finnish epic), runic or runo songs (with reference to the ancient Germanic alphabet), or the old folksongs (in contrast to the more contemporary songs that became popular in the 19th and 20th centuries). This tradition is shared by speakers of the Baltic-Finnic languages (Finns, Estonians, Karelians, Izhorians, Votes, and, to a lesser extent, Livs and Vepsians) who live in the Baltic sea region in northeastern Europe. Currently there are approximately five million speakers of Finnish and one million speakers of Estonian in the world; both have been able to form nation-states after the First World War. The number of Livs, Votes, and Izhorians has been rapidly declining during the recent decades, and their languages are close to extinction.

From a typological perspective, Estonian and Finnish are remarkable because of their unusually complex prosodic systems (Engstrand and Krull 1994). Both languages make lexical as well grammatical use of contrastive duration – the feature of quantity. In Finnish, vowels can be contrastively short or long in any syllable, and consonants can be contrastively short or long (i.e. single versus geminate) anywhere except in word-initial and word-final position. The Estonian quantity system is even more complicated. In the first place, the system is hierarchical: duration is contrastive at the level of segments, syllables, and higher-level units, displaying a hierarchy of many-to-one mappings (different segmental combinations mapping into a smaller number of contrastive syllable durations, and contrastive syllable combinations mapping into higher-level units like metric feet). The second peculiarity of the Estonian system is the fact that it is ternary: there are three-way oppositions at every level – segments, syllables, and metric feet. The distinctive quantities are called short, long, and overlong, and are conventionally referred to as Q1, Q2, and Q3.

The metre of the folksongs – the so-called Kalevala metre – has been extensively studied (for a summary description, cf. Leino 1986). The basic unit is the line, which consists of eight syllables arranged into four trochaic metric feet. Both Finnish and Estonian words are stressed on the first syllable, and usually have secondary stresses on odd-numbered syllables. As the languages also have short and long syllables, the line may be expected to consist of a sequence of alternating stressed long and unstressed short syllables. A complicating factor is the fact that the languages also have words beginning with a short syllable, bearing primary word-level stress. The Kalevala metre requires that a short word-initial syllable be excluded from ictus position. This results in a conflict between word-level stress and verse ictus. The Kalevala line permits short non-first syllables in ictus position; however, a long first syllable is required to appear in ictus position.

It is a matter of conjecture whether the songs composed in the Kalevala metre were ever recited without an accompanying melody, and if so, whether the performer followed the rhythmic pattern of the verse or the stress pattern of the language. Recordings of sung versions, however, indicate that in singing, the musical rhythm may support the verse rhythm, likewise opposing it to the linguistically determined stress pattern. While the trochaic feet by definition consist of a long and a short syllable, the duration of the notes is relatively more uniform, even though the notes under musical or metrical stress are somewhat longer (Ross and Lehiste 1998).

Rhythm is an essential component of human motor activity, ranging from heartbeat by way of repetitious physical labor to child's play, dance and song. It is also very much a part of spoken language. The basic assumption of this study is that the prosodic system of a language is crystallized in the metric structure of its traditional poetry (Lehiste 1990). The rhythmic structure of poetry may just represent what for the realization of segmental sounds has sometimes been called "maximally differentiated style". This is the form of speech in which all oppositions are optimally manifested. We believe that for the suprasegmental system of a language, poetry represents that maximally differentiated style. It is possible to describe, for segmental sounds, the various phenomena of neutralization by reference to the maximally differentiated style. We suggest that in the same way, various prosodically less strictly determined speech styles can be described by reference to the way in which prosody functions in poetry; this would hold especially for metric structures that are native or nativized for a particular language and culture. The way in which linguistic prosody interacts with the metric structure of poetry and the rhythmic structure of music makes it also possible to draw conclusions about the nature of prosody in a given language.

Chapter 2
Estonian old folksongs: history, tradition, collections and availability

1. Recent historical background

The systematic collection of Estonian folk music, its publication and investigation began at the end of the 19th century. At that time, Estonia was part of the Russian empire, and Estonian territory was divided between two administrative units, Estonia and Livonia, the capital of the first being Tallinn and that of the second, Riga (which is the capital of Latvia at the present time). The territories inhabited by Estonians were united into one independent republic after World War I. Between the two world wars, research on folk music was carried on primarily in the Estonian Folklore Archives, founded in 1927 as an adjunct of the Estonian National Museum located in Tartu, and at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Tartu.

In connection with World War II Estonia was incorporated into the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This occupation lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Estonia regained her independence. The period from 1940 to 1991 has a somewhat paradoxical character from the point of view of research on Estonian folk music. On the one hand, this period (especially up to 1956) was characterized by state terror and communist ideological control over all aspects of intellectual life, including research in the humanities. On the other hand, the state continued to provide relatively abundant financial support for scientific research, which made it possible to continue investigation of Estonian folk music at a reasonably intensive pace. The Estonian Folklore Archives continued their work in Tartu under the label of Section of Folklore of the Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald Literary Museum. In addition, research in folklore was also undertaken at the Institute of Language and Literature founded in Tartu in 1947 and transferred to Tallinn in 1952. After Estonia regained her independence in 1991, the activities of scientific institutes were reorganized, and since the year 2000 research in folklore, including investigation of folk music, has again been concentrated at the Estonian Folklore Archives in Tartu, and at the University of Tartu.

This historical background explains why many important publications dealing with research in Estonian folklore appeared in the period following World War II. First among them is Herbert Tampere's five-volume anthology of Estonian folksongs (1956–1965, published in Estonian with Russian summaries), which has established the basis for the classification of old Estonian folksongs as well as the general theoretical framework for their investigation. Next one should mention three volumes compiled and edited by Ingrid Rüütel (1977, 1980, 1986, written in Russian, the first two with Estonian and English summaries). These publications are based on presentations at conferences organized by the Institute of Language and Literature in Tallinn.

These and other publications by investigators of Estonian folklore are relatively unknown to an English-speaking professional audience. The isolation of Estonian folklore research depends partly on the fact that opportunities for contact between Eastern and Western scholars have been quite limited after World War II. For example, the city of Tartu, where the richest collections of Estonian folklore are located, was closed for visits by foreigners due to the presence of a strategically important military airfield. On the other hand, during Soviet occupation, restrictions were placed on scholars living in Estonia with regard to participation in professional conferences and publication of their research abroad, which limited their motivation for trying to reach an English-speaking audience.

It should not be forgotten that the territories inhabited by Finno-Ugric peoples are mostly located within the borders of the current Russian Federation; the exceptions are Estonians, Finns and Hungarians in the west and Saami in the north. Researchers of aspects of the cultures of Finno-Ugric-speaking people tend to live close to the objects of their research, i.e. mostly in eastern Europe. Therefore it was frequently most expeditious for them to employ the local languages – Estonian, Finnish, and Russian – in scholarly interchanges. Several works by Estonian folklorists investigating folk music have become better known through the medium of Russian – for example, a selection of articles by Tampere (1983) from the years 1932–1968 that was published in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), translated into Russian and provided with commentary by Ingrid Rüütel. Another volume should be mentioned in this context – the collective work edited by Richard Viidalepp (1980) entitled *Èstonskij fol'klor* 'Estonian Folklore', whose third chapter, dealing with music and dance, was co-authored by Tampere, Rüütel, and Ruth Mirov.

It is the aim of this chapter to provide a brief survey of the history of the old Estonian folksongs, the process of collecting and preserving them, and the extant collections, concentrating on the musical aspects of the folksongs rather than their texts. The primary subject of the study reported in this book is sound recordings of folksongs. Other sources that expand on the topic or that move on parallel lines include a monograph by Lippus (1995) and Rüütel's entry (2001) in the encyclopedia *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.*

2. Distribution of runic songs in time and space

The Estonian folksong tradition is broadly divided into two periods: older and younger folksongs. The older folksongs are also referred to as "Kalevala songs", "runic or runo songs", and "folksongs in the *regivärss* metre" (the Estonian term *regivärss* refers to the poetic metre employed in the older folksongs). These terms are more or less synonymous. The first term harks back to the title of the famous Finnish folk epic and refers to the fact that the Finnish and the older Estonian folksong traditions share many significant features. The word "rune" is glossed in Webster's dictionary (1990: 477) as "a letter of the ancient Germanic alphabet; a secret, a mystic symbol, sentence, spell, or song; a Finnish or Old Norse poem". The last and next-to-the-last correspondences are relevant in the present context. Webster's definition, too, points to the connection between the Estonian runic songs and Finnish folklore traditions (or perhaps even to the latter's priority relative to the Estonian tradition), which is generally recognized by researchers. For example, Launis (1913) speaks in his work about the communal Estonian-Finnish runic song territory (*estnisch-finnisches Runengebiet*). As far as the third term is concerned, Raun

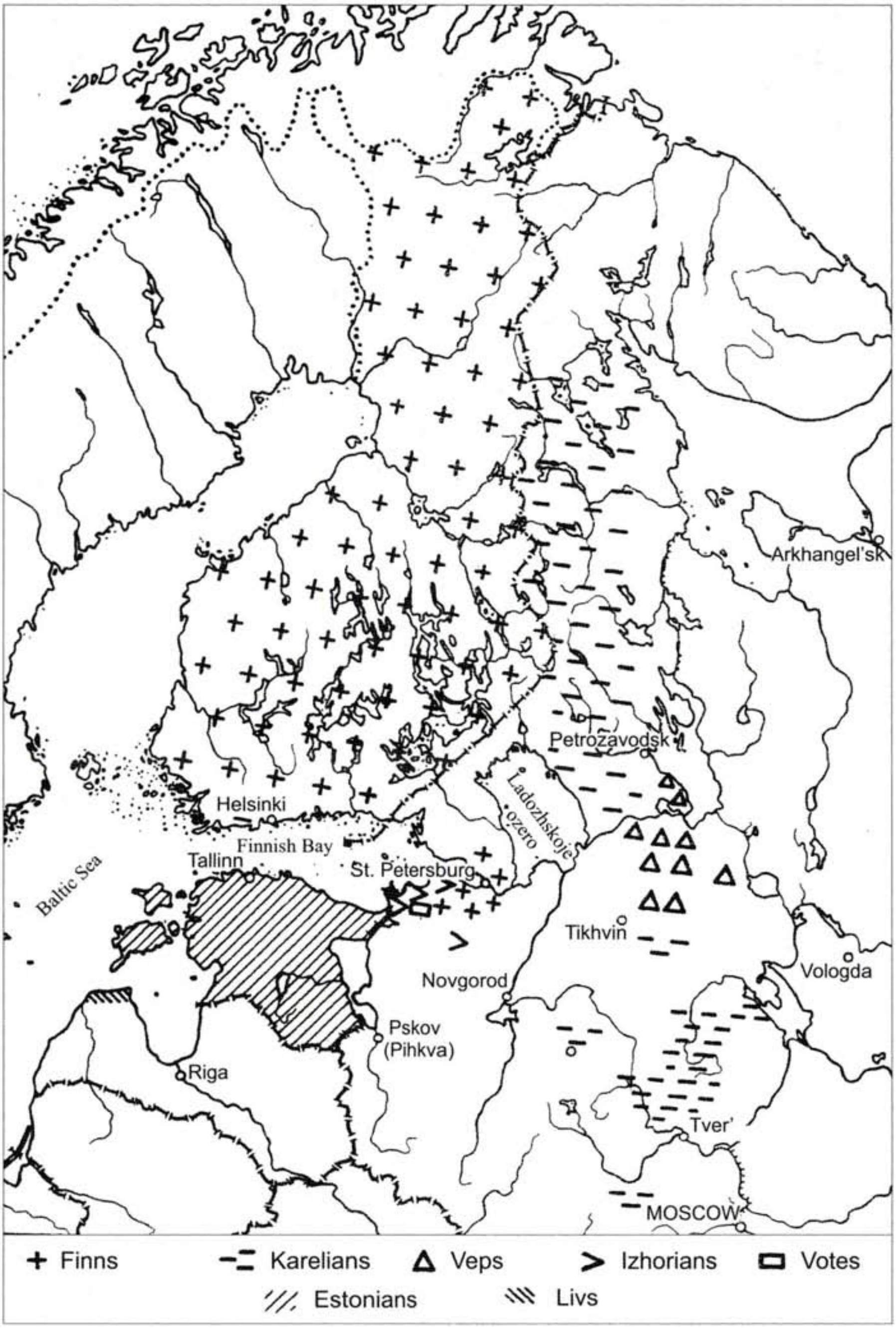
Arkhangel'sk
Petrozavodsk
Ladozhskoje ozero
Helsinki
Finnish Bay
Tallinn
Baltic Sea
St. Petersburg
Tikhvin
Vologda
Novgorod
Pskov (Pihkva)
Riga
Tver'
MOSCOW
+ Finns
–̲ Karelians
Δ Veps
> Izhorians
▭ Votes
/// Estonians
\\\ Livs

Figure 1. Areas populated by Baltic-Finnic people (adapted from Laanest 1975: 13).

([1982] 2000) has proposed the Middle Low German words *rei*(*e*), 'a kind of folk dance', and *rege* 'row' as possible etymological sources.

From the point of view of Europe in general, Ling (1997: 78) has characterized this type of folksongs as follows: "Like the *jojk* of the Saami, Finnish runic song can hardly be considered "singing" in the traditional sense of the word. It is more like a mixture of recitative and calling, with some melodic features as well. The runic song might well be described as a kind of drama including both the imitation of sounds from nature, and mime." (See also Krumhansl et al. 2000 concerning the saami *jojk*s.)

As to typology, Ling assigns the runic folksong to the category of narrative songs, which include – besides the saami *jojk*s – Russian *bylina*s, Ukrainian *duma*s and the epic song repertory of the peoples of the Balkans.

It is difficult to determine the exact age of the runic folksong tradition, but researchers appear to agree that it should be measured in millennia. Rüütel (2001: 343) writes: "The runo song form probably dates from the last millennium BCE when the Balto-Finnic tribes had not separated, and spoke the same Balto-Finnic protolanguage." Runic singing was widespread among Estonians until the 18th century, when it began to be superseded by the so-called younger or newer folksong. Differing from the old folksong the newer folksong employs endrhyme, and its melodies are based on tonal scales. The repression of runic songs by new folksongs was promoted by the spread of the religious movement of the Moravian Brethren, which reached the Estonian peasantry at that time (Leichter [1956] 1997b). Their religious services emphasized music, and the movement opposed heathen practices, which in their view included the runic singing tradition.[1]

The spread of runic songs was not limited to Estonia and Finland. The runic song tradition is shared by most Baltic-Finnic peoples, whose languages constitute a related group within the Finno-Ugric language family.[2] This includes Estonians, Finns, Karelians, Votes and Izhorians, whose historic residence territories are concentrated around the Finnish Bay, which is a branch of the Baltic Sea (Figure 1). The most numerous of these people are the Finns (more than five million) and Estonians (about one million), both of whom succeeded in establishing national states after World War I. The Votes and Izhorians, whose homelands are within the current Russian Federation, are in the process of being assimilated to the Russians, and only very few speakers are left for whom Votic or Izhorian would be first language. The runic song tradition has not been observed among two of the seven Baltic-Finnic peoples, the Vepsians and Livonians; this has been attributed (Tedre and Tormis 1997: 5) to the peripheral location of their settlements relative to the other five Baltic-Finnic peoples or perhaps relative to the Finnish Bay, which constitutes a kind of inland sea for the Baltic-Finnic peoples.

Like the Votes and Izhorians, the Vepsians and the Livonians too are in the process of being assimilated, the former to Russians, the latter to Latvians. The number of Karelians is somewhat larger and may approach a hundred thousand (Viikberg 1999: 228).

3. Cultural-historical and territorial division of Estonia

From the point of view of the history of Estonian culture, it is important to be aware of the historical reasons for differences between the several subparts of Estonian territory. A basic territorial unit recognized in cultural-historical investigations of Estonia is the *kihelkond*, which corresponds primarily to a parish. It is probable that the borders of these units had already emerged on the basis of administrative subdivisions that had existed before the Christianization of the country in the 13th century. In contemporary research, the accepted number of parishes into which Estonia is divided is more than one hundred, including as separate entities larger towns and cities and the territory referred to as Setumaa, the status of which differs from the rest of Estonia due to its different history (Figure 2). The next unit above the *kihelkond* is the *maakond* 'district, county', the total number of which is ten (not counting Setumaa).

The major cultural-historical division is between South Estonia and North Estonia. North Estonia consists of the following districts: Virumaa, Järvamaa, Harjumaa, Läänemaa, Hiiumaa and Saaremaa; South Estonia comprises Pärnumaa, Viljandimaa, Tartumaa and Võrumaa. The boundary between North and South Estonia has been historically even more important than Estonia's present-day frontiers.

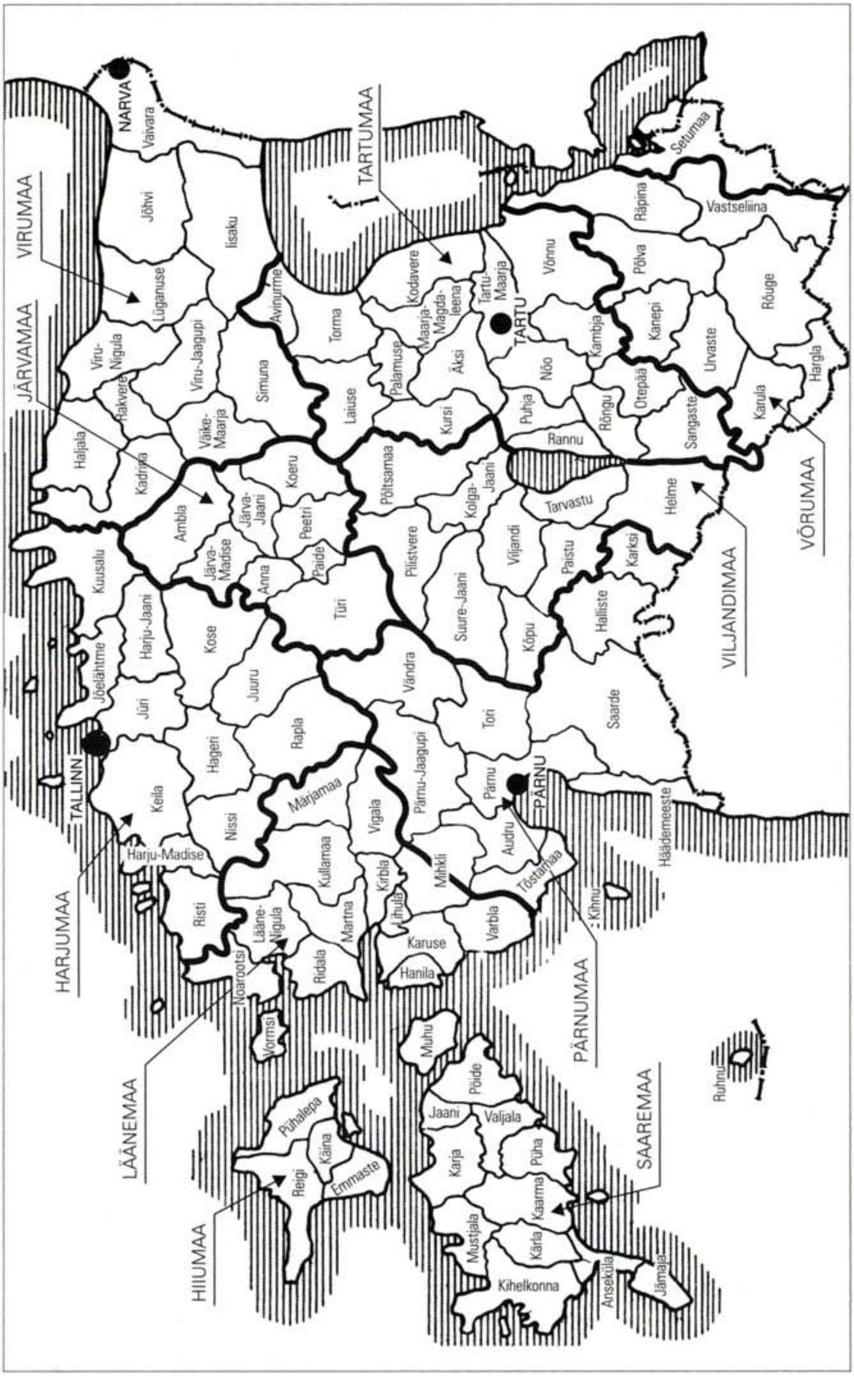
VIRUMAA
JÄRVAMAA
TARTUMAA
HARJUMAA
LÄÄNEMAA
HIIUMAA
PÄRNUMAA
SAAREMAA
VILJANDIMAA
VÕRUMAA
NARVA
TALLINN
TARTU
PÄRNU
Vaivara
Jõhvi
Iisaku
Lüganuse
Viru-Nigula
Viru-Jaagupi
Rakvere
Simuna
Väike-Maarja
Haljala
Kadrina
Avinurme
Torma
Kodavere
Maarja-Magdaleena
Tartu-Maarja
Võnnu
Räpina
Setumaa
Vastseliina
Põlva
Rõuge
Kanepi
Urvaste
Hargla
Karula
Sangaste
Otepää
Kambja
Nõo
Äksi
Palamuse
Laiuse
Kursi
Puhja
Rõngu
Rannu
Põltsamaa
Kolga-Jaani
Tarvastu
Helme
Koeru
Järva-Jaani
Peetri
Ambla
Järva-Madise
Anna
Paide
Türi
Pilistvere
Viljandi
Paistu
Karksi
Halliste
Suure-Jaani
Kõpu
Kuusalu
Harju-Jaani
Kose
Jõelähtme
Jüri
Juuru
Vändra
Tori
Saarde
Rapla
Hageri
Keila
Märjamaa
Pärnu-Jaagupi
Pärnu
Nissi
Harju-Madise
Vigala
Kullamaa
Audru
Häädemeeste
Risti
Lääne-Nigula
Mihkli
Tõstamaa
Kirbla
Martna
Lihula
Varbla
Kihnu
Karuse
Ridala
Hanila
Noarootsi
Vormsi
Muhu
Pöide
Ruhnu
Pühalepa
Käina
Reigi
Emmaste
Jaani
Valjala
Karja
Püha
Kaarma
Mustjala
Kärla
Kihelkonna
Anseküla
Jämaja

Figure 2. The historical territorial division of Estonia.

For example, in the 18th and 19th centuries South and North Estonia belonged to two different provinces (*guberniyas*) of Russia, but in the 17th century South Estonia belonged to Poland, while North Estonia was part of Sweden. The boundary between North and South Estonia has not remained constant throughout history. As a rough generalization, the border between North and South Estonia can be viewed as a diagonal running from the southwest to the northeast, i.e. as a line connecting the towns Pärnu and Narva. Up to the 19th century, two different literary languages were employed in North and South Estonia; since that time, South Estonia, too, has been using the North Estonian literary language. Attempts to revive the South Estonian literary language can be observed at the present time.

Setumaa, located in the southeast of Estonia, constitutes a territorial unit distinct and separate from the rest of Estonia (Vaike Sarv, 2000: 57–58 and 280–281). Setumaa is inhabited by Estonians, but has belonged for a long time to the Pihkva (the Estonian equivalent for the Russian Pskov) district (*guberniya*) of Russia. The inhabitants of Setumaa, the Setus, have always professed Greek Catholicism (Orthodoxy), while Lutheranism has been the predominant confession in the rest of Estonia; only in the 19th century there have been conversions to Orthodoxy. With the creation of the republic of Estonia after World War I, Setumaa as a whole became part of the Estonian state, constituting a separate *maakond.* In the year 1945 Setumaa was divided between the Pihkva *oblast'* (administrative unit within the Russian Federation) and Estonia (at that time a constituent republic of the Soviet Union). This division has continued after Estonia regained its independence in 1991. Differing from the other Estonian administrative districts, Setumaa is customarily not divided into parishes.

Due to their geographical location, the Estonian islands, too, exhibit certain cultural differences when compared to mainland Estonia. The original population of certain of the smaller islands, like Ruhnu (Runö), Vormsi (Ormsö), and Pakri (Råg), as well as of some districts of the west coast like Noarootsi (Nuckö) consisted of Swedes until 1944 when the inhabitants fled to Sweden fearing Soviet occupation. Two of the largest islands, Saaremaa (Ösel) and Hiiumaa (Dagö) have for many centuries been inhabited predominantly by Estonians, but certain Swedish influences have been noticed in the intonation of the western