

Mart Kuldkepp

# The Story of Sigtuna's Destruction (1187) and Estonian Nationalism, 1868–1940

Several medieval and early modern sources on Swedish history tell us of a major event that is said to have occurred in 1187. In that year, it is said, some pagans arrived in Sweden from the east, killed the archbishop of the important Swedish town of Sigtuna, and destroyed the settlement itself. Sigtuna, which in the 11th and 12th centuries had been the most important town in the Lake Malar area, was thereby reduced in status – especially in comparison to the emerging regional centre of Stockholm – and would subsequently remain a place of only local importance.

According to some of these sources, the eastern pagans in question were Estonians. Based on this assumption, in the 19th century the story of Sigtuna's destruction was integrated into the Estonian national discourse and transmitted to subsequent generations as an ancient heroic feat carried out by the ancestors of modern-day Estonians. As such, it was evoked as evidence of the spectacular fighting prowess of the Estonians' forefathers and of their level of political organization before the early 13th-century crusades; even, somewhat paradoxically, as evidence of close Estonian–Swedish relations in the distant past.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I will present a short overview of the role that the “Sigtuna story” played in the broader discourse of Estonian nationalism and how it was used by Estonian cultural and intellectual elites to further the goals of the national movement.

By the early 20th century, Estonians were a territorial national minority in the Russian Empire, inhabiting the northern part of what were at the time its Baltic provinces (Estonia and Northern Livonia). Having gone through a national awakening in the second half of the 19th century, the more educated Estonians – the leaders of the national movement – developed a natural interest in their ancestors from the distant past. Certainly, those Estonians who happened to spend time in Sigtuna found it to be an emotional experience. In August 1917, the town was visited by the famous Estonian politician and one-time German agent Aleksander Kesküla (1882–1963), who was later suspected of having acted as an intermediary

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1 There are many parallel cases of ancient military feats being transformed into sources of national pride in the modern era. A notable example is the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest (9 AD). See Herbert W. Benario, “Arminius into Hermann: History into Legend,” *Greece & Rome* 51, no. 1 (2004): 83–94.

between Lenin and the German authorities in the first years of the war.<sup>2</sup> Kesküla sent several picture postcards depicting Old Sigtuna's medieval ruins to his friend Gisbert von Romberg (1866–1939), the German envoy to Bern. On the reverse of the postcards, Kesküla explained confidently that “Sigtuna was destroyed in July 1187 by an Estonian punitive expedition” and that “after Sigtuna's destruction, Stockholm was built up and made into the new capital.” Boastfully driving his point home, Kesküla added that “today, Sigtuna has 300 inhabitants and one policeman.”<sup>3</sup>

Twenty years later, in 1937, Sigtuna was visited by a group of Estonian students from the Tartu Gymnasium for Girls. Describing their trip, the newspaper *Postimees* noted that “the visitors became particularly excited when visiting the ruins of Sigtuna, where they enthusiastically sang the song ‘Estonia, My Fatherland!’”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, this patriotic outburst had been inspired by the girls' pride in Sigtuna's destruction by ancient Estonians.

These two examples of Sigtuna's magnetic appeal for Estonians are perhaps somewhat more vivid than the norm, but they are far from being isolated cases. In Estonia, the story of Sigtuna's destruction remained salient for decades and came to be used for several different purposes. For anyone with a more granular interest in the development of Estonian nationalism, it is therefore pertinent to ask how and why Sigtuna became an important site of memory for Estonians, and what kind of role it has played in Estonian nationalist discourse. This chapter does exactly that, by exploring the functions of the Sigtuna narrative in Estonian nationalism and suggesting possible factors behind its position of relative importance.

In the context of this volume, the Estonian Sigtuna story provides yet another example of how (supposed) medieval acts of heroism were promoted, transformed, and instrumentalized in service of modern nation-building projects in the Baltic Sea region. But at the same time, the importance of the Sigtuna narrative is not limited to the Estonian national story alone: it is an inherently transnational phenomenon, in that it involves both Estonia and Sweden and, more broadly, interactions between the west and the east of the region.

I will focus on the period up until the Soviet takeover in 1940, but examples of Sigtuna's continuing appeal for Estonians could certainly also be found from the 1990s on. In future, parallel case studies of Sigtuna's destruction could also be added from Latvia, Russia, Finland, and possibly elsewhere. It would also be use-

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2 About Kesküla, see Arens, Olavi, “Aleksander Kesküla,” *Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Toimetised. Ühiskonnateadused* 40, no. 1 (1991): 28–36.

3 Kesküla's postcards to Romberg, August 10, 1917, Bern 1324, L248744-L428746, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are made by the author.

4 “T.T.G. abiturientide laul kõlas Sigtuna varemeil,” *Postimees* June 15, 1937.

ful to compare the story of Sigtuna in Estonian nationalism to other narratives of past heroic deeds, such as the St George's Night uprising of 1343–1345.<sup>5</sup>

## Pagans from the East

Before turning to the topic of Estonian nationalism, it is worth briefly revisiting the relevant sources from the Middle Ages and the early modern period, since the identity of the “eastern pagans” who supposedly bore responsibility for Sigtuna's destruction is far from certain. The earliest known written source on these events, a set of annals from 1263, notes rather tersely that in 1187 the town of Sigtuna was destroyed and Archbishop Johan killed.<sup>6</sup> Another, much later set of annals from the 14th century adds that those responsible for the deed were pagans who had arrived from the east.<sup>7</sup> A few other sources go into slightly more detail about the origin of said pagans. The *Chronicle of Duke Erik (Erikskrönikan)*, a lengthy rhymed chronicle written in the 1320s or the 1330s, claims that the attackers were Karelians.<sup>8</sup> The 16th-century Swedish historians Olaus Petri (1493–1552) and Johannes Magnus (1488–1544) surmise that the attackers were Estonians. Another historian, Johannes Messenius (1579–1636), claims at one point in his book that the attackers were Estonians, at another that they were Curonians.<sup>9</sup> In summary, it seems that the authors of these Swedish sources were not particularly concerned with exactly where the pagans had come from, simply agreeing that their place of origin was somewhere in the east.

It is therefore far from clear who exactly attacked and destroyed Sigtuna in 1187 – Estonians? some other pagans? – and, indeed, there are doubts as to whether any destruction on such a scale took place at all. Archaeological excavations conducted in 1988–1990 failed to locate the telling layer of ash that would constitute evidence of the town burning down in the late 12th century. Even if a force of eastern pagans did attack Sigtuna in this period, it seems that the town

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5 About St George's Night in the context of Estonian nationalism, see Marge Allandi, “Kolm told: Jüriöö, võidupüha, laulupidu,” *Ajalooline Ajakiri. The Estonian Historical Journal* 2, no. 3 (2014): 173–206.

6 Johan was actually archbishop of Uppsala, since Sigtuna had ceased to be a bishopric in the 1160s.

7 Philip Line, *Kingship and State Formation in Sweden* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 333.

8 *The Chronicle of Duke Erik: A Verse Epic from Medieval Sweden*, trans. Erik Carlquist and Peter C. Hogg (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012).

9 Enn Tarvel, “Sigtuna hävitamine 1187. aastal,” *Tuna. Ajalookultuuri ajakiri* 2 (2007): 24–27, 24–26.

was not completely destroyed. Contemporary written sources provide researchers with strong evidence that Sigtuna remained an important urban centre for the next 50 years after its supposed demise.<sup>10</sup> However, it is also well established that Sigtuna's importance did indeed begin to decline in the 13th century, most likely as a result of navigational problems that worsened over time due to Sweden's post-glacial rebound, as well as increased trade competition from Stockholm and Uppsala.<sup>11</sup>

One very likely reason why the story of Sigtuna's destruction made it into the Swedish realm's written sources in the first place, remained there for the following centuries, and attracted additional detail and embellishment over time, is in fact because it provided an explanation for Sigtuna's decline and the corresponding rise of Stockholm. The sources themselves also support this interpretation: the Visby chronicle (*Chronica Visbyensis*), written in the 15th century, claims that Stockholm was established when Sigtuna was destroyed.<sup>12</sup> Several 17th-century sources even claim that the founders of Stockholm must have been the former burghers of Sigtuna, who had ended up townless due to their settlement having been destroyed by the eastern pagans.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the story of Sigtuna's destruction was part of the origin narrative of Stockholm. This is what made this event significant for Swedish authors. Where exactly the eastern pagans had come from was, from their point of view, relatively unimportant.

Nevertheless, the historical importance of Sigtuna's destruction narrative was not limited to Sweden. For Sweden's eastern neighbours – the descendants of the supposed destroyers of Sigtuna – the story came to have a different resonance in the modern era. For them, it was less about the origins of Stockholm and more about daring warriors, possibly their ancestors, embarking on a dangerous expedition over the sea that culminated in a successful siege and sacking of the Swedish capital – one that was so successful that Sigtuna had to relinquish its capital status. And since the Swedish authors had paid little attention to where exactly the pagans had come from, several peoples to the east of Sweden could conceivably lay claim to this ancient feat.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, a remarkable number of historians, writers, and activists from national movements east of Sweden took a liking to the story of Sigtuna's destruction, with Finns, Russians, Latvians, and Estonians alike trying to connect the eastern pagans to their own – rather than someone else's – forefa-

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10 Tarvel, "Sigtuna hävitamine 1187. aastal," 27.

11 Tarvel, "Sigtuna hävitamine 1187. aastal," 27.

12 Göte Paulsson, ed., *Annales Suecici Medii Aevi: Svensk Medeltidsannalistik* (Lund: Gleerup, 1974).

13 Line, *Kingship and State Formation in Sweden*, 333.

thers.<sup>14</sup> The relevant historical and archaeological evidence was thin, not to speak of the fact that attributing medieval raids to modern nationalities was in itself a dubious exercise. Nevertheless, the event was appealing enough to warrant numerous attempts to ascribe Sigtuna's destruction to one's own ethnic group.

An interesting example of how different national perspectives could clash on this issue is provided by a 1935 travelogue about a trip to Sweden. It is narrated by an Estonian who was travelling together with a Finn and a Latvian. The stop at Sigtuna is made at the Estonian's suggestion, to which the others agree. One of them, the Latvian, buys a local travel guide, which – since the Swedes are “honest people,” as the narrator puts it – contains “correct information” about Estonians having been responsible for the town's destruction. Nonetheless, the Latvian cannot believe that Estonians could have done such a thing, claiming – to the Estonian's dismay – that “they couldn't even win their War of Independence without Latvian assistance.” Indeed, the real destroyers of Sigtuna must have been Latvians. At which point, the Finn intervenes in the conversation and corrects both of his companions by saying that, in fact, those responsible had been Karelians. The Latvian immediately agrees to this statement, suggesting that the heroic feat must have been a Latvian-Karelian joint effort.<sup>15</sup>

## The Destruction of Sigtuna in Early Estonian Nationalism

As previously noted, Estonians are only mentioned as the perpetrators of Sigtuna's destruction in later Swedish sources from the 16th and 17th centuries. In itself, however, this does not prove that the pagans who attacked Sigtuna could not have come from present-day Estonia. Given the Estonian mainland's – and especially its islands' – proximity to Sweden, it was even perhaps the most likely proposition. Equating the eastern pagans with Estonians certainly came naturally to the leaders of the Estonian national movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The first amongst them to popularize this theory was Carl Robert Jakobson (1841–1882) in his *Esimene isamaa kõne* (First Patriotic Speech) of 1868, which ap-

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Kaljundi, “Challenging Expansions. Estonian Viking Novels and the Politics of Memory in the 1930s,” in *Novels, Histories, and Novel Nations: Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia*, ed. Linda Kaljundi, Eneken Laanes, and Ilona Pikkanen (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2015): 182–207, 195.

<sup>15</sup> “Ümber Läänemere 6. Kriis Rootsi vaimumaaailmas – Upsalas ja Sigtuna varemeis,” *Vaba Maa* November 25, 1935.

peared in print two years later.<sup>16</sup> Jakobson's speech was an early and very influential attempt to narrate Estonian history from the Estonian national point of view, which significantly diverged from earlier, Baltic German history writing, both in terms of emphasis and fundamental structure. As pointed out by the literary scholar Jaan Undusk, Baltic German histories of the Baltic provinces<sup>17</sup> had a linear character: they recounted the journey from pagan barbarism to Christianization, and subsequently the Reformation. As far as the indigenous peoples of the Baltics were concerned, the Baltic German narrative predicted their unavoidable incremental Germanization.<sup>18</sup>

The Jakobsonian understanding of Estonian history was completely different: it emphasized the resilience of the Estonian nation rather than its inevitable demise. It was also cyclical rather than linear in structure: in Jakobson's narrative, the time before the Northern Crusade became the Estonian golden age, "the time of light," and the following era of serfdom and domination by Baltic German landowners became "the time of darkness." Finally, the time of national awakening in the 19th century became, in its turn, "the time of dawn" – which implied some promise of a return to the original state of enlightenment.<sup>19</sup>

In this framework, Jakobson made use of the story of Sigtuna's destruction (likely relying on Olaus Petri's work, or a retelling of it) as a convenient way to demonstrate the worthiness of ancient Estonians in the "time of light." Before being reduced to serfdom, it seemed that Estonians had been verifiably capable of destroying the capital of a neighbouring state. This, in turn, must have meant that the Estonians were able to accomplish many other impressive things, too. This basic argument remained a mainstay of the subsequent Estonian discourse about Sigtuna. Furthermore, Jakobson's narrative includes other features that were typical of the Estonian version of the story, including the observation that Sigtuna's destruction had led to Stockholm becoming the new capital of Sweden and the equation of Sigtuna's destroyers with Estonians, without mentioning any other possible interpretations. Interestingly, Jakobson also claims, based on unknown (if any) sources, that the local people in Sweden had retained a living oral

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16 Carl Robert Jakobson, "I. Eestirahva valguse-, pimeduse-, ja koiduaeg," in *Kolm isamaa kõnet. Kriitiline väljaanne käsikirjast kommentaaride ja järelsõnaga*, ed. Rudolf Põldmäe (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1991 [1870]): 11–32.

17 Before 1917, the territory of present-day Estonia was split between the governorates of Estonia and Livonia.

18 Jaan Undusk, "Ajalooteõde ja metahistoorilised žestid. Eesti ajaloo mitmest moraalist," *Tuna. Ajalookultuuri ajakiri* 2 (2000): 114–130, 117–18.

19 Undusk, "Ajalooteõde ja metahistoorilised žestid," 117–18.

tradition about Sigtuna's destruction, and particularly about how brave its Estonian destroyers had been.<sup>20</sup>

This claim about the Swedish folk tradition seems strange, at least at first sight. Why would a nation whose capital had been destroyed by foreign invaders attribute any bravery to said invaders? Arguably, Jakobson would have been more credible had he claimed that the local Swedes still harboured resentment towards the “brave Estonians.” But some further factors need to be considered. Firstly, Jakobson was naturally not interested in showing Estonians in any negative light: his concept of Estonian history was focused on promoting the idea of Estonians as innocent victims of foreign (especially Baltic German) oppression, long-suffering as they had been throughout their “time of darkness.” Even an act like Sigtuna's destruction therefore had to be described as an example of Estonian bravery, rather than one of unprovoked violence. Secondly, Estonians had a stake in emphasizing their historical ties to Scandinavia and particularly Sweden, a positive cultural orientation that offered an alternative to the *Kulturträger* pretensions of the Baltic Germans. By linking their ancestors to Scandinavian – Viking – culture, it was possible to minimize the supposed civilizing role of the crusading Teutonic knights.<sup>21</sup>

To make such an interpretation of Sigtuna's destruction possible, it was important to argue that the town had been destroyed in an act of righteous revenge for some comparable act that had previously been undertaken against Estonians. Jakobson comes up with such a justification by arguing that in 1186 the Danish king had unsuccessfully tried to attack some Estonian seafarers, which was what entitled the Estonians to take revenge by attacking Sigtuna, a town that – as Jakobson claims, seemingly without any grounds whatsoever – was ruled by the king of Denmark at the time.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps due to the paucity of sources, but also possibly due to literature's inherent subversive potential to challenge dominant historical narratives, Sigtuna's destruction soon became a favourite theme for fictional treatment.<sup>23</sup> Estonian authors who came to write fictional narratives about Sigtuna's destruction by Estonians preferred to adopt other grounds for revenge. One of them, Karl August Hermann (1851–1909), published a novella in 1886 entitled *Auulane ja Ülo* (Auulane and Ülo), where revenge is provoked by Swedish Vikings kidnapping a young Estonian woman called Linda, the daughter of the Estonian elder Auulane.

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<sup>20</sup> Jakobson, *Kolm isamaa kõnet*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> See Mart Kuldkepp, “The Scandinavian Connection in Early Estonian Nationalism,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2013): 313–38, 327–28.

<sup>22</sup> Jakobson, *Kolm isamaa kõnet*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Kaljundi, “Challenging Expansions,” 183.

Linda's fiancé Ülo ends up following the Vikings and his bride to Sweden, where he and his men destroy Sigtuna and rescue Linda. Throughout the story, Hermann emphasizes that the Swedes and Estonians should be seen as equals.<sup>24</sup> Later, Hermann's story was used as the basis of a libretto for Evald Aav's (1900–1939) opera *Vikerlased* (The Vikings), which opened in 1928 and has retained its popularity down to this day.<sup>25</sup>

In other, non-fictional contexts, it was Jakobson's idea that the Estonian attack on Sigtuna was some form of act of tit-for-tat international politics that retained currency, even if the concrete justification could vary. An example can be found in the thinking of another leading figure of early Estonian nationalism, Villem Reiman (1861–1917), who regarded the story of Sigtuna's destruction as an important milestone in Estonia's geopolitical history. In 1907, Reiman wrote that Estonians were a people with an eventful and warlike past, who had never been able to enjoy any idyllic time of peace.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary: Estonia had always been traversed by great trade routes, and its territory had been coveted by various neighbouring states and peoples. By settling on the coast of the Baltic Sea, the Estonians had "opened a spring of misfortune that would never again run dry."

But at the same time, according to Reiman, Estonians had not simply been passive victims on the stage of history. In ancient times, at least, they had fully participated in regional power politics. For example, Reiman argues, Estonians had defeated the Swedish King Ingvar in the Battle of Kividepää (a mythical battle, possibly around the year 600) and had subsequently destroyed the Swedish capital of Sigtuna as revenge for Ingvar's campaign in Estonia.<sup>27</sup> Only in the early 13th century, when their enemies combined to attack them all at once, were the brave Estonians defeated after a string of heroic victories.

As Reiman was probably well aware, there were about five hundred years between Ingvar's supposed invasion of Estonia and the destruction of Sigtuna in the 12th century. But chronological details and causal chains were less important than the broader significance of the destruction of Sigtuna, which was a central episode in the historical narrative about the so-called Estonian Vikings: the idea that Estonians had participated in Viking-Age geopolitics as equals to everyone else. Reiman believed that in their journeys to foreign lands, Estonians had engaged in both trade and, when necessary, also in pillage and warfare, and that

24 Karl August Hermann, *Aulane ja Ülo. Jutt Eesti muistsest ajast* (Tartu: K. A. Hermann, 1887).

25 Herbert Salu, "Sigtunas förstöring i estnisk prosalitteratur," *Svio-Estonica* 13 (1956): 43–53, 47–48; Kaljundi, "Challenging Expansions," 201.

26 Villem Reiman, "Kolm sammukest rändamise teed," *Sirvilauad. Eesti rahva tähtraamat* 11 (1907): 44–59, 47.

27 Reiman, "Kolm sammukest rändamise teed," 47.



being embedded in the heroic Viking culture had been just as natural to them as it was to their contemporary Swedes and other Scandinavians.<sup>28</sup>

In the end, this idea of the Viking Age as a shared regional cultural heritage was much more important than establishing a credible revenge narrative regarding Sigtuna's destruction. In his cursory treatment of Estonian history published in 1918, Aleksander Kesküla claimed that the Estonian raid (*expedition maritime*) against Sigtuna had been undertaken because the town had welcomed a Norwegian fleet that had returned from an expedition pillaging on the Estonian coast. According to Kesküla, the story of Sigtuna's destruction indicates that the Viking Age "peaked in Estonia a few generations later than in the western part of Northern Europe."<sup>29</sup>

In 1920, in his short book about Estonia for foreign audiences, Estonian socialist Mihkel Martna (1864–1930) confidently stated that "according to historians, Estonians were a warlike people who often troubled and attacked their neighbours," and that "many times, the Scandinavian peoples had to repel the attacks of Estonians, who had conquered and destroyed the Swedish capital of Sigtuna."<sup>30</sup> Yet another early 20th-century Estonian nationalist leader, Hindrik Prants (1858–1932), wrote in 1911 that some of his contemporaries went so far as to suggest that the reason why Sigtuna had even been established in the first place was to serve as a fortress against Estonian pirates.<sup>31</sup>

This understanding of Estonian history had deeper political implications, which could not be discussed publicly in the repressive atmosphere of Russian Empire, but which nevertheless touched upon a fundamental layer of Estonian national identity. Amongst other examples of the historical and cultural Estonian–Scandinavian connection, the stories about ancient Estonian Vikings strongly hinted that the Estonians' natural place was not in the Russian Empire and that their natural fate was not to live under the political and cultural dominance of the Baltic Germans. On the contrary: it suggested that Estonians, just like the Scandinavians and the Finns, were natural members of the Nordic space, from which they had once been removed

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<sup>28</sup> Regarding the discourse about Estonian Vikings, see Kaljundi, "Challenging Expansions," 184–88.

<sup>29</sup> Aleksander Kesküla, *La Question Esthonienne et la Question Septentrionale: Mémoire présenté au nom des Esthoniens de la III conférence des Nationalités* (Lausanne: Librairie centrale des Nationalités, 1918 [1916]), 6.

<sup>30</sup> Mihkel Martna, *L'Esthonie, les Esthoniens et la Question Esthonienne* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1920), 29.

<sup>31</sup> Hindrik Prants, *Soomesugu rahvad Veneriigi rajamisel* (Tallinn: "Hariduse" kirjastus, 1911), 11.

through a series of historical misfortunes and to which it was in their national interest to return.<sup>32</sup>

## Sigtuna's Destruction and Estonia's Independence

The independent Republic of Estonia, established near the end of the First World War (1918) and in its aftermath, was undoubtedly the greatest achievement of the Estonian national movement. Once independent, Estonia had a natural interest in following up on its Nordic ambitions, which by that time had become an established feature of Estonian nationalism. Facing a very uncertain security situation and envious of the relative stability of the neutral Scandinavian states, the political elites of independent Estonia did all they could to forge political ties with the Nordic countries. Different schemes were debated and attempted, including the idea of a joint Finnish-Estonian state and of a proposed Baltic League, a regional federation which according to the original Estonian vision would have included both the Baltic and the Scandinavian countries.<sup>33</sup>

But at the same time, the political and intellectual elites of Estonia also had to rethink some of the deeper characteristics of Estonian nationalism in order to provide a statist, rather than a purely cultural, basis for the ideal of national consolidation. In earlier, pre-independence Estonian nationalism, independent Estonian statehood had not been considered a realistic political goal; the national discourse had been built on a different, cultural nationalist-regionalist basis, which could imagine seceding from the Russian Empire but was not quite prepared for independent statehood.<sup>34</sup>

The Estonian declaration of independence in February 1918 came about due to a specific chain of events, and in many ways in a desperate situation, which at the turn of the year 1917–1918 led to all the Estonian political parties (with the exception of the Bolsheviks) adopting independence as an immediate aim.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, it was only after Germany's defeat in the First World War in the au-

32 Kuldkepp, "The Scandinavian Connection in Early Estonian Nationalism," 321–22.

33 About the idea of a Finnish-Estonian state, see Seppo Zetterberg, *Suomi ja Viro 1917–1919. Poliittiset suhteet syksystä 1917 reunavaltiopolitiikan alkuun. Väitöskirja* (Helsinki: Suomen historiallinen seura, 1977). About the Baltic League, see Marko Lehti, *A Baltic League as a Construct of the New Europe: Envisioning a Baltic Region and Small State Sovereignty in the Aftermath of the First World War* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999).

34 Kuldkepp, "The Scandinavian Connection in Early Estonian Nationalism," 319–20.

35 Ants Piip, *Tormine aasta: ülevaade Eesti välispoliitika esiajast 1917–1918. aastal dokumentides ja mälestusis* (Tartu: Akadeemiline Kooperatiiv, 1934), 79–81.

tumn of 1918, and after the subsequent Estonian successes in the Estonian War of Independence, which lasted until early 1920, that an independent Estonian state became a fully credible reality.

Initially, however, Estonian nationalist discourse was still very much a product of the Estonians' previous experience as a national minority in the Russian Empire and was not prepared to handle the deeper implications of independence. When it transpired that an independent Estonian state was viable – to the surprise of many outside observers, and doubtless to some members of the Estonian political elite as well – the ideologues of Estonian nationalism were naturally incentivized to develop a new statist narrative that would embrace the idea of independent statehood as the natural outcome of long-standing Estonian national ambitions and endeavours.<sup>36</sup>

One way of doing this was to try to demonstrate that some form of Estonian state had already existed prior to the ancient fight for freedom against the crusading knights in the early 13th century.<sup>37</sup> If this was the case, then it was possible to regard all the following periods of foreign rule as foreign occupations. The “return” to independent statehood in early 1918 and the bolstering of Estonian independence in the War of Independence that followed could be interpreted as a natural outcome of the lifting of the latest, tsarist Russian occupation, in the turbulent context of the First World War, rather than some unprecedented revolutionary action.

The activists of the Estonian national movement who embraced the statist idea therefore had to go looking for the roots of Estonian statehood in the Viking Age. Unsurprisingly, the familiar story of the destruction of Sigtuna by Estonians came into renewed focus. While there had been some signs of its use to bolster a statist narrative before – already in Hermann's 1886 story, it is stated that Ülo's father had been the chieftain of “the Estonian people,” i.e., a kind of head of state – it was in the mid-1930s that the most monumental treatments of the Sigtuna narrative made their appearance.<sup>38</sup>

The most prominent example of these was August Mälk's (1900–1987) 1936 novel *Läänemere isandad* (Masters of the Baltic Sea), which contains a detailed description of the destruction of Sigtuna at the hand of Estonians (or, more precisely, inhabitants of Saaremaa), which is once again narratively explained as re-

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36 Liisi Veski, “Towards Stronger National Unity: Statist Ideas in Estonian Nationalism during the ‘Era of Silence’ (1934–1940),” *Journal of Baltic Studies* (online) doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2023.2190991

37 Veski, “Towards Stronger National Unity”; Marek Tamm, “History as Cultural Memory: Mne-mohistory and the Construction of the Estonian Nation,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, no. 4 (2008): 499–516.

38 Karl August Hermann, *Auulane ja Ülo. Jutt Eesti muistsest ajast* (Tartu: K. A. Hermann, 1887), 1.

venge related to the kidnapping of a woman.<sup>39</sup> But Mälk also describes in great detail how the invasion force was assembled and structured: a complex political process that brought together people from various regions for a common military goal. Characteristically for Estonia's authoritarian period (post-1934), an important role was also assigned to the elders and elites, who led their people.<sup>40</sup>

Another fictional work that mentioned the Estonians' supposed destruction of Sigtuna as evidence of their capacity for political organization was Karl August Hindrey's (1875–1947) epic novel *Urmas ja Merike* (Urmas and Merike, 1935–1936), about pre-crusades Estonia.<sup>41</sup> Both Mälk's and Hindrey's novels were richly illustrated in a way that made an even stronger statement than the texts themselves. While the heroes in the novels are described as somewhat anxious and hesitant about going up against the Swedes, the illustrations depict a remarkably determined, militaristic force of Estonian conquerors.<sup>42</sup>

Both Mälk and Hindrey used as their source a radically statist treatment of Estonian history, published in 1932 and entitled *Eesti rahva ajalugu* (The History of the Estonian People), which had been authored by the journalist Juhan Libe (1904–1947) and three historians of the younger generation.<sup>43</sup> In the chapter “Eestlased Läänemerd vallutamas” (The Estonians Conquer the Baltic Sea), the book described the Estonian destroyers of Sigtuna as conscious and purposeful political actors who were attempting to claim military and trade supremacy over the Baltic Sea and to eliminate Sweden as a dangerous competitor.

An extreme example of this sort of geopolitical narrative can be found in history teacher Järvo Tandre's (also known as Rudolf Stockeby, 1899–1943) 1936 article in the magazine *Kaitse Kodu*, entitled “Mehine mineviku tee” (The Manly Way of the Past).<sup>44</sup> According to Tandre, Sigtuna's destruction had been “not just a simple pillaging expedition, but a far-sighted and successful foreign political action”

39 August Mälk, *Läänemere isandad. Romaan eestlaste viikingiajast* (Tartu: Noor-Eesti, 1936).

40 Salu, “Sigtunas förstöring i estnisk prosalitteratur,” 49–50. For an early criticism of Mälk's politicization of the Sigtuna story, see Aita Kurfeldt-Hanko, “Sverige och svensktiden i den estniska litteraturen,” *Svio-Estonica* 12 (1943): 5–23, 14. For a thorough analysis of Mälk's and Hindrey's novels from the perspective of Estonian nationalism's use of cultural memory, see Kaljundi, “Challenging Expansions.”

41 Karl August Hindrey, *Urmas ja Merike: lugu aasta 1000 ümber*. 2 vols (Tartu: Noor-Eesti, 1935–1936).

42 Linda Kaljundi and Tiina-Mall Kreem, *Ajalugu pildis – pilt ajaloos. Rahvuslik ja rahvusülene minevik eesti kunstis. History in Images – Image in History. National and Transnational Past in Estonian Art* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuseum, 2018), 162.

43 Juhan Libe, August Oinas, Hendrik Sepp, and Juhan Vasar, *Eesti rahva ajalugu I* (Tartu: Loodus, 1932), 69, 82–83.

44 Järvo Tandre, “Mehine mineviku tee,” *Kaitse Kodu* 13–14 (1936): 421–433, 422–23.

in which “Estonians destroyed their Carthage,” so that “centuries went by before Sweden was able to assert its interests in the Baltics again.”

In the end, revenge stories had turned out to be superfluous. Especially after the statist turn in Estonian nationalism, it was possible to justify Sigtuna's destruction with the national interests of the hypothetical ancient Estonian state, the defence and advancement of which had been the Estonian nation's natural right and privilege as early as the Viking Age – just as it was in the interwar period.

## Sigtuna in Interwar Swedish–Estonian Relations

Highlighting the Estonians' state-building capacity was not the only use to which the Sigtuna narrative was put in interwar Estonia. It also played a role in Estonian–Swedish relations, as evidence that could be used to highlight the Estonians' belonging to the Nordic cultural and political space, and to underline their similarities to, and even good relations with, the Swedes. This discourse of positive Viking-Age commonality, which goes back to Jakobson and Reiman, affected both fictional and non-fictional Estonian narratives about Sigtuna. Tellingly, in both Mäлк's and Hindrey's novels, learning Swedish is embraced by the Estonians as a mark of status, while in Hermann's story, it is the Swedish prince who has learned Estonian.<sup>45</sup>

In diplomatic contexts, pointing to the supposedly good relations of the past was rhetorically employed as a justification for the continuation of similarly close relations in the present and future. The fact that the event in question was the purposeful destruction of the Swedish capital was not necessarily seen as an obstacle. Nevertheless, for some Estonians, Sigtuna could serve as a slightly cheeky way of reminding the Swedes that the balance of power between the two nations had not always favoured the obviously stronger partner.

In the summer of 1907 (not in 1908, as stated in Rütli's memoirs), two Estonian liberal nationalists, Oskar Rütli (1871–1949) and Hugo Treffner (1845–1912), attended a major Nordic temperance congress that was being held in Stockholm. Amongst other events, they attended a breakfast in the Royal Castle, where they had a chance to exchange a few words with Crown Prince Gustav (1858–1950), who would soon become King Gustav V. Upon being introduced to the two “Estonians from Livonia,” the crown prince said that he knew Livonia well and was happy to think of

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<sup>45</sup> Kaljundi, “Challenging Expansions,” 201.

the times when it had formed a part of Sweden.<sup>46</sup> To this polite statement, Treffner replied that he was glad to hear that the crown prince thought so well of Estonians, even though they had destroyed the Swedish capital of Sigtuna. In response, the crown prince only nodded and kept quiet, apparently shocked by Treffner's words.

Similar use of the Sigtuna trope continued in the interwar period. Villem Ernits (1891–1982), a politician and temperance activist, mentioned Sigtuna while addressing the XII Nordic Temperance Congress, which convened in Tartu in the summer of 1926 and included several Swedish representatives.<sup>47</sup> Ernits stated, perhaps not altogether sincerely, that “we are not proud of the fact that our ancestors destroyed the Swedish capital Sigtuna, although we are glad that they were strong people.”

In a more conciliatory tone, in the *Eesti-Rootsi* album (Estonian-Swedish Album), published in 1929 to mark Gustav V's visit to Estonia, the diplomat and former Foreign Minister Ants Piip (1884–1942) wrote that “there is no doubt that the peoples who surrounded the Baltic Sea in ancient times had close relations with one another. Sometimes, they engaged in friendly business; at other times, they raised weapons in war. Mutual friendship and understanding would grow as a result.”<sup>48</sup> This idea – that warlike actions can over time lead to mutual understanding and even friendship – was in keeping with the earlier Estonian emphasis on the Viking Age as a kind of shared regional cultural heritage.

Whereas it is possible to understand Estonians' desire to depict the destruction of Sigtuna as the start of good relations between the two states, it is perhaps more surprising to note the Swedes' relative lack of interest in the subject, and even agreement with the Estonian point of view. Even in those cases where they did engage with the Estonian version of the story, it is fair to say that Swedish attitudes were characterized by a lack of negative emotional response, acceptance that any enmity between the two nations had over time been overcome, and even willingness to see this event as something positive in the history of Swedish–Estonian relations and as evidence of the ancient Estonians' bravery and might.

Sometimes, the story of Sigtuna's destruction was mentioned by the Swedes themselves for humorous effect, as an amusing historical fact. In 1928, in an inter-

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46 Oskar Rütli, *Mälestusi ühe Eesti sugupõlve tööst ja võitlusist (1871–1949)* (Tallinn: Eesti Päevaleht, 2010), 259–62.

47 Villem Ernits and Nils-Herman Lindberg, eds, *XII Põhjamaade karskuskongress. Den tolfte Nordiska Nykterhetskongressen. Tartu 18–21 juli 1926* (Tartu, Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seuran kirjapaino, 1929), 17.

48 Ants Piip, “Eesti-Rootsi koostöö,” in *Eesti-Rootsi album. Estnisk-svenskt album*, ed. Bernhard Linde, Ants Piip, Hans Pöhl, Gunnar Reuterskiöld, and Jüri Uluots (Ühiselu: Tallinn, 1929): 16–18, 16.

view given to the Estonian newspaper *Postimees*, the Swedish envoy to Estonia Patrik Reuterswärd (1885–1963) noted that it was not just the Estonian and Swedish governments that were interested in closer relations between the two countries, but that the same was also true of their inhabitants more generally.<sup>49</sup> Over time, strong ties had developed between the two nations, which had been in contact with each other for centuries. Jokingly, the minister drew attention to the destruction of Sigtuna by Estonians, noting with laughter that contacts in more recent times had happily been more peaceful.

Another, more serious, way to talk about Sigtuna's destruction by Estonians was to treat it as an episode in the story of how Stockholm had been established, as Swedish historians had done already in the early modern period. In 1928, the Estonian-friendly journalist Pierre Backman (1892–1969) wrote – in an article marking the ten-year anniversary of Estonian independence – that, in fact, Estonians should be commended for their destruction of Sigtuna: after all, it had been the demise of this town that had made possible the subsequent rise of Stockholm as the new capital of Sweden.<sup>50</sup>

Another, and more common, option was to simply treat Sigtuna's destruction as a neutral historical fact, which, while it served as evidence of the ancient might of the Estonians, did not arouse any desire for revenge amongst the Swedes. Instead, there was a certain patronizing sense of wonder that Estonians had been able to accomplish something so impressive. In 1934, Estonia was visited by the former mayor of Stockholm, and a great friend of the Baltic states, Carl Lindhagen (1860–1946). In an interview with *Postimees*, he said that “the recognition of Estonian independence [by Sweden in 1921] was also greatly influenced by the destruction of the town of Sigtuna in the 12th century,” since the Swedes, aware of the story of Sigtuna's destruction, had thought that “a nation that was strong enough to destroy the Swedish capital deserves independence and freedom.”<sup>51</sup>

These remarks can be complemented by an unpublished speech for a Swedish audience, the transcript of which is to be found in Lindhagen's personal archive in the Stockholm City Archives.<sup>52</sup> There, he describes the ancient Estonians as a warlike people, given to both piracy and trade expeditions against Sweden and especially Gotland, but also further east. In 1187, Estonians burned down Sig-

49 “Heanaaberlikud vahekorrad arenevad järjekindlalt (jutuajamine Rootsi saadikuga,” *Postimees* September 4, 1928.

50 Pierre Backman, “Estland inför tioårsdagen av sitt oberoende. En modern bondestat med gammalt nordiskt kulturarv,” *Stockholms Tidning* February 12, 1928.

51 “Balti riikide lähendaja,” *Postimees* July 4, 1934.

52 Lindhagen's speech, transcript, undated. Carl Lindhagens samling, B5, Vol 135: 1. Stockholm City Archives.

tuna. At home, however, their “various small states” were constantly at war against one another, with the more peaceful Latvians being forced to defend themselves against their “wild neighbours.” The Estonian raids against Scandinavians provoked reprisals, as recorded on Swedish rune stones, but their contacts with peoples to the west and to the east also “brought new cultural elements to these uncivilized territories.”

While the idea, attributed to Lindhagen in the Estonian newspaper, that Sigtuna’s destruction had played any role whatsoever in Sweden’s recognition of Estonian independence was pure fantasy,<sup>53</sup> it is likely that Lindhagen’s orientalist understanding of “wild Estonians” was more widely shared. This meant that any harm caused in the distant past by such “culturally inferior” people was likely seen as something akin to a natural disaster, and therefore not something that needed to be compensated for.

This attitude, historically characteristic of Swedish views towards all areas and peoples to the east of Sweden, with a possible partial exception of Finland and the Finns,<sup>54</sup> suggests that anger towards Estonians – and towards ancient pagan Estonians at that – would have meant recognizing the Estonians as equals to the Swedes, challenging the Swedish sense of superiority towards people whom they considered their inferiors. At the same time, it must be kept in mind that there is no reliable information as to what extent Swedes in the interwar period were even aware of the story of Sigtuna’s destruction by “eastern pagans,” never mind whether they attributed this event to ancient Estonians or someone else.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it would be fair to say that a story of doubtful historical veracity – according to which the early medieval Swedish capital of Sigtuna had been destroyed by pagans from Estonia – played a relatively important role in the imagination of both pre-independence and interwar Estonian nationalism. It was a way of anchoring Estonian national history – and thereby also Estonian identity –

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53 About the Scandinavian states’ recognition of the independence of the Baltic states, see Seppo Zetterberg, “Der Weg zur Anerkennung der Selbständigkeit Estlands und Lettlands durch die skandinavischen Staaten 1918–1921,” in *Ostseeprovinzen, Baltische Staaten und das Nationale. Festschrift für Gert von Pistohlkors zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Norbert Angermann, Michael Garleff, and Wilhelm Lenz (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005): 415–46.

54 Mart Kuldkepp, “Swedish Political Attitudes towards Baltic Independence in the Short Twentieth Century,” *Ajalooline Ajakiri. The Estonian Historical Journal* 3–4 (2016): 397–430, 411.



in the Viking Age, and therefore also in the interactions between the two shores of the Baltic Sea. In other words, belief in the Estonian destruction of Sigtuna gave the early Estonian national movement some confidence that not only Scandinavians, but also Estonians, had once been a powerful nation of seafarers who were, *inter alia*, capable of large-scale heroic destructive actions. For the most part, this went with the necessary caveat that the destruction of the Swedish capital had to be some kind of act of revenge.

After Estonia's declaration of independence, the Estonian national narrative of Sigtuna's destruction was integrated into the new, statist version of Estonian nationalism and its conception of history. It was evidence that pre-crusades Estonians had already possessed sufficient capacity for political organization to undertake such a large-scale military-political action – and perhaps even a form of pre-modern statehood, the existence of which would have legitimized post-1918 Estonian independence.

At the same time, the Sigtuna discourse also played a role in contemporary Swedish–Estonian relations, as a kind of historical precedent for close relations and, therefore, as reason to pursue similarly close relations in the future. On both sides, the people who engaged with this question were happy to admit that enmity between the two nations was a thing of the past; they were now able to think back to Sigtuna's destruction, perhaps with a sense of shared nostalgia, like two friends reminiscing about the quarrels of their youth. But what it also showed was that on the Swedish side, the matter lacked any political or emotional salience that would have made it difficult to adopt this point of view. Instead, their mostly indifferent attitude towards the supposed event was likely coloured by some degree of orientalism towards the Estonians

It is probably fair to say that even today, many Estonians think that it was their – rather than anyone else's – ancestors who destroyed the medieval Swedish capital, and that they still feel some degree of pride in this fact, even if they are unlikely to break into patriotic song when visiting the ruins of Old Sigtuna. But one should not underestimate the impact that the story of Sigtuna's destruction has had on Estonia's national memory culture. As a rare if contested example of a possible pre-13th-century Estonian military victory, it is likely to remain salient at least as a figure of imagination, if no longer as a constitutive building block of Estonian national identity.

