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QUARTERLY

KEKRI – AN ANCIENT FINNISH HARVEST FESTIVAL

Kekri is an ancient Finnish harvest festival and the predecessor of the current Christian All Saints' Day. It was originally celebrated in honor of Kekri, or Köyri, the god of agriculture and fertility, to ensure good harvests and livestock. Linguistically, the word is based on an ancient Indo-Iranian word meaning the cycle of the year.

Kekri has the same European roots as the Celtic Samhain festival, from which the current American Halloween has developed. Kekri celebrations declined in the 20th century due to urbanization, new traditions, and opposition from the church.



Kekripukki in the late 19th or early 20th century. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Rich festive traditions and beliefs

During the festival, spirits and fairies were believed to move among the living. The festive day began with a morning sauna, which was first dedicated to the ancestors and the saunatonttu (sauna elf). Evil spirits were kept away by burning bonfires and turnip lanterns. A large harvest feast and beer drinking also played a central role.

According to belief, the head of the household had to be drunk during kekri to ensure a bountiful harvest the following year.

Kekripukki

Characters dressed in scary costumes, inside-out fur coats, and ladles that served as horns went from house to house in a procession. The characters demanded treats by shouting "*Kekriä vai uunia?*" (*"Kekri or oven?"*) – refusal was threatened with breaking the oven, which is similar to today's "*Trick or Treat*" tradition.

Today, the old festive tradition is being revived in various parts of Finland. The most famous modern tradition is found in Kajaani, where a huge straw effigy is burned every year. Before being burned, the effigy is floated in the middle of the Kajaani River.

EXPEDITION TO SANDBY BORG ON ÖLAND: MASSACRE AND FINNISH PATERNAL LINEAGES

Sandby Borg, located on the island of Öland, is a 5th-century Iron Age ring fort that was avoided by locals for centuries due to its cursed reputation. The reason for the superstition was only revealed during archaeological excavations in the 2010s, when a brutal massacre was uncovered at the site. An unknown attacker had entered the castle at night and slaughtered the inhabitants on the spot.

Interdisciplinary discoveries and Baltic Finnish roots

DNA and strontium isotope analyses isolated from the deceased provide an exceptional insight into the Iron Age Nordic region long before the Viking Age: firstly, the deceased had diverse paternal lineages. The Y-DNA samples of the deceased identified exactly the same amount of traditional Scandinavian haplogroup I as Finno-Ugric haplogroup N (N1a1).

The paternal lineages found and the Baltic amber jewelry found in the ruins of the fortress show that the Fenno-Ugric peoples were an active part of the Nordic communities and power structures already in the 5th century.





Detail of the wall ruins at Sandby Borg. Photo: Juha Tuikka.

Another interesting detail was that the deceased were not buried, in an attempt to deny them access to the afterlife. The tragedy was likely related to the Nordic power struggles that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire.

At that time, there were numerous ringforts on the island of Öland, which in its own way reflects the tense atmosphere that prevailed in the area. However, Sandby Borg is unique among these forts. Thanks to the preserved human remains, it is like a time capsule offering a rare glimpse into the lives of the people of that era.

Cultural integration

Although strontium isotopes indicate that some of the inhabitants were from mainland Sweden or the eastern Baltic Sea, the majority had already grown up on Öland and assimilated into the local community. The eerie ruins and dark history of Sandby Borg thus reveal an interesting and long-forgotten chapter in the early common history of Finns and Scandinavians.

The ruins of Sandby Borg, Öland. Photograph: Juha Tuikka

THE RAILWAY THAT RECONNECTED HISTORY

After decades without cross-border passenger trains, the railway again links Finland and Sweden. The new Oulu–Tornio–Haaparanta service reconnects Finland with Sweden and Norway, opening a continuous journey across Fennoscandia. This modern route follows tracks leading to a world-changing story.

In April 1917, Vladimir Lenin left exile in Zürich on an eight-day journey to Petrograd. Germany, then at war with Russia, allowed Lenin and other revolutionaries to cross its territory in a "sealed" railway carriage, hoping their return would destabilise the Russian Empire.

Lenin travelled through Germany, crossed by ferry to Trelleborg, and continued through Stockholm to Haaparanta. Because no railway bridge yet crossed the border, his party completed the Swedish stage by sledge over the frozen Tornio River. After questioning in Tornio, they boarded a Finnish train and travelled south through the Grand Duchy of Finland. Lenin reached Petrograd and soon stood at the centre of the revolution.





Germany's strategy succeeded in the short term. The Bolsheviks seized power, and Russia withdrew from the First World War. Winston Churchill later portrayed Lenin as a human weapon of mass destruction, transported into Russia "like a plague bacillus" to destroy the enemy from within.

The historical irony was immense: Germany helped Bolshevism take power, while Nazi Germany later launched a war of annihilation against the Soviet state it had helped bring into existence.

Lenin's journey also had an unintended but fortunate consequence for Finland. After the Bolshevik takeover, Finland declared independence on 6 December 1917. Lenin's government recognised Finland on 31 December 1917, paving the way for international recognition.

Today's train carries ordinary passengers, not revolutionaries. But between Haaparanta and Tornio, travellers cross a frontier where railways once helped redirect world history–and opened the way to an independent Finland.

HAAPARANTA STATION–A GATEWAY BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Haaparanta station has repeatedly connected personal lives with major events in European history. During the First World War, the border town became a vital transport bottleneck between Western Europe, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Lenin was only one of the many travellers whose journeys passed through this northern gateway. Finnish volunteers also departed from Haaparanta for military training in Germany. During the Second World War, German military trains crossed Sweden to Tornio.

Migration via Haaparanta

When the Lapland War began in 1944, evacuees fled in the opposite direction, while Finnish war children travelled through Haaparanta to safety in Sweden. After the war, the station became equally important to Finnish labour migrants. For many Sweden Finns, Haaparanta was the departure point for a new life in Sweden. Juha Tainio, who then lived in Örebro and was studying to become a journalist, made the long journey through the station in 1973.

A ferry strike prevented him from travelling by sea, so he took night trains and railbuses through Boden, Haaparanta and Kemi to reach Tampere for his final examination. In a sense, he followed the same northern route that Lenin had travelled in 1917. Passenger services later disappeared, leaving Haaparanta at the end of an inactive railway. The station became a youth centre, and its international rail connections seemed to belong to the past.



Juha Tainio in Tornio.

A return to the age of trains

In 1987, Haparanda cultural director Tapio Salo proposed creating a local memorial to Lenin's journey. Inspired by a popular Lenin attraction at Stockholm's Royal Library and the new openness of glasnost and perestroika, Salo hoped the plaque would attract Soviet visitors from the Murmansk region.

When Juha Tainio returned by train after the reopening of the Finnish connection, he found the station crowded with passengers. The train brought him close to his former home in Haaparanta, where he had lived for 15 years. The station was no longer merely a terminus living on old memories. It had again become what geography and history made it: a meeting place between countries, railway systems and generations.