

## Panel Discussion: About Names of Large Water Bodies Surrounding Estonia

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As observed by many participants at this seminar, names of large water bodies are mostly motivated by directions (west, east), other geographical names (countries, cities, etc. adjacent to the water bodies), ethnonyms, and sometimes the etymology remains obscure. If we look at water bodies surrounding Estonia (Baltic Sea, Gulf of Finland, Gulf of Riga and the large lake separating Estonia and Russia, the fifth largest in Europe), we may see that we can see all four options represented in their names. Which is also noteworthy that at some point in the history – although very shortly – three of the water bodies are or have been named after Estonia.

Let us take the **Baltic Sea** first. Its established name in Estonian is *Läänemeri* – ‘west sea’. It is not arguably a very old name, first written instances go back to about 1840’s when schoolbooks started to appear in Estonian. We do not know the ‘original’ popular name in Estonian for the sea area, probably it was simply a Sea or Great Sea as in Latvian or Livonian, e.g. The first known reference to the sea in Estonian was in 1811: *Eesti-merri* ‘Estonian sea’. This was probably a mistranslation of the German Ostsee as the translator must have associated the name *Estland* with ‘east’ (which is one of the etymologies sometimes considered for the name Estonia). In 1821 the name was already translated more properly as *Hommiko-merri* ‘east sea’ (literally ‘morning sea, dawn sea’). The name *Läne merri* first appears in a handwritten map dated in the 1840’s. In fact, it is a parallel variant to another name *Rootsi merri* ‘Swedish sea’. Naming a sea based on the geographical name of the opposing seashore seems so natural that it could even be based on authentic local names used in coastal areas. Consequently, *Läänemeri* may have also been an authentic name but we do not yet

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know more about the history. Later in the 19th century *Läänemeri* became to be an established name for the sea but especially in the 20th century *Balti meri* has also been used, mostly as a translation loan from Russian.

The second name is the **Gulf of Finland** which is *Soome laht* in Estonian. The first written evidence of it goes back to 1821 (Some *löppe-merri*). In Estonian it does not have any known alternative names but from earlier records (as told by Sirkka Paikkala yesterday) it has been occasionally named *mare Estonum*. Various other names have been already explored by Sirkka, including those referring to Livonia and Ruthenia (Russia). In Russian bylinas it is also referred to as the ‘sea of Virumaa (Wierland)’, a county in Estonia (*море Вирьянское ~ Веряйское*) and in Icelandic ‘the gulf of Karelia’ (*Kirjálabotn*).

So we have ‘lost’ two hydronyms referring to Estonia but we still keep the third, as a consolation. But this is not the name used in Estonian. The border lake between Estonia and Russia has two completely different names. In Estonian, it is called **Peipsi** (in German Peipus), a name of disputed origin. It is thought this name goes back to pre-Finno-Ugric times, first spoken in a kind of Proto-European language. But in Russian the name is *Чудское озеро*, which in translation would be ‘Estonian lake’. The ethnonym *Chud* is an archaic designation which refers either to Estonians or a larger group of Baltic-Finnic languages. The origins of this word is also disputed, one often explains this through a Sámi word *čutte ~ čudde* ‘enemy’ or Russian *чужой* ‘stranger, foreigner’ (< Gothic *þiuda* ‘people’). But it is quite evident that Chudskoye Ozero means ‘Estonian lake’, as it has been occasionally been translated into German as *Estensche see* (1448).

So these are the three names among variants of which Estonia has figured. There remains the fourth, the **Gulf of Riga** which is currently named *Liivi laht* ‘Gulf of Livonia’ in Estonian. Origins of the Estonian name are somewhat uncertain, it seems that this name was revived in the 1930’s and later again in the 1990’s, in the mean time it was called *Riia laht* in Estonian which is the same as the Gulf of Riga in English. In historical maps the name of Livonia was used quite often in the 16th – 17th centuries (1539, 1562 and 1566 *Mare Livonicum* ‘Livonian sea’, 1574, 1589 and 1636 *Sinus Magnus Liuoniae* ‘Great Gulf of Livonia’, 1652 *Sinus Livonicus* ‘Gulf of Livonia’, 1700 *Golphe de Livonie*). But it is very doubtful if this name has really been preserved in

Estonian only. Most probably *Liivi laht* is an artificial name motivated by desire to remember the small Livonian people living on the shores of the gulf. As the gulf goes north to encompass the shores of Estonia that during many centuries belonged to the governorate of Livonia, it may also be seen as an ‘inner sea’ of that province. More research is, however, needed here.

Research into sea names and their evolution is perhaps somewhat neglected in Estonia but it certainly deserves our attention.

**Note:** The short paper is based on the manuscript of the Dictionary of Estonian Place Names (Eesti kohanimeraamat) that is currently being compiled, expected to be published in 2016.