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Materiality, Verbal Art, Mythic Knowledge, and the Lived Environment – Aineellisuus, suullinen runous, myyttinen tieto ja eletty ympäristö (ASME)

Frog, Joonas Ahola, Jesse Barber, Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä, Tuukka Karlsson, Siria Kohonen & Karina Lukin, University of Helsinki

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The Materiality, Verbal Art, Mythic Knowledge, and the Lived Environment project (ASME), funded by the Kone Foundation (2021–2025), explores materialities linked to verbal art and mythic knowledge in premodern Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian traditions. Such materialities are considered from a variety of angles in contexts ranging from their historical environments through to their modern reinventions and reuses today.

The ASME project breaks from current paradigms of thinking. Materialities have been widely overlooked and neglected in the rich and extensive research on Finno-Karelian kalevalaic poetics and magic, their transformations through publications such as Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala* (1835; reorganized and radically expanded 1849), and the embodied performances of contemporary *runo*-singers today. Research on Scandinavian traditions has given materialities more attention. On the one hand, runic writing is preserved on stones, swords, and so on and Viking and medieval poetry and prose are linked to the physicality of manuscripts. On the other hand, the turn of interest to performance and living practice requires, in the case of medieval and Iron Age Scandinavia, the reconstruction of situations and consideration of connections to spaces and rituals that are reflected in the archaeological record.

Attention to such connections and materialities in Scandinavian research nevertheless remains limited in scope. Materialities are a rapidly-rising topic of interest, yet the materialities of oral verbal art and orally-transmitted knowledge and beliefs have remained invisible to research, owing to established paradigms of thinking. The ASME project brings this phenomenon into focus, filling a significant gap that both meets current interests and opens onto new knowledge.

We began by reconsidering empiricism as a point of departure for considering materialities. Materialities are commonly conceived from an etic perspective of scientific thinking: they are approached as things in the world, both natural and cultural, that can be *empirically* known through touch, taste, sound, smell and sight, from trees in a forest or the sound of thunder to the smell of baked bread or glow of a smartphone at night. Current interests in Finnish folklore studies have led to a pioneering reconceptualization of materialities from emic perspectives – i.e., perceived and imagined materialities. This approach includes the physicality of a written page but also non-empirical materialities, such as the materialities of unseen agents and forces, oral poems as objects that people can own, sell, or even lose and find, and so forth. Transferring power, knowledge, or memory to

drink or food is found in both Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian traditions, but how this relates to verbal art or poems as texts has been left unexplored. Earlier approaches to materialities excluded the possibility that people may conceive of knowledge as no less material than the sound of thunder or the smell of bread. Rethinking non-empirical materialities reciprocally requires rethinking materialities that may be taken for granted in our own society, which is pervaded by digital media and virtual encounters.

Since its emergence in the 19th century, folklore studies has focused on traditions as intangible texts and beliefs – i.e., verbal art and what is now discussed as mythic knowledge. This focus has reciprocally shaped research, leaving several dimensions of the traditions under study invisible. Our turn to emic materialities breaks from this paradigm: we aim to tear down the walls of the box inside which researchers are accustomed to think by demonstrating, exploring, and explicating the importance of materialities with which verbal art and mythic knowledge are bound, both in how they are perceived and how metaphysical beliefs are concretely tethered to the lived environment of material culture and natural surroundings.

As the emic materialities of vernacular traditions are brought into focus, it becomes necessary to interrogate what happens to them as they are transformed into heritage in contemporary milieux. People continue to engage with texts of verbal art and traditional knowledge as things to which some people but not others might have rights, or for understanding the experienced world, or for creating relationships not with supernatural agents but with nations. The ASME project examines materialities in both Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian cultures alongside one another, following traditions of verbal art and mythic knowledge normally considered intangible, and we thoroughly explore their changing relations to emic materialities in the lived environments of different times and places. Our comparative dimension augments the empirical studies by shedding light on types of sameness and difference between the two cultures and also between premodern and modern cultures as traditions of the former are

selectively taken up and reinvented as heritage in the latter. Through this research, we set out to develop ground-breaking new knowledge of international and multidisciplinary relevance by theorizing how the dynamics of the three components' interaction form a system, and how that system participates in reciprocally constructing the significance of each component.

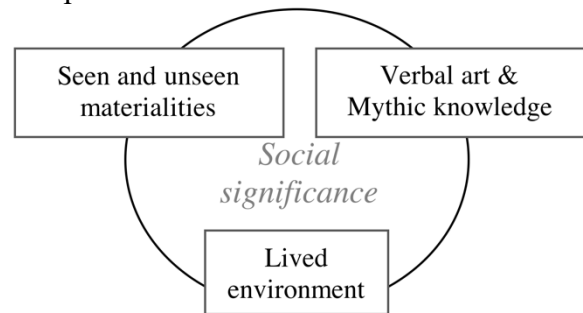


Figure 1. Diagram of materialities, verbal art and knowledge, and the lived environment as forming a three-part system in which the social significance of each is shaped through that system.

The ASME project recognizes unseen materialities of premodern oral traditions and places these in relation to the materialities of heritage production, their embodiment by people, objects, the environment, or by print and digital media. The insights, new understandings and theoretical perspectives produced by the project will change the way people understand these traditions.

Organization and Aims

The ASME project is organized around six anchor studies that follow the arc of history, from premodern traditions through the present day. The six anchor studies are organized complementarily, with two pairs of studies each focused on Finno-Karelian and Scandinavian traditions, respectively, as well as one study that focuses on the life of each originally oral tradition in writing and one study that focuses on heritagized performance and practices. The project is centered in folklore studies, but the seven researchers each bring different approaches and expertise that also connect with other fields, including linguistic anthropology, religious studies, musicology, philology, and cultural semiotics.

The ASME project advances beyond simply exploring materialities of verbal art by proposing and testing three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The materialities of verbal art and associated knowledge are bound up with the lived environment and people's interactions with it.

Testing this hypothesis requires the anchor studies to consider how changes in the lived environment, including those effected by technologies like electricity, book printing, and social media, affect materialities. This connects the anchor studies to the second hypothesis:

- Hypothesis 2: Heritagization strips oral verbal art and knowledge from the materialities of their premodern lived environments and reconstructs them in relation to the materialities of new media on the one hand, and enables them to produce new meanings by linking them to the materialities of the contemporary society's environment on the other.

The roles of selection and reinterpretation in relation to meanings leads to our third hypothesis:

- Hypothesis 3: The dynamic interaction between materialities, verbal art or knowledge, and the lived environment reciprocally relate to the social significance of the three parts as a system.

By empirically testing these hypotheses through the anchor studies and comparisons across them, the ASME project aims to develop theoretical perspectives that can be applied and further developed by scholars working with the same and other traditions.

Anchor Study 1: Finno-Karelian Kalevalaic Poems as 'Things' in the World

Anchor study 1, led by Tuukka Karlsson, examines three genres of Kalevala-metric poetry: incantations, epic, and lyric. The study is interested in emic conceptions of the materialities of these text types. Theoretically, the investigation engages with linguistic anthropologic discussions on semiotic ideologies, registers, and affordances residing in material and immaterial signs. In addition, methods developed in folklore studies are applied to the large corpora of texts the study makes use of.

The study uses the digitized corpora of published Kalevala-metric poetry (skvr.fi), which comprises approximately 89,000 texts

and fragments of various genres. Additionally, approximately 60,000 unpublished archived texts and fragments are used as a complementary research corpus. The poetic material constitutes the data that will be investigated for implicit and explicit evaluations and (re)valorizations of the material aspects residing in the tradition. Collectors' correspondence and field notes, such as those of Iivo Marttini, are also examined to explore differences between performers' and collectors' conceptions of text and text-type valorizations.

This anchor study is interested in the material affordances of various genres and the potential differences in how texts of various genres are connected with different materialities in vernacular metadiscourse.

From vernacular considerations of oral texts and genres, this anchor study advances to the reception, utilization, and vernacular conceptions of Lönnrot's *Kalevala* in Viena Karelia during the latter half of the 19th century. This stage situates vernacular conceptions of texts and their evaluation in relation to those of researchers. Especially toward the end of the 19th and early 20th century, the research and archival paradigms guiding the collection of Kalevala-metric poetry conceived some performances as 'inauthentic', such as poems thought to be learned from Lönnrot's epic. A category "Learned from *The Kalevala*" was even used to separate poems seen as less valuable than the so-called authentic texts in the publication of an edition of the corpus, placing them in a separate section rather than with other poems of the same genre, subject, or formal type. This part of the study examines the material and immaterial aspects of language ideologies and registers (those of the collectors and those of the community members). It investigates both sides of the oral tradition's reception in material form outside its domain of everyday use. On the one hand, it examines how vernacular mythic and ritual poetry was treated and discussed in circles outside of its traditional use, as in newspapers from the 19th and early 20th century. On the other hand, it analyzes the re-introduction of this poetry to the oral poets or original authors.

Finally, this anchor study looks into diachronic enregisterment processes and changes in how the poems have been interpreted, becoming bundled together with materialities during the 19th and early 20th century. This study will offer new perspectives on how the poetry's affordances have changed from pre-modern times to the early years of modernization.

Anchor Study 2: Finno-Karelian Mythic Knowledge, Incantations, and Power in Material Objects

Anchor study 2, led by Siria Kohonen, focuses on emic perspectives and materialities connected to incantations and rituals in early modern Finno-Karelian contexts. It attends especially to combinations of ritual materialities, verbal incantations, practical manifestations of mythic knowledge in ritual contexts, and the mythic/ritual conceptions of *luonto* [literally 'nature'] and *väki* [literally 'force'] and their material and embodied aspects. The primary sources of the study are the corpus of ritual reports and belief narratives, as well as recollections about and instructions for incantations and rituals deposited in the Folklore Archive of the Finnish Literature Society. The corpus of Kalevala-metric incantations is used as an additional source. Close reading and techniques of comparative folklore research are combined for analysis, as are theory-based content analyses stemming from performance and ritual theories and theories of the cognitive science of religion. The study focuses on five themes.

First is the dynamic force called *väki*, which was ritually acquired and manipulated. In ritual practices, manipulating *väki* forces was usually connected to material objects that were considered to possess *väki* or represent it; for instance, iron tools represented the *väki* of iron in rituals. *Väki* was also considered to be contagious: it could transfer to a human or an animal and infect them – i.e., make them ill.

Second is the dynamic force called *luonto*, which is linked to the body of a performer and conceived of as essential for the efficacy of incantations. Comparable to *väki*, the *luonto* force could also infuse a human, resulting in an ecstatic state of consciousness. However, this

was not considered as illness but as something essential for the ritual's efficacy.

Third is material objects to which a verbal charm was somehow transferred. In healing rituals, incantations were often used together with material objects like salt, ashes, animal excrement, or nails made of alder wood, that were considered to aid in the process.

Fourth is the use of drink, food, ointment, or a physical object in connection with the transfer of ritual knowledge from one person to another or for an incantation's efficacy. In healing rituals, incantations were usually recited while making an ointment, and this was considered to boost the ointment's efficacy. In a sense, incantations were considered to be one of the ointment's ingredients. Similarly, some belief narratives describe how the ritual and mythic knowledge of a *tietäjä* (a type of ritual specialist) could be mixed with a drink and served to a pupil.

Fifth is imaginations of pain as somehow a concrete object in healing incantations. In a mythic sense, pain could be grabbed, stored in vessels, drowned in a river, or minced. Pain was also characterized as someone's property that had escaped from its owner and found a place to hide in the patient.

These five nexuses of materiality in this tradition have not previously been investigated alongside one another. Exploring their parallels and differences will yield a new understanding of how materiality operates within the tradition, and perhaps also how vernacular materialities of different phenomena may be related by common operations according to common principles.

Anchor Study 3: Medieval Icelandic Discourses and Social Realities

Anchor study 3, led by Joonas Ahola, utilizes the concept of materiality as a means to scrutinize different formally bound types of expression in medieval Icelandic literature and the society or culture that this literature reflects. Medieval Iceland was predominantly an oral culture, and this orality may be seen also in the written sources. It seems that certain oral texts, like traditional poems, were considered to be individual *units* and distinct from the general flow of speech or other traditional poems. For example, there are

accounts in the saga literature describing how a poem could be delivered as a gift – and even though the poem was delivered (as well as composed) orally, it seems that the text itself was considered to be the gift – and not, for instance, the act of reciting the text. So, such a poem was considered to be a distinct sequence of speech, and it was also considered to be deliverable. This may indicate a conception of an oral text as a kind of a material unit.

Certain oral texts, such as legal formulas or romantic poems, were also utilized in medieval Iceland as performatives to achieve certain impacts. In other words, they functioned as *instruments*. As instruments or tools, these texts were considered to have a certain power of their own (even though this power often depended upon different aspects of the context in which they were used). Can the concrete impact of an utterance be considered a sign of concreteness, or materiality, in the utterance? This leads to an interesting question of where the performativity of such utterances, or texts, gained their driving force. It may be assumed that these sources of force were not the same in the cases of, for example, legal and magical formulas – but people’s ability to influence their immediate surroundings seems to have been considered equally concrete through both human law and some kind of a metaphysical law (or the invisible agents that represent it). Can the source of performative force be considered an aspect of materiality in medieval Icelandic conceptions – and does this require reassessing the concept of materiality regarding immaterial, oral texts?

Another intriguing question is to what degree the *form* in which the uses of such formulas are represented had an impact on *how* these uses are represented. For example, in saga literature, where the use of magical formulas or prophecies is described, these utterances are often used by the narrator for foreshadowing subsequent events, and such narration-based purposeful representation of the use of such formulas may obscure the way they may have been used in real life.

Another fascinating question is connected to the hypothesis that recognizability was crucial for performatives: what aspects made such performatives *recognizable* as performatives? To what degree were the texts,

for instance, considered or required to be fixed or invariable, or formulaic in certain text segments, in order to be recognized as valid and functional performatives, and what kind of recognizability do they represent? Within this anchor study, the fixedness and formulaicness of these texts is also examined in the transmission of medieval manuscripts in which they appear: their written transmission may be a relevant indicator of the degree to which they were established within the culture, at least in the environment of the writers.

In summary, anchor study 3 discusses the relationship between materiality and performativity in an oral culture through the (seemingly paradoxically) literary sources of medieval Iceland. First, it asks what exactly the relationship between instrumentality and materiality in an oral culture is, exploring the degree to which instrumentality may be interpreted as materiality, and vice versa. Second, it asks what the relationship between an oral text’s fixedness and its instrumentality / materiality is, investigating the extent to which a text’s fixedness may be interpreted as a metaphor of its materiality.

Anchor Study 4: Scandinavian Mythic Knowledge, Incantations and Power in Material Objects

Anchor study 4, led by Jesse Barber, examines worldviews conveyed by Scandinavian medieval sources on pre-Christian religions, and compares them with later Scandinavian sources about folk beliefs. The study uses textual sources as well as objects from the archaeological record to consider the materiality of these beliefs. Incantations are especially important in illustrating how supernatural power existed for believers, not only in the mythic world, but also in empirical reality. This study does not consider the medieval and later sources as isolated traditions; rather, it places both on a long-term spectrum of continuity of beliefs, while also considering the fusion of these traditions with Christian cosmology.

The connection between Old Norse mythology and later Scandinavian folklore can be illustrated through legends about Kettil Runske. Kettil Runske is a *trollkarl* or *runkarl* [‘sorcerer’] and his nickname *Runske*

emphasizes his use and knowledge of runes. He is surrounded by a cycle of legends, most of which depict him saving the common people and fighting sorcerers, trolls and giant serpents by binding them with his rune-staves and his runecraft. In one legend about the origins of his powers, Kettil steals these rune-staves from Oden, which in some ways designates Kettil as the Christian successor to the old god as the wielder of the runes. These legends come mostly from southern Sweden but can also be found in the North. Most legends about him were collected around the 17th century, and the earliest known mention of Kettil comes from Olaus Magnus in 1555.



Figure 2. The runestone at Frösö, said to be from a sorcerer binding a serpent in the lake.¹

One episode from Kettil's legendary cycle depicts him binding a sea serpent to the bottom of lake Storsjön in Jämtland, Sweden, which was collected there in 1635. The legend tells of a sea serpent that was harming the local people. The people lacked the means to destroy it, so they sent for the help of the renowned Kettil Runsk. Kettil came and erected a great stone on the island of Frösö and carved runes upon it, which bound the serpent to the bottom of the lake. The legend reports that there the serpent will stay, so long as the runes remain. Other variants of the legend say that once the sea serpent grows large enough to encircle the island and bite its own tail, the world will end. The runestone mentioned in the legend is an actual runestone from the archaeological record of Frösö. The runes upon the stone say nothing of a local sea serpent, but the stone does depict a serpent biting its tail.

This legend has many parallels with myths about the world serpent that, in the medieval material, encircles all land, biting its own tail, and that will break forth at Ragnarök. It is also important to remember that, when these legends were documented, they were most likely isolated from published versions of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* and medieval eddic poetry. Traditions of the world serpent were most probably forgotten by the 16th century in Sweden. However, it is possible that these legends have their roots in older traditions about the world serpent. This is especially enticing when considering that Kettil stole his runestaves from Oden, linking him to the Old Norse Óðinn, who bound the world serpent just as Kettil does the sea serpent.

The study is organized in four parts. The first focuses on textual sources that convey cosmological beliefs. The second concentrates on material from the archaeological record connected to mythic knowledge, and the third on incantations that demonstrate the use of mythic powers. The last combines the above sources to illustrate the long-term continuity of beliefs in Scandinavia

Sources include medieval eddic and skaldic poetry, saga literature, published corpora of later charms and runic inscriptions, as well as published and unpublished narrative folklore, such as legends and beliefs. Unpublished materials used are mainly in the archives of Uppsala's Institute for Language and Folklore and Stockholm's Nordiska Museet.

Anchor Study 5: Capturing, Transforming and Commodifying Oral-Traditional Poetry through Writing

Anchor study 5, led by Frog, examines the adaptation of verbal art and mythic knowledge to written text and its continued circulation and transformations in written media. These processes are traced through the parallel cases of Old Norse eddic poetry and Finno-Karelian kalevalaic poetry, with emphasis on poetic *texts*. Particular attention is given to how the products of these processes were understood, the potential gaps between poetic texts as 'things' and their manifestations as or in physical artefacts, and how these understandings and associated evaluations changed over time in relation to different

historical situations. The study has four symmetrically arranged branches of inquiry, with two branches each for eddic and kalevalaic poetry, and two branches each for early and recent collection and editing.

The first branch explores eddic poems as things that were transformed into material artefacts, as well as their circulation as hand-written manuscripts. These poems were first written down in medieval Iceland, where they were used and copied in that society. The medieval evidence is thin, but detailed philological analysis of text variation reveals dimensions of how people understood and engaged with the poems. The manuscripts themselves also present relevant indicators of how the texts were evaluated and the material artefacts in which they are preserved, with additional indicators in the few descriptions of manuscript use. This branch of inquiry then jumps ahead to the ‘discovery’ of eddic poems in the heritage construction projects of the 17th century. The boom in copying that followed reconceived the eddic poems as a work called *Edda*, specifically Sæmundr’s *Edda* after its imagined compiler. A multitude of copies are available from this period and several of the central manuscripts exhibit significant investment in the form of illuminations (i.e., illustrations). Alongside attempts to produce rigorously accurate copies, people also expanded poems, such as the version of *Baldrs draumar* that was increased by between one third and half of the medieval length; truncated them, such as a version of *Vafbrúðnismál* that had been shortened by almost 20%; reorganized them, like versions of *Hávamál* and *Völuspá*; as well as created new compositions that became adopted as parts of Sæmundr’s *Edda*.

The second branch turns to the collection and editing of the poems in publications, which began already in the 17th century and continues through the present. This branch is developed in dialogue with the first, including how people engage with the published artefacts, the texts that they contain, and also the medieval texts and artefacts in which they are preserved. Even today, for example, scholars discuss the *Poetic Edda*, often treated as a distinct work, although the 13th-century manuscript GKS 2365 4to is merely a core that continues to be edited,

expanded, and sometimes reorganized in ways surprisingly similar to 17th-century copies.

The third branch concerns the collection, editing, and publishing of kalevalaic poetry in the 19th and 20th centuries, although it had been documented on a limited basis already earlier. This study attends to how collectors viewed what was performed as variations of socially circulating ‘texts’. Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* and the reception of *Kalevala* ‘as’ folklore holds a central position. Collectors in the mid-19th century used it as a frame of reference, treating oral poems as variants of the *Kalevala*’s text, and thus they might only document lines or passages they considered missing from its pages. This branch parallels the first on the manuscript circulation of eddic poetry; it differs by including the publication as well as the compilation and editing of poems in Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* and other works.

The fourth branch turns to the modern editing of kalevalaic poetry mainly in the 20th century up through the present. The *Kalevala* holds a central position in especially the early phases of these practices, having historically played a central role in the organization of materials in the archives. The quantity of the corpus itself becomes a factor impacting these processes: at around 150,000 variants and fragments, the early phases of editing and publishing the corpus established structures that have been difficult to supersede even as research interests have changed. For example, individual performers are commonly brought into focus in current research, yet the corpus remains organized by region and text type, and there is still no way to search by performer in the digitized edition of over 87,000 variants and fragments.

The materialities of both eddic and kalevalaic poetries are examined across their respective histories. Current editorial activity is considered part of these histories, reflecting recent changes in how material artefacts are approached and understood in relation to texts that they present. The respective histories reveal both continuities and changes in understandings that can often be linked to broader changes in society or intellectual culture more generally. When the histories of writing down and reproducing eddic and kalevalaic poetries are compared, they reveal

patterns that offer a frame of reference for considering cases in other cultures as well.

Anchor Study 6: Materially Situating, Embodying, and Reinventing Knowledge and Traditions

Anchor study 6, led by Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä, examines adaptations of kalevalaic poetry and mythic knowledge in contemporary society outside of written text editing and reproduction. This anchor study is interested in the intersections between the ‘ancient past’, materiality, nature (often characterized in the materials of the study as something that is separated from ‘human’ and ‘culture’), and contemporary social and political environments. The project suggests that materiality plays a significant role in the reproduction of the ‘kalevalaic’ traditions and interpretations: the multi-layered and multitemporal interpretations of premodern mythic knowledge are commonly narrated in relation to or through things such as natural landscapes and/or natural materials such as wood. The study asserts that these narratives and interminglings of intangibilities and tangibilities are becoming more and more significant in contemporary society, as ‘traditional knowledge’ has become one of the sources from which people seek answers for complex crises such as climate change or having lost connection with nature. These processes seem to re-circulate romantic views of the past, the ‘ancient’ and of ‘nature’. Yet, the premodern nature-related mythic knowledge in the Finnic areas can be described as anthropocentric and even exploitative, as it represents societies that were dependent on, for example, slash-and-burn agriculture, farming, and small-scale hunting.

This anchor study critically investigates such relations and interpretations by analysing, for instance, the ‘Vienan reitti’ hiking route in Eastern Finland near the Russian border (also travelled by Lönnrot), the prehistory exhibition

of the Finnish National Museum, and the Finnish forest yoga phenomenon. The anchor study will develop a methodological approach in which (visual) discourse analysis, ethnographic field work, and autoethnographic experiences are put into dialogue. The study discusses the material, spatial, embodied, and discursive dimensions of re-interpreting kalevalaic poetry and mythology in today’s society. By focusing on fairly banally nationalistic and culturally accepted contemporary interpretations of kalevalaic mythology, the study provides a much-needed insight into the materials, spaces, places, and bodies that become chosen to reproduce and re-interpret the ‘furthest past’ of Finnishness.

Synthesis

The six anchor studies are tightly linked by their topics and the phenomena that they address, and they are being developed in dialogue with one another. Coordination and collaboration across the anchor studies is organized through workshopping and research collaborations. We are currently planning a larger multidisciplinary seminar-workshop on the theme of the project. In addition to publications by individual researchers in diverse venues, the project team is planning a collaborative book that will offer a synthesis of research findings.

Notes

1. Photo attributed to Bengt A Lundberg, Riksantikvarieämbetet, CC BY 2.5, accessed via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:J%C3%A441_Fr%C3%B6s%C3%B6stenen_-_KMB_-_16000300013546.jpg.

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