

Unto Salo

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UNTO OLAVI SALO, professor emeritus of Finnish and Comparative Archaeology at the University of Turku, died in that city on the 25th of October 2019 at the age of 91. He was born in Tyrvää (present-day Sastamala) on the 10th of September 1928. He was admitted to membership of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1977.

Unto Salo's childhood environment, the Asemämäki ("Station Hill") district of Tyrvää, was also known as Nälkälänmäki ("Hunger Hill"). Its residents were workers and small entrepreneurs, and the community's political spectrum ranged from supporters of the reformist Social Democrat Väinö Tanner to Communists. In his memoirs, Salo, the son of a member of the Red Guard in the Finnish Civil War of 1918, gives us a very warm and intimate picture of life in this community, showing a deep attachment to his home region.

His family placed great emphasis on education, and all three of their children completed their matriculation examinations. Unto Salo matriculated from the Tyrvää Coeducational High School in 1948, having already embraced a worldview that valued education and Finland's cultural heritage. These ideals followed

him throughout his later career. He considered himself to be a conservative and romantic by nature.

In his own words, Salo left for Helsinki with the intention of reading history and searching for a world view of his own, but lost his way and strayed into the provinces of archaeology and ethnology. Alongside his actual studies, he was naturally attracted to the Satakunta Student Nation and was eager to involve himself in a broad range of its activities, including the celebrated literary salons of author Maila Talvio. The emphasis placed by the student nation on support for cultural activities in its members' home province of Satakunta laid a firm basis for Salo's later career and strengthened his deep-seated regional identity that had already formed in his childhood. He gained his degree in 1955.

Salo had a flying start to his career in that he was appointed director of the South-West Häme Local Heritage and Museum Association, based in Forssa, for the period 1955–1958. One of the leading figures in the association was Esko Aaltonen, Professor of Sociology at the University of Turku, who was particularly influential in cultural circles, and as an apprentice to

him, Salo gained considerable experience in active involvement and influencing matters in Finnish society. It was thanks to Aaltonen that Salo was able to establish a lifelong active relationship with the Finnish Museums Association that eventually led to honorary membership. He also acquired practical experience of museum work through several short periods as an acting curator at the National Museum of Finland in 1955 and 1957–1958.

In 1956 Mauno and Ester Wanhalinna donated their manor property at Lieto to the University of Turku in order to promote the study of archaeology and initiate research concerning the ancient hillfort of Vanhalinna which was located on the grounds of the manor. Again, it was Esko Aaltonen who guided the choice of a leader for the excavations in favour of Unto Salo. This was to be of crucial importance as far as later developments in his career were concerned.

The next step after Forssa was the Satakunta Museum in Pori, which appointed Salo as its director in 1958. *Oi Satakunta armahin, sun kultamaitas tervehdin!* (O Beloved Satakunta, I salute your golden lands!). Following the stagnation of the war years, the museum was in anything but a healthy state, and years of toil lay ahead in order to revise its ways of working and obtain a new building for it. Eventually this was successful, however, and alongside this demanding administrative work, Salo was also able to gain further academic qualifications: a licentiate degree in 1964, followed in 1969 by the defence of his doctoral thesis, *Die frühromische Zeit in Finnland*, dealing with the history of Early Roman Iron Age settlement in the context of the whole Baltic Sea region. And that was not all. Salo also considered

museums to be research institutes. Alongside his administrative duties at the Satakunta Museum, he initiated a programme of active archaeological research on a scale that was unusual for a museum outside Helsinki. He carried out systematic excavations, largely with private funding, as is the custom nowadays, at archaeological sites in the Pori area, which he could expect to provide new information on the earliest strata of settlement at the mouth of the Kokemäki River. The result was a monograph on the subject published in 1970.

Unto Salo's achievements in both administration and research during his period as head of the Satakunta Museum were the result of exceptional inspiration, organizational ability and willpower. I cannot recall anything comparable in my own original professional environment, the State Archaeological Commission, which became the National Board of Antiquities – the present-day Finnish Heritage Agency – which was responsible for the country's museums. Everything he did in his museum work had an inevitable educational purpose to it and represented diligent popularization of academic research. At the same time, his efforts underlined the interests and rights of the region, which he did not believe were sufficiently well represented in Finnish antiquarian administration led from Helsinki. The concentration of all archaeological finds at the National Board of Antiquities was something that he found particularly unreasonable and tantamount to cultural deprivation. The attitude adopted by this government authority did not correspond in any way to Salo's view of the common good, any more than did that authority's explanations for the lack of any staff for

attending to the needs of external scholars and researchers. In his view, the outcome of this was that freedom of research and the right to conduct it had become the exclusive privilege of the civil servants working for the body that officially owned the collections. Unfortunately, the problem of customer service still remains unresolved in this connection.

In 1972 Unto Salo became the first person to be appointed as Professor of Archaeology at the University of Turku. By the time he took up this post, he had developed into a staunch, broad-based and extremely experienced museum official actively involved in local heritage affairs, qualities that this man from the provinces could make full use of as a professor.

The establishment of a new discipline was not an easy matter, and it was not helped when in his first year in office he became caught up in the "one man, one vote" controversy in the politics of university administration. He nevertheless entered the fray, announcing his opposition to the reforms on the ground of "saving the radicals from their own radicalism". When he wrote an extensive article entitled *Vallankumous hiipii sukkasillaan* ("The revolution creeps in on stockinged feet") for the Independence Day edition of the daily newspaper *Aamulehti* in 1972, the Association of Finnish University Professors asked for permission to circulate offprints of it among the members of the Finnish Parliament. Salo later became a member of the governing board of the professors' association and was its vice-chairman for a time around 1980.

Archaeological research concerning the Satakunta region also came to be based in Turku with the arrival of the new professor, whereupon the province of South-

West Finland naturally came to be involved. The central themes were the development of settlement and organization of society on the coast and further inland. The topics of dissertations were not restricted to these themes, however, and tended to vary from specific artefacts to methodological issues, even branching out into classical archaeology, while the time window could vary from the Stone Age to the Middle Ages, the archaeology of which had not been greatly to the fore previously.

Salo's own research was mainly concerned with the Bronze Age of Satakunta, early urban history, the spread of Christianity to Finland and Finnish mythology, e.g. investigations into worship of the god of thunder. His background in museums also meant that he was instrumental in launching the systematic teaching of museology in the University of Turku in collaboration with Åbo Akademi University.

Unto Salo was also active in the administration of the University of Turku. He was dean of the Faculty of the Humanities in 1977–78 and first vice-rector of the university in 1981–84. He also sat on numerous committees appointed by the Ministry of Education to resolve problems in the field of antiquities.

But alongside this, Salo continued his policy of encouraging the construction and expression of a Satakunta regional identity, e.g. by serving as a board member and chairman of the Emil Cedercreutz Foundation in 1979–2004 and of the Satakunta Historical Society in 1995–2005. He was also instrumental in reviving the *Satakunta* publication series.

His retirement in 1992 gave Salo an opportunity to return to his old research themes, leading to the publication of what

can only be described as a huge number of books and articles.

Argumentation for early regional organization in Satakunta continued. In fact, Salo developed upon the ideas that he had already suggested in 1967, even extending them as far as the regions of Häme and Karelia. For Salo, Satakunta was Finland's oldest province, which already had a high degree of organization in the Late Iron Age. The chain of circumstantial evidence on which he based these conclusions resembles the constructs put forward by another historian who hailed from Satakunta, Professor Jalmari Jaakkola. This interpretation, which has been described as 'maximalist', has been evaluated critically on various scores. Had Salo taken into account even the recent Swedish research that he knew only marginally, his interpretation of matters would have definitely been less radical. Salo's interpretation of the early history of towns in Finland, which he presented during his professorship, has also been criticised as based on indirect evidence.

The label of 'maximalist' must also be given to Salo's much-discussed claims of the early introduction of Christianity to Finland, which he dated to the Merovingian Period (600-800 AD). He even referred to the early parishes in Finland as having been 'Orthodox', several centuries before the great schism between the Eastern and Western churches in 1054.

Salo's visions of ancient Finnish mythology and beliefs, however, became his main topics. His intention was to clear the way for new views of Finnish prehistory, the current interpretations of which suffered from "a misty lack of perspective", as he once noted. He maintained that the picture presented of past times should be

a cultural history built upon all the traces left from the past. This meant that alongside archaeological evidence – and perhaps beyond it – attention should be paid to the history of language and information preserved in the form of traditions. Hints of his interest in these matters were already given in his *lectio praecursoria*, in which he combined evidence put forward by archaeologists and linguists. Salo expressed his interest in words and language also by coining his own archaeological terms.

Unto Salo had in mind a dream of tracing the cultural history of the ancient beliefs of the Finns by continuing the work of the Turku specialist in comparative religion, Uno Harva, whom he greatly admired. A flood of new ideas began to pour forth as he wrote his visionary and inspired synthesis of the worldview of the early Finns. This inspired synthesis that bypassed the problems of dating of both linguistic history and folklore took the form of an almost 1,500-page trilogy dealing of the ancient Finns' understanding of the world and human life and their imagery of the after-life. This was partly a return to the theme of Ukko, the chief god of Finnish mythology. At the same time, it gave rise to explanations for the motifs on the Early Iron Age Celtic Gundestrup cauldron discovered in Denmark and for the arrangement of the stones at Stonehenge.

Salo's syntheses provide something of a cultural guided tour among various historical periods and worldviews. His visionary presentations of circumstantial evidence have been said to be "heavy going" for the reader. It is by no means easy for archaeologists to follow any methodological approach that may be adopted in his works. Salo makes no effort in his writ-

ings to place archaeological finds or the observations based on them in the socio-cultural context to which they would belong in view of the location where they were discovered. Instead, he attempts to find something to say about each object in terms of cultural comparisons by tracing its origin and the historical and geographical manifestations of the motifs connected with it. As far as I understand, this method stems from the dominant paradigm of the Finnish historico-geographical school of folklore studies. Salo's approach can with good reason be regarded as inherited from Uno Harva and Martti Haavio, which is not surprising in view of the respect he had for them as role models. Haavio referred to it as "the motif-historical method", in which one may roam through all the cultures to which the "product of tradition" under investigation points in terms of its motifs before finally presenting an interpretation of its origin and philosophical background as derived from such comparisons. This diffusionist and typological interpretation completely ignores questions such as the function of the object in its original cultural context

and why it was fashioned in the way it was when it finally came into the hands of the researcher as an item of data requiring explanation.

Unto Salo gave his massive 832-page volume of memoirs the title *Iso tammi, lehväntaittajan tarina* ("The Great Oak, a tale of he who bent its leafy branches"). The motto quoted runs: *Jo on tammi kallistunut, sillaksi ikisijahan, mennä miehen matkalaisen, paljasjalkaisen palata* ("Now the oak has bent down, into a bridge with ancient times, where a man can pass over and a native return"). Salo's guided tour amongst the mythological and archaeological riddles of the world's cultures did indeed lead him back to where he started out, Satakunta. Identification with his home province lay at the core of his life and everything he did. Satakunta was the mythical heart of his gigantic world tree of the Kalevala epic. He who bent a branch from it could gain eternal happiness and he who cut its fronds eternal love and affection. Unto Salo gained both of these.

Everything was written that had to be written.

*Obituary by
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