

## **From Runeberg to Runes – An Attempt to Preserve the Knowledge of Older Forms of the Swedish Language in Modern Finland (summary)**

The main part of the area which the present-day republic of Finland consists of belonged to the Kingdom of Sweden between the middle of the twelfth century and the year 1809. During this time, with the exception of the earliest centuries when the Swedish language had to share its position as the main written language with Latin and Middle Low German, written Swedish was used at all levels of society. Although the use of Finnish began to grow after the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Swedish was still the most important written language at the end of the nineteenth century. Although these facts are learnt in school if not before, it comes as a surprise to many university students that a historian dealing with the older periods of the history of Finland has to understand Swedish and not only modern Swedish but also the older forms of it. Moreover, especially studies dealing with the early modern or medieval periods require palaeographic understanding of old handwriting. However, the popularity of the Swedish language among the Finnish school students is low and besides that, the present-day linguistic education provided by the schools does not include any courses in historical linguistics. In fact, even at the universities it has become more and more rare that the students are given knowledge about ancient forms of any language – in certain historical departments Latin is still taught, but courses in ancient Swedish, for instance, have been organized only within linguistic departments and even there the possibilities of arranging those courses have decreased rapidly due to diminished economic resources.

In order to solve or at least ease that problem a small group of experts have begun constructing a web resource which has been entitled *From Runeberg to Runes* (Fi. *Runebergistä riimuihin*; Sw. *Från Runeberg till runor*). The name contains references to the Finnish national poet and the written alphabet of the Vikings; at the same time the name reveals the structure of the web resource: the student has first a chance to approach the language of the nineteenth century, which is quite similar to the language of today, and from there, go towards older and more unfamiliar forms of Swedish. The web resource consists of three major sections: palaeographic exercises, text understanding exercises and a grammar which is meant to help everyone, but especially history students to understand the linguistic structures that do not exist any more in the living language. The web resource is freely accessible at <http://www.jyu.fi/gammalsvenska> and it is meant to serve both

as a tool for solitary practice and as supplementary material for a forthcoming virtual course on the same topic.

The makers of the web resource are thankful for the support they have received but at the same time they want to mention the fact that present-day virtual teaching in Finland or at least at the University of Jyväskylä seems to require quite a lot of technical know-how from the researchers and teachers involved: in this case, those three who have provided the contents have also been obliged to construct most of the technical surroundings, which has delayed both the completion of the resource and the start of the planned virtual course. Thus it is not surprising that virtual teaching within humanistic subjects is nowadays mostly carried out by younger researchers and teachers, whereas senior experts, who probably would have the most knowledge to share, concentrate themselves on more traditional forms of teaching. This problem could be solved with more intensive co-operation between those in humanistic subjects and those in information-technological sciences.

Jari Eilola, Docent  
Department of History and Ethnology,  
University of Jyväskylä, Finland  
jari.eilola @ campus.jyu.fi

Marko Lamberg, Docent  
Department of History and Ethnology,  
University of Jyväskylä, Finland  
marko.lamberg @ campus.jyu.fi

Seija Tiisala, Lecturer  
Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature,  
University of Helsinki, Finland  
seija.tiisala @ helsinki.fi