

## Change of Cultural and Natural Names in Põide Parish (Saaremaa, Estonia)

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### **Abstract**

Place names can be classified into cultural and natural names. This classification is expedient, because the names change differently as do their referents. The present article is focused on the evolution of the place names of a single parish in Estonia from 1787 through to this day. Although nearly half of the names of either group have not survived, the changes observed across the groups are different. Cultural names tend to be subject to total lexical replacement, whereas natural names are rather replaced partly, change affecting either the determinative or a part of the attribute.

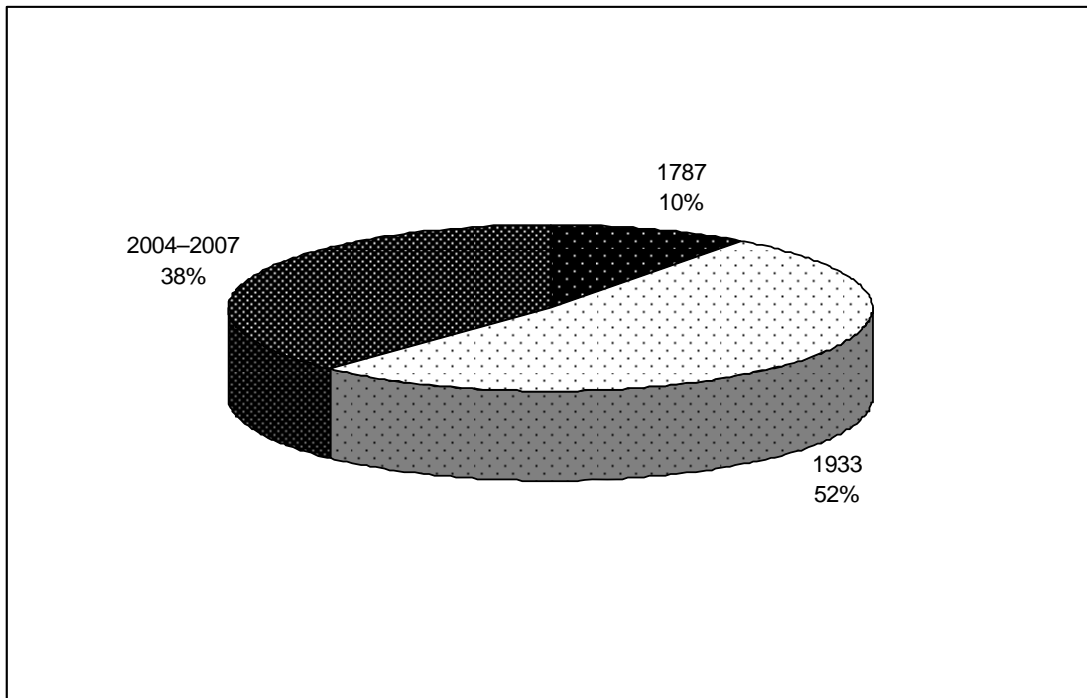
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### **Introduction**

Evolution of Estonian place names throughout the past three centuries is analysed on the example of a single parish, (now rural municipality) Põide, situated in the Isle of Saaremaa, comparing the resulting data in regard to natural and cultural names. Saaremaa is the largest of the Estonian islands, with Põide situated in its eastern part. Throughout history, agricultural activities have been more typical of the inland part of the parish, whereas the coast-dwellers used to make most of their living from fishing rather than from agriculture. The islanders have still retained their own dialect and a strong local identity, which is supported by the relatively isolated way of life. Settlement is quite dense, the village being the largest unit. The villages are situated rather near to each other, while the houses are sited haphazardly either over the whole village territory, or – in the case of a linear village – in its central part, where the buildings are clustered, as the fields lie further off. The population of the parish is approaching a thousand (growing manifold each summertime), distributed over the more or less 500 farms making up a total of 30 villages.

Broadly, the place names of the region fall into two groups. The extremely intricate coastline, enveloped by sea from three directions, is probably the reason for the prevalence of natural names, whereas the agricultural areas lying further inland have inspired a multitude of cultural names. The natural names tend to be more stable, as their referents also usually last longer than man-made places. However, the region is a single cultural whole with a homogeneous population and a common history.

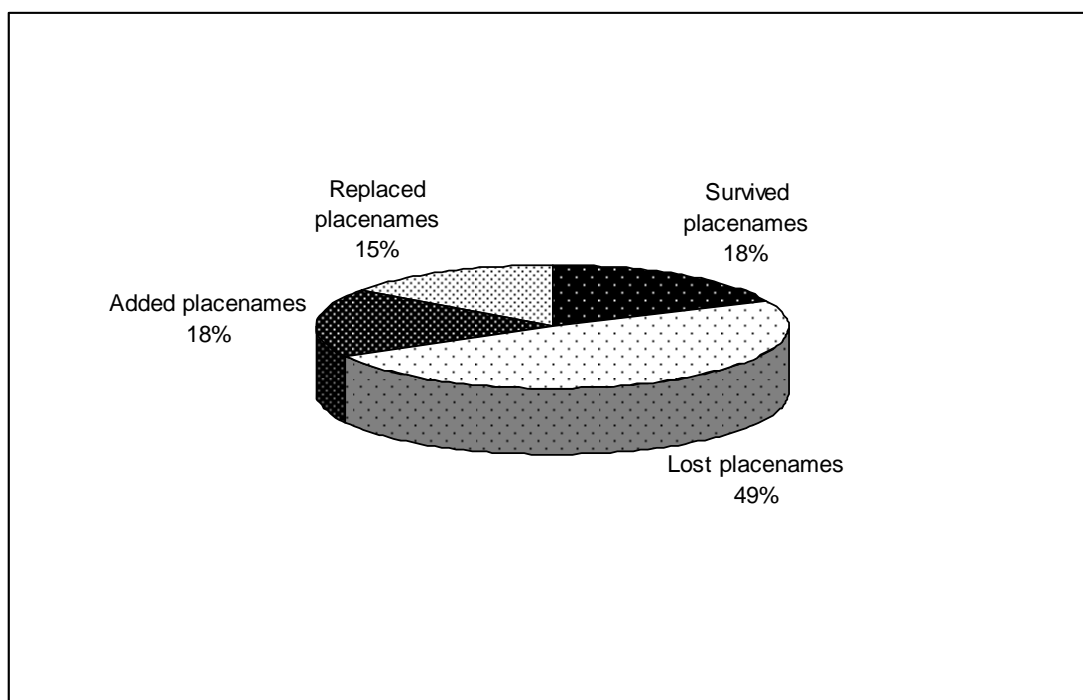
The study is based on material from 1787, 1933, and modern times. The names of 1787 come from a German-language map atlas kept at the Estonian Historical Archives (section 2072, catalogue 3, item 426d). That material contains 367 place names. The 1,921 toponyms of the year 1933 come from the collection of the Institute of the Estonian Language. The modern material (1,397 names) has been collected by myself in 2004–2007. The total number of the toponyms is 2,911. Their distribution across the three periods is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Period statistics of the place names analysed

As can be seen, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century material is the least numerous (10%). Very few farm names have made their way to the atlas maps used, and this holds for the maps of those times in general. Only lonely farms have been mentioned by name there. The settlement names are in German, the main emphasis lying on bigger agricultural sites. The names of smaller units (fields, meadows, pasture parts) are seldom mentioned, if at all. Natural names are few; in a general case mention is made of them if they happen to contain an agricultural patch (e.g., an islet with a hayland potential). As the aim of the atlas was to represent the names of agricultural objects, the village, farm and natural names have an ancillary function, helping to define the location of cultivated plots. Most of the material (52%) represents the year 1933. At that time there were still very many small cottager's plots, whose names are now gone as are the farms. In addition, in that material the agricultural as well as natural objects are regarded as consisting of many small parts each carrying its own name. The modern material (38%) is characterized by a lower proportion of names of cultivated lands and microtoponyms. The names of bigger places have survived, but those for their smaller components have fallen into oblivion.

Of all names analysed 18% (533) have survived, 49% (1,441) have disappeared, 18% (515) have been added and 15% (422) have been replaced, either fully or partly (see Figure 2). As we can see, nearly half of the names have disappeared. The big proportion of the names lost is largely due to the prevalence of the material of 1933, which contains a lot of names of very small places, which is indicative of the special aim of the collection. Also, many names have just been dropped from usage, without replacement, as it is no longer necessary to refer to their denotata.



**Figure 2.** Status of the place names

The function of a place name is to identify, not to describe an object (see also Alas 2008: 37–43). Place names are like mini-texts with a meaning where the connotative and associative component prevails over the denotative one (Christoph 1990: 232). When the place changes, the name may remain the same if it still suffices to identify the place. However, with the loss of sufficient motivation for the place to be referred to by that particular name the name will disappear, being in some cases replaced by a new one. The process may be triggered by a change of the place, by a sensational event, by destruction or obliteration of the place, or by its loss of function due to changes in way of life. The essential factors are the historical process and natural conditions. Social factors may deprive some places of the necessity of naming and highlight some new ones, while natural conditions may affect the character of the place, making a shallow out of an islet, for example, or turning a meadow into a brush or woodland.

Place name changes include place name emergence (a newly significant place needs a name to distinguish it from others), replacement (in total or in part), and loss (the name has been dropped from use and/or its referent has been destroyed [see also Ainiala 1997b: 108–113]). Survival means that the name still applies to the same place. Change of a place name is also geographically bound, but the requirement of sameness applies only to the site, not to the kind or size of the place (see also Ainiala 1997b: 108–109). Thus places will retain their geographic location, although their size and/or kind may change. *Koigi soo* (*soo* ‘marsh’), for example, has kept its name, although the marshland has been drained and meanwhile lost part of its area. So has *Aabelaskma* retained its old name, although the original meadow has turned into a woodland.

### **Cultural vs. natural names**

Name variation depends on the kind of the place of reference. Place names can be divided into cultural and natural names. Cultural names refer to settlements, agricultural objects and artefacts, i.e., places bearing traces of human activity, whereas natural names are associated with landscape and waters. P. Päll in the book *Eesti murded ja kohanimed* [Estonian dialects and place names]

(Päll et al. 2002: 289–296) classifies agricultural names under natural names. In my opinion, however, agricultural names should be regarded as a separate group because, due to the special character of agricultural places, their names have their own rules of variation over time. Notably, agricultural names tend to change more often than natural names, as natural objects are of a more stable character.

For natural objects the names mainly depend on the location, but also on its form and size. For cultural names, again, the main factor is location, but the origin, history and owner of the place are also important motivators. Moreover, natural objects can be classified according to landscape, whereas use should be the right base for classifying agricultural names (Mallat 1997: 103). Such differentiation between the names of places affected by direct human activity or created thereby on the one hand, and those of the natural, non-human-bound places on the other is expedient because of the different durability of their referents and, hence, themselves. Object stability, in turn, is the second vital condition, besides a steadfast tradition, for the name to stick for a long time. A name familiar to and approved by many is less likely to change. Agricultural names are usually created in a small community in order to identify a place on a farm rather than in a bigger area (Ainiala 1997a: 234, 238; Ainiala 2002a: 933; Ainiala 2002b: 183–184; Harling-Kranck 2002: 191). Of course, such a division resting on the presence or absence of human influence also allows for borderline cases: woods can be planted or felled, and dams can be built to change a river's flow, and yet the wood and the river are counted among natural objects.

The diagram in Figure 3 demonstrates the proportions of cultural and natural place names in our material from three different periods. We can see that both in 1933 and 2007 there is a slight prevalence of natural names, whereas the material of 1787 is slightly richer in cultural ones. This does not exclude, however, the possibility that natural names might have dominated the 18<sup>th</sup> century use as well, even though the maps analysed do not prove it. After all, the aim of the source atlas was mapping agricultural objects, while natural objects were mentioned only as landmarks helping to locate arable lands.

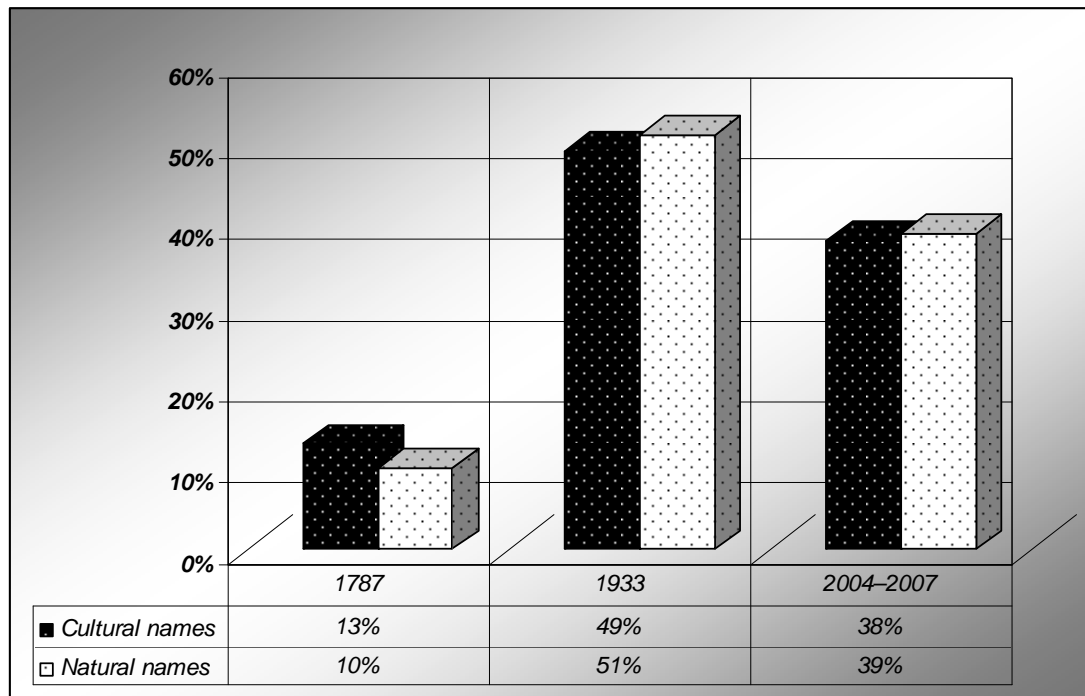


Figure 3. Cultural vs. natural names

## Cultural names

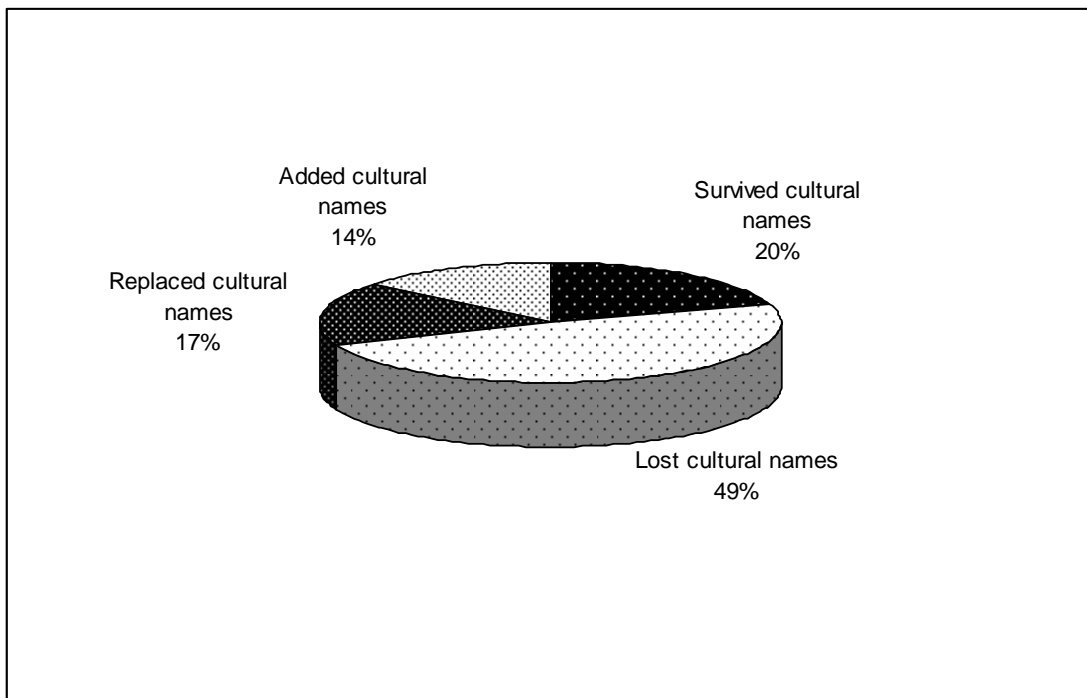
Classification of cultural names brings out two main subclasses: settlement names and agricultural names. The third group – artefact names – is less central, being not homogeneous. The most important group of artefact names in our material consists of road names, which will be discussed further on. Settlement names refer to human dwelling places, such as villages and farms. Agricultural names occur in associations consisting of hayland, field and pasture names. Unlike settlement names agricultural names are not very stable. Created by a small community the names are meant to identify a place within a farm rather than on a big territory.

Unlike agricultural names, a large share of which belong to microtoponyms and are familiar to a small group of people, natural names are usually known to more people as natural places are less owned and more public. The owner or user of a field, for example, may well need to refer to different parts of the field, a need hardly experienced by an outsider, though. Another feature of agricultural names is their close connection with ownership: a change of hands (owner or user) would hardly leave the names untouched. For example, the object mapped as *Uus Nieth* ‘new meadow’ in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had become *Leepõld* (*põld* ‘field’) by 1933 due to change of land use, while nowadays the place is called *Mihkli ja Matsi põllud* ‘fields of Mihkli and Matsi farms’ according to the new ownership.

Although many names of agricultural objects are referred to by microtoponyms, which are used by few people and which thus are inclined to get lost more easily, some agricultural names have survived well due to being macrotoponyms (Ainiala 1997b: 111). The best prospects for survival can be predicted for names of lands with several owners or users (Slotte, Zilliacus and Harling 1973: 116, after Ainiala 1997b). Such names are village-specific, depending on the centrality of the site (Ainiala 1997b: 111). The field at a road junction, for example, being called *Surnuaiatagune põld* ‘the field behind the cemetery’ is familiar to the inhabitants of several villages, and so are the *Linnapõllud* ‘hillfort fields’ situated halfway between two villages, the name being centuries old.

Settlement names form a large part of cultural names. Unlike agricultural names, settlement names are extremely stable. The modern village of *Kõrkvere*, for example, was known as *Korckver* in 1453, while *Kakuna* was bearing the name *Kackona* at least as far back as 1670.<sup>1</sup> People’s homes, being an important part of the landscape, are not obliterated quite so easily. Village and farm names are known far more widely than in just one farm. The more users to a name, the harder it is to replace it. Every farm has its own name, while ancestral farms have borne it for centuries, like e.g., the farms of *Laasu* (1670 *Poiande Ehoma Laasz*), *Pärdi* (1670 *Ehoma Perdi Laaz*) and *Lõo* (1738 *Leo Reino Michel*).

The largest group of the cultural names (49%) consists of lost ones. Without settlement names the percentage would be even higher. Village names belong to the stablest, change having affected only the determinative part of a very few of them. Such loss has happened, for example, to the notion of *asundusküla* or *asund* ‘settlement village’ which was topical during the land reform of 1919. The settlement village once built on the lands of a former estate needs not be distinguished from other villages any more and thus the determinative has changed: *Muraja asund* → *Muraja küla*. In a general case even the elliptical form *Muraja* will suffice, while the generic term is added in special cases only. High stability is also characteristic of farm names. Even a great number of names of lost farms are still there, although they can be classified under “lost names”. The farm of *Riidlahe*, for example, had ceased to exist by 1933, but its name is still remembered. For the proportion of different classes among the cultural names analysed see Figure 4.

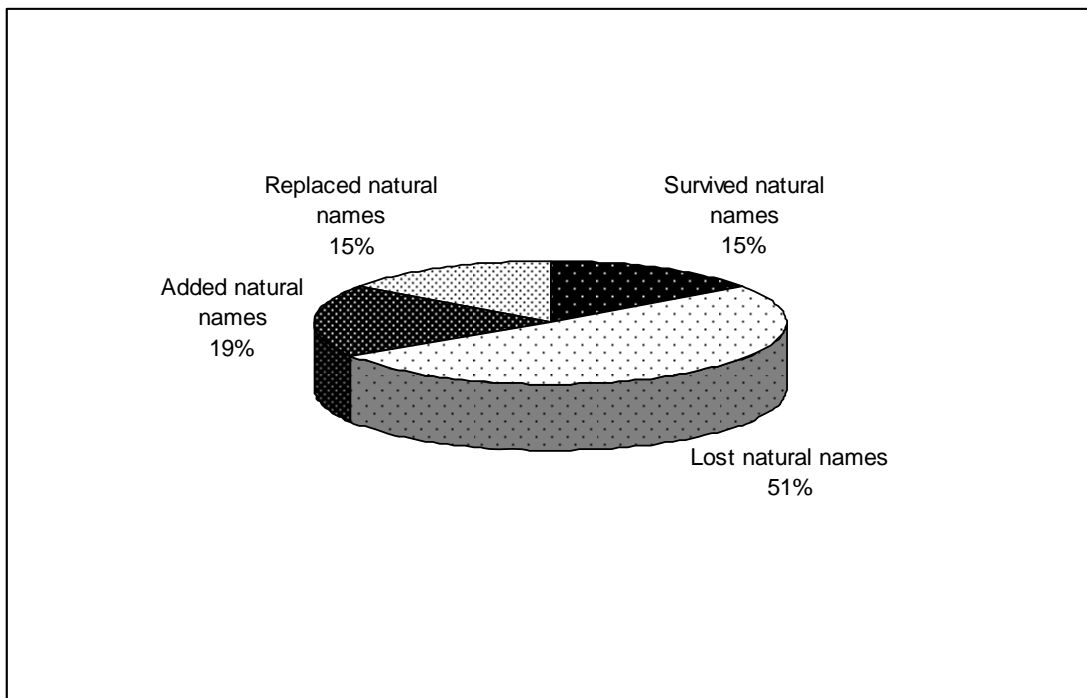


**Figure 4.** Cultural name statistics

Only 2% of all cultural names can be classified under “survived agricultural names”. Here the implementation of new agricultural systems leading, in turn, to landscape transformation has been a major factor in name formation and loss. A lot of names have fallen victim to the decrease of the role of agriculture in the local economy. Name loss has hit the former common fields and parts of them. The number of pasture and hayland parts has also dropped, as has the necessity to refer to those parts by a special name. Changes in the way of life have reduced people’s need for haylands and pastures. Cattle breeding is increasingly moving from single farms to cooperative ones, which considerably reduces the number of people who actually use haylands and pastures and, consequently, need to refer to such places. The field name *Jausapõllu*, for example, has survived until today, but the names of its parts mentioned in 1933 (*Keskmine põld*, *Suurpõld*, *Vanatänava põld*) have already escaped people’s memories. Artefact names contain a group with the most additions – road names. As many as 78% of the road names are new. This may be due to an increase in human mobility and more frequent use of certain roads. The former small roads and paths, however, which were less used (and thus less referred to) have disappeared. Smaller roads have been replaced by bigger ones built mainly during the Soviet period. One of the latter, for example, is called *Suur tee* ‘big road’, while the former cart roads called *Keskmine tee* ‘middle road’ and *Lai tee* ‘wide road’ have disappeared. With the loss of the referent, however, the names can also be classified among the lost ones.

### Natural names

Names are used by many people, which makes oral tradition difficult to break. The names of some big central natural places can be surprisingly old. Figure 5 shows that as far as status goes there is not much difference between the natural and cultural names. As is the case with the cultural names, most (51%) of the natural names analysed can be classified under lost names, while the groups of added, survived and replaced names are more or less similar in number.



**Figure 5.** Status of natural names

Oronyms make up one of the largest groups besides farm names, making up well over half (61%) of the landscape names. Although hills are rather stable in nature, only 15% of the oronyms have survived. The reason, again, might be changes in way of life. There is no more need, for example, for referring to elevations crossed by onetime small roads. More oronyms have disappeared due to a decrease in the necessity to distinguish between parts of agricultural objects. (As revealed by the material of 1933, some of such parts were indeed referred to by oronyms.) As a result, three quarters of the oronyms have been lost. There is only one oronym in our material that has made its way through all three periods – *Ainemägi* (*mägi* ‘hill; mountain’).

The largest group of maritime names consists of names of peninsulas, whose number has grown at the expense of former islets. *Kibbasaar* (*saar* ‘island’), for example, used to be an islet in 1787, but had turned into a peninsula called *Kübassaare poolsaar* by 1933. Thus we can see that a change in the natural object has resulted in the former generic term changing into a part of the attribute and the addition of a specifying determinative *poolsaar* ‘peninsula’. The contemporary form of the name is the same. Yet by today 49% of the names of coastline objects have disappeared as (1) the shores are becoming increasingly less passable due to vegetation, (2) islets are turning into peninsulas due to land rise, and (3) the local inhabitants move about less, on average, than in earlier times.

### **A comparison of cultural and natural names**

If we compare natural names to cultural names including farm names, the resulting percentages are relatively similar. The major difference is observed in added names. Of cultural names 20% are new, against the 30% in natural names (see Figure 6). The reason might be a change in the way of life – people moving away from agriculture.

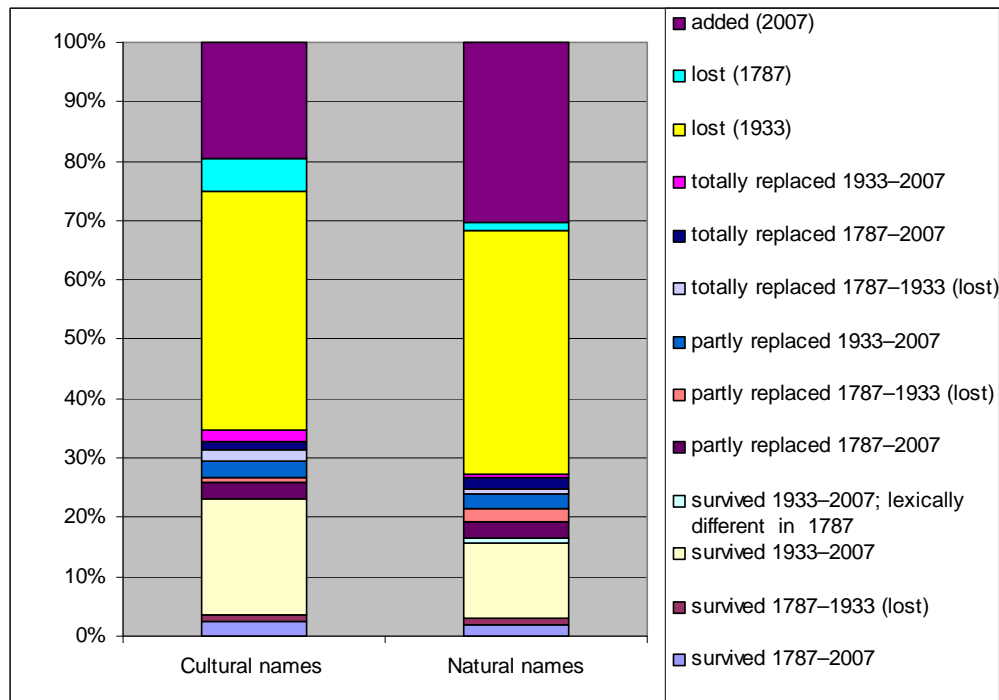


Figure 6. Status statistics of cultural vs. natural names

Among the names surviving from 1787–1933 (and lost by now) there are 3% of agricultural names and 1% of natural names (see Figure 7), which is a significant difference for such small occurrences.

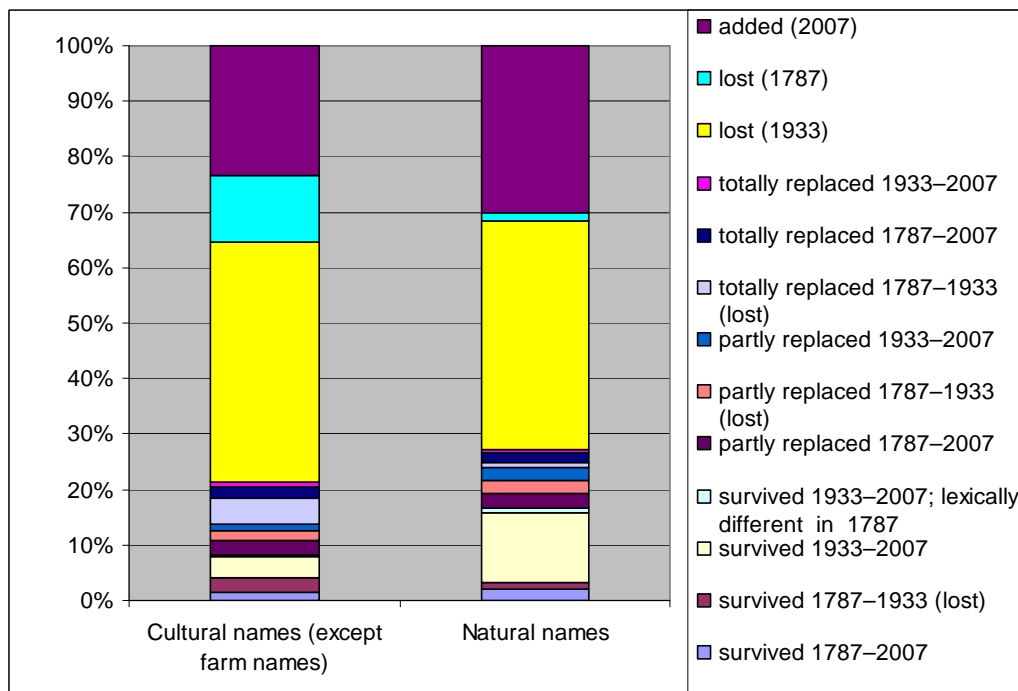


Figure 7. Occurrence of cultural (except farm) names vs. natural names



A similar conclusion can be drawn from a comparison of the agricultural and natural names recorded in 1787 (see Figure 7): the lost percent of the agricultural names is 12 against the merely one percent of the natural names. Another marked difference concerns the names that survived from 1933 to 2007, in which the 19% survival of the cultural names exceeds the 13% of the natural ones (see Figure 6). The bias, however, is largely due to farm names making up a very considerable part of the cultural names (as many as 914 of the 1,865 cultural names refer to a dwelling). A dwelling as a very stable, conspicuous and important object both in the landscape and in people's lives adds a great deal to the stability reading of cultural names. If, however, farm names are excluded from the list (see Figure 7), the survival of the cultural names from 1933 to 2007 is a mere 4%, which proves that cultural names are, after all, less stable than the natural ones.

Although the diagrams indicate the loss of nearly half the names, many replaced names have retained at least part, if not the whole of the attributive component, while replacement has affected just the determinative, or part of it. The peninsula bearing the name *Kordi Saar* (*saar* 'island') in 1787, for example, was called *Kordimaa* (*maa* 'land') in 1933 and, having undergone another replacement of the generic term, is now known as *Kordisäär* (*säär* 'spit'). Name change may involve either name-internal variation (e.g., *Oitmi Rand* (1787) → *Oitme karjamaa* (1933) → *Oitme niit* (2007)) or be purely lexically based (e.g., *Sarrapicko Pöld* (1787) → *Kõrgaapöld* (1933) → *Mardi pöld* (2007)).

The material also reveals that new names are often not motivated by common nouns but by some earlier name. There is, for example, a village part called *Kadarikumehed*, which does not originate in the noun *kadarik* 'juniper thicket', as one might first guess, but is a secondary name derived from a field name *Kaddaricke und Werni Pöllut*, represented on the map of 1787 as reference to the area where the farms were built up later. Another important factor in name formation is analogy. *Ardla soo*, for example, that existed in 1933, has obviously motivated the name *Välta soo* given to the adjacent swampy grassland, the name analogously consisting of the name of the village that the land belongs to and retaining the determinative *soo* 'marsh'.

## Conclusion

In Pöide, place names have survived better on the extensive coastal areas, where the soils are not so fertile. My collector's yield of toponyms from the coastal villages was far more numerous than from further inland, containing also more microtoponyms. The number of names collected from the central part of the municipality, which lies about 10–30 km from the sea, was smaller, as there people are engaged more in agriculture and the need for referring to smaller places has dwindled. In the coastal area the need for microtoponyms seems to be more topical. The coastal area is also characterized by a prevalence of natural names over the cultural ones. Natural names, in turn, are familiar to more people and, thus, more stable. Although the collection of 1933 contains quite a lot of names of fields, pastures, etc. from Pöide inland, a decrease in the need of reference has caused the names to be forgotten by now.

To sum up, about half of the names have disappeared, which applies to both natural and cultural names. The two groups differ in that most of the changed names of cultural objects have undergone a total lexical replacement, whereas the natural names have been subject to partial variation affecting either the determinative or a part of the attribute. The main factors of change have been social and historical changes (agricultural reforms, urbanization, concentration of settlement and other changes in way of life) as well as natural conditions (the shores growing less passable, islets turning into peninsulas due to land rise, etc.) (see also Simm 1971: 688; Simm 1976: 556). In general, the toponyms of the territory have been relatively stable, with a tendency to decreasing numbers and convergence towards standard Estonian. The continuity of the settlement at Pöide is confirmed, aside from other evidence, by the place names persisting since

the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the territory, there is not a single region that has no names surviving from earlier times. The fact that slightly over half of the names have made it down to today shows the viability of the local place names.

### Note

1. The collection of 1933 contains some references to earlier sources, according to which the material of 1453 comes from “Liv-, Est- und Kurländisches Urkundenbuch” Part 1, Vol. 11; the names of 1670 are drawn from fragments of “Landt-Buch” (Archive of the Kuressaare Town Government); and those of 1738 have been found in “Revisions-Acta von der Prowince Oesel gehalten Anno 1738” kept at the Estonian State Central Archives, Tartu.

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