In Estonian culture, the past has value, and efforts are continuously being made to commit to memory that which is considered worth remembering. While there exist a number of histories (national history, literary history, art history, etc.), so far no comprehensive and systematic translation history has been written on Estonian culture. At the same time it cannot be said that there is lack of interest in translation history: on the contrary, many studies have been and are being made in relation to this topic. To use the terminology employed by Aleida Assmann to explain the areas and operation of cultural memory, the recent developments in the attitudes towards translation history in Estonia seem to show that translation history is something that should be remembered and brought out of the archives, transferred from states of passive remembrance and passive forgetting to the sphere of active remembrance.

In comparison with many other areas, the idea that a history of translation is something desirable and necessary for a culture is a relatively recent phenomenon; in any case, younger than the idea of the indispensability of literary history, for example. One of the reasons for this may lie in the way translation has been perceived in Western culture and what its relation to ‘original’ literature has been. Susan Bassnett has estimated that the boundary between originals and translations began to be drawn in the seventeenth century, when the idea of an ‘original’ began to acquire currency, and that by the nineteenth century, the status of a translation was generally considered to be lower than that of an ‘original’. This kind of distinction between originals and translations has been noticeable in Estonian culture also, especially since the formation of the influential group “Young Estonia” at the beginning of the 20th century. Additionally, in Estonia as well as in many other countries, literature has been instrumental in shaping the identity of the nation and the concept of national culture. This has lead to a situation in which most translation histories composed to date have focused on the history of literary translation from the viewpoint, to a large extent, of national literary and cultural history.

On the other hand, for some time already there have been calls to reconsider the national model of literary history, which has been premised on ethnic and often linguistic singularity. While Estonian traditional histories, such as linguistic, national, etc. have indeed often emphasised the quality of national selfhood, the history of cultural life in the territory of present day Estonia may also well be regarded from the perspective of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity. Several disciplines (for example linguistics, literary studies, and history) have already been paying attention to this aspect for some time now, focusing on the multi-linguistic and -cultural facets of the history of the Estonian territory and are thus approaching a possible interest sphere of translation history. From the perspective of cultural memory,
another field that is important but that has, for the most part, escaped the attention of traditional histories of literature and translation is the intersemiotic transfers and transmedial relations between various media, between literature and other arts.

Translation history could be a potentially comprehensive framework for the conceptualisation of various types of cultural contacts and transfers in the multilingual and multicultural history of Estonia. This means that translation history need not be modelled after traditional national or literary histories but that translation history itself could be regarded as a more general model that allows the integration of the national and the transnational, the belles lettres and the wider sphere of literature, elements of verbal and non-verbal culture, the principle of ethnic and discursive singularity and that of heterogeneity. It may be that what we end up with is not so much a history of translation as a history of culture, with translation as a connecting thread that runs through various topics and historical periods.

Elin Sütiste is a Researcher at the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu; PhD in semiotics. Her main research areas are history, theory and semiotics of translation. E-mail: elin.sytiste@ut.ee.