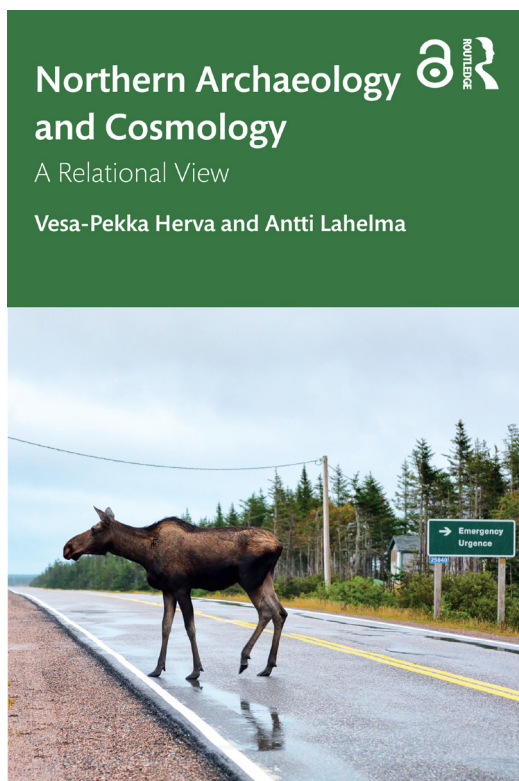


Vesa-Pekka Herva & Antti Lahelma:  
*Northern Archaeology and  
 Cosmology: A Relational View.*  
 Routledge, Oxford 2020. ISBN 978-  
 0-429-43394-8. 202 pp.

This eagerly-awaited monograph from two world-leading authorities on the materiality of circumpolar cosmologies makes a fresh and deeply-original contribution to northern archaeology. The back cover promises a 'magical tour through the North', engaging with the rich and fine-grained archaeology, history, folklore, and ethnography of Fennoscandia and surrounding regions. Readers will certainly not be disappointed as they are escorted on a flowing interpretive adventure that leads through the multiple realms of the shamanistic-animistic cosmologies that have structured the lifeways and worldviews of northern Europe over many millennia.

The depth and freshness of this synthesis make this compact book difficult to place within the usual categories of academic literature. On one level, it offers a concise and highly-accessible overview of Finnish prehistory, which has not seen an English-language monograph for half a century, perhaps explaining why the region tends to get left out of the standard textbook narratives of European prehistory. On another level, the book is also an innovative application of new archaeological theory; specifically, it aims to apply new developments in 'relational thinking' to an extended regional sequence. While it fully succeeds in this aim, its coverage of abstract theoretical concepts is deliberately kept to a minimum, enabling relational perspectives to be used to 'think through' the deeper cosmological significance of rich and diverse forms of material evidence.

Prior to embarking on our northern odyssey, Herva and Lahelma remind readers that they need to be profoundly suspicious of the modern Cartesian division of the world into neat dichotomies of the material versus the spiritual, the human versus the non-human, the organic and the inorganic. While it is debateable whether these categories have analytical utility in other times



and places, they are certainly of limited assistance when exploring the deeper interpretive opportunities offered by Northern Archaeology. Having made this important point, the authors quickly move into an exploration of alternative perspectives; they reflect on the classic 1990s TV series *Northern Exposure*, whose episodes blend the mundane and the extraordinary, incorporating the realities, imaginaries, and fantasies of the diverse cast of locals and recent arrivals. Choice of this clear and accessible entry point into deeper explorations of relational thinking enables Herva and Lahelma to highlight the sense of magical – and often unexpected – interconnectedness that lies at the heart of northern existence.

The book then moves on to summarize the fundamentally relational animistic-shamanistic worldviews that define existence in the Circumpolar World; the most important message from these ethnographies is we need to

'take animism seriously'. Readers are then treated to a vivid and at times terrifying account of how the fragility of life unfolds among these sentient northern ecologies – everything can be living, and has the potential for life, even if not all things are alive at the same moment, or in every situation. This deep existential unpredictability sounds chaotic, demanding, and even intimidating, and in many ways, life in the inspired northern world certainly is. Herva and Lahelma skilfully examine how these unstable relational worlds demand constant vigilance, engagement, and negotiation. They emphasise that knowledge is inherently situational, and that we are required to be constantly attentive to our surroundings, and to negotiate our place in them. If all goes well, existence can continue as desired, but it can also fall apart quickly, with life forces being lost or taken over by others, only to appear again in new forms. Perhaps most importantly, an animistic worldview means that properties and personalities are not inherent in things, but emerge out of an unfolding dialogue – or the relationality – that links all things. This offers an original interpretive perspective that is equally productive whether applied to ethnographic, historic, or archaeological evidence.

More generally, these relationships play out over multiple domains, both physical and conceptual. The authors explain how all northern ethnographies tend to divide the world into different levels or realms, typically a forested middle world of the here and now in which humans exists with animals and other spirits, as well as an upper world of masters and deities, and a watery underworld of illness and death. These domains may be organised on a vertical axis of underworld, land, and sky, as well as one a horizontal plane, with a cold world of the dead located to the north, which is connected to the middle world by rivers that convey the souls of the departed to the underworld. While this tripartite model is often oversimplified in ethnographic and especially archaeological accounts, Herva and Lahelma draw out a deeper and more contextual understanding, highlighting how the relational essence of all existence makes these northern life-worlds complicated - and even contradictory - to negotiate in daily practice. They also explain how temporality becomes a messy and mysterious thing, though shifts in

the northern material record suggest that some of the major contours of northern worldviews have been subject to long-term transformation and change, while other aspects show deeper continuity.

Having established that relational thinking forms the beating heart of northern cosmologies and worldviews, Herva and Lahelma then make the brilliantly original move of using the layered conceptual universe of the North to structure their exploration of the material evidence. The book is structured into a tripartite division of 'Land', 'Sea', and 'Sky', with individual chapters offering more contextual and thematic investigations within each of these three cosmic domains. This strategy is masterful, because it enables them to trace out specific relationships as they unfold over time, and then to loop back and forth to view the same themes from alternative perspectives, building layer-upon-layer of insight and understanding.

We journey first into the domain of 'Land', with the 'earthy' nature of this theme tending to focus most directly on material evidence, ensuring that some of the richest archaeological insights emerge here. Chapter 2 examines 'Stone Worlds', offering an in-depth account of human relations with the prehistoric materiality of northern landscapes. Often underappreciated in northern ethnographies is the fact that digging into the soil surface, marking or quarrying stone, or entering into or making deposits in caves and fissures is to connect with other worlds, opening scope for communication but also obligation and danger. This relational capacity is highlighted through exploration of the major rock art sites of Alta, Nämforsen, Vingen, Lake Onega, and others, including examination of their micro-topographies, and the significance of the acts of carving. The chapter also explores the cosmological significance of the region's narrow and twisting rock-crystal caves, which frequently bear traces of prehistoric visits and offerings. Also insightful is that these relational engagements with the land can be traced through to historic mining practices – exploiting the earth opened contacts with the deities of the underworld, who were able to travel through solid rock in the same way humans can walk through a forest. Most geological outcrops had 'keeper entities', which made mining into a form of social practice, involving

both material exploitation as well as reciprocal gifts and offerings to the powerful forces of the underworld.

Chapter 3, entitled 'Houses, Land and Soil', builds on these insights. Here we move back into prehistory again and focus on the material transformations that have been typically described as 'the pit house phenomenon'. While this was preceded by the first traces of digging and placing the dead into earthly resting places, the widespread construction of houses that were now being excavated directly into the materiality of the earth, combined with new uses of stone and clay, hints at deliberate manipulation of forests and landscapes, combined with intensification in scale and intensity of regional interactions, all suggest that a new constellation of relationships was taking shape. While the sum total of these developments has typically been classified by Finnish and Russian archaeologists as a unique kind of 'Northern Neolithization' (defined by the hunter-gatherer adoption of pottery, and without any transition to farming), Herva and Lahelma avoid such simple categories and focus instead on understanding the relational dimensions that underpin these phenomena, generating a much deeper and more original contextual understanding of these transformations. In particular, the sunken house pits appear to form the focus of offerings and earthly communication, perhaps expressing new cognitive relationships with the underworld and its inhabitants. Again, many of these practices appear to persist into historical times, and the chapter also draws on folklore and Finnish ethnography to examine the placement of concealed gifts and offerings in house floors and building foundations. Also fascinating in these later accounts, is that rural householders would first 'sleep with a place' before building a new homestead. Their nocturnal dreams would reveal the true character and potentials of a place, including the spirits and deities that dwelled there, whereas most of these relational dimensions were invisible in the bright light of day.

By Chapter 4 we are venturing into the classic ethnographic themes of 'Forests and Hunting', but even here, Herva and Lahelma nurture the potentials of a deeper relational approach, enabling them to offer stimulating accounts of the significance and social practice of prehistoric

moose hunting. Looking at the full constellation of material evidence, they argue that hunting involved a cosmic journey of dreaming, covert observation and stalking, followed by courtship and seduction, and then copulation, 'killing' and transformation. Almost all of these relational dimensions can be traced among the rock art scenes, but also in the use of moose headed staffs and other forms of material culture. Likewise, ancient relationships with the bear can also be reconstructed in vivid detail; these animals were probably hunted and consumed as acts of ritual communion, and the teeth retained, drilled and worn as a way of maintaining relational connections with the animals' capacities and life forces.

We then explore the cosmological significance of the realms of the 'Sea'. On a more general scale, this involves presenting the Baltic Sea as a kind of northern equivalent to the Mediterranean Sea, that has nurtured and sustained its own unique web of cultures and connections. Chapter 5 explores 'Coastal Landscapes and the Sea', and argues that rapid post-glacial uplift of the land, which resulted in the relentless receding of ancient coastlines, would have been noticeable even within prehistoric generations; Herva and Lahelma suggest that these shifting spatial relationships would probably have been understood in animistic terms. For example, the emergence of 'other-worldly' islands from the depths of the waters may explain why they were singled out for mortuary activities from prehistory through to recent times. In Chapter 6, we focus on 'Boats and Waterways', exploring how the moose-headed boats that are so frequently depicted in the rock art scenes also existed in reality, as evidenced by organic finds at Finnish peat bogs. In turn, the cosmic significance of boats as conveyors of the souls of the dead, is also explored, along with the use and significance of canoes in prehistoric and later burial practices. By Chapter 7 we have gained enough contextual understanding to appreciate the role of 'River Mouths and Central Places' in northern cultural landscapes, both real and imaged, for example, the fact that most of the major rock art complexes are situated at major aggregation points on the lower reaches of large salmon rivers, or at the meeting points of large riverine networks.

The final leg of our journey takes us into the celestial realms of the northern 'Sky', which

revisits many of the earlier themes and case-studies from yet set of another original angles. Chapter 8 on 'Birds and Cosmology' explores the role played by birds – and especially migratory waterbirds – in northern cosmologies. The ability of waterfowl to move between land, sky, and to live on, and dive into, rivers and waterbodies was taken to indicate special attributes, while their seasonal appearance and departure coincides with the passage of time and departure of the souls of the dead. Not surprisingly, we are presented with rich corpus of prehistoric and ethnographic evidence that points to the enduring relationship between waterbirds and the commemoration of death and departure. Moreover, the interactions between water birds and prehistoric human hunters involved use of bird bone flutes to imitate their calls, which appears to contrast significantly with the acts of seduction and symbolic intercourse that seems more typical of ancient moose hunting (see above).

In Chapter 9 we have reached 'Sun, Light and Fire', which explores the major seasonal paradoxes of the northern skies – the blinding and sleep-depriving effects of the endless midnight sun in the summer months, interspaced with permanent winter darkness, that is, in turn, illuminated by the familiar constellations of stars and the spectacular dancing performances of the northern lights. As we move onto the theme of fire and transformation, there is more archaeological evidence to suggest that creation and nurturing of household fire was about rebuilding the cosmos, and that significantly, many of the prehistoric pit houses may have been symbolically closed down and burnt to end this cycle of obligation and mutual respect. Likewise, the manipulation and firing of clay may also have served to reflect a deeper meditation on the world and its endless cycles of transformation.

The short Epilogue adds some final reflections on this northern 'World Full of Life', and takes wider stock of the rich interpretive prospects offered by application of relational ontologies and epistemologies. The final sections argue that there are clearly multiple parallels and connections between 'North and South', that is, between Fennoscandia and the Mediterranean World of Classical Antiquity. At this point, Herva and Lahelma make a final closing appeal to archaeologists to better appreciate

that Northern Europe has always been in active dialogue with regions further to the south, and that Fennoscandia should no longer be regarded as having been remote and isolated periphery. Given that by this stage in the book, our minds are overflowing with a profound appreciation of the myriad relationships that lie at the heart of northern life-worlds, this point feels tangential and somewhat distracting. It could probably have fitted better in the opening pages of the book, and served alongside the shortcomings of Cartesian thinking as another useful point of departure into our northern adventure.

On balance, this book is a bold and inspiring attempt to write deeper interpretive archaeologies using new theoretical approaches, and it succeeds extremely well. The secret of this success may lie in the fact that the theoretical engagements with relational thinking are deployed as an effective guide, rather than becoming an end in themselves. The main chapters are primarily enlivened by a keen sense of ethnographically-informed insight and understanding, and this awareness also shapes the core thematic structure. Clearly, this monograph has grown, developed and matured over years of sustained dialogue between the two authors. In fact, this joint authorship is yet another unusual feature of this book, with most monographs an output of years of solitary personal research. It is perhaps fitting that this smooth and tightly-integrated exploration of relational cosmologies is itself the product of a creative "relational" engagement between two original thinkers who clearly have their own ideas and understandings of the material, yet combine them into a persuasive and illuminating analysis that offers something truly new. To conclude, Northern Archaeology and Cosmology: A Relational Approach makes a refreshing and fundamentally important contribution to the research literature, and is destined to become a modern classic.

Peter Jordan  
Arctic Centre, Groningen Institute of  
Archaeology, University of Groningen, The  
Netherlands  
p.d.jordan@rug.nl