

# Something Old, Something New: Excursions into Finnish Sacrificial Cairns<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article approaches the archaeological phenomenon known in Finland as ‘sacrificial cairns’ by examining the scholarly history and by placing these cairns in the context of the recent theoretical discussion concerning the essence of ritual and secular in prehistoric societies. ‘Sacrificial cairns’ are traditionally considered to have been Iron-Age altar-like constructions for the worship of various supernatural powers. This view started to develop already in writings on the Finnish ‘ancient religion’ (Fi. *muinaisusko*), and was made explicit in antiquarian and then archaeological scholarship. The grounds for identifying sacrificial cairns were sometimes very slight, but they nevertheless influenced future research. Later, secular perspectives were added to ritual ones. I argue that the scholarly tradition and the consequent archaeological attributes of sacrificial cairns are an over-simplification, and that there is thus reason to re-examine the old interpretations. Although the existence of prehistoric cairns as places of sacrifice is implied by the ethnographic record, the same evidence also suggests that the relationship between cairns with sacral and secular functions is far less straightforward than has previously been thought. Following the recent discussion, some of the cairns traditionally identified as sacrificial might perhaps better be defined as structured depositions, possibly resulting from practices in which the ritual and the secular were inseparable.

Keywords: *cairns, ethnographic analogies, folk religion, Iron Age, rituals, sacrifice*

Cairns and other stone monuments have excited both common people and antiquarians throughout history, and many, most imaginary uses have been suggested for these ancient constructions. Interpretations have followed their respective zeitgeist: the time around the beginning of the nineteenth century, for example, was especially ripe for gruesome fantasies and chilling descriptions of ancient sacrifices and other bloody rituals performed by stone monuments (Burl 1999, 140–141; see also 37). In addition, a lack of

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field evidence easily led to mere speculation about possible non-sepulchral religious functions of ancient monuments, an approach which was criticised early on. The British scholar Major M. J. Walhouse (1878, 21) remarked already in 1878:

The Druids were seen everywhere; [...] cromlechs were held to be the 'altars' on which they celebrated their bloody rites; while any chance marks on their surfaces were channels to drain off the blood of victims, and holes or chinks in the slabs were magical openings, through which auguries were drawn from their dying groans and cries.

Finland has no megalithic monuments, but a similar perception of prehistoric sites can nevertheless be seen at the dawn of Finnish scientific archaeology – although on a more modest scale – when a function was assigned to the recently surveyed stone constructions.<sup>2</sup> As a result, some of them were thought to have worked as non-sepulchral sacrificial places.

One of the aims of this article is to examine and discuss the traditional concept of the *sacrificial cairn* as it appears in the light of scholarly history. This history has had continuous implications for modern interpretations of cairns of prehistoric origin. The scholarly history of the subject is neither always explicit nor straightforward, but it is nevertheless crucial in understanding both the concept and its usage. It is also essential to illuminate the underlying traditional premises of the concept, as they involve some considerable oversimplifications with regard to the cairns' original function.

In addition, I suggest a focus on ethnographic material for a more comprehensive understanding of sacrificial cairns and of the functions of cairns in general. The proposed approach is seen as particularly useful in the current situation, where the interpretation of archaeological sites is moving beyond a mere ritual-secular dichotomy. This opposition is where sacrificial cairns are traditionally situated: they are regarded either as places of worship or as the remains of purely pragmatic activity. I argue that although some of the cairns which archaeologists have categorised as sacrificial may be better regarded as structured depositions, the ethnographic evidence suggests that some prehistoric cairns are in fact former sacrificial sites.

### Sources for a Reconstruction of Finnish Iron Age Belief-Systems

Finnish Iron Age belief-systems, unlike Norse ones, in practice fall entirely outside the scope of written sources. Research must thus operate primarily

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2 The terms *Finland* and *Finnish* are used throughout this article in connection with prehistory as well as modern times; in such cases they refer neither to nation nor to nationality, but are used simply to refer to the geographical area equivalent to modern Finland.

within the sphere of archaeology, ethnographic material and toponymy. Because of the nature of these sources, it is hard to extend interpretations beyond general observations. Although we can be relatively certain of some of the elements of Finnish Iron Age belief-systems – for example the importance of ancestors – considerable further research is required to reconstruct prehistoric religious praxis on a more detailed level. The present article constitutes such an attempt, proceeding from a highly detailed point of view; it is this that accounts for the length of the text. The subject, that of sacrificial cairns, is one that has certainly received insufficient attention. These monuments, however, are of extreme importance to the study of Finnish Iron Age belief-systems; they are one of the few archaeological sources, outside mortuary practices, for investigating rituals.

### **A Definition of Sacrificial Cairns**

Sacrificial cairns, as their name suggests, are thought to have functioned as sacrificial places. This presumed sacrificial nature, however, is often left unexplained. Sacrificial cairns are traditionally defined in Finnish archaeology by their unusual or carefully built structure, or – more importantly – by the nature of the finds. Unburnt animal bones and teeth, pottery shards, burnt clay and iron slag are usually mentioned as signs of sacrificial cairns, but the distribution of the finds is also considered to be of importance (Kivikoski 1955, 165; 1961, 255–6; 1966, 49–50; 1969, 47; Salmio 1982, 192; Muhonen 2008, 19, 181). The main criterion, however, is the absence of (cremated) human bones and metal artefacts related to burials; to quote Jouko Voionmaa (1953, 60–2), the cairns are ‘empty’.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, these features are used to distinguish sacrificial cairns from graves.<sup>4</sup> (The latter may also include sacrifices [for the deceased], but they are perceived primarily as burials.) Another traditional attribute of sacrificial cairns is the presence of remains of animal bones, which are taken to imply sacrificial rituals (cf. Edgren 1968, 41). Further, since these cairns are commonly found in cemeteries, the vicinity of graves is apparently taken as a further indication of their cultic function.

With regard to their geographic and temporal distribution, sacrificial cairns are considered to be found commonly in the Kokemäenjoki River

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3 There have, however, been some exceptions, where the presence of metal artefacts has not prevented interpretation as a sacrificial cairn (see e.g. Leppäaho 1939; Honka-Hallila 1984, 33; Saksala 1985, 46–7; 1998, 73).

4 In current research this criterion has not been crucial (see Raike & Seppälä 2005, 65). Early scholarship also offers an exception: Theodor Schvindt (1893, 59–60, 191), and subsequently A. M. Tallgren (1917, 99) interpreted a stone construction found at Tontinmäki, Räisälä (in Karelia) as a sacrificial site despite the presence of human bones. In both cases, however, the role of human remains is ambiguous, as human sacrifices are not mentioned explicitly.

area and the Southern Häme lake region (Kivikoski 1969, 47), and are dated mainly to the Iron Age (ca 500 BCE–1200 CE) in the Common Era (Salo, U. 1989, 16). Some cairns interpreted as sacrificial places have also been investigated in Karelia (see Saksa 1985, 46–7; 1998, 72–3). It is worth noting that sacrificial cairns are traditionally thought to exist primarily or exclusively in the Iron Age area of permanent agricultural settlement (i.e. southern Finland; see e.g. Carpelan 2007, 19), although this point has not been made explicit.

This traditional view of sacrificial cairns entails numerous uncertainties. First of all, their temporal distribution is far from unproblematic, as they have been dated mainly on typological and contextual grounds. In many cases the only finds that allow typological dating are pottery shards, belonging to the general category of Iron Age coarse ceramics. This type of ceramics can be dated only roughly to the Iron Age, or, according to Johanna Enqvist (2005, 98), to between 600–1000 CE. The production of such or very similar pottery, however, continued into the Middle Ages (ca 1200–1550 CE) (e.g. Salo, U. 1989, 18 with reference; Taavitsainen 1990a, 127, 223). Some sacrificial cairns may thus date to a later period than previously thought, especially since the identification of ceramics has been subjective and the terminology involved can easily lead to misunderstandings (see Enqvist 2005, 98–101). In contextual dating, on the other hand, it is assumed that sacrificial cairns found in cemeteries must originate from the same period as the graves. In my opinion this should not be taken for granted. The dating of sacrificial cairns thus remains far from precise.

### *Definitional Remarks*

Before proceeding to scholarly history, some definitional clarifications are needed. *Sacrificial cairn* is a problematic and subjective term, as it carries ritual connotations. Instead of being interpretational, it should be seen as a purely classificatory term constructed by the needs of comparative archaeology. It is for this reason that it is used in this article in quotation marks. ‘Sacrificial cairn’ thus refers to a stone structure containing archaeological material such as unburnt animal bones and teeth, pieces of pottery, burnt clay and iron slag – as in the traditional definition. Here, however, the term is used solely in a non-explanatory sense.

Two exceptions to this principle, however, are necessary. Since earlier views of sacrificial sites only later developed into the above-mentioned archaeological class of ‘sacrificial cairn’, I use the term without quotation marks

in connection with scholarly history; here it refers to the whole concept of cairns as sacrificial sites, and its evolution. The second exception involves my own interpretations, which are partly based on ethnographic records. In this case, the term is in fact explanatory.

### Scholarly History

The concept of the *sacrificial cairn* evolved within Finnish archaeology to explain certain anomalies in cairns, above all the observed or presumed absence of the dead. Mentions of sacrificial cairns occur widely in Finnish archaeological scholarship and research, although the subject remains to be thoroughly analysed. The best known article on the subject was undoubtedly that published in *Suomen Museo* in 1970, when Jaakko Sarkamo defined one of the cairns at the Retulansaari Iron Age site as a sacrificial one (Sarkamo 1970). Sarkamo subsequently reinterpreted the same cairn as the remains of mainly secular activity (Sarkamo 1984), but his previous conception of its function has persisted. Sarkamo's article probably contributed greatly to the popularity of such interpretations (see e.g. Mäntylä 1976, 65; Huurre 1995, 208–10; Raike & Seppälä 2005, 65–6), although the conception of cairns as places of worship was not new in Finnish archaeology in the 1970s. A similar interpretation had been presented five years before Sarkamo by Anna-Liisa Hirviluoto (1965, 3–4), who was convinced that a cairn she excavated at Janakkala was what remained of an Iron Age sacrificial place. Twelve years earlier, Jouko Voionmaa (1953, 61–3) had suggested a similar function for certain cairns at Rapola, Sääksmäki. Both Hirviluoto and Voionmaa were to a certain extent influenced by earlier work on the subject by Ella Kivikoski, who in turn cited Jorma Leppäaho's excavation report on cairns at Kyyhkylä, Mikkeli (see Leppäaho 1939; Kivikoski 1949, 1950). Kivikoski and Leppäaho had also suggested explanations in terms of sacrificial activities. The original roots of such interpretations, however, are to be found in yet earlier research.<sup>5</sup>

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5 This chain of influence begins with Leppäaho's conclusion that there were no human remains in cairn I at Kyyhkylä. This was probably one of the reasons why he was convinced that the cairn was not a grave but rather a '*sacrificial cairn*'. Leppäaho's views seems to have affected those of Kivikoski and in turn those of Hirviluoto. However, new osteological analysis confirms that cairn I at Kyyhkylä could have been a grave, as a small amount of burnt human bone was identified (Kati Salo, personal communication). This example indicates the burden of earlier conclusions regarding sacrificial cairns, but the story does not end here. Although cairn I at Kyyhkylä can be considered as a grave rather than a sacrificial cairn (cf. Taavitsainen 1992, 8 and references therein), Kivikoski and Hirviluoto could still have been right in their interpretations. Kivikoski's view is discussed in this article under the heading 'Triangle of stone' (see also Muhonen 2008, 151–7).

*The Concept Takes Shape*

The problem in tracing the origins of the concept of *sacrificial cairn* is that early investigations usually operated without precise or indeed any references as to prehistoric beliefs. What we are most interested in here is the construction of an accurate chain of scholarly inference (i.e. which ideas affected a particular investigator's interpretation of a site), but this is impossible for the same reason. However, as what we are talking about is the birth of scientific archaeology in Finland, there were not very many scholars or forums for publishing. It can therefore be presumed with reasonable probability that investigators were well acquainted with the publications of their own time, and we can use the dating of publications to build an ascending chain of scholarly inference. The result is a general description, which also draws on the academic tendencies of the time. The charting of Finnish 'ancient religion' did not take place in a vacuum, but occurred as an interplay between several disciplines (Muhonen 2008, 23, 36). The search must thus be extended beyond archaeology.

The idea of cairns as places where prehistoric sacrifices were carried out was formulated already at the dawn of Finnish scientific archaeology, but allusive suggestions already occur in earlier writings. Israel Reinius, Assistant Vicar at Laihia, Ostrobothnia, had excavated some cairns in the region; in 1733, he concluded that one great heap of stones had undoubtedly been a sacrificial place in ancient times (Aspelin 1871, 83). It is not clear, however, how Reinius reached this conclusion, and whether he was describing a sacrificial cairn or a grave. He may have interpreted the cairn as a grave, as he already knew that these existed (Äyräpää 1935, 288) and therefore referred for example to offerings for the dead.

The famous Eräpyhä, a promontory located in the narrows between Längelmävesi and Pappilanselkä, Orivesi, was certainly more influential in the evolution of the concept. Eräpyhä has commonly been considered a sacrificial place, and is still sometimes referred to as such (see e.g. Käkikoski 1908, 211; Suvanto 1949, 166–7; Tuominen 1977, 128–9; Hiukka 1981, 11; Raitio *et al.* 2003, 197; *Juupajoen, Längelmäen ja Oriveden luontokohdeselvitys* 2004, 117; Kovalainen & Seppo 2006, 47; for a different interpretation, however see Vilkuna K. 1950; 1964, 183–6). Today there is only one cairn on the cape, but at least in the mid-nineteenth century there were two (see Kivalo 1907, 859, 862; Salmo 1965; Suni 1977, 9; Pukkila 2003, 68–9). Eräpyhä is mentioned by several scholars who were trying to account for the Finnish 'ancient religion' (Fi. *muinaisusko*). In the eighteenth century, these included Christian Erik Lencqvist in 1782 (1904, 120; cf. Porthan 1982, 53) and Christfrid Ganander

in 1789 (1995, 27). In the nineteenth century, we find Reinhold von Becker in the 1820s (*Turun Wiikko-Sanomat* 21/1820; Forsman 1896, 125–6, 132–3); Julius Krohn in 1869 and 1894 (1869, 28; 1894, 34); Elias Lönnrot in 1874 (1874, 77); and Väinö Wallin (later Voionmaa) in 1894 (Wallin 1894a, 231).<sup>6</sup> Some sources mention only the promontory as a sacrificial place, but this nevertheless impressed its mark on the cairn as well. It is probable and in some cases obvious that Eräpyhä as a sacrificial site (e.g. Heikel, A. 1882, 97; Aspelin 1885, 94; Kivalo 1907), and earlier writings in general (e.g. Aspelin 1871, 83–8), were very familiar to such nineteenth-century antiquarians and archaeologists as H. A. Reinholm and J. R. Aspelin. At some level, this probably affected their subsequent interpretations of sacrificial cairns. As closer scrutiny reveals that there is no credible evidence of sacrifices at Eräpyhä (Muhonen, forthcoming), the promontory must be regarded as a poor starting place for Finnish archaeology. It should, however, be noted that in the lack of material evidence the cairn of Eräpyhä was also more or less associated with grave cairns (see e.g. Heikel, A. 1879b; Aspelin 1885, 49; Kivalo 1907, 863; cf. Heikel, A. 1882, 97).

When we seek the earliest written reference to Eräpyhä, the path leads back from Lencqvist and Ganander to the 1750s (Muhonen, forthcoming). The earliest surviving document referring to Eräpyhä, by the clergyman Andreas Salovius is from the year 1753 (Lehtonen 2006, 226). To quote Salovius' *Beskrifning öfwer Orihwesi Församling* (Description of Orivesi parish):

They [the Finns] are said to have carried out idolatrous acts on a cape of rock extending into the great Längelmävesi, where a ring heaped of stones still exists. The place is called Eräpyhä, which means a place separated as a sanctuary. (Lehtonen 2006, 306, my translation.)

What Salovius recorded was nothing more than a legend, familiar to local people among other stories of Eräpyhä. The place-name itself has also led interpretations astray. First of all, the existence of a legend like this is not peculiar, as similar narratives are numerous (see e.g. Maukonen 1879, 30; Pelkonen 1902, 283; Riukuniemi 1911, 195). Some of them may even them-

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<sup>6</sup> Eräpyhä seems to have even taken on the status of a representative though unofficial Finnish heathen sacrificial place, and was described as such to the general public in the newspapers (see *Dagens Nyheter* 78/1878; *Hämäläinen* 66/1892). Anton Wilhelm Lindgren, Finnish publisher and editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Hämäläinen*, took a step further, describing the cairn as a sacrificial site in fictitious and highly imaginative terms (see *Porin Kaupungin Sanomia* 39–50/1861; Lindgren 1863). He wasn't the only one (see *Aamulehti* 36/1888).

selves be the products of folklorism.<sup>7</sup> Although folk-tales and legends can indeed transmit truthful elements about (pre)history (see e.g. Äyräpää 1935; Liestøl 1939, 50–1), their course of transmission may be extremely complex (see e.g. Muhonen 2008, 37–40 with notes). Folk-tales alone thus cannot be considered convincing with regard to ‘ancient sacrifices’, especially in any particular place. Early writers nevertheless assigned them historical value (see e.g. Tallgren 1918, 150–1; Niemi 1922, 33). Furthermore, the first written reference to Eräpyhä seems eventually to have been forgotten: the legend had become scientific truth.

The Eräpyhä cairn should rather be connected with inland grave cairns, the *Lapp cairns* (Fi. *lapinrauniot*). First of all, it was located in a milieu typical of these cairns (see e.g. Vilkuna, J. 1993, 50; Salo, U. 2000, 57; Lähdesmäki & Palokoski 2005, 146, 150). The toponym with *pyhä* (‘sacred’) seems to strengthen this interpretation, as it is possible that the place-name and the Lapp cairns are spatially connected (Taavitsainen 2003, 13). In any case, *pyhä* in this case referred to a territorial boundary and as such also marked the zone between the inside and the outside. The place-name *Eräpyhä* can therefore be best understood as a marker for an ownership boundary, having little to do with the ‘sacred’ in a present-day Christian sense (Anttonen 1996, 108–16; 2003, 229, 232). It was therefore misleading for early scholarship, as was the parallel drawn by Lencqvist between the Eräpyhä cairn and the megalithic circles of Britain, such as Stonehenge (see Lencqvist 1904, 169).<sup>8</sup> By this means, eighteenth and nineteenth century romantic visions of ancient rites comparable to druidical sacrifices at stone monuments were also introduced into Finnish scholarship. This bold and above all unrealistic analogy must have contributed to the interpretations favouring sacrificial cairns.

The Eräpyhä cairn could have been assembled in prehistory. Likewise investigations in the 1850s and onwards suggested that sacrifices had taken

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7 Journalism reporting the latest antiquarian and archaeological work was extensive already in the 19th century. For example J. R. Aspelin’s ideas about ancient stone constructions as heathen sacrificial places found their way widely into the provincial press (see *Ahti* 31/1878; *Keski-Suomi* 80/1878; *Pohjois-Suomi* 81/1878; *Päijänne* 79/1878; *Suomalainen Wirallinen Lehti* 117/1878; *Uusi Suometar* 116/1878).

8 To make things more complicated, Eräpyhä could have been a sacrificial place, but for a different reason. According to old Finnish folk custom, boundaries have been treated with religious reverence, and sacrifices have sometimes been brought to them (Okkonen 2003, 40 with references). The same connection between boundaries and sacrificial sites may also occur in Lapland (Viinanen 2007). This alternative, however, cannot be proven, as the Eräpyhä cairn never had a chance to be excavated properly – it has been plundered several times, for example by treasure-hunters in 1864 (Mäkinen 1967, 144; Sinisalo 1990, 38; see also Heikel, A. 1882, 97; Nisula 1978, 8–9).



place at certain prehistoric sites, including at the cairns. Noteworthy names in this connection include C. A. Gottlund, J. W. Calamnius and J. R. Aspelin (see Calamnius 1868, 218; Aspelin 1871, 94, 103), but most views prior to the 1870s have to be considered as dilettante speculation.<sup>9</sup> The investigations by H. A. Reinholm proved to be important for the future: he was among the first to distinguish between grave cairns and cairns as places of (non-sepulchral) sacrifices (see Reinholm 1871; *Helsingfors Dagblad* 272/1871; *Suomalainen Wirallinen Lehti* 120/1871; *Åbo Underrättelser* 157/1871; Koskinen 1874, 133; Hjelt 1882, 372, note). The 1870s also saw another, even more important and certainly more explicit formulation of the idea of sacrificial cairns. Johan Reinhold Aspelin, the ‘father of Finnish archaeology’, excavated a couple of cairns in the famous pre-Christian cemetery of Päivääniemi in Lempäälä, interpreting one of them as a sacrificial place (Figure 1). What is interesting in Aspelin’s explanation is that he connects this cairn with sacrifices for the dead:

I could only conjecture that it [the cairn] was an altar, where sacrifices were burnt for the dead. This peculiar altar was filled with clay to the ground, and ash and coal was also found. No artefacts, however, were found, even after a thorough search. (Aspelin 1879a, my translation; cf. D. E. D. Europaeus’ [1873, 201] interpretation of burned offerings and grave mounds in Russia; Aspelin 1875, 310–2, see also 229, 266, 284.)

This ‘altar’ had been heaped up right next to a grave cairn. What we have here is one of the first archaeological interpretations of a distinct sacrificial cairn. The reasons for Aspelin’s interpretation are obscure; among the most plausible are earlier archaeological investigations and views of stone constructions as sacrificial sites, ethnographic information about sacrifices, the influence of foreign scholarship, and the vicinity of a grave cairn (see Aspelin

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9 See also the article by Reinhold von Becker in *Turun Wiikko-Sanommat* 21/1820; cf. *Helsingfors Tidningar* 79/1849. J. W. Calamnius suggested this kind of interpretation for *Metelinkirkko* (‘Giants’ Church’) (cf. Murman 1865, 13–4), which, however, is more than a simple round cairn. J. R. Aspelin (1878, 1879b) agreed with Calamnius, and thought that these circular stone embankments could have been heathen sanctuaries. It is important to observe that Aspelin used his knowledge of Mordvin folk religion and sacrificial places in making this assumption (see Aspelin 1873, 183–5). These places were called *keremet*. They were sometimes fenced areas but not cairns; the only thing resembling one was the offering pit sealed with stone slabs (see Aspelin 1873; Harva 1942, 189–205; see also Heikel, A. 1894a). For more information on scholarly history and for a recent discussion of the Giants’ Churches, see e.g. Forss 1991, 1996; Okkonen 2003, especially 131–3, 187–98, 219–26, 238; Ridderstad & Okkonen 2009.

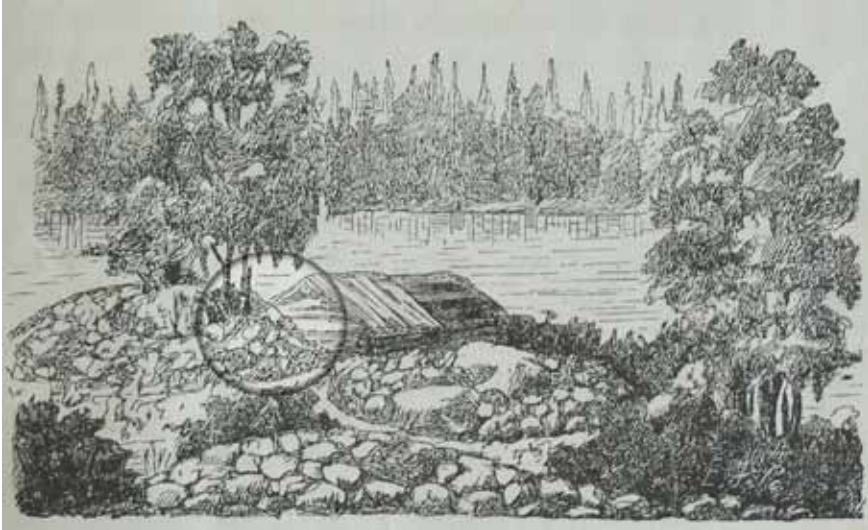


Figure 1. Grave cairns in Päivääniemi, Lempäälä. Judged from Aspelin's (1879a) description and map of the cemetery (see Salmo 1952, 123, note 319, 124; see also Heikel, A. 1894b, 162), the small cairn or 'sacrificial altar' which he excavated is behind the cairn on the left (in the middle of the highlighted circle). Published in Heikel, A. 1882, picture 8.

1885, 48 for a similar interpretation based on the proximity of archaeological remains). This interpretation presumably contributed for example to Henrik Johannes Heikel's explanations concerning the Päivääniemi cairns he excavated following Aspelin's investigations in the area (see Heikel, H. 1896; 1899, 7–8; see also Heikel, A. 1882, 6–10; Lähdesmäki & Palokoski 2005, 82 for a later comparable interpretation). Heikel was in any case familiar with Aspelin's results, and he also backed up his conclusion with ethnographic material and foreign scholarship. He comments that what his excavations revealed were probably not graves, but 'places around which our heathen forefathers concentrated their religious ceremonies' (my translation). This suggestion was familiar to Jouko Voionmaa, who tried to determine a function for the puzzling cairns at Rapola, Sääksmäki, almost sixty years after Heikel's investigations in Päivääniemi (see Voionmaa 1953, 62, note 2). Voionmaa's publication turned out to be one of the most influential works regarding sacrificial cairns.

Aspelin's and Heikel's conclusions can be compared with the view of Juhana Lehtinen (1883, 117), although the latter was scientifically far less solid. Lehtinen's comments on a cairn at Ikaalinen were nevertheless written with considerable confidence. It is worth noting that he based his interpretation only on seeing the cairn; it was not excavated:

Although it [the cairn] has shifted and has perhaps been partly dismantled in the course of time, there seems to have been a higher structure cobbled together in the middle. Thus it can be supposed with full reason that it has been a sacred altar, a sacrificial place in heathen times (my translation).

These examples cannot be separated from their wider context. By the beginning of the twentieth century, three major categories of Scandinavian sites had been defined: settlements, burials and offering sites (Berggren 2006, 303). A similar categorisation can also be seen in the Finnish archaeology of the time. The number of applicable categories was small, and almost anything could be called 'sacrificial'. Contemporary scholarship regarding the 'ancient religion' of the Finns undoubtedly also influenced the views of cairns without burials, in that sacrifice was perceived as having formed an integral part of this religion. In particular sacrifices to the ancestors were seen as important; influential names in this connection include M. A. Castrén and Julius Krohn (see Castrén 1853, 123–5, 174; Krohn 1869, 2–3, 21–2, 24, 26–30). It is interesting to note that Aspelin was quite cautious in his earlier interpretations about the cairns he had excavated in Ostrobothnia: he pointed out that the meaning of the animal bones found in one of the cairns had to be reevaluated later, although he speculated about such functions as grave goods and meals eaten at the time of the burial (see Aspelin 1871, 132, 145). Fourteen years later Aspelin stood on much firmer ground, concluding that sacrifices were a part of the Finns' 'ancient religion' and that cemeteries were possible places where sacrifices took place (see Aspelin 1885, 48, 70, 91–6).<sup>10</sup>

The concept of sacrifice as a part of Finns' 'ancient religion' was by no means new in nineteenth-century scholarship; in fact, it can be traced back at least to the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>11</sup> As the leading authority in early Finnish archaeology (see e.g. Nordman 1968, 20–38), Aspelin's conclusion was nevertheless important in conferring verification, approval

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10 According to Otto Donner (1874, 51), it was occasionally assumed that the ancient Finns did not sacrifice. Donner refers to Aspelin, who had a different opinion and suggested that the verb *palvella* ('to worship') could have meant 'to sacrifice' (see Aspelin 1873, 250, note).

11 Sacrifices for the dead (as part of Finns' folk religion deriving from pre-Christian times) was mentioned already in 1551 by Mikael Agricola (see e.g. Setälä *et al.* 1930, 109), who was fighting against the old beliefs, whether heathen or Catholic. Agricola's aims, however, were theological rather than historical (Anttonen 2007, 162, 164, 170). In a historical sense, sacrifices were depicted for example by Johannes Messenius in the 1620s (see Lönnroth & Linna 2004, 31), by Daniel Juslenius (1929, 78–9) in 1700 and by Henrik Gabriel Porthan (1982, 165, notes 67–8) at the end of the 18th century.

and acceptance of the concept of sacrifice in the scientific archaeological discussion in Finland. And, as cairns proved to be crucial with regard to one aspect of prehistoric religion – as final resting places for the deceased, sometimes even more (see e.g. Heikel, A. 1879a) – it is easy to understand why they were thought to have functioned as places for non-sepulchral religious activities as well. What is involved here is the derivation of function on a morphological basis: cairns became an acceptable context for ancient sacrifices. This is not surprising, considering that other commonplace remains – such as stony pits – might also be considered as either graves or heathen sacrificial sites (see Heikel, A. 1882, 12). Folk legends of ancient sacrifices could also have affected scientific interpretations, not just of Eräpyhä but of sacrificial cairns in general. The latter is harder to prove; nevertheless, folk legends (including those referring to sacrifices) were sometimes considered to be of value for archaeology (see e.g. Wallin 1894b, 1; see also Heikel, A. 1882, 55–8).

To conclude, the late nineteenth century saw two influential advances in scientific archaeology at a national level: 1) the embedding of the concept of sacrifice as an integral part of Finnish ‘prehistoric religion’, and 2) the introduction of the idea of the sacrificial cairn.<sup>12</sup> As a significant explanatory model, the second of these entailed the first as a verified premise. By the end of the nineteenth century, the former unscientific and hesitant idea of the sacrificial cairn was thus archaeologically plausible.<sup>13</sup> It seems, however, to have taken several decades before the concept became widely applied.

### Ritual vs. Rubbish

Scholarly interpretations favouring prehistoric sacrifices, as we have seen, have a long history in Finland. When we look at archaeology alone, a strongly polarized trend emerges: material has been perceived as remnants either of purely pragmatic actions or of ritual practices. A widespread archaeological debate as to whether artefacts have been cached or sacrificed is also evident in Finland (see e.g. Tallgren 1931, 171–6, 198, 215, 219; Leppäaho 1949, 44,

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12 It should be pointed out that although the perceived function of these cairns corresponds to what is now called *sacrificial cairn*, they were not literally called by this name. Early investigations were nonetheless a prerequisite for later work on the subject.

13 As certain non-sepulchral cairns were so keenly interpreted as sacrificial places, they came to be known in Finnish archaeology primarily as sacrificial cairns, not by a term pointing to some other function. This paved the way for later interpretations and probably resulted in searching for more sacrificial cairns on sometimes scanty grounds. It can also be suggested that interpreting something as *sacrificial* is more intriguing and exciting than considering it for example as a pile of household waste.

68, 73, 84–6; Salmo 1952, 79, 128, 147, 179, 212, 231, 234–5; Kivikoski 1961, 43, 46, 54, 89, 97, 100, 119, 132–3, 137, 179–80, 186, 211–3, 261, 279–83; Salo, U. 1984, 143, 154, 162–3, 174–5, 177, 191, 197, 238, 242; Huurre 1995, 67, 89, 107, 114, 120, 122–3, 209), and it is not surprising that interpretations of certain features have followed the same ritual-secular dichotomy.

Joanna Brück (1999) has demonstrated the way in which ritual and non-ritual practices are implicitly defined in archaeology as mutually exclusive categories. It is thus no wonder that archaeological interpretations have often oscillated between the extremes of ritual and secular (see Bradley 2005, 3–40). ‘Sacrificial cairns’ are an exemplar of features interpreted in this bipolar manner (cf. Thedéen 2004, 44–5 for a similar situation in Sweden). Retrospectively, this is expressed by Ella Kivikoski (1961, 255–6): ‘Odd sites which are difficult to account for are often interpreted as sacrificial. [...] One explanation may of course be that it is simply a question of refuse heaps [...]’ (my translation). In addition to the two alternatives of sacrificial sites or the remains of refuse heaps, these cairns have also been viewed for example as the foundations of houses, temporary smithies, manufacturing places for pottery, and cairns related to cultivation (see Kivikoski 1966, 50; Edgren 1968, 41–2; Huurre 1972, 65–6; Hirviluoto 1977, 9; Sarasmo 1984, 2; Sarkamo 1984; Salo, U. 1989, 16; Pohjakallio 1994, 109–15; Muhonen 2008, 176, 181; for discussion on identification, see Taavitsainen 1992; Muhonen 2008, 171–5).<sup>14</sup> There are a number of reasons for a pragmatic interpretation. The Finnish Iron Age farmstead formed a compact unit of dwelling, cemetery and field; it is thus plausible to suggest that as land was taken under cultivation, piles of stones accumulated near all of them. Since the patches of land in question were already unusable for anything else, it would have been natural to dump household waste in the same places.<sup>15</sup> Cairns could

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14 ‘Sacrificial cairns’ have also been viewed for example as inhumations (see Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984, 268). According to this view, the absence of the dead is explained by the fact that unburnt bones are poorly preserved in the Finnish acidic soil. However, this is not the most plausible explanation; unburnt skeletal evidence has been found in some Iron Age cairns, and a closer examination of some ‘sacrificial cairns’ has revealed no inner structures which could relate to inhumations (Muhonen 2008, 177). The same viewpoint is also presented by Ella Kivikoski (1950, 11; 1961, 255). Presumed inhumations should therefore be considered doubtful, especially considering that archaeologists have a tendency to overemphasize the cairns’ function as graves (Okkonen 2003, 31).

15 ‘Sacrificial cairns’ are a recurring phenomenon in Iron Age cemeteries. Even if the material in such cairns is seen purely as waste, finding these cairns in or near cemeteries would not in itself be strange; our modern way of keeping trash and the dead spatially separated should not be projected onto the past (see Lundqvist 1991, 55–6; Unto Salo has even suggested that cremated human bone was considered purely as waste and placed in refuse mounds [Salo, U. 2004a, 206–7, but see also Raninen 2005, 55; Muhonen 2008, 110–1]).

have functioned as refuse heaps, from which organic material was later dispersed over the field. There is also another practical aspect to consider: burying organic waste under stones would have been a convenient way to prevent attracting scavengers. All in all, it is hard to believe in the total absence of prehistoric refuse heaps – although they may not have been seen as refuse according to present-day standards.

Materials belonging to the domestic sphere of life, when found in graves, have often been regarded as magical or symbolic. Here the interpretational point of reference for such material is provided by context – although perhaps we should not take this context as self-evident; without defining a grave, we are by default referring to our own cultural conception of what a grave is, and projecting it into the past. The situation is very different, however, when domestic materials are found for example in dwelling sites. This leads to a secular interpretation, since domestic life and ritual are seen as mutually exclusive (Bradley 2005). Interpreting ‘sacrificial cairns’ – like many other archaeological features – has been difficult precisely because the material in them is what can be expected to be found in settlements (= mundane surroundings), while the more immediate context (cairns resembling graves, sometimes occurring in cemeteries) has pointed towards a ritual explanation.

Without a new perspective, then, ‘sacrificial cairns’ would seem to have reached an interpretational dead end. Luckily this is not the case: one interesting view is offered by the recent debate. The archaeological material in ‘sacrificial cairns’ may be comparable to some of the finds in features nowadays increasingly interpreted as structured or ritual depositions. Such a practice – the structured arrangement of buried objects – can be seen throughout the later prehistory of Europe (Pollard 2001, 315). Structured depositions sometimes involve objects that can be considered as waste, but they are found in such places as boundary ditches, postholes or pits, suggesting their intentional selection and placement. Structured or ritual deposition (or other analogous concept; see e.g. Brudenell & Cooper 2008, 15–6) is a much more general category than sacrifice, and its interpretative potential has therefore been highlighted (see Berggren 2006). ‘Sacrifice’ and ‘offering’ are narrowly defined; without the availability of a more general category, much otherwise ritually deposited material is thus easily excluded. Indeed, there are major problems in identifying sacrifices if the definition of such practice is taken seriously. But it is also important to note that Finnish ‘sacrificial cairns’ are easily totally stripped of their ritual connotations if they are not seen as sacrificial. There is perhaps no need to do so.

'Sacrificial cairns' could possibly better be termed 'structured depositions', as they are often found within cemeteries and their general appearance resembles a typical Finnish Iron Age grave form, the cairn. But is this morphological equivalence misleading? I have questioned whether perhaps certain cairns are too easily seen as sacrificial precisely because of this (Muhonen 2008, 105). It is characteristic of structured deposits that the depositional practices involved appear to defy functional explanation (Brück 1999, 328). In the case of Finnish 'sacrificial cairns', such an explanation is not impossible; the archaeological material in them can be considered as waste, and it has sometimes been deposited arbitrarily. Clarification of this question would necessitate analysis of the spatial data of finds for a large number of 'sacrificial cairns', but such attempts have so far been rare. In addition, in earlier Finnish excavations the spatially precise data of such materials as burnt clay, pottery and slag have seldom been recorded. Nevertheless it is important to review the phenomena of structured depositions by deconstructing an old mode of thought, the ritual-secular dichotomy, for it may be impossible to understand some of the 'sacrificial cairns' without reconsidering definitions of ritual and rationality.

#### *Deconstructing the Ritual-secular Dichotomy*

Defining ritual has proved to be extremely problematic, for both anthropologists and archaeologists. It is often emphasized that rituals share certain properties which differentiate them from other types of human action, but it is not agreed what those properties are. Some scholars view rituals entirely as religious, others allow more latitude in this matter, some argue for a loose definition (e.g. Kyriakidis 2007a). The salient point is that ritual is understood as opposed to that which is secular, practical and functional. Ritual acts do not seem to 'do' anything in terms of modern western logic, and have therefore been considered symbolic.<sup>16</sup> This division is the outcome of post-Enlightenment scientific thought. In archaeological interpretations, ritual is thus identified by default when sites or artefacts cannot be explained

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16 An example from Finnish folk religion can perhaps illustrate this. In Finland, stones are known to have functioned as sacrificial objects in cairns for example to secure luck in fishing (see Harva 1932, 472-3; Vilkkuna, K. 1965, 97). While we find the custom of sacrificing rocks irrational, there is no need to question the firm sense of logic behind it. In terms of causality, those who deposited the rocks in cairns undoubtedly felt entirely sensible in doing so. To quote Brück (1999, 326), 'what modern western observers might label "irrational" ritual activity in fact constitutes a perfectly logical and practical way of dealing with the world given a particular understanding of how the universe works'.

in terms of the present-day functionalist domain (Brück 1999; see also Bradley 2005, 20). It is therefore important to keep in mind that in referring to such concepts as ritual and practical in an archaeological framework, we are talking about our own world view. This is not a universally applicable mode of thought: there are societies where the ritual and the secular are not comprehended as distinct opposites (Brück 1999, 326). I strongly agree with the argument by Sonja Hukantaival (2007, 70), that Finnish rural society (as represented above all in the ethnographic records of the nineteenth and early twentieth century) was one such society, and that ethnographic analogies drawn from it might therefore open up new possibilities in interpreting such archaeological phenomena as 'sacrificial cairns'. In addition, as the following ethnographic analogies show, perceptions of value can sometimes seem inconceivable in terms of present-day rationale. These circumstances have far-reaching corollaries, one of the most important being that from our viewpoint ritual depositions can too easily be perceived as waste or may in fact exist in a non-ritual context of 'rubbish'. I suggest that the main problem is not in demarcating sacrificial cairns from refuse heaps, but in our reluctance to abandon contemporary Western conceptions and our obsession for clear-cut classifications not applicable to the past. In the recent discussion, the sacral-secular dichotomy is seen as particularly problematic, and an approach aiming at a holistic interpretation is therefore seen as appropriate (see e.g. Brück 1999; Jennbert 2002, 105, 114–15, 119; Andrén 2002, 331–2; Insoll 2004; Bradley 2005; Berggren 2006, 304; Renfrew 2007).

There are ample ethnographic examples warning us not to perceive ritual and mundane items or contexts in a strictly bipolar manner. At first glance, certain material finds are easy to regard as waste or otherwise valueless (cf. e.g. Brück 1999, 332; Ersgård 2002, 294). For example slag and burnt clay – one of the most common materials in 'sacrificial cairns' – is sometimes considered as entirely trash or as a mere by-product. This assumption, however, is too categorical; these materials have had ritual meaning among the Finnish folk, and slag has in fact been sacrificed (see Paulaharju 1910, 325–6; Rantasalo 1933a, 162, 164, 365; 1933b, 855, 952, 1024, 1086–7; 1934, 1455, 1464; Häyhä 1983, 26–7; for a discussion of the meaning of slag, see Ikäheimo 1988, 77; Burström 1990; Taavitsainen 1992, 7–8; Shepherd 1997; Anttonen 2002b, 133). Following this analogy, Western views of refuse should not be projected onto the past (cf. e.g. Thedéen 2004, 151) and considering certain cairns as definitely piles of rubbish may be just as biased as seeing sacrificial cairns everywhere. However, it should be taken into account that some of the materials interpreted as waste could also have ended up in cairns



by later depositional processes, which were not ritual by our standards (cf. Brudenell & Cooper 2008). One such process is the cleaning up of trash from a previous period of a dwelling site, but this itself may have involved formalised procedures undertaken in renewing or abandoning a dwelling site (cf. Brück 1999, 333–5; Pollard 2001, 323).

It has been pointed out that ritual items can be found in mundane contexts and mundane items in ritual contexts (e.g. Kyriakidis 2007b, 18). Examples are found in Finnish folk religion. For example, the skull of a cow was placed at the bottom of a refuse heap to promote luck with cattle (Rantasalo 1933b, 939, 941, 957); when the *kekri* (a traditional Finnish festival, with both pre-Christian and Catholic elements) was celebrated, dust swept from the floor was taken to the sheep pen evidently for the same reason (Paulaharju 1922, 180). Animal bones were placed in refuse heaps in prehistoric Scandinavia too, in a manner indicating something more than ordinary waste (Jennbert 2002, 109). Another example is the Mordvin custom of sacrificing to the deceased: sacrifices were sometimes placed in a refuse heap, where trash from the deceased's house and from the memorial feast was deposited and which formed the dwelling-place of a supernatural being. Sacrifices were probably also carried to places close to the Mordvin cemeteries, where artefacts polluted by the dead were deposited (see Harva 1942, 35–6, 44–5, 72–3).

It is in fact possible that the material we perceive as waste in the 'sacrificial cairns' had something to do with the deceased or with the funeral process. According to Finnish custom, artefacts polluted by the dead were taken to cairns, and some of them were burned (Vilkuna, K. 1965, 88–9; see also Pelkonen 1902, 221; Paulaharju 1922, 274; for burnt and otherwise deliberately damaged objects in prehistoric cairns, see Karvonen 1998). These cairns and 'sacrificial cairns' have been equated in terms of their general traits (see Okkonen 2003, 39); even if such a conception existed in the Iron Age, however, burning contaminated artifacts separately in the context of cremation burial is another question. These artifacts could have become scorched with the deceased, although this is a matter of practice.

All these points suggest that the cairns traditionally defined as sacrificial in Finnish archaeology are perhaps neither such nor are they refuse heaps. Whether they can be regarded as structured depositions requires more in-depth investigation. Joanna Brück (1999, 332) has pointed out that what we define as refuse may have functioned in marking out significant places, and 'sacrificial cairns' could also have resulted from this kind of practice. The material in these cairns is from the domestic domain and it is tempting to

see them as special, since there seem to be so many points of convergence between the contents of prehistoric rituals and domestic life (Bradley 2005). It nevertheless seems that some of the 'sacrificial cairns' indeed are the type of archaeological evidence which, to quote Brück (1999, 316), 'all too rarely fits the neat categories ritual-secular constructed by archaeologists'.

If the presumption of 'sacrificial cairns' as structured depositions is correct, a few corrections to their essence need to be made. First of all, these monuments probably were not differentiated ritual places in terms of the Iron Age worldview. They certainly were rational in terms of the perception of causality. And, most importantly, sacrificial objects could easily have been associated with what we call refuse, even if the latter itself was not expressly sacrificed. It is entirely possible that what from our point of view are separate functional and ritual aspects were completely intertwined in the 'sacrificial cairns', and that it is artificial to try to distinguish them. The practices that produced such structured depositions as 'sacrificial cairns' can then best be understood and referred to as formal behaviour: performance, *ritualisation* (see Bradley 2005, 33–4, 209), albeit their precise content and meaning still has to be identified individually. Although this is probably difficult to demonstrate, what we might call 'rituals of religious nature' (i.e. actions in which beliefs in supernatural powers were expressed) were perhaps not involved in the formation of 'sacrificial cairns' at all, or were only one part of a wide range of activities involved in their origin (cf. Andrén *et al.* 2006, 13). If the presumption of structured depositions is correct, what was meaningful was the formal nature of the actions, which were carried out following their performers' worldview. These actions were thus repetitive, and observable patterns in the archaeological record may be expected (cf. Bradley 2005, 208–9; Kyriakidis 2007b, 9; Marcus 2007, 45–6).

#### *Interpretative Tradition in Sweden and Estonia*

The Finnish 'sacrificial cairns' to a certain extent resemble the Swedish *skärrostenshögar*, heaps of fire-cracked stones. Although the latter were constructed (mainly) in the Bronze Age (see Thedéen 2004, 142–3), i.e. earlier than the Finnish 'sacrificial cairns', this similarity has not gone unnoticed (e.g. Voionmaa 1953, 63; Kivikoski 1950, 11; Hirviluoto 1977, 9; Salmio 1982, 192–3; Uino 1986, 170). It is not surprising that the debate over the cairns' ritual and practical functions has also formed part of the Swedish archaeological debate, as these monuments are considered problematic on the other side of the Gulf of Bothnia as well. The *skärrostenshögar* are interpreted for

example as the remains of buildings or sacred meals, graves, bronze casting or cremation sites, boundary marks, refuse heaps and/or sacrificial cairns; they have also been connected with sacrificial cairns known from Icelandic sources and from Swedish folk religion. The point is also stressed that the *skärrostenshögar* may have involved considerable symbolic value, in that they represented the home and were centrally placed focal points in the human mental world. In addition, the *skärrostenshögar* are perceived as multifaceted and multifunctional constructions, and it is noted that they may belong to a category which transcends our present conceptions (e.g. Nylén 1958, 33–4; Hyenstrand 1968, 73–6; Jensen 1986, 19–20; Lundqvist 1990; 1991, 55–7; Kaliff 1994; 1997, 57–62, 73–5, 102–5; Connelid *et al.* 2003, 186–7; Thedéen 2004, especially 12–3, 41–56, 82–4, 142–64, 190–5; see also Jennbert 2002, 110; Bradley 2005, 106–7, 207).

The Swedish interpretative tradition is thus more nuanced, but the same ritual-secular dichotomy has characterized both the Finnish and the Swedish debate. The situation in Estonia is different. Although cairns resembling the Finnish ‘sacrificial cairns’ and the Swedish *skärrostenshögar* are found in Estonia as well, they have been interpreted in Estonian archeological scholarship as ‘clearance cairns’ for the reception of refuse; they have never been viewed as sacrificial cairns (Valter Lang and Heiki Valk, personal communication; see also Uino 1986, 171). This is particularly interesting in that potential ethnographic source analogies occur in Estonian folk religion. More importantly, however, the archaeological discussion relating to a certain type of cairns has relied heavily on previous national interpretation models, on a certain scholarly tradition. This tradition is a double-edged sword: it provides useful concepts to work with, but also easily blurs our vision to see what has not previously been suggested. And, as in the Finnish scholarly tradition, it can spur archaeologists to emphatically identify cairns where only sacrifices were involved – something that could be too simple to be true.

### **Folk Religion and Cairns as Sacrificial Places**

In the following sections, I address the issue of cairns as sacrificial places from an ethnographic point of view. I argue that while some of the ‘sacrificial cairns’ may be remnants of much more diversified practices (i.e. formalised behaviour) than has previously been thought, there are probably also some cairns that were used exclusively for the purpose of sacrifice.

Nineteenth-century Finnish archaeological scholarship seems to have shown surprisingly little interest in harnessing folk religion as an ethno-

graphic source analogy in investigating sacrificial cairns. On the other hand, early archaeology was primarily concerned with issues on a grander scale; cairns other than graves were of secondary interest. As a result, notions of prehistoric sacrificial cairns were based on miscellaneous source material of varying reliability, or – in the worst case – on virtually nothing.

The real existence of sacrificial cairns has been much debated, and the scholarly history suggests the strong influence of chain of inference ultimately based on modest evidence. In addition, ‘sacrificial cairns’ could have been structured depositions rather than precisely sacrificial in function. Should the concept of the sacrificial cairn, then, be abandoned? Briefly, the answer is no, as I show below; a complete change of course would leave a great deal of potential source material unanalyzed. In identifying sacrificial cairns, the starting point lies in archaeological observations. But they cannot be dealt with in the manner for example of Reinholm and Aspelin. Following in the footsteps of H. A. Heikel and suggesting that we examine ethnographic material is a good place to start; but it is unnecessary and inappropriate to lean, as he did, only on an isolated analogy from distant region. (For a discussion of the function of ‘sacrificial cairns’ based on an ethnographic approach, see also e.g. Uino 1997, 49; Okkonen 2003, 39.)

#### *Problems with Ethnographic Analogies*

It is crucially important to be aware of the uncertainties that arise when ethnographic analogies are brought into play. Their value as establishing direct parallels between present and past has been much debated, and has received considerable healthy criticism. What is emphasized is that the true potential of ethnography is in widening our interpretative horizons beyond the here and now. Ethnography also helps us to realize the existence of a complexity which is absent in the mere material form (see e.g. Parker Pearson 2003, 44; Insoll 2004, 114–6; Fogelin 2007, 29–31). The drawbacks of ethnographic analogies have to do in particular with assumptions of unchanged cultural continuity, and with the search for parallels across completely different geographical areas and great periods of time. The situation is different, however, when cultural continuity can be established, and this applies to religion as well (cf. Salmon 2000, 397; Demarrais 2005, 143).

There are also other drawbacks to ethnographic analogies. One of the most problematic is what I would call an *ostensible match*. Briefly, this refers to a complex situation, in which various elements picked from ethnographic records are patched together into a source analogy and a one-to-one parallel

from the archaeological record seems to be found. This provides an almost irresistibly convenient analogy to work with. Of course, it may be correct. But when we recognize that only a small portion of later folk customs are recorded, that the process of working with them is probably highly selective, and that the nature of these customs and beliefs is (and has been) constantly changing, caution is needed in identifying 'perfect matches' between source and target. The elements in ethnographic source analogies should thus be seen as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle which can be put together in many alternative ways, each producing a contextually and semantically coherent and logic picture (Figure 2).

There are of course different kinds of ethnographic analogies: phenomena and their details are two different things. Phenomena can be seen as large building blocks, while the details form their surface patterns. While the surface is constantly changing, the blocks itself are generally transformed or cease to exist at a slower pace. Ethnographic analogies are thus more justifiable when they are used to produce end images of low resolution. The custom of sacrificing in cairns is considered here as a single block, but the precise content of this practice has morphed through time. In the next section, the analogy is therefore established on a general level, exploring the probability of the overall existence of Iron Age sacrificial cairns.

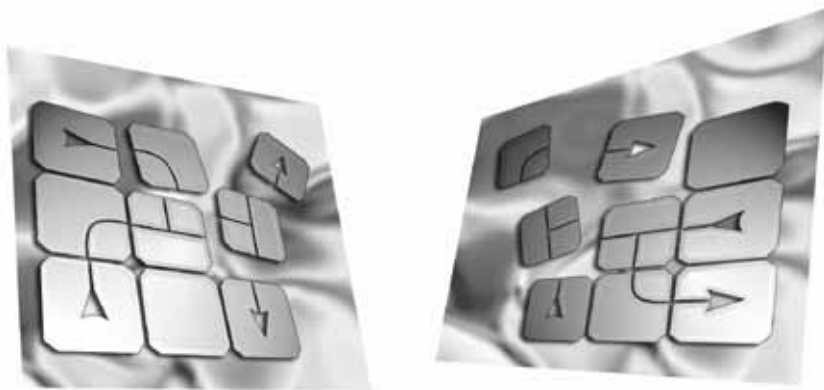


Figure 2. Two different but in itself logically coherent pictures patched from the same pieces. Each piece represents one element in an ethnographic source analogy.

*The Analogy*

Material phenomena are inseparable from their wider context. In the case of Finnish sacrificial cairns, the source and target frameworks to be taken into account are shown in Table 1.

According to Markus Hiekkänen (2007, 12–5; cf. e.g. Korpela 2000, 34), one of the decisive factors in the change of religion was the organized and intensive missionary work carried out starting in the eleventh century, perhaps even slightly earlier. The next two centuries can be termed ‘semi-heathenry’ (see Taavitsainen 2000, 27) but at the threshold of Middle Ages (ca 1200–1550 CE), it is obvious that Finns were familiar with the key elements of Christianity. Many heathen customs and belief survived the change of religion, albeit in more or less changed form. Sacrifice was a concept embedded in the Catholic faith as well; although the customs and the sacrificial objects were different, the approval of the basic idea by the Church furthered the preservation of traditional sacrificial practices. Catholicism disapproved above all of the most flagrant elements in folk religion (e.g. burial customs) but other old practices had more room to breathe. Private cult (in households, gardens and forests) developed on the basis of both heathen and Catholic

Culture historical framework		
	source	target
time frame	from 1600s to 1800s	Iron Age (ca. 500 BCE–1200 CE)
geographic area	Finland and Karelia	Finland and Karelia
religious context	Christianity, folk religion	Iron Age belief-system

Phenomenon	
source component	target component
cairns used as sacrificial places	cairns used as sacrificial places

Table 1. Components of analogy within the corresponding temporal, geographic and religious contexts. Folk religion can be defined as set of beliefs which is preserved by oral tradition and customs. It exists alongside world religions based on written tradition (e.g. Siikala 1985, 305). Folk religion is uninstitutionalised, as was religious life of the Finnish Iron Age (see e.g. Korpela 2000, 33–4; Anttonen 2002a, 52; Salo, U. 2004a, 523). The latter has to be named for operational purposes, and the term used here is Iron Age belief-systems which can be described as family-centered, incoherent and oriented in preserving folk groups here and now (cf. Steinsland 2005, 31–3). Instead of one set of beliefs, the term refers to many uninstitutionalised views and practices. In addition, the term should not be comprehended as a distinct sphere of life. This categorization and the following discussion uses many terms with criticized connotations (see Jennbert 2002, 108; Insoll 2004, 8–9) but they are not to be seen here in neo-evolutionary sense or in a clear-cut manner.

beliefs and continued as folk religion. Only the advent of the Reformation marked a more rigid attitude towards private cult, including sacrifices, but in the most remote rural areas in Finland they nevertheless flourished for centuries to come. The clergy noted the custom of sacrificing money in the churches; food was still sacrificed under holy trees or beside rocks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see e.g. Harva 1933, 208–11; Haavio 1951; Juva 1958, 152; Hautala 1960, 1965; Berndtson 1965, 553; Laasonen 1967, 261–2; Varjola 1980; Sarvas 1982, 46–7; 1999, 103; Siikala 1985, 340; Hiekkanen 1988, 51–2, 65; Talve 1990, 271; Sarmela 1994, 33; Virrankoski 2001, 79–80, 120–1, 163).

This, briefly, is the overall historical framework which forms the basis for source analogy regarding sacrificial cairns, and in which cultural continuity from the Iron Age until historical times is of particular importance. A survey of the Finnish ethnographic and historical literature shows that cairns have indeed been part of Finnish folk religion, and that sacrifices of varying form were carried out for varying reasons: foodstuff, coins, spirits and rocks were sacrificed to promote luck with cattle, to a gain good catch, or to help with a journey (Muhonen 2008, 71, 74–5, 77, 85–8). Meat was among the sacrificed materials, as demonstrated by an example from Pälkjärvi, Karelia. A man was accused of ‘serving the devil’ by carrying beer and spirits to a cairn standing at the edge of his field. It was also reported that he had taken a piece of meat from a slaughtered animal there every time (Kuujo 1963, 192). The devil of course had nothing to do with this custom: the accusation was made in 1690, i.e. at a time when folk customs and beliefs were still eagerly associated with witchcraft. Although blood is not mentioned in this or other Finnish records describing the sacrifice of meat, a cautious link can be drawn between these cairns and certain Scandinavian pre-Christian *harg* (see e.g. Steinsland 2005, 284).<sup>17</sup> A similar custom has also been recorded in Heinola (ca 135 km northeast of Helsinki), where the farmwife carried meat among other foodstuffs to a cairn located in the middle of the field. These sacrifices were meant to promote luck with cattle, and bones were found in the cairn as remains of this activity (Marjakorpi 1910, 59). No direct parallels can be presumed between these cairns and the one on the island of Vaygach (Figure 3), but it is nevertheless interesting to hear what the polar explorer Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld (1881, 77–80) has to say about the latter:

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17 Sacrificing blood in cairn, however, is a practice recorded in Estonia (see Selirand 1989, 168). It is also noteworthy that according to Finnish folk belief, blood could have been dropped in cairns in a sacrifice-like manner (see Rantasalo 1933a, 187).

Our Russian host told that the Samoyeds [i.e. Nenets] traveled far to sacrifice and to swear vows in these places. They eat the meat of the sacrificial animals; the bones are dispersed on the sacrificial mound and the gods [small blocks or larger stakes of wood carved at the upper end to resemble human faces] are smeared with the blood of the sacrificed animals. [...] the sacrificial mound was a cairn a couple of square meters in size, standing on a separate rise in the ground. In between the stones were deer skulls, smashed to extract the brains but with the horns still on the frontal bones; [...] deer skulls with impaled frontal bones, placed on stakes and erected on the mound. [...] A group of other deer bones, [...] Bear bones, among them paws and the half-skinned head of a bear so recently shot that the meat had not yet decayed; [...] A group of pieces of iron, broken axes, worn pots, old knives, a metal part of a broken harmonica etc. and finally those mighty beings [the above-mentioned pieces of wood], to whom all this was sacrificed. (My translation)

This description gives rise to a few general remarks. First, the only objects with a distinct liturgical meaning (for us) were the wooden sticks – the ‘gods’. Under normal conditions, these would not be preserved from the

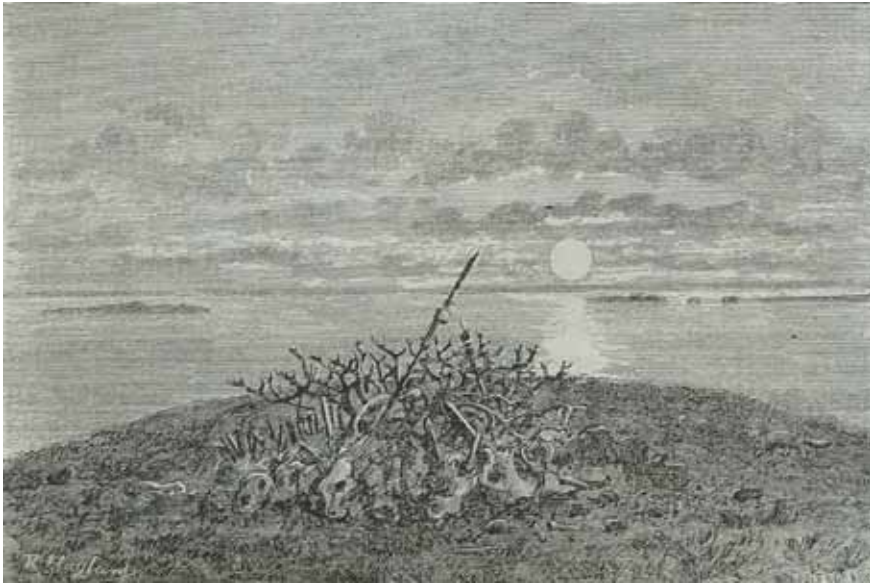


Figure 3. Sacrificial mound on the island of Vaygach, south of Novaya Zemlya. Drawing by A. Hovgaard. Published in Nordenskiöld 1881, 78.



Iron Age until today. On the other hand, a sacrificial place does not have to have included such objects at all, as Anders Kaliff (1997, 60) points out regarding pre-Christian Scandinavian sacrifices. He also notes that sacrifices like foodstuff and drink do not necessarily leave clearly observable traces (cf. e.g. Marcus 2007, 47). This kind of perishable material is also suggested by Finnish ethnographic records; as organic material (including unburnt bone) survives poorly in acidic Finnish soils, there is a strong possibility that there are prehistoric sacrificial cairns totally devoid of finds or with perhaps only pottery shards (cf. Jennbert 2002, 113). Archaeological recognition of these cairns may be impossible, but that does not imply that all sacrificial cairns lie beyond the methods of archaeology.

Explicit motives behind Finnish cairn sacrifices are scarce, but they can nevertheless be seen to correspond to other sacrifices from the historical period (see Anttalainen 1994, 111–2): the function of cairn sacrifices was to promote people's livelihood and to ensure their safety. As such they fit the definition by Hans-Egil Hauge (modified after Åke Hultkrantz):

In a sacrifice is embodied an action which is intended by overhanding [sic] an object to one or more supernatural beings to establish a good relation between man and the supernatural beings upon whose will he is dependent (Hauge 1965, 130).

Definitional aspect is of course of primary importance if we want to be accurate; in Finnish archaeology, definitions of sacrifice have not been of overriding concern. The terms 'sacrifice', 'offering' and even something as vague as 'sacrificial offering' (Fi. *uhrianti*) are frequently used, but their content is too often left ambiguous. The definitions of 'sacrifice' and 'offering' are varied, but I use the two terms as equivalent; they may refer to either animate beings or inanimate objects (regardless of their attributes) which are given to supernatural recipients to establish or consolidate the link between humans and supernatural beings (see e.g. Levinson 2004, 379; Henninger 2005, 7997–8001). The aspect of reciprocity between humans and supernatural beings is also of importance (cf. Green 2002, 20, 22, 24). Specific supernatural beings – beings whose existence is not based on rational evidence and who are believed to be to a certain extent more powerful than humans (Enges 2003, note 1) – are not often mentioned in connection with sacrificial cairns, but it is not too bold to consider elves (Fi. *haltijat*) to have been the most common recipient of sacrifices. Mountain trolls (Fi. *vuoripeikot*) are mentioned explicitly, but sacrifices could also have been made to the

dead who were buried in cairns or were thought to lie there (Muhonen 2008, 77–82, 95–8). However, as the interrelationship between supernatural beings and sacrificial customs are complex and chronologically layered, more research is needed to reconstruct the full picture of this multidimensional element in folk religion and its relation with Iron Age belief-systems.

Certain sacrificial places – such as rocks, trees and groves – known in folk religion have their roots firmly in prehistory. As it is hard to find convincing grounds why cairns as sacrificial places might have developed entirely only after Christianization, it is no exaggeration to seek their origin in prehistory as well. Certain kinds of sacrificial cairns are also known for example in Lapland, Scandinavia and Estonia (see Krohn 1894, 31, 76; Holmberg 1915, 25; Olrik & Ellekilde 1926–1951, 487–9; Hagberg 1937, 512–21; Haavio 1942, 452; Koski 1967, 50ff; Selirand 1989, 168; Vorren 1985; Vorren & Eriksen 1993; Steinsland 2005, 257; Wennstedt Edvinger & Broadbent 2006; see also Karjalainen 2007), although they are varied and probably represent multiple traditions. It would be plausible to consider some of them as part of an old and widespread cultural phenomenon, which it indeed seems to be (see e.g. Walhouse 1878; Barton 1908; Sierksma 1963) – an aspect not possible to discuss further here.

The ethnographic analogy outlined here is presumably valid in general terms; this, however, is only the first step in an interpretative process where archaeological observations play a crucial role in order to avoid intuitive classifications (cf. e.g. Koivisto 2008, 39–41). Archaeology is a prerequisite in this matter also because sacrificial cairns recorded in ethnography should not be expected to correspond perfectly with prehistoric ideology. For example, animal bones found in Finnish ‘sacrificial cairns’ have their counterparts in historically recorded sacrificial cairns of the same geographic area; but – to quote Evangelos Kyriakidis (2007b, 16) – ‘it cannot be assumed that the constancy of the material evidence for the ritual practices necessarily reflects a continuity of the associated beliefs’. Later sacrificial customs regarding cairns are a combination of pre-Christian ideology and Catholic influence (Muhonen 2008, 95–100). Furthermore, sacrificing something to a cairn does not always stem from prehistory. One example comes from Kontio-Leppälahti, Karelia, where sacrifices such as milk was carried into cairns (Killinen 1890, 100, 106). The most obvious reason for this custom was the fact that there had formerly been a Russian chapel at the same place, and it was still considered to be holy ground – (former) Orthodox cemeteries are known to have been places of worship (e.g. Salenius 1910, 249; Saloheimo 1963, 121; see also Paulaharju 1909, 83).

*Revising the Function*

According to one view, Iron Age 'sacrificial cairns' were possible altars and their primary function was connected with the worship of the dead (Anttalainen 1994, 99). An 'altar' is defined as 'a raised structure on which sacrifices are offered to a deity' (Edsman 2005, 275), but in the light of ethnographic material this definition is too restrictive. Without becoming further entangled in semantics, this conceptual problem can be solved if an altar is instead perceived as a structure where sacrifices are offered to *supernatural beings*. In the Iron Age, the dead were undoubtedly of great importance – this has been even referred to as the cult of the dead (cf. e.g. Siikala 1985, 334–5; Sarmela 1994, 29, 59; Anttonen 2002a, 57); thus cairns may have been constructed, as has been proposed, for worshipping the dead in the cemeteries. The diversity of the ethnographic evidence, however, suggests that sacrificial cairns also existed outside cemeteries. Sacrifices could also have been performed to the elves for example on journeys or in the wilderness, to promote luck in fishing and hunting. One of the most important motives in recorded Finnish and Karelian folk religion relating to sacrifice was to promote the means of livelihood and to help coping with the natural environment (see e.g. Anttalainen 1994; Sarmela 1994, 46–51). The core means of livelihood – cultivation, animal husbandry, fishing and hunting – remained the same (although their proportional relevance fluctuated) in rural areas from the Iron Age down to the time when folk religion began to be recorded. The agrarian way of life surely required comparable supernatural assistance before the shift in religion as well, albeit the details of customs presumably differed. This gives sufficient grounds to suggest that Iron Age sacrificial cairns may have been one form of contact between people and supernatural beings with regard to securing success in gaining a livelihood.

Ethnographic records can also provide other useful perspectives. The sacrificial objects placed in cairns varied widely, and no high degree of congruence should thus be expected in the archaeological material either. There is no reason to believe that uninstitutionalised Iron Age belief-systems produced identical ritual places (cf. Andrén 2002, 309; Andrén *et al.* 2006, 13–4; see also Jennbert 2002, 114).

The meaning of the stones has received little attention in Finnish writings on sacrificial cairns; they are often seen simply as forming altar-like constructions. Indeed, one plausible function could have been to cover the sacrifices to prevent them from being eaten by animals, but there are also other possible alternatives. As a lasting material, stones could have been used to mark the sacred ground and make it visible. It could have also been important to

invest energy in creating sacrificial sites, and piling up stones is one way of doing so (Muhonen 2008, 169–70). It is furthermore interesting to note that such historically known sacrificial sites as trees are closely related to stones, and sacrificial trees known from Finnish historical sources sometimes grew on cairns (see e.g. Rossander 1910, 322; 1911, 264). This cannot be regarded entirely as a coincidence; the semiotic connection between stone structures and trees is also known from Iron Age Scandinavia: according to Anders Andrén (2004), the world-tree was represented in three-pointed stone settings which could also have had a physical connection with real trees. This tradition prevailed in ‘household trees’ (Sw. *vårdträd*), bearing numerous similarities to Finnish sacrificial trees known from historical times. The following description is therefore interesting; rather than a direct parallel, however, it should be seen as a possible example of a more complex belief-based meaning of the building material of sacrificial cairns.

While stones are known to have served as sacrificial objects in cairns, they have also been used in a different manner. In Karelia, when the cattle were let out of the barn in the spring the farmwife took three stones from a cemetery, an ant hill or from under a sacrificial tree.<sup>18</sup> The stones functioned as tokens, and were restored in the autumn when the cattle were returned to the barn for the winter. The stones were the property of the forest elf; by moving them, the safety of the cattle was ensured for the summer (*Uusi Suometar* 21/1878; 135/1878). The places from which the stones were taken were not arbitrary but carefully reasoned out – supernatural beings dwelt in cemeteries, in the vicinity of sacrificial trees and in ant hills; the last-mentioned were considered to be the home of the forest elf (see e.g. Harva 1948, 272, 287–8). As the stones of the sacrificial places were ‘charged’ with supernatural power, they could have also been used for other magical purposes (see Hämäläinen 2005, 107). From this perspective concrete prehistoric sacrificial sites may have been far from constant, and objects could have been removed from them as well as brought there.

### *Triangle of Stone*

There are many problems in identifying prehistoric sacrificial cairns, but the effort is nevertheless needed to avoid unnecessary skepticism and to keep the dialogue alive.

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18 The number three is a recurring element in Finnish folk magic, as elsewhere. It has been important – at least in recent centuries – to do something three times or to use three similar objects to accomplish something. One common variation was to do things based on the number nine (3 times 3), an important number known also from pre-Christian Scandinavian religion (see e.g. Andrén 2005, 121), or 27 (3 times 9).

I have looked at the scholarly and research history partly by pointing at flaws in argumentation, which in hindsight is relatively easy. But earlier views of sacrificial cairns also deserve credit where appropriate. Ella Kivikoski, whose work was referred to above in connection with the roots of the concept of the sacrificial cairn, was one of those scholars who found the concept plausible. She excavated three cairns in Tarhamäki, Urjala (some 125 km northwest of Helsinki) already in 1948, and considered the third of them as sacrificial. My views overlap with hers at certain points, but there are also other aspects to discuss.

The following description is based on the excavation report and an article by Kivikoski (1949; 1950). Tarhamäki is considered to be an Iron Age cemetery, but only the three cairns excavated by Kivikoski have been archaeologically investigated (Lähdesmäki & Palokoski 2005, 238). One is classified as a grave, but to my knowledge the burnt bone found within has not been identified osteologically. The second cairn was interpreted hesitantly as a grave, as it contained only a fragment of a polished bone artifact. The third cairn was of the shape of an irregular triangle and was located in an area bordered by a few large stones (Figure 4). There was an outer ring of larger stones, especially on the eastern and southern side of the cairn. The inner stones were laid irregularly, and the only inner structure observed by Kivikoski was a semi-oval construction resembling a hearth or cooking place. This interpretation seems possible, as coals, sooty earth and pottery shards were found inside the ring. There were also pieces of

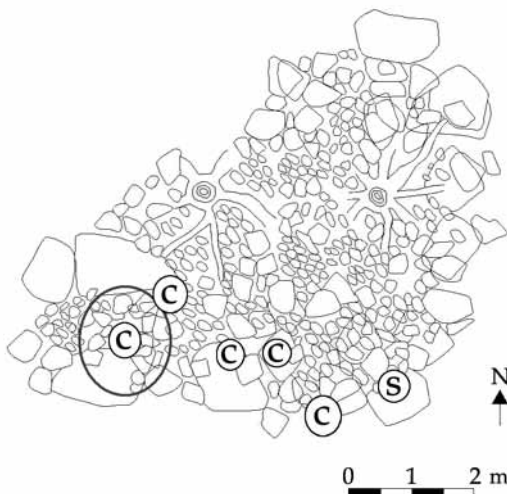


Figure 4. Cairn III in Tarhamäki, Urjala. Distribution of concentrations of ceramics are marked with 'c' and iron slag with 's' – neither all of the finds were, however, marked in the original map nor it is afterwards possible to place them in it (see Muhonen 2008, 152). Possible hearth or cooking place is seen in the middle of the large circle drawn in the southwestern part of the cairn. Drawn after Kivikoski (1949).

pottery elsewhere in the cairn, but these too were mainly concentrated in small clusters, often lying on top of large stones. According to Kivikoski, these were remains of pottery vessels which had broken where they stood. Besides pottery, only animal teeth and iron slag was found. The slag was mainly placed in a single location on top of a large stone, with a smaller stone placed there as a cover. Similar cover stones were also found on top of some of the concentrations of pottery.

Many observations point towards the careful deposition of objects. Although teeth (possibly equine) were found here and there, and some of the pottery was also found dispersed, all ceramics were discovered within the southern part of the cairn. There were thus clearly observable patterns of distribution. It is also interesting that the southern and the eastern axes of the cairn were aligned according to the cardinal points, namely east-west and north-south. The possible hearth is a further indication of the cairn's function, as is its deliberate form – albeit irregular. Kivikoski thought that sacrifices had possibly been brought there. According to her, pottery vessels could have been filled with fat or other food substances, while the slag was a gift given in connection with the making of iron.

In general, I agree with Kivikoski. Her interpretation, however, is limited to only some of the finds, while some of the others have alternative explanations. If the observation of a hearth is correct, something was cooked or burned in the cairn; is this an indication of sacrificial meals, or was it more about fire sacrifices – or both? It is interesting that no burnt objects were found in the cairn, not even bones. If fire sacrifices took place, then perhaps only something that leaves no archaeologically detectable traces was burnt. If meat was cooked and eaten, the teeth may have been the only part of the animal to survive, as unburnt bone decomposes rapidly in the Finnish acidic soils. Teeth may also result from a *pars pro toto* form of reasoning, whereby only skulls were brought to the cairn – if we recall the sacrificial mound of the Nenets, certain bones seemed to have formed a considerable part of the bone material found in it. At Tarhamäki, the sacrifices could also have been of highly selective nature. Following this alternative, a further explanation can be suggested: according to one conception, the vital force is concentrated in the outermost parts of the animal body – the hair, horns, teeth, cloven hooves and nails (Karsten 1952, 111). Sacrificing these body parts could have been considered even more appropriate than depositing an entire animal. In the case of slag sacrifices, parallels from Finnish ethnography, as we have seen, are known; it is perhaps worth noting that most of the pottery – the remains of sacrificial vessels – and the slag were deposited in similar care-

ful manner. But there is also another interesting point: slag was sometimes used in Finnish rural areas to prevent birds of prey from seizing the catch (Saraste 1939, 149). Rather than suggesting that the slag was not sacrificed but was used to prevent the sacrificed foodstuffs from being consumed by animals, I would see this analogy as a further indication of the many possible belief-based meanings of slag in the Iron Age.

For whom, then, was the cairn built? What were the supernatural beings to whom the sacrifices were brought? If the site is actually a cemetery, it could have been about sacrificing to ancestors. There are also other questions which have to remain unanswered for now: when was the cairn in use? (It has not been radiocarbon dated; the coarse pottery points roughly to the Iron Age and the beginning of the Middle Ages.) How long did it remain in use? How is it related chronologically to the other cairns in the area? These are important questions; the answers could teach us more about the beliefs of the community that built the cairns at Tarhamäki.

### **Bone as an Indicator of Function?**

The third cairn in Tarhamäki excavated by Kivikoski revealed no burnt bone, which she took as a further indication of its function as something other than a grave. Although Kivikoski's interpretation of the cairn is in itself plausible, this kind of reasoning is in my opinion deceptive. In the last section of this review of the problematic nature of 'sacrificial cairns', it is now in order to discuss some of their other traditional attributes – i.e. what is thought to betoken such a structure.

One significant criterion in identifying 'sacrificial cairns', as noted above, has been the presence of (presumed) animal bone. Briefly, the assumption that bones are a sign of sacrifice lacks sufficient source criticism, although it must also be acknowledged that animal remains do have potentially wide-ranging religious meaning (see Insoll 2004, 71–6). A thorough analysis of the material is needed, however, to determine whether or not it has in fact been sacrificed (e.g. Taavitsainen 1990b; Rydving & Kristoffersson 1994, 195, 208); this has usually not been the case in investigations of Finnish 'sacrificial cairns'.

Unanalyzed burnt bone is nowadays justifiably considered problematic with regard to site classification (e.g. Taavitsainen 1992, 8; Rähälä 1994, 79), but the traditional Finnish interpretation of 'sacrificial cairns' relied heavily on the mere presence or absence of burnt and unburnt bone. Such reasoning is easier to understand when we keep in mind that extensive osteological

analyses have been carried out in Finnish archaeology only in the last four decades, and that analyses of bone material from cremation cemeteries have been scanty (Formisto 1996, 81; Salo, K. 2005, 9–11; see also Wickholm & Raninen 2003, 3). The method for identifying burnt bone fragments was available for example in Sweden already in the late 1940s (see Lahtiperä 1970, 199), but it began to be used in Finland only in the 1970s. Cairns containing burnt bone were previously classified as graves because they often – though not always – also contained artifacts definable as grave goods.<sup>19</sup> This has been the case since the beginning of scientific archaeology in Finland. As a consequence of this traditional approach and the unavailability of methods, no osteological verification was necessarily required in order to identify a site as a grave cairn even after the 1970s, if it contained burnt bone and ‘grave goods’. This implies that any burnt bones, at least when numerous, would not be interpreted as relating to a sacrificial cairn (for exceptions, see Sarkamo 1970, 41; Raike 1988, 6; Nurminen 1990, 11; Pohjakallio 1992, 3; 1994, 114–5). When we keep in mind that sacrifice by burning has been part of Finnish folk religion (see e.g. Paulaharju 1914, 133; Rantasalo 1933b, 1103, 1211–2, 1216; Harva 1948, 345–6; Häyhä 1982, 152–3, 299–300), and that prehistoric Finnish worship can be tied linguistically with the burning and roasting of meat in sacrificial rituals (Anttonen 1992, 32–3 and cited literature; see also Salo, U. 2004a, 522) – it can be argued that the traditional archaeological standpoint is illusory. In conclusion, the old definitions are inadequate, and cairns previously classified without osteological analysis as graves or sacrificial places should not be taken at face value. Although the majority of the cairns previously defined as graves on the basis of burnt bone will probably on closer scrutiny prove indeed to be final resting places for the dead, there will always be exceptions (see Vormisto 1985, 155–62; for interpretation, see Salo, U. 2004b, 178, 192; Muhonen 2008, 127, 131, 181).

Another, more complex dilemma is arrived at if the possibility of finding human bone in ‘sacrificial cairns’ is added to the equation. Traditionally, ‘sacrificial cairns’ are thought to contain only animal bones, not human ones. On the other hand, given the generally held view with regard for example to Germanic Iron Age religion that human sacrifices were an intermittent

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19 The absence of metal artefacts is sometimes interpreted to indicate for example a grave from the Migration Period (see e.g. Salmo 1952, 80–2, 89–90, 92, 132). The amount of burnt bone has also been a criterion in assessing the function of cairns: if only a slight amount of burnt bone was found, the cairn could have been classified as sacrificial. This view is naturally potentially skewed; Finnish Iron Age grave cairns contain – for whatever reason(s) – usually far less bone than ‘there should be’. There are many examples where less than 30 grams of burnt human bone has been found (see Muhonen 2008, 160, note 234).



part of it (e.g. Patrick 2000, 50–1; Näsström 2002, 64, 254–5; Steinsland 2005, 301; see also Green 2002, 15, 201), might the same possibility not hold true of Finnish prehistory?<sup>20</sup> And given that sacrificial cairns have most probably been part of prehistoric cult in Finland, would it not be worth considering the potential for finding human remains in some of them? The question follows: if this suggestion is accepted, how can we distinguish actual sacrificial cairns from grave cairns? While human bodies or bones in peculiar contexts can easily be given alternative interpretations – for example as the remains not of sacrificed but of ritually killed persons (see e.g. Näsström 2002, 26, 48–52, 73), evil-doers or persons with abnormal physical and/or mental attributes – the situation is even more complex when we are dealing with a place where human bones are expected to be found as part of an ordinary burial. Cairns are an example of such a context.

As already noted, the distribution of finds can be a useful parameter in identifying ritual contexts. This also applies to graves and sacrificial depositions (Kivikoski 1961, 255–6; Rähälä 1994, 79; Muhonen 2008, 18–9 and the literature cited therein). Careful deposition is also implied by Finnish folk religion, according to which objects were sometimes laid down under sacrificial trees according to certain principles (see Rantasalo 1933a, 463, 469). When human bone is present, however, analyzing the distribution of finds will probably prove to be irrelevant: burials and sacrifices may both be actions where material is deposited in a purposeful way and producing similar distinct patterns of distribution. Do we then rely on the traditional interpretation, where the presence of metal artifacts is supposed to represent the deceased's belongings and/or burial goods and therefore signal a grave? Such reasoning is problematic, in that it underestimates the potential value of artifacts as sacrificial objects; a number of cairns lacking human bone but containing damaged objects can perhaps be classified as sacrificial (cf. Karvonen 1998, 9–10, 12). On the other hand, archaeologists have usually considered only metal artifacts to have been of high worth – an obviously ethnocentric view. This is potentially deceptive, as perceptions of value are culturally bound (cf. Green 2002, 25). In Finnish folk religion, for example, the value of a sacrificed object was in many cases less important; the main idea was simply to sacrifice (Anttalainen 1994, 111).

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20 Such a suggestion is by no means new, but it always faces strong resistance, due to our Western cultural conceptions of acceptable action and our notions of value. We should bear in mind that humans are not necessarily always more valuable than animals or inanimate objects. Furthermore, what we consider to be brutal and indeed inhuman may in another cultural framework constitute an extremely holy act (Green 1998, 170–1, 174–5; 2002, 15–6, 26).

The above comments are meant to stimulate discussion and to emphasize the need to add more dimensions to the oversimplified traditional view of the 'sacrificial cairn'. It is evident that with regard to human sacrifice and alternative interpretations, material remnants alone are usually ambiguous and offer only a varying degree of different alternatives, nothing more. Archaeologists' caution in interpreting finds as a sign of human sacrifice is therefore justified (Green 1998, 174); overestimating its occurrence is just as misleading for the reconstruction of the past as is its categorical denial. *Sine ira et studio.*

### Conclusions and Future Prospects

'Sacrificial cairns' are best understood as logical part of scholarly history. The development of the concept was anchored in the birth of scientific archaeology in Finland, although it drew influences from the antiquarianism and scholarship concerning the 'ancient religion' (Fi. *muinaisusko*) of the Finns which had a vigorous role in the nineteenth century. The concept of the sacrificial cairn was refined in archaeology, and new meanings were assigned to it. The foundation for interpreting such monuments was sometimes very weak, but the idea of the sacrificial cairn was persistent. The sacrificial nature of the cairns was a product of the nineteenth century; mundane interpretations were brought into the discussion in the twentieth century when excavations led to new discoveries. This led to uncertainty, resulting in the establishment of sacrificial cairns as part of a general archaeological ritual-secular dichotomy. This period was characterized by interpretations oscillating between the ritual and the secular.

Earlier scholarship is still influential: due to the interpretative tradition and the unavailability of methods, many elements in sacrificial cairns were easily taken for granted and some of these ideas have persisted. One of the greatest assumptions concerns bone material from earlier excavations. This is where the equation 'burnt bone = human = grave :: unburnt bone = animal, sacrificial cairn/refuse heap' is essentially problematic. Human remains do not necessarily mark graves, and it cannot be assumed that burnt bone is human-related by default. Moving beyond the old interpretations requires extensive osteological analysis, spatially precise field data, radiocarbon datings, and above all the systematic comparison of 'sacrificial cairns'.

The ritual-secular dichotomy can be seen as the greatest encumbrance of earlier scholarship. The current theoretical approach, where this dichotomy has been dismantled, may be making it obsolete with regard to 'sacrificial

cairns' as well. The plausible interpretation of 'sacrificial cairns' is enhanced by seeing them potentially as structured depositions: the material in these cairns may be the result of a variety of formal practices, performed according to a worldview which is alien to us. This is also implied by ethnographic records, which can be used to broaden the present-day and thus restricted way of looking at things. At least some of the 'sacrificial cairns' could have been constructions made to mark out significant places, where objects related to the dead were taken and/or where old dwellings were given a treatment analogous to human remains. We might call these actions ritual, but by prehistoric standards they were entirely rational and practical. Sacrifices are just one possibility in a wide spectrum of such practices. But a reversal in interpretational polarity is not needed even if 'sacrificial cairns' were not sacrificial at all. There are many other possible and even simultaneous belief-based functions for a cairn, even if to present-day eyes its archaeological material looks like rubbish. This aspect requires further examination.

Ethnographic records of cairns as sacrificial places are ample, and a further comparison of different traditions can prove fruitful in reconstructing ancient belief systems. Although some of the customs of sacrifice are the product of the historical era, the roots of such practices are firmly in prehistory. According to ethnographic analogy, Finnish cairns which were used as sacrificial places probably existed even before the turning point between these periods. Furthermore, the diversity of historical sacrificial customs suggests that such practices in cairns alone are perhaps ramified further and more widely than we are today aware.

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