

## Superstition in the House of God?

### Some Estonian Case Studies of Vernacular Practices\*

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#### Introduction

When studying ritual practices in churches it is often the official rituals of institutionalised nature that have been focused on. The unofficial ones (magical, vernacular, popular interpretations) have been labelled as folk religion and have usually only been mentioned in passing. These two sides of ritual practices have traditionally been studied separately and due to the lack of systematic background the latter has often been treated as a collection of random magical acts that have little to do with Christian religion. Vernacular practices that seemingly have little or no connection with the official liturgy in churches have often been considered originating in the pre-Christian period, thus being pagan in nature. This in its turn has created a view of the syncretic nature of folk religion where pre-Christian and Christian elements have intertwined to form a mixture of popular interpretations of Christian liturgical elements. Contrary to such interpretations in this article we suggest that both ritual practices have to be understood in the same frame and instead of representing two different traditions they form a closely associated system in a particular time period.

In the present article we discuss the vernacular side of rituals conducted in churches and focus on some material examples that can possibly be related with them. The main questions are: firstly, in what way are magical elements distinguishable from the official Christian liturgical ones, if at all? Can archaeology add anything to attractive descriptions of magical rituals in churches and chapels from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries? And most importantly, are we as archaeologists able to distinguish the remains of magical

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rituals from those of other practices, in other words, can we detect the 'religion as it is practiced'? These questions are discussed in the light of four case studies which reveal the large and varied material connected to the matter.

### **Theoretical reflections**

Before approaching the actual case studies and practices, we should explain the terms used in this discussion. Concerning the concepts 'unofficial', 'popular' or 'folk' religion, Leonard Norman Primiano has been very critical of their usage, naming the terms residualistic and derogatory. He has also considered the juxtaposing of these terms with 'official' religion on a two-tiered model problematic.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, the creation of dichotomies and verbalising clear-cut differences between (religious) practices or elements is a conventional scholarly approach. We can observe this, for example, in the traditional treatment of magic and religion as two different faces of a single coin – for example magic vs. religion, where the first is seen as manipulative, secret, private, practical, prohibited, and so on, while the qualities ascribed to the latter include supplicative, public/open, symbolic, permitted for everyone, and so on (compare with the classical theorists such as Mauss, Durkheim and Frazer).

Instead of 'unofficial', 'popular' or 'folk' religion, Primiano has suggested to use the concept 'vernacular' religion, emphasising the 'private' or 'personal' component in it, defining it as 'religion as it is lived', as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it.<sup>2</sup> An important implication here is Primiano's notion that since religion inherently involves interpretation, it is impossible for the religion of an individual not to be vernacular. The concept of 'vernacular religion' has been widely adopted since 1995. However, the inability to think outside frames and strict classificatory rules is reluctant to disappear, so 'vernacular' has mostly been used to simply substitute former notions such as 'folk', 'popular' and 'unofficial'. However, vernacular religion is not the dichotomous or dialectic partner of 'institutional' religious forms – in 'vernacular' the focus of the study has shifted to people, the practitioners,

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Norman Primiano, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife', *Western Folklore* 54 (1995), 37–56, at 38.

<sup>2</sup> Primiano 1995, 44.

instead of religion or belief as abstract categories,<sup>3</sup> so the approach to the source material should be rethought.

Primiano's view stands for the emic viewpoint according to which we should be completely open-minded in our studies and not take sides in the matter we study and should only proceed from the explanations of the studied people; so it rules out any universal and satisfactory generalisations. On the other hand, an entirely emic approach is impossible, especially when we are discussing practices in the light of archaeological remains. Thus, the wisest thing to do is to acknowledge the multifaceted character of our source material, the absence of clear and unambiguous patterns, but continue with classifications, statistical analyses, and other academic tools needed for drawing wider generalisations.

On a theoretical level we very much agree with Primiano's views and stick to the concept of 'vernacular religion' in our article, attempting to use the concept adequately when interpreting our source material, as a concept of its own and not as a step on the official-unofficial scale. On the other hand we also prefer to continue using 'folk' or 'popular' or 'magical' when describing certain practices, but not as direct synonyms for 'vernacular'. The relationship between the concepts can be described as follows: vernacular in this context is understood as a system, which includes practices and interpretations through which religion is lived by certain people, whereas magical and popular are used as more specific 'labels' for practices within the vernacular system. However, it should not be forgotten that vernacular practices are very much connected with the official religious or liturgical programme, so the former is constantly influenced by the latter (if not so much the other way around), which makes it impossible to draw a strict line between them. Thus, in case of an individual vernacular practice, it might be possible to discern between popular or magical and liturgical or official Christian elements (in the sense of 'syncretism'), but their intertwining as well as personal interpretation by every single practitioner makes the matter very complicated.

In the context of vernacular religion or 'religion as it is lived'<sup>4</sup>, syncretism is perhaps not the best word to use, since it implies that we could divide the practices into parts and would thus be able to clearly verbalise the difference between magical (popular) and religious elements in rituals and then apply the

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard Norman Primiano, 'Manifestations of the Religious Vernacular: Ambiguity, Power, and Creativity', in Marion Bowman & Ülo Valk (eds), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life. Expressions of Belief*, Equinox: Bristol 2012, 382–394, at 384.

<sup>4</sup> Primiano 1995, 44.

pattern obtained from one case to all similar situations. Moreover, this implies that the difference is meaningful from the point of view of the expected outcome for the practitioners especially. Vernacular practices involve different elements in different combinations; thus the character of the practices is situational and context-specific, and no unambiguous and universal pattern can be followed. The reason for this is that the origin of the elements, or differentiating between the practices by classifying them into categories, is not important for the practitioners; they are meaningless for the outcome. As stated by William Sax, this categorization is clearly 'our' problem.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Mary Douglas stated in the 1960s that only our Western experience and our rituals take place in separate compartments, in oral societies experiences overlap and interpenetrate, and form a symbolically consistent universe.<sup>6</sup> Also S. J. Tambiah has stated that magical acts are performative acts (like all ritual acts), whose positive and creative meaning is missed and whose 'persuasive validity is misjudged if they are subjected to that kind of empirical verification associated with scientific activity'.<sup>7</sup> However, in this sense Richard Kieckhefer's reference to Aron Gurevich's suggestion that the majority of people in the Middle Ages did not see the difference between church rituals and magical ones, should be mentioned. Kieckhefer was opposed to this declaration, stating that this is an underestimation of people, since conceptually it is not difficult to see the difference between praying to God, invoking demons, and using natural forces. It is just that they saw no need to locate different behaviours in the system of abstract categories as we do.<sup>8</sup>

A good illustration is the use of the sacramental host to magically enhance one's shooting precision in an Estonian folklore account:

One who wants good hunting luck should go Communion, take the bread out of his mouth, go to the woods, put the bread between two trees that touch each other and then from a distance turn his back to the tree and take aim at the bread over his shoulder. Then he must go away without looking back. The account tells of a man who did look back

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<sup>5</sup> William S. Sax, 'Ritual and the Problem of Efficacy', in W. S. Sax, J. Quack & J. Weinholt (eds), *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2010, 3–16, at 4.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Pelican Books: Harmondsworth 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, 'Form and Meaning of Magical Acts', in Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah ed., *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1985, 60–86, at 60.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, 'The specific rationality of medieval magic', *American Historical Review* 99 (1994), 813–836, at 836.

while shooting and saw the figure of the Crucifixion between the trees. He was startled, threw the gun away and fled. On his way somebody struck him in the face. After this he stopped going to the forest.<sup>9</sup>

The text implies that the practitioner clearly understood the difference between right (the official Christian liturgy) and wrong (magical practice) conduct. However, from the point of view of the outcome, the origin of the chosen elements was insignificant as long as they were efficacious (the sacramental host clearly was efficacious because of its liturgical source). There are a few similar stories that imply that the host must be taken from the church secretly, so it was obvious that it was a wrong thing to do, but clearly the end justified the means. This in its turn refers to the multifaceted character of the practices, where the means used could vary, but they varied within a certain system. In other words – not everything could be used, since not everything worked, but the efficacy of practices was clearly in the hands of the practitioner, and so was the choice of elements in a given practice.

Thus it is obvious that the academic differentiation between 'Christian' and 'non-Christian' or 'religious' and 'magical' elements does not help us much, as both are combined in various ways and to differing extents in different practices. We suggest that if we are to search for the archaeological remains from vernacular practices connected with churches, we have to focus on the meaning of the particular ritual context for the practitioner, directly connected with the desired outcome of the practice. Thus certain classification is in order, but not perhaps the infertile dichotomy of official (Christian, religious) and vernacular elements. As a classification one could use the division of practices according to purpose. Several authors<sup>10</sup> have used similar classifications for magical acts, with the emphasis on different purposes, for example protective/apotropaic, healing, to lesser extent divination and sorcery (and other maleficent purposes). All these activities need potentially efficacious elements.

Thus we should be looking for (or rather noticing) the potentially powerful or efficacious elements and artefacts in the archaeological material

<sup>9</sup> Tartu, Estonian Literary Museum, Archive of Folklore, E 28066(11) (dated 1896). All translations by the present authors unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Kieckhefer 1994; Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1989; Karen Jolly, 'Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices', in Karen Jolly ed., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. The Middle Ages*, Athlone Press: London 2002, 1–71; Roberta Gilchrist, 'Magic for the Dead? The Archaeology of Magic in Later Medieval Burials', *Medieval Archaeology* 52 (2008), 119–159.

and describe their connection to practices. Such powerful objects could comprise both Christian liturgical objects (for example the Bible, the host, holy water) but also objects like natural stones and fossils, or artefacts carrying magical signs. According to folklore texts the liturgical elements used in vernacular practices include the host and holy water, which should help against a variety of problems, mostly illnesses. However, elements connected to the inside or outside of the church were similarly powerful: soil from the churchyard and pieces from the rope of the church bell were used to keep a child calm and heal sore ears, hymnals were used for divination, the keyhole of the church helped against tooth ache, pieces from an altar candle were used when healing animals, the apron or scarf worn in church helped against snake bite, just to mention a few examples. Sometimes objects were brought to the church to charge them with efficacy or to aid healing processes; for example in case of nose bleed, one should let the blood drop on a timber wedge, and strike the wedge into a church bench; in case of sore fingers, one should rub them against the church or chapel walls.<sup>11</sup>

It is obvious from the examples that the described practices would leave nothing material to be studied by archaeologists, and importantly, even if the material remains would survive, they would appear in the everyday context, for example in settlements, and nothing would indicate their significance. An exception is formed by coins, which were used to press furuncles and had to be dropped on the church floor (about the archaeological implications see below). What comes to the natural smooth and round stones, their efficacy is mostly dependent on the situation (for example, healing practices might involve the third stone from the sauna stairs, or a stone collected from a crossroads); in case of fossils their appearance and similarity to a specific body part would make them powerful objects in healing practices; and in case of 'thunderbolts' (prehistoric artefacts, also fossils), their efficacy is clearly connected to the legend according to which they fall down from the sky during a thunderstorm.<sup>12</sup> To conclude, the ascribing of efficacy to elements used in different vernacular practices is very much context-specific, even though we can see some recurrent choices in folklore texts.

How then to define when an object is a part of the official Christian liturgy and when the same item would have been used for 'magic'? From the

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<sup>11</sup> All mentioned examples are found in the folklore records in the Archive of Folklore of the Estonian Literary Museum.

<sup>12</sup> Kristiina Johanson, 'The Changing Meaning of "Thunderbolts"', *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 42 (2009), 129–174, at 130.

point of view of vernacular religion sacramental bread has been used both in the official religious practices and simultaneously in magical acts. Still, in both contexts the interpretation of the host, as the body of Christ, is the same. The difference becomes apparent in the goal and the nature of the practice (for example using the *Pater noster* as a prayer and as incantation),<sup>13</sup> but also in the qualities valued in the host. In liturgy it embodies the presence of Christ, in magical practices it is used because of its different powerful qualities, in the given case because of its efficacy in enhancing shooting precision. So, we might see here the traditional dichotomy between religion and magic, the first having more general aims, the latter more specific ones. However, we do not wish to emphasise the traditional view, as many examples demonstrate no such difference, e.g. in the case of the *Pater noster*. The situation where the elements are used makes the religious context different, although the object and its original meaning remain the same. Thus, we should not focus on the initial or 'official' function of objects as this will lead us to a dead end. Instead the focus should be set on identifying the context and through that the specific meaning of the artefacts used or elements chosen are revealed.

How can we study vernacular practices if we wish to not take sides in the matter we study and desire to proceed from Clark's encouragement to leave the studied issue in the hands of those we study?<sup>14</sup> One way out could be a context and period specific approach, meaning that when discussing vernacular religious practices we must focus on a specific period (for example medieval or modern practices) and not address some universal and general pattern in human behaviour. Nor should we interpret use of similar elements (liturgical, everyday, magical) in different associations as static syncretism. It is obvious that vernacular beliefs and practices are connected with the official ones and thus vernacular religion changes constantly as well (compare with the imagistic mode of religiosity).<sup>15</sup> So the medieval 'syncretism' and modern age 'syncretism' were different and instead of focusing on the completely artificial problem of pre-Christian religious phenomena within the Christian religion, we should rather study vernacular Christianity and the practices connected with it in some particular time-period.

<sup>13</sup> Carolina Pihelgas, "Kolm kõrd meie isa enne lugeda, siis...". Meieisapalve kasutamise loitsuna eesti rahvausundis', *Keel ja Kirjandus* 1 (2013), 30–47.

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Clark, 'Witchcraft and Magic in Early Modern Culture', in Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark & William Monter (eds), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: the Period of Witch Trials*, Athlone: London 2002, 97–169, at 107.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity. A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmissions*, Altamira Press: Walnut Creek, Lanham 2004.

## The case studies

Archaeological sources for vernacular religious practices in churches or other Christian sanctuaries are not numerous and we are dealing with very varied and scarcely studied phenomena. There are finds and sources that refer rather to 'more official' Christianity and there are finds that indicate a more 'magical' side. However, the scarcity of sources cannot be considered as a sign of lack of rituals. For example, organic substances that do not keep were used in rituals. Although sources for this kind of actions are not numerous, a few indicate that the background of these rituals was apparently guaranteeing agricultural success and blessing of the food.

The house of God has not stayed unaffected by superstition. A few times I have seen myself that a piece of raw meat has been brought to the church and I heard from an old person that it was really there because of the superstition and not by accident.<sup>16</sup>

In Petseri monastery sometimes a couple of grain sacks are brought to the church and left there for a few days. The Seto people think that their grain will obtain exceptional blessing.<sup>17</sup>

It is clear that no material traces are left behind by these kinds of activities, especially if the grain was actually removed after it was blessed in the church. Even more than organic materials, vernacular rituals have included verbal enchantment, but naturally its association with specific artefacts is difficult to establish.

The following cases are chosen to reflect the Estonian situation regarding, on the one hand, activities that were carried out in churches, but without a background directly originating in the official Christian doctrine, and on the other, activities where symbols and artefacts directly associated with Christianity have been used in a way that does not correspond unambiguously to the official liturgy.

### *Cross graffiti*

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<sup>16</sup> Tartu, Estonian Literary Museum, Archive of Folklore, H III 3, 108(38) (dated 1889).

<sup>17</sup> Tartu, Estonian Literary Museum, Archive of Folklore, E I 42 (293) (undated).





**Fig. 1. Crosses inscribed into the corners of Kadrina church, Virumaa. Photo by Tõnno Jonuks.**

One of the most complicated and least studied types of sources of religious practices connected with Estonian churches is the cross graffiti. Cross graffiti have not been much discussed elsewhere either<sup>18</sup> and thus we cannot offer more comprehensive data about them in the current article. In contrast to Finland where cross graffiti is known mostly inside buildings, the known Estonian examples are all on the outer walls of churches. The practice has been spread over whole Estonia, although the examples are quite different from each other.

Most commonly only single and simple crosses are inscribed with two straight lines on the surface of the construction stones on the corners of a church or on portals. When the crosses have been engraved on the corners the surroundings of portals and western corners have been preferred but not the eastern corners. Less often, e.g. in Karula Church in Southern Estonia, the crosses have been incised on the stones of the nave. A church clearly distinguished from the others is located in Kadrina, in North Estonia, where the abundance of crosses exceeds that in any other church in Estonia (Fig 1). In Kadrina the crosses can be found on all the outer corners of the church. They are very numerous, various forms are present, and have sometimes been engraved so high that a ladder or a scaffold must have been used to reach the place. The various forms of crosses in Kadrina church include simple small crosses, which are common over Estonia, but the majority represent different, among others very complicated forms and it seems that in Kadrina the purpose was to be unique

<sup>18</sup> Tanja Ratilainen, 'Kilroy was here: A Glimpse of the Graffiti of Holy Cross Church in Hattula', in J. Harjula, M. Helamaa & J. Haarala eds., *Times, Things & Places. 36 Essays for Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen*. Raisio 2011, 380–391.

and produce a cross as exceptional as possible. Kadrina is also the only example where the crosses have been engraved relatively lately as judged from a few clearly new engravings. In this case the abundance of old crosses might have attracted more engravings of similar signs, even at a time when other Estonian churches have not enticed any new cross graffiti.



**Fig. 2. The 'Karula couple' – two human figures on the Eastern wall of Karula church, Valgamaa. Photo by Tõnno Jonuks.**

At this point we should mention the most unique among the graffiti associated with Estonian churches, that rather reminds of a rock carving – the so-called 'couple of Karula' (Fig 2). The

carving was discovered relatively lately, in 2004, when the two human figures engraved into the granite stone of the eastern side of the church were detected. One of the figures represents clearly a man, the other a pregnant woman.<sup>19</sup> We are dealing with a matchless composition, nothing of the kind is known from Estonia or elsewhere that we know of. Several interpretations can be seen as the background to the 'couple of Karula' and taking into account the big belly clearly depicted on one of the figures and the penis on the other, some fertility magic could be an attractive interpretation. It seems more likely, however, that we are dealing with what was initially a double cross, known from similar depictions in Karula. It is possible that only later, perhaps in the twentieth century, after the church was left in ruins during the Second World War, the double cross was redesigned to depict a couple in the style of Neolithic rock carvings.

Cross graffiti is definitely a tradition not only associated with churches. For example, graffiti of a 'consecration cross' has been found on the seventeenth-

<sup>19</sup> Marge Konsa & Tõnno Jonuks, *Valgamaa Karula kiriku kiviraiendid*, field report in the archive of archaeology at the University of Tartu, Institute of History and Archaeology, 2010, [http://www.eau.ee/~drenkhan/khy/Karula\\_kiriku\\_kiviraiendid.pdf](http://www.eau.ee/~drenkhan/khy/Karula_kiriku_kiviraiendid.pdf) (last consulted 12.6.2015).

century grouted surface of the Kiltsi fortified manor together with two caricature male profiles.<sup>20</sup> In addition, numerous small and simple crosses are known from the walls of the gate of the Pointer Tower in Haapsalu castle, where these were interpreted as possible protective magical signs.<sup>21</sup>

Since no research specifically dedicated to cross graffiti in Estonia exists, it is difficult to assess the age and purposes of this activity, especially in connection with churches. Since the known cross graffiti are associated with medieval parish churches, whereas these kinds of signs are entirely missing in churches founded since the nineteenth century, the tradition might have a medieval or early modern background. The purpose of cross graffiti is also difficult to explain. In Estonian churches the signs are almost exclusively exposed in 'public' places, preferably on the corners of the façade or the surroundings of portals. Considering the large variety of forms of the crosses of the Kadrina Church, all the crosses there have been engraved to be displayed and have clearly been exposed. Thus, the background to the sign cannot have been some secret ritual. Naturally, this generalisation cannot be made for all churches. Doors and corners are locations that are universally perceived as liminal and from the point of view of efficacy, liminality might have given the rituals the extra power. This must not, however, have necessarily always been the case: in a folklore text<sup>22</sup> about rubbing a sore finger against the church wall the part of the wall was not indicated, suggesting that the plain wall must have worked as well. The only cross in Ambla Church in Järva County is simple, consisting only of two lines, and has been engraved on the northern portal that was not in use, so the tradition is clearly different here than in the Kadrina example. According to Tanja Ratilainen<sup>23</sup> these kinds of crosses were engraved into the columns of Finnish churches by people who arrived to the service from some distance, and they engraved crosses into the pillars as a pastime while waiting for the service to begin. Owners' signs have been mentioned as one possibility as well, but considering the similarity of the crosses and the scarcity of any other sign, this interpretation seems doubtful.

It is likely that a simple universal sign such as the cross might have carried different meanings, which varied chronologically and regionally. The

<sup>20</sup> Tõnno Jonuks, 'Kiltsi mõis – keskaegsest kivimajast esindusliku härrastehooneni', in U.Trumm ed., *SA Virumaa muuseumid toimetised* (2012), SA Virumaa muuseumid: Rakvere 2012, 32–47.

<sup>21</sup> Erki Russow & Anton Pärn, 'Majalugu ehk millest kõnelevad Osutitorni müürihoone jäänused', in *Läänemaa muuseumi toimetised 16*, Läänemaa muuseumi: Haapsalu 2013, 88–130, at 98.

<sup>22</sup> Tartu, Estonian Literary Museum, Archive of Folklore, H II 74, 471 (75) (dated 1905).

<sup>23</sup> Ratilainen 2011.

current priest of the Kadrina Church, Meelis-Lauri Erikson<sup>24</sup>, has heard that the crosses were carved into the church walls as a symbolic token after confirmation. Considering the character of the crosses exposed in Kadrina Church, confirmation, as well as other more personal anniversaries, might be a reason to celebrate with engraving a cross. However, some crosses, especially the solitary ones, might be connected to a personal wish, perhaps even to confirm an enchantment and to turn it more efficacious. However, it is remarkable that the tradition of engraving crosses into the church walls cannot be found in written sources or folk tradition. Moreover, the crosses have not been mentioned in the descriptions of churches, which again is indicative of ignoring popular religious practices and concentration on liturgical Christianity only.

Tanja Ratilainen<sup>25</sup> leaves the possibility open that the crosses on church walls could be connected with pilgrimages. Especially in case of the Hattula Holy Cross Church it is known that people came to see the holy cross relic there. Although written sources are not known, we cannot exclude the late medieval or early modern popular pilgrimage tradition associated with the Kadrina St. Catherine church, in connection of which crosses may have been engraved on the walls of the church. This would explain the abundance of crosses and the variety of forms, especially the occurrence of very elaborate crosses, suggesting that it might have been somehow necessary to show off with an as spectacular and detailed cross as possible.

### *St. Anthony's Cross -pendants*

Also associated with the tradition of pilgrimages are the pendants in the shape of St Anthony's cross produced by local masters, which have a clumsy image of the Crucifixion depicted on them (Fig. 3).<sup>26</sup> Presently, five of these are known, all from Northern Estonia. As a matter of fact, similar pendants – an encircled T-shaped cross made from the alloy of tin and lead – are relatively widespread in Early Modern jewellery. A few of them are exceptional because of the engraved, sometimes even caricatural, depictions of the Crucifixion, which imply that we may not be dealing with ordinary jewellery. Perhaps the representation of Christ indicates their different and more specific meaning.

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<sup>24</sup> Personal communication to the authors.

<sup>25</sup> Ratilainen 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Tõnno Jonuks & Lauri Joosu, 'Pendants of St. Anthony Cross with the Crucifixion from Estonia – Possible Badges of a Folk Pilgrimage', *Estonian Journal of Archaeology* 17 (2013), 123–138.



**Fig. 3. Pendants of St Anthony cross with the Crucifixion (RM A 5: 190). Photo by Tõnno Jonuks.**

It is possible that these pendants are connected with some local and popular pilgrimage site that emerged in the fourteenth century, the role of which in the religious life of local people would have been definitely more significant than that of long distance pilgrimages.<sup>27</sup> In the context of North-Estonia the most likely place for such a site would be St Mary's chapel in Viru-Nigula, which is one of the few pilgrimage destinations of medieval Estonia.<sup>28</sup> Beside the tradition of long-distance pilgrimages in medieval Christian culture, shorter and local pilgrimages started to spread in the fourteenth century. These also inspired popular pilgrimages, which did not focus only on clerical shrines.<sup>29</sup> According to a seventeenth-century description, people gathered together from far and distant places to Uduallikas (Foggy Spring) in Viljandi county, where they offered to St Brigitta. A local female self-applied priest was active 'bei ihrem Gottensdienst' and coins with a cross sign were offered into the spring.<sup>30</sup> In 1836 many coins were found from the spring, with Russian coins in the top

<sup>27</sup> Aldur Vunk, *Jeesus läks maal kõndimaie: ristosõjad ja palverännakud Eesti keskajal*, Argo: Tallinn 2005, 221.

<sup>28</sup> Vunk 2005, 221.

<sup>29</sup> Vunk 2005, 221.

<sup>30</sup> Nikolai Busch, *Studien zur baltischen Vorgeschichte I* (Abhandlungen der Herder-Gesellschaft und des Herder-Instituts zu Riga 6:1). Rīga 1937, 65–66.

layer, Swedish ones in the middle and coins minted in Tallinn and Riga by the Teutonic Order at the bottom.<sup>31</sup> The general gathering on certain clerical dates, the activity of a local 'priest' and the offerings in the spring point to folk traditions of pilgrimages<sup>32</sup> or rather to a local, popular interpretation of Catholic pilgrimages. At such events magic, especially healing and fertility magic, was as important as the honouring of Christian saints.<sup>33</sup>

The best known examples of folk pilgrimage sites in Estonia are connected to the Risti chapel in Viljandi county and St Mary's chapel in Viru-Nigula. A description from 1666 by Michael Scholbach, the Lutheran priest of Viru-Nigula at that time, refers to the latter. According to the text, people from a large territory gathered together around the ruins of the chapel on the Assumption of Mary (2 July). They offered bread and coins, which were also shared with local beggars, but according to the description also figurines of children and children's shirts were sacrificed. The wax figurines were made in order to obtain fertility for childbirth.<sup>34</sup> Such a popular interpretation of a Catholic tradition continued long after the Reformation and descriptions about healing magic where sufferers crawled on their knees around the chapel ruins and offered bread and coins at the altar of St Mary's chapel are recorded in 1635,<sup>35</sup> 1667, and as late as in 1715.<sup>36</sup> Similar descriptions of gatherings and feasts, offerings of bread and coins and of wax figurines are known also from other places, including large clerical pilgrimage destinations like Pirita monastery on the feast of St Vitus (15 June).<sup>37</sup>

Such observances are often described as pagan relics that have been preserved within the Christian religious culture. But it is more likely that the interpretation should be vice versa – these are the local and vernacular interpretations of the official Catholic pilgrimage and saint's cult traditions that have been shaped to fit better the needs and interests of local communities and contexts. In addition, most such descriptions come from the late sixteenth and

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<sup>31</sup> Friedrich R. Kreutzwald & Alexander H. Neus, *Mythische und magische Lieder der Ehsten*, Harro v. Hirschheydt: Hannover-Döhren 1975 (originally Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften: St Petersburg 1854), 107.

<sup>32</sup> Vunk 2005, 223.

<sup>33</sup> Vunk 2005, 350.

<sup>34</sup> Rudolf Winkler, 'Ueber Kirchen und Kapellen Ehstlands in Geschichte und Sage', in *Beiträge zur Kunde Ehst-, Liv- und Kurlands*, vol. 5, Franz Kluge: Reval 1900, 1–20, at 19.

<sup>35</sup> Adam Olearius, *Täiendatud uus reisikiri Moskoovia ja Pärsia teekonna kohta*, trans. by I. Leimus, Olion: Tallinn 1996, 122.

<sup>36</sup> Winkler 1900, 19–20.

<sup>37</sup> Balthasar Russow, *The Chronicle of Balthasar Russow*, trans. by J. C. Smith, with J. Eichhoff & W. L. Urban, Baltic Studies Center: Madison, WI 1998, ch. 49.

the seventeenth centuries. This period had witnessed the victory of Protestantism over Catholicism, and in this context of religious conflict vernacular rituals were demonised by Lutheran priests. Still, in the descriptions of these rituals we can find clear analogies with the Catholic cult of the saints, the rituals of which in many cases nevertheless were not so different from the earlier honouring of pagan gods. Although most of such rituals were probably conducted at local churches and chapels, certain special sites, somewhat more remote, like the Viru-Nigula or Risti chapels, had more power and were more efficacious for obtaining the results desired with the rituals. This rather universally human behaviour was probably one of the reasons for the emergence of local pilgrimages during the fourteenth century.

As a confirmation of the visit to the pilgrimage destination and as a reminder of the pilgrimage special badges were sold – souvenirs where the iconography was specifically connected with the destination.<sup>38</sup> Since the fourteenth century also local pilgrimage sites emerged. Their badges were more universal and cannot easily be connected with certain places. Thus the origin of most late medieval (after 1400) pilgrimage badges is unknown. Based on this Lars Andersson has suggested that although the Great Pilgrimages dominate in research tradition, the local ones were more important to the majority of the population.<sup>39</sup> Many of the pilgrim badges from these destinations are simple, depicting only a cross or a T-cross, sometimes encircled with a ring,<sup>40</sup> similar to the above described examples from Estonia.

It is not justified to treat all T-shaped pendants as pilgrim badges but the Crucifixion on some of the crosses indicates their special meaning. Possibly the locally produced St Anthony crosses with the Crucifixion should also be interpreted as the material representation of folk pilgrimages from the sixteenth

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<sup>38</sup> Lars Andersson, *Pilgrimsmärken och vallfart. Medeltida pilgrimskultur i Skandinavien* (Lund Studies in Medieval Archaeology 7), Almqvist & Wiksell: Stockholm 1989; Vunk 2005; Carina Brumme, *Das spätmittelalterliche Wallfahrtswesen im Erzstift Magdeburg, im Fürstentum Anhalt und im sächsischen Kurkreis. Entwicklung, Strukturen und Erscheinungsformen frommer Mobilität in Mitteldeutschland vom 13. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert*, (Europäische Wallfahrtsstudien 6), Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main 2010, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Andersson 1989.

<sup>40</sup> H. J. E. van Beuningen, A. M. Koldewey & D. Kicken (eds), *1000 Laatmiddeleeuwse insigne suit de collective* (Heilig en Profaan 2, Rotterdam papers 12), Stichting Middeleeuwse Religieuze en Profane Insignes: Cothen, 1993 at 125; A., M. Koldewey, *Geloof & Geluk: sieraad en devotie in middeleeuws Vlaanderen*, Terra: Arnhem 2006, 197; Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 7), Boydell Press: Suffolk 2010, 177; M. Rębkowski, 'The Finds of the Pilgrim Badges from the Polish Baltic Coast', in Hartmut Kühne, Lothar Lambacher & Jan Hrdina (eds), *Wallfahrer aus dem Osten – mittelalterliche Pilgerzeichen zwischen Ostsee, Donau und Seine: Beiträge der Tagung Perspektiven der europäischen Pilgerzeichenforschung, 21. bis 24. April 2010 in Prag* (Europäische Wallfahrtsstudien 10), Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main 2013, 33–50.

and seventeenth centuries. A clear difference between the official badges and popular ones is that the first were intended to be attached to clothing and thus usually only one side was decorated. The latter ones resembled pendants and fitted better the general tradition of using jewellery. Thus we should not call such local pendants with the Crucifixion proper pilgrimage badges, although they were probably local interpretations of such badges. Vernacular religion is often based on the official religion and is an interpretation of it. As pilgrimages were popular and widely appreciated in the medieval society, this was an attractive phenomenon also for rural culture and on the ritual level was associated with healing and fertility magic.

#### *Small round stones*

In Estonian archaeological collections there are a few examples of small round stones, which have been collected during the excavations as something unusual (Fig 4). Unfortunately, the find contexts of these stones have usually not been documented and this makes the interpretation of these artefacts difficult. Small and smooth natural stones are familiar finds not only in excavations of churches but also from rural settlement sites and to a lesser extent also from graves. But in Estonia, and with a few exceptions elsewhere as well, they are still unstudied.



**Fig. 4. Round stones from St Nicholas' church in Tallinn (TLM 17409: 124, 564, 567). Photo by Tõnno Jonuks.**

It is clear that mostly the interests, knowledge and purposes of the leader of the excavations lie behind the classification of these stones as find material. It

is not easy to differentiate between 'more specific' and ordinary stones at Estonian settlement sites that are mostly situated in moraine landscape, and especially in the case of church investigations where excavations go through the



layers of construction debris, which typically consist of both natural and artificial stones. The problem of not recognizing the material traces of 'magical' activity in archaeological excavations has been widely acknowledged. Roberta Gilchrist has admitted that natural items like round stones or fossils are easily overlooked during excavations, even when found directly next to a body or inside a coffin.<sup>41</sup> Amy Gazin-Schwartz has noted that in the course of excavations many remarkable artefacts (stones with holes, for example) have been thrown away as natural or (for example in the case of very old artefacts) ignored as out of context, since the context for such finds may be anomalous, but is not particularly special.<sup>42</sup>

Until now we know of finds of such pebbles only from St John's church in Tartu and St Nicholas' church in Tallinn. Four stones are known from St John's church, but the exact context has been recorded in only one case (TM A 47: 74): it was found in the infilling layer of burial cist number 7. The others have not even been mentioned in excavation reports. In 1978 three smooth stones were found in St. Nicholas' church in Tallinn (TLM 17409: 56, 124, 564). All these are natural, very smooth and well-polished and clearly different than the rest of the soil in the church. However, these too are not reflected in the excavation reports, and thus their further interpretation is complicated.

In Estonian folklore smooth round stones have been called healing stones, also raven stones or thunderstones. Similar ideas are widely known and an array of universal beliefs is connected with these. On the one hand obtaining the stone is always regulated and the find context is what gives the stone its efficacy. For example, a raven stone was found in a raven's nest and it was believed that the raven had brought the stone from a faraway, exotic place (Palestine, the Ararat mountains, Dead Sea, but also Finland). Thunderstones have according to folklore traditions been collected from the ground after a lightning strike, and the material connected with this belief comprises different curious stones and fossils, but also archaeological stone implements (for example Stone Age axes, arrowheads, Iron Age strike-a-lights).<sup>43</sup>

The obtaining of the majority of healing stones was context-specific and dependent on the purpose. For example, efficacious stones could be collected in crossroads at a given time or in front of the sauna. The purposes that are associated with the stones can be divided into two. Raven stones are connected

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<sup>41</sup> Gilchrist 2008, 124.

<sup>42</sup> Amy Gazin-Schwartz, 'Archaeology and Folklore of Material Culture, Ritual, and Everyday Life', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 5 (2001), 263–280, at 273.

<sup>43</sup> Johanson 2009.

with wide-spread, even universal applications, like learning to understand the language of the birds or attaining general happiness, the whole wisdom of the world, the skill to open all doors or the ability to find all the treasures in the world. These are powers much reminiscent of the qualities of the philosopher's stone, sought by alchemists for centuries. It is most likely that these elements were adopted into Estonian oral tradition from some early modern literary source.

The other variety of powers attributed to stones, including all smooth stones, consist of healing magical skills – the ability to remove pain, heal different skin and ear diseases, relieve the consequences of snake bite or to prevent and heal apoplexy, to name a few more widespread ones. These skills are more characteristic of popular magic than the previously mentioned and can form a background to the pebbles found in settlement sites. An interesting case has been recorded from Uusvada in the south-eastern corner of Estonia, where the informant's grandmother knew the art of healing and used to cure illnesses with smooth round stones shaped like pigeon's eggs possibly in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> This account has been used as a theoretical background in some cases to collect smooth stones during archaeological excavations.

Similarly to smooth round stones, stone axes have also been used for healing practices and kept close for the purpose of acquiring broader supernatural powers. It is possible that a fragment of a stone axe from Türi churchyard is also connected with healing or apotropaic magic, since nothing else connected with the Stone Age has been found in the area of the cemetery. The use of stone axes as grave goods in early modern burials is confirmed by a find of a Neolithic metatuff axe in a seventeenth-century grave in Tartu. In addition we know of several Stone Age axes that according to the find reports have probably been gathered from medieval or modern village cemeteries.

Perceptions of stone artefacts and fossils as healing magical items have been discussed elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> The majority of these artefacts that are evidently secondarily used according to find reports, originate in everyday space. Very seldom can we find indications of their use in a specific context, such as that discussed by Vasks involving a mid-nineteenth century Latvian sorceress called *Miļā māte* ('Dear Mother'): 'She had two quite large bags full of such holy

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<sup>44</sup> Heiki Valk, 'Arheoloogilisi andmeid Uusvadast 2005', field report in the archive of archaeology at the University of Tartu, Institute of History and Archaeology, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Johanson 2009.

relics. These contained all sorts of thunderballs, i. e. stone and bronze axes and chisels, and jewellery found in old graves...'<sup>46</sup>

Unfortunately because of the missing context information the interpretation of smooth round stones in churches is very complicated. The stones could have reached the church as personal tokens accompanying the dead, but they may also have been deposited in the church, the most significant place of power, during a (healing or apotropaic?) magical ritual. The axe in Türi churchyard might have this same background.

### *Coins*

Where the previous examples rather represented types of artefacts that are not very widely recorded, the more common artefacts that can be associated with vernacular rituals in churches are coins.<sup>47</sup> They are known from many churches in Estonia, but unfortunately their interpretation is limited: either they have been labelled as 'offerings' without further discussion about their purpose, or they have been considered as having been lost between the floor boards. Up to now there is no overview of coin finds from Estonian churches, although coins have been obtained from the majority of places where archaeological excavations have been conducted during the last years with the use of a metal detector.<sup>48</sup> Their number is often modest, however, limited to a few tens of coins; altogether slightly over a thousand single coins are known from Estonian churches.<sup>49</sup>

Only the church of Harju-Risti clearly stands out with its 1200 coins found in the mixed soil layer between the modern and medieval floors.<sup>50</sup> In single cases some concentration areas appeared, but the majority of coins came from mixed layers, thus suggesting no firm context for interpretations. The depositing of coins started directly after the completion of the floor of the nave in the fifteenth century, with the main period dating to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and ending in the nineteenth century. This amount of

<sup>46</sup> Andrejs Vasks, 'The Symbolism of Stone Work-Axes (Based on Material from the Daugava Basin)', *Archaeologia Lituana* 4 (2003), 27–32, at 30.

<sup>47</sup> See also Frida Ehrnsten's article in this issue on coins found in Finnish churches.

<sup>48</sup> See e.g. Mauri Kiudsoo, 'New interesting coin finds in 2008', in E. Oras & E. Russow (eds), *Archaeological fieldwork in Estonia 2008*, Muinsuskaitseamet: Tallinn 2009, 210–213, at 211; Mauri Kiudsoo, 'New interesting coin finds in 2009', in E. Oras & E. Russow (eds), *Archaeological fieldwork in Estonia 2009*, Muinsuskaitseamet: Tallinn 2010, 185–189, at 187.

<sup>49</sup> Villu Kadakas, Kaire Tooming, Mauri Kiudsoo & Juhan Kilumets, 'Archaeological Studies in Risti Church and Churchyard', *Archaeological Fieldwork in Estonia 2011* (2012), 175–188, at 184.

<sup>50</sup> Kadakas et al. 2012, 183.

coins cannot have ended up under the church floor simply as the result of single losses. Some additional interpretations should also be considered.

More thorough studies of coins from churches and monasteries have been done in Scandinavia.<sup>51</sup> Norway emerges as the richest area of single coin finds from churches.<sup>52</sup> Altogether more than fifty thousand coins have been counted from churches and monasteries, while only a few hundred have been collected from rural settlements in Scandinavia.<sup>53</sup> The coin finds from Scandinavian churches have been dated to the eleventh to seventeenth centuries, while in Estonian churches coins have been left between the floor boards up to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

It is clear that leaving coins under the church floor might have had different meanings. We certainly cannot rule out losing, which is likely to be the case with buttons and other clothing details that have been found under the church floor. One possible interpretation is that the coins are grave goods and derive from burials that have been made under the church floor but have gotten mixed afterwards. It is also possible that small concentrations of coins from Paide and Harju-Risti churches derive from a leaking alms box, from where the coins had spilled out.<sup>54</sup> The offering of coins is also a possible interpretation, although not very much background to this behaviour can be found in narrative sources. Also folkloric traditions, which usually are relatively rich in different religious rituals to be performed in churches, offer only single instances in which coins have been offered in churches.

When a furuncle has appeared somewhere, then one must take three three-*kopeck* coins and press the furuncle once with each of the coins. Then, when one goes to the church, one should leave the coins on the church floor, at which the furuncles are said to disappear at once.<sup>55</sup>

This kind of healing magical behaviour is not only connected with churches, since numerous similar texts are known describing offerings to stones and springs. Thus, the cited text should not be considered as the interpretation of

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<sup>51</sup> Henrik Klackenborg, *Moneta Nostra: monetarisering I medeltidens Sverige* (Lund Studies in medieval archaeology 10). Almqvist & Wiksell: Stockholm 1992.

<sup>52</sup> Svein Harald Gullbekk, 'Monetisation in Medieval Scandinavia', in N. Holmes ed., *Proceedings of the XIVth International Numismatic Congress Glasgow 2009 II*, The International Numismatic Council: Glasgow 2011, 1458–1464, at 1458.

<sup>53</sup> Gullbekk 2011, 1458.

<sup>54</sup> Kadakas et al. 2012, 184.

<sup>55</sup> Tartu, Estonian Literary Museum, Archive of Folklore, H III 20, 569 (44) (dated 1894).

medieval and modern coin finds, but we are rather dealing with healing magic done in religiously 'powerful' places, churches as well as stones and springs. The depositing of coins ended in the beginning of the nineteenth century and thus may not have survived up to end of the century when oral traditions began to be collected. At the same time this does not contradict the main content of tradition quoted above, that is, the church as a religiously efficacious place suitable for different rituals, including magical ones, where the objects used might be, for instance, coins. Thus the explanation of the coins found under the church floors might include various interpretations that all leave similar traces in the archaeological material. If we emphasise their interpretation as offerings, it is likely that the coins have not only been offered to a particular god or saint but they have also been deposited into a potentially powerful place hoping for good health and perhaps also more abstract happiness and well-being.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this overview of fairly eclectic sources about vernacular religious practices it seems firstly that the way how rituals are conducted and meanings ascribed to them is a rather irregular behaviour, which nevertheless has a system. This system of (re)interpreting the official liturgy in vernacular practices was very flexible, encompassing different traditions and meanings that were important in a particular context. Churches as religiously powerful places attracted also common people to undertake healing rituals and practices to gain good luck and fertility. As many such rituals got their inspiration from the symbolism of official liturgy these were interpreted, using religiously powerful symbols (the cross) and other elements (the Bible, the host and others). This resulted in combinations of similar symbols but in slightly different contexts. It was well illustrated by the example of cross signs on church corners and portals but also by the example of pilgrimage badges which represented not official pilgrimage destinations but popular interpretations of them. The cases of stones (and axes) and coins represent more universal symbolism which was realised at the most powerful religious centres and thus believed to be more effective.

It easily seems that compared to other sources, for instance textual records, archaeology offers little new. However, none of the examples represented here have clear analogies in narrative sources, partly because they

predate the collecting of oral tradition, but partly since these practices were never recorded. Archaeological data and interpretations of possible material remains of vernacular rituals have also another important role, since they can point to changes in religious practices, stressing not the stability of religion but rather that religion, especially vernacular practices, are constantly interpreted and thus constantly developed. This makes it nonsensical to look for ancient and pagan relics in these practices; instead we should focus on more particular contexts: temporal, spatial or phenomenal.

Approaching vernacular practices in this way makes it possible to study their interactions with official liturgy, its interpretation and modification for particular needs. It is unquestionable that some elements or beliefs may have their roots also in the pre-Christian period, but it is also obvious that the meanings of such elements have changed. And so, instead of studying Christianity and folk religion, we should rather think about medieval religions, or (early) modern religions. After all, considering the seventeenth-century descriptions of 'pagan' rituals, it is obvious that what was described was not pre-Christian paganism but vernacular interpretations of Catholic traditions that were demonised by Lutheran priests. And this should lead us to rethink the concept of 'paganism' in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century oral tradition.

Vernacular tradition has often been misused while taking the term just to replace 'folk religion'. This was not the original meaning of the term, which rather aims at focusing on the way a particular person used and lived their religion. This means that vernacular is not characteristic only to the lower strata of society, but each representative of every social class, including the religious and social elites, has his or her own vernacular religion. Of course the differently composed groups might have shared vernacular elements, for example, how they perceive a particular religious element or conduct a given ritual or understand a specific practice. At the same time, the members of a group might also have different views on some other element or practice, which means that the overall corpus of the particular beliefs and perceptions of a single person is still always unique, personally vernacular.

It should be emphasised that vernacular does not stand in opposition to official Christianity; it rather combines different personal and / or shared practices and beliefs, thus being a flexible system that is still affected by and can work only in symbiosis with the official one.<sup>56</sup> In many contexts above we could

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Whitehouse 2004.

see or assume that the people who performed the ritual did know that it was not officially tolerated, but because 'the end justifies the means' the vernacular tradition was still practiced.

Such a worldview has created a collection of practices and beliefs which are partly chaotic, but systematic at the same time. These practices and beliefs do use official religion, but it is further interpreted to fulfil some particular demands. For these practices there are no limits to attributes and thus crosses and coins, stones and charms exist side by side with the Bible, the host and holy water in the same religious system where one of the most powerful and thus religiously effective places was definitely a church.

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