

# Frogs in Miniature Coffins from Churches in Finland

## Folk Magic in Christian Holy Places\*

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### Introduction

Curious discoveries were made during renovation work of two Eastern Finnish churches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Several tens of miniature wooden coffins with the remains of a frog inside were found under the church floors. However, after the immediate media buzz had blown over, these finds were soon largely forgotten. The ethnologist U. T. Sirelius was the first scholar to briefly mention these finds in his article about Finnish magic objects published in 1906.<sup>1</sup> He explained that the frog coffins were a part of fishing magic aimed at stealing the luck of the catch from more fortunate fishermen. He also published a drawing of one of the frog coffins that had been found. The few later mentions have been similarly brief, and often simply repeat this notion.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I introduce a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon. This is done by gathering and presenting the information on actual finds of miniature coffins from churches and by studying late nineteenth-century folklore on magic practices involving these objects collected for the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (FLS FA) in Helsinki. This folklore shows that the practices involving a buried or concealed miniature coffin are basically quite similar, but there is also variation in both form and meaning. It should be noted that the place where the coffin is buried or concealed as a part of these rituals varies greatly in the folklore, and thus the church or churchyard is only one possibility. Since the

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<sup>1</sup> Uuno Taavi Sirelius, 'Muutamista suomalaisten taikakaluista', *Virittäjä* 10: 3-4 (1906), 33–40, at 38.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Uuno Taavi Sirelius, 'Varautuminen: Taika- ja varausneuvot', in U. T. Sirelius, *Suomen kansanomaista kulttuuria: Esineellisen kansatieteen tuloksia II*, Otava: Helsinki 1921, 554–561, at 559; Raila Kataja, 'Kuopion tuomiokirkon sammakkoarkut', *Kuukauden Esine* Helmikuu 2008, Suomen Kansallismuseo: Helsinki, [http://www.nba.fi/fi/kansallismuseo/kokoelmat/kuukauden\\_esine\\_2008/arkku](http://www.nba.fi/fi/kansallismuseo/kokoelmat/kuukauden_esine_2008/arkku) (last consulted 8.1.2013).

latter are the locations where finds of miniature coffins have been reported, I will concentrate here on these contexts.

The information on reported finds of miniature coffins is largely based on newspaper articles written shortly after the discoveries, since only a few of the discovered coffins were preserved. Additionally, I have used correspondence between parish offices and museum authorities, and recorded first-hand oral accounts describing the finding of these coffins during renovation work. In the case of the few preserved coffins the main sources of information are the museum catalogues and, naturally, the objects themselves.

Before I move on to present the available data, I briefly discuss theoretical issues of the main concepts relevant to this study, and the multi-source methodology that I use. The concepts that are essential for discussing these finds are firstly 'magic', which has already appeared in this paper, and the broader concept of 'folk religion', which includes 'magic' as discussed here. 'Witchcraft' is the third key term, and it is here understood as one form of 'magic'.

Since these finds are from churches belonging to the Christian (Lutheran) faith, one of the main interests of this study is the dynamic relationship between 'folk religion' and the 'official' religion. Other questions discussed are the internal logic guiding these practices, how they fit into the world view of the people, and in particular the purposes and meanings of the rituals that involved them. In the light of the folklore, it is apparent that the most common purpose of the miniature burial was to punish a witch who was held responsible for an occurred misfortune by manipulating the sympathetic link between a magic worker and his/her magic.

### **Folk religion, magic, and witchcraft**

The essentially abstract categories of religion, ritual, and magic are all difficult, if not impossible, to define in any universal way that would satisfy every scholar. This issue has been recurrently discussed in academia, and I have also briefly reviewed this debate in a previous paper.<sup>3</sup> My conclusion was that the main problem lies within the relationship of reality and language, where language is always a simplification of complex reality.

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<sup>3</sup> Sonja Hukantaival, 'Understanding Past Actions – Changing Attitudes towards Ritual, Religion, and Everyday Life'. *Interarchaeologia* 5 (in press); see also e.g. Jack Goody, 'Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem', *The British Journal of Sociology* 12 (1961), 142–164; Dorothy Hammond, 'Magic: A Problem in Semantics', *American Anthropologist* 72 (1970), 1349–1356; Michael D. Bailey, 'The Meanings of Magic', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1 (2006), 1–23.

Acknowledging this fact, it is fruitful to view categories less strictly, allowing them to have dynamic borders.

I prefer simple definitions of terms, and thus, following the sociologist Steve Bruce, I understand 'religion' as beliefs, practices, and institutions that assume the existence of 'supernatural' agency.<sup>4</sup> The notion of 'supernatural' makes this definition problematic, since a division of 'worldly' and 'otherworldly' existence may not apply in all cultural contexts. However, in this particular case the definition is quite sufficient.<sup>5</sup> 'Folk religion' (also called popular or vernacular religion), then, is one aspect of religion. Quoting the folklorist Don Yoder: 'Folk religion is the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion.'<sup>6</sup>

Defined in this way, folk religion cannot exist without the relationship to an 'official', institutionalized religion. In this case the official religion is, naturally, Christianity; more precisely Lutheranism, and in a few cases Russian Orthodoxy. Still, the relationship between official religion and folk religion should not be seen as a dichotomy, and it is also important to realize that folk religion does not equal pre-Christian religion. The folklorist Laura Stark explains this complex relationship as follows:

[...] folk religion represents neither Christianity's 'contamination' of ethnic folk belief nor the 'misinterpretation' of Christianity by the non-literate rural populace, but a functional system in which the most useful elements of each belief system are adopted and fashioned into a syncretic whole.<sup>7</sup>

The 'magic' discussed here is a part of folk religion, since it utilizes 'otherworldly' powers in a way not approved by the official theology. 'Magic' can be understood as goal-directed practice, but it is essentially a specific understanding of causality. Even though many attitudes towards magic in the classic studies of the late nineteenth – early twentieth century by for example James George Frazer and Marcel Mauss are hopelessly outdated, the principles of sympathetic magic outlined by them are still relevant; they can even be regarded as fundamental structures of human

<sup>4</sup> Steve Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1995, ix.

<sup>5</sup> About supernatural/otherworldly in Finnish folk religion see e.g. Kaarina Koski, "'Outoa tuntematonta väkeä": Näkökulmia väkeen tuonpuoleisen edustajana', *Elore* 10 (2003), [http://www.elore.fi/arkisto/1\\_03/kos103a.html](http://www.elore.fi/arkisto/1_03/kos103a.html) (last consulted 10.1.2014); Laura Stark, *The Magical Self: Body, Society and the Supernatural in Early Modern Rural Finland* (FF Communications 290), Academia Scientiarum Fennica: Helsinki 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Don Yoder, 'Toward a Definition of Folk Religion', *Western Folklore* 33 (1974), 2–15, at 14.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Stark, *Peasants, Pilgrims, and Sacred Promises – Ritual and the Supernatural in Orthodox Karelian Folk Religion* (Studia Fennica Folkloristica 11), Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2002, 30.

cognition.<sup>8</sup> The notion that magic is often believed to work through a sympathetic connection between objects that have been in contact or simply resemble each other is evident. Also the idea that a part represents the whole (*pars pro toto*) is well documented.

The practitioner of magic manipulates these representative parts or images in an attempt to produce desired effects in the represented whole through this link between things. Magic, however, is not believed to simply be a result of mechanical cause and effect: The intention of the practitioner guides the effect, and many 'otherworldly' powers or entities may be utilized or persuaded to contribute to the cause. The internal logic is not quite this apparent in all magic. However, in the case of the miniature coffins it seems that the laws of sympathy combined with a notion of otherworldly power/agency (namely the *väki* belief<sup>9</sup>) are sufficient grounds for understanding the practices, as will be discussed below.

Witchcraft and sorcery are in scholarly contexts often defined as malicious magic (*maleficum*) seeking to cause harm,<sup>10</sup> though some studies also do use them as synonyms for magic.<sup>11</sup> While a clear-cut division where witchcraft always refers to malicious magic is very much a construct of scholars, I have nonetheless adopted this use of the concept here. In practice, a line between harmful and beneficial magic cannot be easily drawn, since the impact may have differed depending on whose viewpoint is taken into account. Some very extreme magic measures could also have been perceived as morally acceptable in the community if the deed was thought to be justified.<sup>12</sup>

In order to comprehend the practices involving a miniature burial, it is crucial to realize how powerful the belief in magical harm has been. Laura Stark's study on the magical world view of early modern rural Finland gives very good insight into this aspect. In a world where the possibility of magic impact was widely accepted, stories about magic skills were a form of social currency which produced real effects in everyday life.<sup>13</sup> The suspected

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<sup>8</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edn., Papermac: London 1992, 11–48; Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (Routledge Classics), Routledge: New York 2006; Jesper Sørensen, *A Cognitive Theory of Magic* (Cognitive Science of Religion Series), AltaMira: Lanham 2007, 95.

<sup>9</sup> As is discussed below, *väki* refers to both personal and impersonal (otherworldly) agency. See e.g. Koski 2003; Kaarina Koski, 'Conceptual Analysis and Variation in Belief Tradition: A Case of Death-Related Beings', *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 38 (2008), 45–66, <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol38/koski.pdf> (last consulted 4.3.2014); Stark 2006, 258–262.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Jari Eilola, *Rajapainnoilla: sallitun ja kielletyn määrittelemisen 1600-luvun jälkipuoliskon noituus- ja taikuustapauksissa* (Bibliotheca Historica 81), Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2003, 50–186.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Stephen Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 2011, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Stark 2006, 180–186, 194.

<sup>13</sup> Stark 2006, 445.

witches were members of the community, neighbours, with whom disagreements or other social tension had escalated. When someone suddenly fell ill, or some other kind of misfortune occurred, the reason was readily attributed to evil thoughts, curses, or actions by an envious, or otherwise malicious, neighbour.<sup>14</sup>

I have briefly discussed the multidisciplinary approach to matters of folk religion that I prefer in my studies in a previously published paper.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps a more accurate label would be a multi-source method, since I use different source materials, while still treating them from an archaeological perspective (even though I am also trained in folkloristics and comparative religion). In any case, this method calls for a good understanding of how the various source materials have formed, and the critical issues related to them. In this study, the actual objects, the written documents and the folklore accounts are treated as equally important, if dissimilar, sources for gaining understanding of the phenomenon at hand.

Next, I will firstly present the cases of miniature coffins discovered in churches that have come to my attention, and then move on to review the folklore accounts that tell of the practices involving such objects. As mentioned above, one key source on the discovered coffins consists of old newspaper articles. As always with media, there is the possibility that facts have been misunderstood by the reporter, or they have been deliberately sensationalized. Unfortunately, it seems that only nine of these coffins have been preserved, and thus more precise studies of the actual number, content, or material of all the coffins are not possible. However, the few preserved objects do ascertain that the whole story of the miniature coffins is certainly not a fantasy.

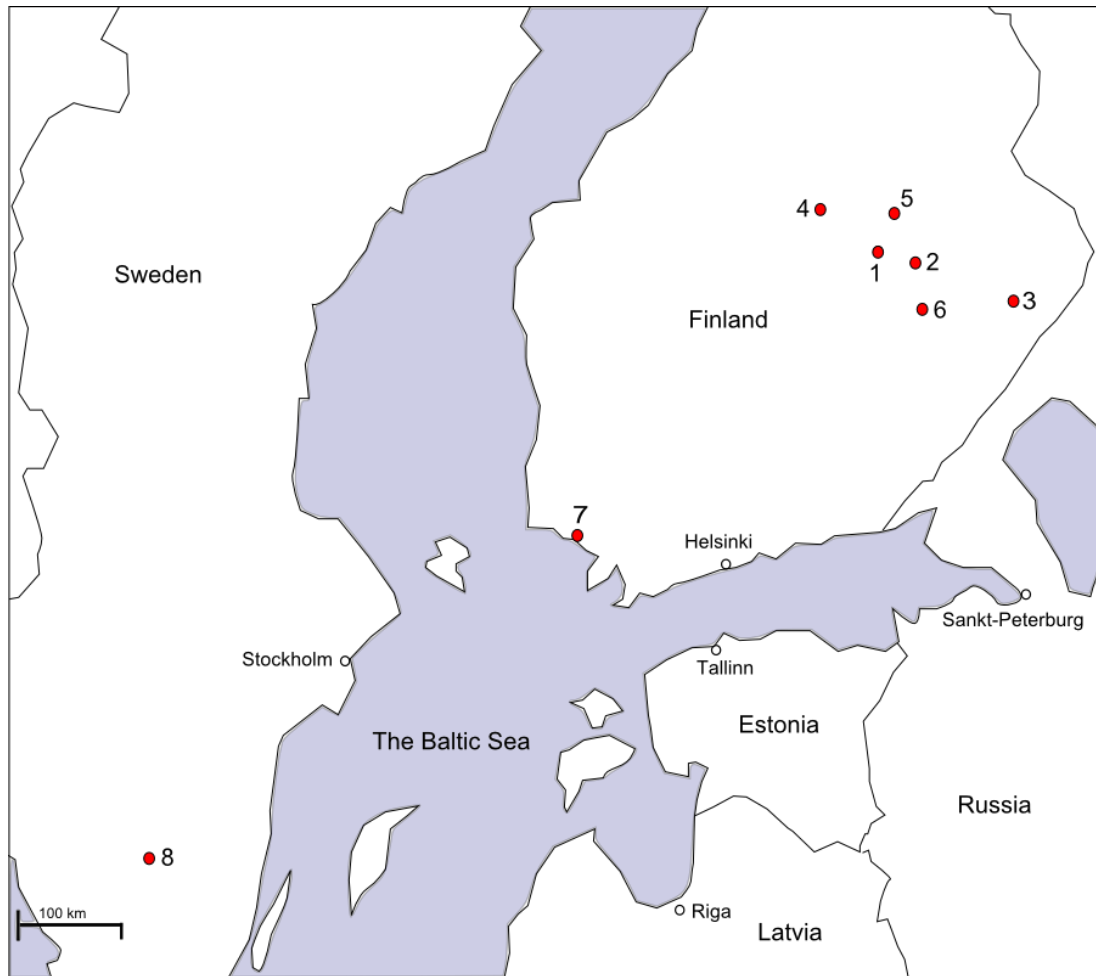
### **‘Curious’ finds from churches**

The locations of the eight churches where miniature coffins have been reported are shown in Map 1. Most of the sites are fairly close to each other in Central and Eastern Finland, but as can be seen from the map, there are also two exceptions. Table 1 summarizes the churches and their finds. Next, I will present these cases individually in the order in which they appear in the map and in the table.

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<sup>14</sup> Stark 2006, 163–253; also e.g. Eilola 2003, 256–302.

<sup>15</sup> Sonja Hukantaival, ‘Finding Folk Religion – An Archaeology of ‘Strange’ Behaviour’, *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 55 (2013), 99–124, <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol55/hukantaival.pdf> (last consulted 10.1.2014).



**Map 1. The locations where miniature coffins have been discovered in churches: 1) Kuopio, 2) Tuusniemi, 3) Kiihtelysvaara, 4) Pielavesi, 5) Nilsjä, 6) Heinävesi, 7) Turku, and 8) Bringetofta.**

No.	Church	Finds
1	Kuopio Cathedral	At least 32 miniature coffins; frogs, pieces of fishing net, textile
2	Tuusniemi Church and Bell Tower	Possibly up to 100 miniature coffins; frogs, bedbugs, hair, grains
3	Kiihtelysvaara Church	Four (?) miniature coffins; cat, squirrels, alder puppet
4	Pielavesi Old Church	Miniature coffin; alder-puppet / bound frogs, birch-bark puppets
5	Nilsjä Old Church	Miniature coffin; frog, piece of fishing net, textile
6	Heinävesi Old Church	Miniature coffin; frog, piece of fishing net
7	Turku Cathedral	Miniature coffin; frog, textile
8	Bringetofta Church (Swe.)	Miniature coffin; bat, textile

**Table 1. The churches where miniature coffins have been reported.**

*Kuopio Cathedral*

The newspaper *Savo-Karjala* wrote in July 1895 that 26 wooden miniature coffins had been found during renovation work under the floor of Kuopio Cathedral's choir.<sup>16</sup> Kuopio is the central town of the eastern Finnish province of Northern Savo, and the stone Cathedral was consecrated in 1816.<sup>17</sup> According to the newspaper report, the coffins were found when the floor of the choir was opened, and they had obviously been pushed there through the ventilation hatches in the foundation with long poles over a lengthy period.

The newspaper report explains that the small, c. 17 cm-long, coffins were made of alder with a lid of aspen. Inside the coffins were the remains of a frog to which a piece of linen cloth and a piece of net had been attached with a needle. Most of the coffins were already decomposing but some were still intact and one was even quite fresh. The workers assumed that the frog coffins were a part of fishing magic; one boy had known that those who had concealed them were 'not from far away' and that it was envious fishermen who concealed these coffins in order to harm each other. The newspaper report concluded with an appalled remark about such superstitious practices existing in the centre of civilization in Northern Savo.



**Fig 1. The coffin found in 1895 in Kuopio Cathedral and kept in the National Museum (KM F 1253). Photo by Timo Syrjänen (1985), National Board of Antiquities. Copyright restricted.**

The most recently deposited coffin was kept. According to the newspaper *Päivälehti*, it was displayed in November 1895 at the monthly meeting of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki.<sup>18</sup> At this point it is mentioned that there had been 30 coffins altogether, but this could be a rounded figure. This coffin is one of the two that ended up in the National Museum in Helsinki (see Fig. 1). The other one was delivered to the museum two years later in 1897. According to the museum catalogue, the later one was a new find, but its discovery does not seem to have aroused similar

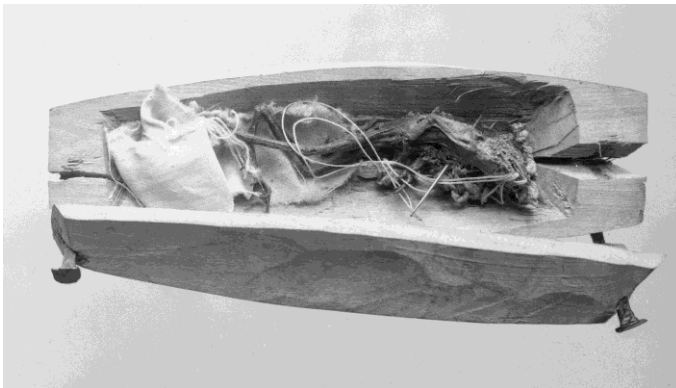
<sup>16</sup> 'Kummallisia löytöjä Kuopion tuomiokirkosta', *Savo-Karjala* 72 (10.7.1895), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Bruno Granit-Ilmoniemi, *Kuopion kirkko 1815–1915*, Kirjapaino Sanan valta Oy: Kuopio 1915, 37.

<sup>18</sup> 'Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran', *Päivälehti* 259 (7.11.1895), 3.

interest in the media as two years earlier, when the report summarized above was reposted in numerous newspapers around the country. However, when five additional coffins were discovered in 1901 the newspapers were again interested. I have translated here the brief report published in *Savo-Karjala* in its entirety, since it also gives a good impression of how these finds were perceived by the media when discovered:

Five small, c. 15 cm-long, coffins each with a frog and a piece of seine net inside have again been found in the stone foundation of the church during the repairs and painting of the cathedral of our town. Similar finds were discovered about five years ago also when the church was being renovated. Judging by the number of caskets now found, one frog sacrifice per year was made since then, to who knows what guardian spirit in the search of luck or whatever. It is truly miserable and pitiable that such superstition still lives on, such disgusting and also childishly ridiculous work of an ignorant magician!<sup>19</sup>



**Fig. 2. The second frog from Kuopio Cathedral in the National Museum (KM 3442). The mouth of the frog appears to have been stitched shut. Photo: National Board of Antiquities. Copyright restricted.**

Judging from this report it seems that all five newly discovered coffins were fresh ones, concealed between the years 1895 and 1901. This idea, however, could simply come from the number of finds. The newspaper *Uusi Savo* gives some additional information, noting that the coffins were ‘in the same place as the older finds’, specifically under the floor of the women’s side (the north side) of the church. This observation was not mentioned in the earliest report, but *Uusi Suometar*, which was one of the few papers that did not simply repost the *Savo-Karjala* report, reveals that this was the case.<sup>20</sup> The letter in *Uusi Savo* also mentions that the newly found coffins were planned to be kept in the local museum.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> ‘Löytöjä’, *Savo-Karjala* 80 (19.7.1901), 2.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Pakanuus’, *Uusi Suometar* 157 (11.7.1895), at 2.

<sup>21</sup> Olli, ‘Kirje Kuopiosta’, *Uusi Savo* 82 (20.7.1901), at 2.



The Kuopio Museum has the information that these coffins were discovered, but apparently the objects did not end up there. However, one coffin from Kuopio Cathedral was delivered to the museum in 1900. This 17 cm-long coffin contains the dried remains of a frog.<sup>22</sup> The two coffins kept in the National Museum in Helsinki have been briefly presented by Raila Kataja in 2008 on the museum's web pages. Both coffins are made of alder and there is a frog inside. The frog was either wrapped in pieces of fishing net, or the net was put under the head of the frog. There are three pieces of net or fabric in each coffin. In both cases the frog was impaled with a needle with some white thread in it.<sup>23</sup> An old photograph taken of the 1897 coffin suggests that the frog's mouth was stitched shut with the thread before impaling the animal with the needle (see Fig 2.).

### *Tuusniemi Church*

In 1907 several dozen frog coffins were found during renovation work in the Church of Tuusniemi in Northern Savo some 40 kilometres directly east of Kuopio. This wooden church was built in 1869.<sup>24</sup> The newspaper *Savotar* reported that the coffins were discovered when the foundation of the church was repaired. Also these coffins had been put under the floor through openings in the foundation. According to the newspaper, all the coffins contained a frog, which was wrapped in fish net or fishing line and pinned with a needle. The newspaper report also explains that these frog coffins were sacrifices made by fishermen in order to obtain good fishing luck and to protect their gear against the evil eye.<sup>25</sup>

It seems that this was actually not the first or last time when miniature coffins were found at the site. I have found a first-hand folklore account recorded in 1916 about previous finds from Tuusniemi in the Folklore Archives. These were discovered in the bell tower built in 1818.<sup>26</sup> The informant, Antti Heiskanen, who worked as the smith's assistant when a striker and base were made for the bell, remembers that several miniature alder coffins with a frog, some bedbugs, animal hair, or grains inside them were found in the space between the ceiling and roof of the bell tower. He also mentions that the coffins may have been concealed in order to restore luck for the growth of grain that had been spoiled through witchcraft.<sup>27</sup> A

<sup>22</sup> Catalogued KHMESIE 1689; Kuopio Museum amanuensis Helka Väisänen, pers. comm. 18.3.2014.

<sup>23</sup> Kataja 2008; The one delivered to the museum in 1895 is catalogued as KM F 1253 and the one delivered in 1897 is catalogued as KM 3442: 1.

<sup>24</sup> Carolus Lindberg, *Suomen kirkot: Maamme kirkkorakennuksia käsittelevä tietoteos*, Kustantaja Kuvataide: Helsinki 1934, 279.

<sup>25</sup> 'Kummallisia löytöjä kirkon sillan alta', *Savotar* 120 (19.10.1907), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Lindberg 1934, 279.

<sup>27</sup> Helsinki, FLS FA, Tuusniemi. Lönnbohm, O. A. F. b) 2905. 1916.

new bell was installed in 1879,<sup>28</sup> which means that the informant apparently recalled events that had occurred almost 40 years earlier, unless a new base and striker were made later as well. Nevertheless, the account seems sincere.

Another piece of oral history was recorded from sexton Tuomas Voutilainen in the mid-1930s. He explains that five years earlier, when the stone foundation of the church was repaired on the altar side, he carried close to 70 miniature coffins from under the church floor to a place known as *Kanahauta*<sup>29</sup> close by the church. He had opened a couple of them and one contained a dead frog wrapped in fishing net and a 5 *penni* coin with red thread passing through a hole in it. He also mentions that the frog resembled a miniature human corpse.<sup>30</sup>

### *Kiihtelysvaara Church*

In 1931 some miniature coffins were found during renovation work in Kiihtelysvaara Church in North Karelia. This is also a wooden church, which was built in 1769–70.<sup>31</sup> In this case the newspaper *Savo* apparently exaggerated the conditions of the find, since a letter written in 1933 by the parish office to the museum authorities in Helsinki gives slightly different details about the finds. The newspaper reports that two crucified squirrels inside miniature aspen coffins were discovered under the floor of the sacristy, and that this was done as a part of love magic in order to drive a rival mad. A cat inside a coffin was also found in the space between the ceiling and the roof, and a puppet made of a Y-shaped alder stick and wool yarn. The newspaper report concludes with the remark that these finds may be 150 years old, and they are clearly the work of professional witchdoctors that were paid with barrels of grain for their help.<sup>32</sup>

A letter written two years later to the museum authorities shows a less dramatic side of the story. Dean Juho Nojonen who wrote the letter in response to an enquiry explained that the carcass of a cat had been found inside a hollowed alder trunk in the sealed space between the ceiling and roof of the southern entrance hall. He continues that two squirrel carcasses were found in the stone foundation of the church on the side of the altar. They had been similarly ‘packed’ as the cat, and had probably been put there when the church did not yet have a sacristy. A puppet made of

<sup>28</sup> Aimo Junkkari, *Tuusniemen kirkko*, Kuopion ev.lut. seurakunnat: Kuopio 1989, 12, <http://www.tuusniemi.fi/Tiedostot/tuusniemen%20kirkko.pdf> (last consulted 14.1.2014).

<sup>29</sup> According to a local informant, Kyllikki Tourunen (6.3.2014), the *Kanahauta* (Chicken Grave) is a deep natural pit near the church.

<sup>30</sup> Helsinki, FLS FA, Tuusniemi. Räsänen, Otto. KRK 118: 131. 1935–6.

<sup>31</sup> Lindberg 1934, 98–99.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Merkillisiä löytöjä Kiihtelysvaaralla’, *Savo* 188 (15.7.1931).

woollen yarn had also been found in this place. The architect Rancken had discussed these finds with some antiquarians, who had told him that only the puppet was of any interest, the letter explains. However, this puppet could no longer be found. The carcasses had been thrown away, but first the finds had been photographed<sup>33</sup>, and the coffins were kept by the dean.<sup>34</sup>

The coffins were delivered to the National Museum of Finland. They are very roughly made, 40–45 cm long pieces of hollowed alder trunks. There are three of them, all similar, and it seems that one of them belonged to the puppet. It also seems that the larger trunk where the cat had been was not kept after all. This inconsistency was noticed by the antiquarians, but they never received an answer from the dean when inquiring about it.<sup>35</sup>

### *The Old Church of Pielavesi*

The fourth church where miniature coffins have been reported is the old church of Pielavesi in Northern Savo. This wooden church, situated on an island in Lake Pielavesi, was in use from 1797 until it was dismantled in 1882.<sup>36</sup> According to an account in the Dialect Archives of the Institute for the Languages of Finland recorded in 1933 two miniature coffins were found between the stones on the north side in the church's foundation. This account was published by Tenka (formerly Touko) Issakainen:

The experience of the pastor's son Svante J. Hornborg (1860–1928) was recalled and recorded by his nephew after his death. The c. 20 cm-long coffins had a human figure carved from alder inside. The figure had eyes made from tin and a cross on the chest. On top of the cross was a coin. The coin and cross were fastened on the figure with red thread.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> The photograph has been published in Ilma Vatanen, 'Kiihtelysvaaran kotiseutumuseon syntyvaiheet', in M. Peltonen ed., *Kiihtelysvaara ennen ja nyt*, Kiihtelysvaaran kunta ja seurakunta: Kiihtelysvaara 1977, 167–173, at 172; and Jari Uimonen, *Kirkko vaaralla – keskellä kylää. Kiihtelysvaaran seurakuntaelämää 1500-luvulta tähän päivään*, Kiihtelysvaara-Seura ry.: Kiihtelysvaara 2003, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Helsinki, National Board of Antiquities, Topographic Historical Archive, Kiihtelysvaara.

<sup>35</sup> Helsinki, National Museum of Finland, Main catalogue, KM 7604: 1–3.

<sup>36</sup> Marja Terttu Knapas, 'Pielaveden kirkot', in M. T. Knapas ed., *Ylä-Savon kirkot*, (Suomen kirkot – Finlands kyrkor 19), National Board of Antiquities: Helsinki 1993, 67–98, at 68–71.

<sup>37</sup> Touko Issakainen, 'Taikatekstien arkistokontekstit ja hermeneuttinen tutkimusote', in T. Kurki ed., *Kansanrunousarkisto, lukijat ja tulkinnat*, Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2004, 111–137, at 132–133; Touko Issakainen, "'Vainajien lapset". Taikaesineet ajassa', *Ennen ja nyt* 2 (2006), at 5, [http://www.ennenjanyt.net/2006\\_2/issakainen.pdf](http://www.ennenjanyt.net/2006_2/issakainen.pdf) (16.1.2014); Tenka Issakainen, *Tavallista taikuutta. Tulkinta suomalaisten taikojen merkityksistä Mikko Koljosen osaamisen valossa*, (Annales Universitatis Turkuensis C 347) University of Turku: Turku 2012, 140, <http://www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/84792/AnnalesC347Issakainen.pdf?sequence=1> (last consulted 16.1.2014).

Even though these coffins had been found by the informant's uncle, it seems that he may have kept them and showed them to the nephew, since the description is so detailed. It is naturally also possible that parts of this account come from the nephew's imagination, but magic practices involving similar alder puppets are nevertheless well known,<sup>38</sup> making the account perfectly plausible.

For example, a similar alder puppet bound with red thread and put inside a miniature alder coffin has been reported to have been found in the eighteenth century in the Liperi churchyard in North Karelia.<sup>39</sup> Also Issakainen writes about alder puppets found outside the church; in Karttula in Northern Savo. They were found in the 1870s and one of them is kept in the National Museum.<sup>40</sup>

Another piece of oral history explains that when the old church of Pielavesi was demolished, some human figures made of birch bark and frogs bound with thread, strips of textile, or birch bark were found under the church floor. The account explains that they had been put there as part of magic practices. The human figures were small, c. 10–20 cm long.<sup>41</sup> This account was recorded in the mid-1930s, with approximately 50 years between the record and the find event. However, in the light of these two pieces of oral history, it seems clear that some magic artefacts were found when this church was dismantled.

### *The Old Churches of Nilsii and Heinävesi*

There is also oral history recorded in the 1930s concerning finds from the old church of Nilsii in Northern Savo and the old church of Heinävesi in Southern Savo. The old church of Nilsii was in use from 1797 to 1906, and it was dismantled in 1915.<sup>42</sup> According to an account in the Folklore Archives, a miniature coffin containing a frog was found under the altar during the dismantling work. The account also mentions that this coffin is kept in the Kuopio Museum.<sup>43</sup> The coffin is in fact part of the collections of the Kuopio Museum, and it is kept in the small local museum in Nilsii. According to the museum catalogue, this 17 cm-long coffin made of birch contained a frog, a

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Matti Kuusi, 'Pohjoispohjalaista taikuutta kahden vuosisadan takaa', in M. Kuusi, *Perisuomalaista ja kansainvälistä* (Tietolipas 99), Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 1985, 22–44, at 39–44; Issakainen 2006; Juha Ruohonen, 'A Witch's Coin from Tervo', in J. Harjula, M. Helamaa & J. Haarala eds., *Times, Things & Places: 36 Essays for Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen*, J. P. Taavitsainen Festschrift Committee: Turku 2011, 344–357, 350–354.

<sup>39</sup> Ilmari Manninen, *Liperin seurakunnan historia Ruotsin vallan aikana*, (Suomen Kirkkohistoriallisen Seuran Toimituksia XV), Suomen Kirkkohistoriallinen Seura: Helsinki 1917, 80.

<sup>40</sup> Issakainen 2004, 133; 2006, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Helsinki, FLS FA, Vehmersalmi. Airaksinen, Emil. KRK 91:73. 1935–6.

<sup>42</sup> Lindberg 1934, 178.

<sup>43</sup> Helsinki, FLS FA, Nilsii. Pirinen, Kalle. KRK 112:14. 1935–6.

piece of fishing net and a piece of linen fabric. It was found in 1912 under Nilsjä Church. However, the contents of the coffin have been lost at some stage and only the coffin remains.<sup>44</sup>

The old church of Heinävesi was in use from 1840 until it was burnt down by lightning in 1887.<sup>45</sup> An account in the Folklore Archives explains that a miniature coffin containing a frog and a piece of seine net was found in the stone foundation when it was taken apart. The account explains this as an attempt to improve fishing luck.<sup>46</sup>

### *Turku Cathedral*

The above presented sites are all situated on the eastern side of the border between western and eastern Finnish cultures (see Map 2 below), but one frog coffin has also been found in the south-western part of the country known as Finland Proper. The Turku Cathedral, the medieval masonry church where the find was discovered, is the national shrine of Finland. In addition to the location, this find also differs from the above ones by its slightly older date.

The miniature coffin was found inside the jamb of the portal of the Tigerstedt-Wallenstierna chapel on the south side of the cathedral during extensive renovation work in 1923–24. The c. 20 cm-long coffin is very elaborately made from varnished pine with a strip of linen cloth glued to the rim. The lid has been fastened with a nail in each end. There are three small holes drilled in a horizontal line on both sides of the coffin. According to the find information, a frog's skeleton and a bundle of cloth were inside. However, when the object was now taken from storage for examination, no skeleton could be found. It must have been either removed at some stage or it simply decomposed. Only a small piece of a bone that had stuck on the cloth was discovered. According to archaeo-osteologist Auli Bläuer, the piece of bone is certainly either from a frog or a lizard,<sup>47</sup> which means that the original observation of a frog is highly likely to be correct. There are two pieces of white textile in a bundle inside the coffin: one larger piece of finer linen or cotton cloth, and a smaller, rougher piece. There is an inscription on the bottom of the coffin bearing the stylized initials 'HM'.

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<sup>44</sup> Catalogued KHMESIE 477; Kuopio Museum amanuensis Helka Väisänen, pers. comm. 18.3.2014.

<sup>45</sup> Lindberg 1934, 43.

<sup>46</sup> Helsinki, FLS FA, Heinävesi. Pakarinen, Kalle. KT 79:49. 1937.

<sup>47</sup> Pers. comm. 18.9.2013.



**Fig. 3. The miniature coffin found in Turku Cathedral is very elaborately made. Photo by Sonja Hukantaival (2014).**

The coffin is kept in storage at the Cathedral Museum and is catalogued with the number 1397. It was displayed in the museum's exhibition at least in the

early 1950s.<sup>48</sup> The coffin was also photographed shortly after it was found, and one of these photographs is published in the book about witches and witchcraft trials in Finland in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries by Marko Nenonen and Timo Kervinen. This book mentions that the coffin was deposited in the 1680s, but no grounds are given for this interpretation.<sup>49</sup> The date must come from when the space was taken into use as a burial chapel in 1687. The space, however, was in fact originally a medieval porch.<sup>50</sup> The find information is not precise enough to establish that the coffin was concealed in a place that had been accessible only in the late seventeenth century.

To find out if the coffin could be even older than this, the small piece of bone found in it was AMS-radiocarbon dated.<sup>51</sup> The result was a <sup>14</sup>C age of 180 ± 30 BP which gives a calibrated date (2 sigma) with the highest probability (52.2 %) in the period 1720–1820 AD or (19.5 % probability) in 1650–1700 AD. The nineteenth century is also possible, but considerably less likely (4.1 % probability) than the earlier dates. A peak in the calibration curve coinciding with the early twentieth century can be disregarded, since the coffin was discovered in the 1920s, and it is not likely that it had been recently concealed. Radiocarbon dating is not very precise and this effect is emphasized when dating recent items.<sup>52</sup> Still, the radiocarbon date confirmed that the frog inside the coffin was certainly not older than the late seventeenth century. Building-historical considerations increase the probability of a late seventeenth century dating and the miniature coffin

<sup>48</sup> Juhani Rinne & Iikka Kronqvist, *Turun tuomiokirkko: opas kokoelmiin tutustuttaessa*, Turku Cathedral: Turku 1952, 16; its old number was 106: 31.

<sup>49</sup> Marko Nenonen & Timo Kervinen, *Synnin palkka on kuolema: Suomalaiset noidat ja noitavainot 1500–1700-luvulla*, Otava: Helsinki 1994, 66–67.

<sup>50</sup> C. J. Gardberg, Simo Heininen & P. O. Welin, *Kansallispyhäkkö. Turun Tuomiokirkko 1300–2000*, Tammi: Helsinki 2000, 187.

<sup>51</sup> Ua-48076.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. R. E. Taylor, 'Radiocarbon Dating in Archaeology', in C. Smith ed., *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, Springer: New York 2014; Kit W. Wesler, 'Dating Methods in Historical Archaeology', in C. Smith ed., *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, Springer: New York 2014.

coincides typologically with the full-sized coffins in the Uppsala Cathedral of Kjellberg Type 5, which dates to c. 1650–1750.<sup>53</sup> Thus the find is quite reliably placed in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century.

*Bringetofta Church: an analogous case from Sweden*

In addition to the Finnish finds presented above, one find from southern Sweden has come to my attention. A miniature pine coffin (15 cm long) was found during restoration work in 1992 in the medieval church of Bringetofta in Jönköping County, Småland. It was published by Eva Londos in the periodical of the local heritage society. The object had been walled up under a window in the western wall that was built in 1754. Inside this coffin was a piece of white linen textile that was likely to have been a piece of clothing. Wrapped inside this cloth were the remains of a bat. At the time of this publication, no similar finds were known to Londos. The find is kept at the Jönköping County Museum.<sup>54</sup>

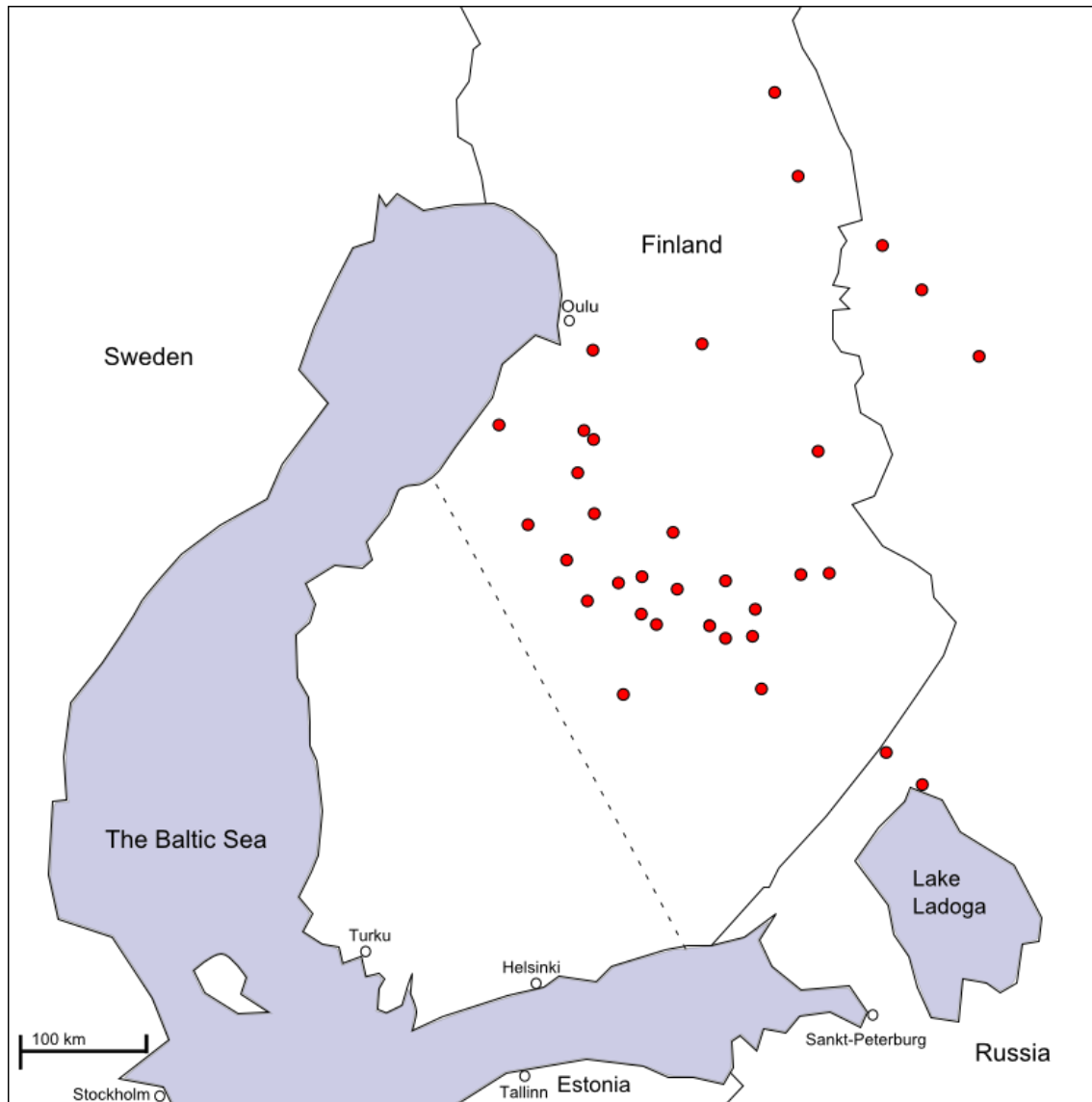
**‘A frog is then put in an alder coffin’ – The folklore evidence**

The folklore evidence gathered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century about practices involving a miniature coffin is fortunately quite extensive, so there is no need to try to guess what meanings they could have been carrying. Naturally, this material has also passed through formation processes that have influenced its present state. The interests of the collectors, the willingness of informants to discuss these practices, and the archives’ classification system all contribute to the material available for research. The total number of accounts studied here is 63, 49 of which are published in either the *Suomen Kansan Muinaisia Taikoja* (Ancient Magic of the Finnish People) series or the *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* (Ancient Poems of the Finnish People) series. The unpublished ones are kept in the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki (FLS FA). A table with complete reference information to each account is found as an appendix at the end of this paper.

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<sup>53</sup> Joakim Kjellberg, pers. comm. 9.4.2014; Joakim Kjellberg, ‘To Organize the Dead: The Stratigraphy of Post-Reformation Graves from Uppsala Cathedral’ (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>54</sup> Eva Londos, ‘Föremål och fenomen: En fladdermus begravning?’, *Hembygdsförbundet Informerar: Jönköpings Läns Hembygdsförbund* 17: 4 (1992), 10–11.



**Map 2.** The locations where folklore concerning magic miniature coffins has been collected are marked with dots. The dashed line indicates the approximate course of the border between the western and eastern Finnish cultures.

The area where folklore material describing these coffins has been collected is shown in Map 2. The largest amount of material has been recorded in Central Finland (16 accounts). The other areas are Northern Savo (14 accounts), North Karelia (9 accounts), North Ostrobothnia (8 accounts), Dvina Karelia in Russia (7 accounts), Kainuu (3 accounts), Ladoga Karelia in Russia (2 accounts), Southern Savo (1 account), and South Lapland (1 account). The remaining 2 accounts are recorded in Ostrobothnia without more exact information. The Karelian areas in Russia belong to the Orthodox faith, while the other regions are Lutheran. As can be seen on Map 2 the folklore material has only been collected from areas belonging to eastern



Finnish and Karelian cultures.<sup>55</sup> However, two of the cases of coffin finds presented above (Turku and Bringetofta) indicate that the picture may not have been quite this simple.

When looking at the reasons why a ritual ending with burying a miniature coffin was carried out, especially one type of situation dominates: when misfortune was suspected to have been caused by means of witchcraft. Most of the accounts (67 %) describe practices of counter-magic, where evil influences are directed back towards the sender, often lethally. The accounts describing these practices are often quite long and detailed. I have chosen here as an example a shorter published description that I have translated from Finnish. This account was recorded in Pihtipudas in Central Finland in the 1890s.

When a field has been spoiled and one wants to kill the one responsible for this, one should circle around the field three times with a frog in a bucket of water. Water from the bucket is sprinkled on the field while circling. Then the frog is removed, its legs are bound with red thread, and it is put in a coffin made of alder wood. The coffin is then buried in the churchyard in the most recent grave while reciting burial words and saying: 'As many devils will come to take the life of the spoiler as the number of needles of coniferous trees in the range of the church bell's chime.' This will kill the witch responsible for ruining the field.<sup>56</sup>

In this account a sympathetic connection between the 'spoiled', bewitched, field and the frog is made through water sprinkled on the field. In many other accounts something associated with the bewitched object (field, farm animals, hunting or fishing equipment) is put with the frog (or other animal/object, see below) in the coffin, sometimes even in its mouth; for example some grains or sprouts of a bewitched field, or pieces cut from the equipment. The circling around the affected area and bounding with red thread, or alternatively impaling with nails or needles, are also recurring elements of these rituals.

However, not all accounts describe counter-magic. A small part of them (15 %) tell of malignant magic, where something or someone is bewitched and even killed. In principle, these practices are in outer appearance very similar to the above discussed counter-magic ones.

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<sup>55</sup> About the cultural areas based on historical provinces and the cultural border, see Matti Sarmela, *Finnish Folklore Atlas*, (Ethnic Culture of Finland 2), Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2009, 11, 661–662, 665. <http://www.kotikone.fi/matti.sarmela/folkloreAtlas.pdf> (3.6.2014).

<sup>56</sup> *Suomen Kansan Muinaisia Taikoja III: Maanviljelystaikoja*, A. V. Rantasalo ed., Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 1912, no. 658 e5.

However, in these cases something belonging to the intended victim is buried in the coffin. For example, one account tells that a field can be bewitched so that sprouts will not grow if some grains are taken from its harvest and put in the mouth of a frog which is then buried in a miniature coffin in the churchyard.<sup>57</sup> The crucial difference between the meanings is the intention of the practitioner which guides the effect.

As already hinted above, frogs are not the only things that could be buried in these rituals, but they are the most commonly mentioned (in 70 % of the accounts). The next frequently mentioned animal is pike, or simply fish. Squirrels are also mentioned, and one account even describes the burial of a human foetus. This Dvina Karelian account explains that if someone has bewitched a cowshed or stable by concealing a foetus in it, the witch is killed if this foetus is buried in a miniature alder coffin in the churchyard.<sup>58</sup> A small number of accounts describe a miniature burial where the content of the coffin does not include an animal. For example, one account explains that if a hunter has been bewitched to die in pain, some of his blood should be taken before he dies and buried in a miniature alder coffin on the north side of a hill under an anthill. This will cause the death of the witch simultaneously as the victim dies.<sup>59</sup>

Other substances of the body mentioned to have been buried without any accompanying animal are milk, feathers, and pieces of hooves (horse and sheep). The cases where feathers were buried alone or together with a frog are special in the sense that they were aimed at harming or killing a thief who has stolen a bird from a trap. In one account from Dvina Karelia soil taken from the bottom of the lake under the seine net should be buried in a miniature coffin if the fishing equipment has been bewitched. This coffin should be buried on the north side of a hill in a place where the sun never shines, and then a forest spirit will kill the witch.<sup>60</sup> Also some human-made objects could be used: one account describes the burial of a knife,<sup>61</sup> and another a woman's headdress.<sup>62</sup> These are both examples of malicious magic aimed at killing someone.

Even though several accounts describing practices involving an alder puppet (called 'alder child', 'alder boy', or 'alder man') have been recorded, I have only come across one describing the burial of the object in a miniature

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<sup>57</sup> SKMT III, 565 j.

<sup>58</sup> *Suomen Kansan Muinaisia Taikoja IV, 2: Karjaitaikoja*, A. V. Rantasalo ed., Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 1933, no. XIV 234.

<sup>59</sup> *Suomen Kansan Muinaisia Taikoja I: Metsästystaikoja*, M. Varonen ed., Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 1891, no. 106.

<sup>60</sup> *Suomen Kansan Muinaisia Taikoja II: Kalastustaikoja*, M. Varonen ed., Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 1892, no. 349.

<sup>61</sup> SKMT I, 100.

<sup>62</sup> SKMT IV:2, XIV 352.

coffin.<sup>63</sup> However, one puppet inside its coffin from Northern Savo kept in the National Museum,<sup>64</sup> and the finds from the old Church of Pielavesi and Liperi churchyard presented above also show that this has been done, but perhaps it was not as common as the use of frogs. The folklorist Matti Kuusi has summarized the various uses of an alder puppet. It could be used for example to punish an unidentified thief, to protect a child against the ‘night-crying-maker’, in healing magic, and love magic.<sup>65</sup> An alder puppet could also be used when delivering cattle from the ‘forest cover’; where this image represents the forest which is forced to release the cattle it has enchanted.<sup>66</sup> Cattle could also be protected against wolves with the help of an alder puppet conjured to act as a herdsman.<sup>67</sup>

Some of the counter-magic examples give a choice between actually killing the witch and only making him/her suffer. This choice is made through details in the burial. For example, one account from Pihtipudas in Central Finland explains that if the frog coffin is thrown in rapids the witch will die but if it is buried under a stone he/she will suffer.<sup>68</sup> A record from Puolanka in Kainuu explains that if the pike used in this case is buried in a black coffin the witch will die, but will only suffer if the coffin is white and no burial words are recited.<sup>69</sup> In some accounts the choice is made through the position of the coffin: if it is buried with the bottom down (as in a normal burial) the witch will die, but will only suffer if it is buried on its side.

As shown by the examples given here, the church and churchyard were not the only locations where these miniature coffins could be buried. The burial place was often associated with the bewitched site, for example when curing a bewitched field the coffin may have been buried by this field. However, in several cases it is clear that the chosen location of burial was connected with the kind of otherworldly aid sought for the effort, as in the example given above where a forest spirit was mentioned. Especially places with streaming water were favoured, and some accounts specify that a water spirit will assist in punishing the guilty. This is related to the *väki* belief discussed in the following section.

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<sup>63</sup> Tenka Issakainen, *Tavallista taikuutta. Tulkinta suomalaisten taikojen merkityksistä Mikko Koljosen osaamisen valossa* (Annales Universitatis Turkuensis C 347), Turun yliopisto: Turku 2012, 144–145.

<sup>64</sup> Sirelius 1906, 35; Ilmari Manninen, ‘Kansanomaisesta tautiopista ja taikaparannuksista’, in E. Jutikkala ed., *Suomen Kulttuurihistoria I*, Gummerus: Jyväskylä 1933, 228–244, at 243; catalogued as KM F 277.

<sup>65</sup> Kuusi 1985, 42–43.

<sup>66</sup> SKMT IV:2, VII 179, 180; see also Stark 2006, 357–380 about the ‘forest-cover’.

<sup>67</sup> *Suomen Kansan Muinaisia Taikoja IV, 1: Karjataikoja*, A. V. Rantasalo ed., Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 1933, no. VI 77.

<sup>68</sup> SKMT III, 422.

<sup>69</sup> SKMT III, 143.

### Discussion: Magic to Kill, Magic to Heal

The folklore accounts show that the miniature coffin rituals were strong magic, often believed to have lethal consequences. The majority of these records describe counter-magic where an unidentified witch or thief is punished for sorcery or theft. However, the newspaper reports reviewed above explain these practices as malignant magic performed by envious people in order to harm rivals practising the same livelihood. It is likely that there are two kinds of sources of bias present that form this divergent picture. Firstly, the newspaper reports are likely to be sensationalized to some degree; a shocking story of gruesome witchcraft is always more interesting than one about more socially acceptable behaviour. Secondly, since counter-witchcraft was seen as socially acceptable (see below), informants may have been more comfortable in discussing it with a folklore collector. In reality, as also some of the folklore accounts indicate, a similar ritual may have been possible both in order to bewitch and to counteract sorcery. Since the notion of the coffins as sacrifices found in the media is not confirmed in any of the folklore material, it may simply be the interpretation of reporters.

Laura Stark's studies show that counter-magic where a witch was punished by sending back the evil influence to its source was a socially acceptable form of magic in the rural communities. These practices, often referred to as 'sending back the dog', were thought to only affect the guilty. They were thus a safe way to direct punishment, since they could not harm the innocent. For this reason, they were especially well suited to cases where the identity of the offender was uncertain. Stark also explains how this punishment of witches fit into the Christian environment. The magically-oriented and popular Christian world views shared the expectation that evildoers would be punished by supernatural means, with both modes of thought seeking moral closure. The Christian norm for forgiveness, however, clashed with the idea of magical revenge as a form of self-protection. The idea of forgiveness deprived victims of moral closure achieved through vengeance, and in the minds of the community it left the evildoers free to continue terrorizing their neighbours.<sup>70</sup>

Since folk religion is more oriented towards practical, everyday issues than the 'life hereafter' of official Christianity,<sup>71</sup> people easily resorted to the unofficial option in this kind of situation, where justice in the afterlife was not seen as a satisfactory immediate sentence that would actually force the

<sup>70</sup> Stark 2006, 180–186, 194–195, 233–239.

<sup>71</sup> See e.g. Ilkka Pyysiäinen, 'Folk Religion and Theological Correctness', *Temenos* 39–40 (2003–2004), 151–165, at 156–157.

evildoer to stop the harmful action. One interesting question is how the church and churchyard as holy places of the official religion combined with inappropriate practices of revenge or even witchcraft. A holy place in Christianity was also perceived as a powerful place in folk religion, but the otherworldly power of the church used in the miniature coffin practices did not come from God.

In the light of the folklore evidence and scholarly studies on *väki* beliefs it seems obvious that the otherworldly agency used in the church and churchyard came from the deceased: the *väki* of the dead. The ‘devils’ mentioned in the example above could also refer to this *väki* instead of actual demons.<sup>72</sup> In the context of folk religion, the notion of *väki* refers to both an impersonal otherworldly power and to otherworldly beings. Many different entities were believed to possess *väki* in the Finnish-Karelian folk religion: for example the forest, water, earth, fire, rock, metal, and the dead. These different types of *väki* were different in strength and could be manipulated against each other in magical practices.<sup>73</sup> For example the *väki* of water has sometimes been declared the oldest and strongest one, especially the kind found in rapids,<sup>74</sup> but this is not consistent since folk religion lacks dogmatic rules.<sup>75</sup>

One example where both the relationship with the official (Orthodox) religion and the different potency of the types of *väki* are discussed was recorded at Pistojärvi in Dvina Karelia in the late nineteenth century:

If a hunter’s gun has been bewitched so that it does not kill prey, a squirrel should be caught by any means, and the gun should be smeared with its blood. The squirrel is then skinned without using a knife and a coffin is made of a lone alder-tree. The squirrel is put in the coffin and buried in the churchyard like a corpse, while reciting prayers as a priest, but not the Priestly Blessing or the Lord’s Prayer from the part ‘but deliver us from evil’ onwards. Then the witch will die, and no one can heal him/her. But if the witch is unbaptized, so that a priest has not blessed him/her, then this will not work. In this case the coffin should be drowned in rapids; the water *väki* will find

<sup>72</sup> Kaarina Koski, *Kuoleman voimat: Kirkonväki suomalaisessa uskomusperinteessä*, Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2011, 132–134.

<sup>73</sup> On *väki* see e.g. Kaarle Krohn, *Suomalaisten runojen uskonto*, (Suomen suvun uskonnot I), Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 1915, 65–146; Touko Issakainen, “‘Tulenväki on kaikkein väkevin, se kun polttaa niin kovasti’”. Kansanuskon väki-kategorian uudelleenarviointia’, *Sananjalka* 44 (2002), 110–127; Koski 2003; 2008; 2011; Stark 2006, 258–262.

<sup>74</sup> Krohn 1915, 93.

<sup>75</sup> See Issakainen 2002 for critique against the scholarly use of the *väki*-concept. This is mainly connected with the fact that *väki* not only refers to otherworldly agency, but also has “profane” meanings. In this study the ambiguity of the *emic* meanings of the word causes no problems: The discussion is connected with the wider discussion on defining abstract terms mentioned above (cf. e.g. Hukantaival in press).

him/her, and there is no escape. If the coffin is put in the rapids so that it can be removed, the punishment can be reversed if the witch comes forward to confess, but only the one that put the coffin there can heal him/her.<sup>76</sup>

In this account it is clear that the informant was aware of a tension between the ritual and the official religion. Certain key parts of Christian prayers were not suitable to be used in this connection, and the notion of a need to use stronger power if the offender was unbaptized is very interesting. Dvina Karelia was still a peripheral area with loose ecclesiastical organization and few churches in the late nineteenth century,<sup>77</sup> and thus the alternative that not all people were baptized was possible, though hardly common.

As a quite typical example, this account can also be used as a basis for a closer analysis of the logic behind these counter-magic practices: The hunter's gun was bewitched, and while doing this the witch has inevitably formed a sympathetic link with the target. This link is transferred to the squirrel by smearing its blood on the gun (contagion). Now the squirrel represents the witch. When the squirrel is buried, the action affects the witch; what happens to the image of the witch also happen to him/her (imitation). Up to here it seems that the ritual works fairly mechanically without the help of assisting beings or powers. However, the notion that the ritual will not work on an unbaptized villain reveals that some 'tamed' power that was not potent enough was used. Instead of the almighty power of God the power used here might be that of baptized dead buried in the churchyard. In any case, since these Christian elements were perceived as ineffective against an unbaptized witch, the 'older' power of the rapids was needed to find the witch through the sympathetic link between him/her and his/her magic. Ultimately, this *väki* delivered the punishment, so technically this ritual was not only about sending back the same evil energy used by the witch.

When a similar ritual was used to bewitch someone, the same logic was basically present. Now something associated with the target was used to transform the animal to represent the victim, who was then harmed by burying it. The idea becomes slightly more obscure when the ritual was used to bewitch something that was not a person, but still the idea was to bury a piece of the target in order to cause the effect of death/inoperativeness in the represented whole. Also in these cases the *väki* of the burial place may have

<sup>76</sup> SKMT I, 282; translated by the current author. Note: The Finnish personal pronoun does not differentiate between the sexes.

<sup>77</sup> See e.g. Nina Lavonen & Aleksandra Stepanova, 'Kansanusko ja ortodoksisuus Karjalan tasavallassa', in T. Laitila & T. Saarinen (eds), *Uskonto ja identiteetti: Suomalais-ugrialaisten kokemuksia ja vaiheita Venäjällä ja Neuvostoliitossa*, Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 1999, 29–41; Stark 2002, 34–39.

been used as the power that caused the effect. Generally, the frog and fish were connected with the water *väki* while the squirrel belonged to the sphere of forest *väki*, and thus the choice of animal may also have been of significance in the ritual.<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, the cases where a bird thief was punished show that a sympathetic link was also believed to form between the thief and the stolen bird, whose leftover feathers could be used to harm the thief.

The old texts of U. T. Sirelius and Ilmari Manninen explain that the alder puppet in its miniature coffin kept in the National Museum belonged to the sphere of healing magic. They claim, without any reference information, that a healer transferred the disease to the wooden figure, and when this figure was buried in the churchyard the disease also died, and thus the patient was healed.<sup>79</sup> In fact, healing magic involving an alder puppet made from a stick and red yarn or textile (but not buried in a coffin) has been recorded in witchcraft and superstition trials in Liminka in 1678 and in Paltamo in 1748. However, these cases do not confirm the notion of burying the disease. In the Liminka case the healer had divined that the sickness originated in the forest, and the alder puppet was bound in the forest in a similar fashion as when the forest was forced to release the enchanted cattle in the folklore account mentioned above. Evidently the wooden figure represented the forest *väki* in this case. The Paltamo case is more unclear, but also here the figure was taken to the forest so that the patient could be released from his agony.<sup>80</sup>

One of the folklore accounts of frog coffins also describes healing magic. This account, recorded in Kuopio in the 1930s, depicts a healing ritual for epilepsy. The first part of this ritual takes place at a house, where the patient is treated while sitting on a threshold, the second part consist of preparing and concealing the frog coffin in the foundation of the church (with a piece of the patient's undergarments used as a burial shroud for the frog), and in the third part the patient is treated in the churchyard.<sup>81</sup> Though not explicitly stated in this account, it is possible that the healer suspected that the disease was caused by witchcraft. Epilepsy was one of the conditions easily suspected to have been the effect of sorcery.<sup>82</sup>

One question arising from this discussion is how old these practices may be. Presently, the evidence does not reach further back in time than possibly the late seventeenth century. It is nonetheless plausible that these

<sup>78</sup> See also Issakainen 2012, 143–145 about the use of frogs and pikes in Finnish folk magic.

<sup>79</sup> Sirelius 1906, 35; Manninen 1933, 243.

<sup>80</sup> Kuusi 1985, 39–44.

<sup>81</sup> Helsinki, FLS FA, Kuopio. Koponen, Juho. KRK 103:92. 1935–36.

<sup>82</sup> See M. Hako ed., *Kansanomainen lääkintätietous*, (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran toimituksia 229: 4), Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2000, 19.

customs existed in some form also earlier. Since the form of this ritual follows conventional burial practices, this aspect must be considered when considering its age. Nevertheless, similar practices have been known in ancient Assyrian and Greece contexts. Especially the Assyrian rituals that have survived in ancient texts, as discussed by Lorenzo Verderame, are quite strikingly similar in essence to the nineteenth-century Finnish-Karelian examples despite the considerable age difference. If a witch was unknown, figurines were moulded from clay or wax to represent the witch and then burned or bound to send back the evil force to its source; and a mouse is elaborately buried with all relevant funeral rites as counter-magic against sorcery.<sup>83</sup> The Ancient Greek examples are four miniature lead coffins containing lead figurines found in a graveyard in Athens dating from c. 400 BC, apparently made to attack enemies named on the objects.<sup>84</sup> However, the question of whether this similarity is due to common roots of the practices or simply universal cognitive traits<sup>85</sup> is beyond the limits of this paper.

Most of the found miniature coffins and all related folklore records belong to the Eastern Finnish and Karelian cultures. They are dated chiefly to the nineteenth century. The coffins from Turku and Bringetofta differ from the pattern due to their location, slightly earlier date, and the material of the coffins, being of pine instead of alder connected to most other cases. However, also aspen and birch have occurred, and perhaps the choice of material was wider than indicated by the folklore accounts. The evidence is too scarce to form a convincing hypothesis, but it is possible that the Turku and Bringetofta coffins belonged to a western variant of the custom; one that had already completely disappeared by the late nineteenth century when the collection of folklore material intensified. Additional finds would be needed to address this question adequately.

It is difficult to know if the numerous frog coffins found especially in Kuopio and Tuusniemi in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were an exceptional phenomenon, or if the intensity of the practice had simply remained secret earlier. However, it seems that something had caused the practice to surge in the area. Since the coffins have been reported to contain pieces of fishing equipment, it can be suspected that there was an extensive problem with the fishing waters in the lakes at the time. The problem might have been suspected to result from the witchcraft of envious neighbours; or at least it triggered a need to increase individual fishermen's

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<sup>83</sup> Lorenzo Verderame, 'Means of Substitution - The Use of Figurines, Animals, and Human Beings as Substitutes in Assyrian Rituals', in C. Ambos & L. Verderame (eds), *Approaching Rituals in Ancient Cultures* (Rivista Studi Orientali Supplemento 86), Fabrizio Serra editore: Rome 2013, 301–323.

<sup>84</sup> John G. Gager ed., *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1992, 15–17, 127–129.

<sup>85</sup> See Sørensen 2007 on universal cognitive aspects of magic.



fortune by sabotaging the equipment of others. This is another issue that requires further investigation in future studies.

## Conclusions

The phenomenon of the magic miniature coffins is complex and dynamic, and many aspects of these practices exceed the limits of this paper. For example, questions about the choice of buried animal are left for future discussion. The folklore accounts show that the most common reason for performing this ritual was when misfortune was suspected to have been caused by sorcery. In these cases, the ritual was aimed to counteract the evil influence and to punish the witch. However, the same practice could also be used to cause any victim suffering. In this paper, the basic logic of sympathetic magic present in these rituals is revealed as: 1) an animal is transformed to represent a witch or victim by the means of contagion or *pars pro toto*; 2) the effect is transferred to the witch/victim according to the laws of imitative magic when the animal is buried; 3) the aid of the otherworldly agency of the burial place is used to give power to the effect.

Since these coffins have been discovered in churches, the relationship between the practices and 'official' religion is a key element here. The place of burial donated the otherworldly power needed to fulfil the impact of the ritual. However, in the case of the church and churchyard this power was not divine, but rather that of the deceased buried there. The power of the dead has been used in numerous magical practices, since it was believed to be a potent force that could be manipulated by a skilful magic-worker.<sup>86</sup> Purely Christian elements are still present in the practices, since the burial form and rites were borrowed from this sphere. This is a good example of how the key components of the different belief systems were adopted and shaped into a syncretic 'folk religion'.<sup>87</sup>

Essentially, the frog coffins as counter-magic against witchcraft are a similar phenomenon as the famous witch bottles of the British Isles and United States. The custom is known from both finds and written documents, and it has existed at least from the seventeenth until the nineteenth century. In this practice the urine of a victim of witchcraft was put in a bottle (preferably a Bellarmine jug), together with sharp pins, needles, or shards, hair, nail-clippings, and sometimes a piece of fabric cut in a heart shape. The

<sup>86</sup> See e.g. Jari Eilola & Piia Einonen, 'Peukalot silkkirievussa: Ruumis ja ruumiinjäsenet noituudessa ja taikuudessa', in J. Eilola ed., *Makaaberi ruumis: Mielikuvia kuolemasta ja kehosta*, Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2009, 185–240; Emmi Tittonen, "'Nouse ylös vanha väki, lastujen perään!'" Hautausmaiden taikuus 1700-luvun lopulla', *J@rgonia* (14/2008), 1–19, <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/20072> (last consulted 13.3.2014); Koski 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Stark 2002, 30.

plugged bottle was heated on a fire and then buried, often upside-down. The aim of this practice was also to harm the witch through the sympathetic link between him/her and the victim.<sup>88</sup> This concluding observation illustrates the significance of counter-witchcraft practices in Early Modern Europe and beyond.

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<sup>88</sup> Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, New Amsterdam Books: New York 1987, 163–183; Brian Hoggard, ‘The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft and Popular Magic’, in O. Davies & W. de Blécourt (eds), *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe*, Manchester University Press: Manchester 2004, 167–186; M. Chris Manning, *Homemade Magic: Concealed Deposits in Architectural Contexts in the Eastern United States*, unpublished MA Thesis, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 2012, 94–140.

**Appendix 1.** The miniature magic coffins in folklore. The lower case letter in front of the location refers to the tradition-areas based on historical provinces: e) Central Finland, f) Southern Savo, g) Northern Savo, i) Ladoga Karelia, j) North Karelia, l) North Ostrobothnia, m) Kainuu, n) Lapland/Far Bothnia, p) Dvina Karelia.<sup>89</sup> Recent merging of municipalities has not been marked. Abbreviations: SKMT - *Suomen Kansan Muinaisia Taikvoja*, SKVR - *Suomen Kansan Vanhoja Runoja*, FLS FA - *Finnish Literature Society, Folklore Archives*.

Appendix 1. Miniature Magic coffins in folklore				
Location	Object	Context	Meaning	Reference
(East-Ostrobothnia)	Alder-coffin: squirrel	In the forest	Counter-magic	SKMT I, no. 104.
(Ostrobothnia)	Alder-box: feathers	In the ground	Punishing thief	SKMT I, no. 672.
e Hankasalmi	Alder-coffin: fish	By field	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 699.
e Keitele	Alder-coffin: frog/pike	In ant-hill	Counter-magic	FLS FA. Keitele. Tiitinen, Martti 3152. 1937.
e Pihtipudas	Coffin: frog	In field	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 654.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	In hearth	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 655.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	?	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 658.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	By stone	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 666.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	In churchyard	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 654 e5.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	In rapids	Counter-magic?	SKMT III, no. 487.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	In lake	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 654 e4.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	Where the frog was found	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 654 e5.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	Rapids or under stone	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 422.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	In lake	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 654 e1.
e Pihtipudas	Alder-coffin: frog	?	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 696.
e Viitasaari	Alder-coffin: frog	Under cowshed	Protective magic	SKVR IX4 1570. Viitas. Moisio 8. 1890.
e Viitasaari	Coffin: frog	Rapids	Counter-magic?	SKMT III, no. 653.
e Viitasaari	Alder-coffin: frog	In cowshed	Counter-magic	SKVR IX4. 1335. Viitas. Moisio 43. 1890.
f Heinävesi	Coffin: frog	Church	Fishing magic	FLS FA. Heinävesi. Pakarinen, Kalle. KT 79:49. 1937.
g Iisalmi	Alder-coffin: feathers	Rapids	Punishing thief	SKMT I, no. 669 g.
g Karttula	Alder-coffin: Frog, pike, egg	By field	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 652.
g Kuopio	Alder-coffin: frog	Church	Healing magic	FLS FA. Kuopio. Koponen, Juho. KRK103:92.

<sup>89</sup> See e.g. Sarmela 2009, 661–668.

Appendix 1. Miniature Magic coffins in folklore				
Location	Object	Context	Meaning	Reference
g Maaninka	Alder-coffin: frog	-	For divination	FLS FA. Maaninka. Leinonen, Arne. KRK106:117.
g Nilsinä	Alder-coffin: pike	?	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 642 g.
g Nilsinä	Alder-coffin: frog, feather	Shore of rapid	Punishing thief	SKMT I, no. 636.
g Nilsinä	Coffin: frog	Church	Malicious magic	FLS FA. Nilsinä. Pirinen, Kalle. KRK 112:14.
g Pielavesi	Coffin: frog	?	Protective magic	FLS FA. Pielavesi. Partanen, Anna. KT 97:13. 1938.
g Pielavesi	Coffin: frog	?	Malicious magic	FLS FA. Pielavesi. Raatikainen, Eelis. KRK114:53.
g Tervo	Aspen-coffin: frog, feathers	In lake	Punishing thief	FLS FA. Tervo. Tiitinen, Martti 3145. 1937.
g Tuusniemi	Alder-coffin: frog, coin	Church	?	FLS FA. Tuusniemi. Räsänen, Otto. KRK118:131.
g Tuusniemi	Frog-coffin, bedbug-coffin	Bell tower	Counter-magic	FLS FA. Tuusniemi. 1916. Lönnbohm, O. A. F. b) 2905.
g Vehmersalmi	Alder-coffin: frog	Churchyard /Under house	Malicious magic	FLS FA. Vehmersalmi. Airaksinen, Emil. KRK 91:109.
g Vehmersalmi	Alder-coffin: frog	Under building	?	FLS FA. Vehmersalmi. Räsänen, Otto. KRK118:230.
i Impilahti	Alder-coffin: pike	In the ground	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 643.
i Ruskeala	Coffin: frog	Church	?	FLS FA. Ruskeala, Kuolamo. Holmberg, U. b)601. 1909.
j Juuka	Alder-coffin: sprouts	Churchyard	Malicious magic	SKMT III, no. 568.
j Juuka	Alder-coffin: frog	In water	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 662.
j Juuka	Alder-container: frog	Field	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 657.
j Kaavi	Alder-coffin: frog	Road or path	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 654 j2.
j Kaavi	Alder-coffin: frog, feathers	River	Punishing thief	SKMT I, no. 636 j.
j Kaavi	Alder-coffin: frog	Under stone	Counter-magic	SKMT III, 660 j1.
j Kaavi	Alder-coffin: frog, grain	Churchyard	Malicious magic	SKMT III, no. 565 j.
j Kaavi	Alder-coffin: pike	Road	?	SKMT III, no. 643 j.
j Pielisjärvi	Alder-coffin: frog	?	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 654 j1.
l Käsämäki	Alder-coffin: frog	?	Counter-magic	SKVR XII2 7503. Käsämäki. Keränen, E. 106. 1883.
l Merijärvi	Alder-coffin: frog	In stream	Malicious magic	FLS FA. Merijärvi. Schroderus, Martti. KT 202:35. 1936.
l Muhos	Alder-coffin: frog	Field	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 661 l.
l Piippola	Alder-coffin: frog, feathers	Ant-hill	Punishing thief	SKMT I, p. 234 (636 l); SKVR XII2 7902. Piippola. Krohn 1098. 1884.
l Pulkkila	Alder-coffin: frog	Field?	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 656.
l Pyhäjärvi	Alder-coffin: frog	In stream	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 697; SKVR XII2

Appendix 1. Miniature Magic coffins in folklore				
Location	Object	Context	Meaning	Reference
				7508. Pyhäjärvi. Krohn 14779 b. 1885.
l Pyhäjärvi	Coffin: frog	Churchyard	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 667.
l Reisjärvi	Alder-container: frog	'buried'	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 665.
m Kuhmo	Alder-coffin: sheep hoof	In sheephouse	Keeps sheep on pastures	SKMT IV,1, no. VI 374.
m Kuusamo	Alder-coffin: red yarn	In lake	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 659 m1.
m Puolanka	Alder-coffin: pike	Field	Counter-magic	SKMT III, no. 143.
n Koutajärvi	Alder-coffin: headdress, milk	Churchyard	Malicious magic	SKMT IV,2, no. XIV 352.
p Jyskyjärvi	Alder-coffin: foetus	Churchyard	Counter-magic	SKMT IV,2, no. XIV 234.
p Pistojärvi	Alder-coffin: squirrel	Churchyard, rapids	Counter-magic	SKMT I, no. 282.
p Pistojärvi	Alder-coffin: blood	Ant-hill	Counter-magic	SKMT I. no. 106.
p Pistojärvi	Alder-coffin: prey	In forest	Counter-magic	SKMT I, no. 105.
p Pistojärvi	Alder-coffin: knife	In forest	Malicious magic	SKMT I, no. 100.
p Teeriniemi village	Alder-coffin: horse hoof	By pastures	Keeps horse on pastures	SKMT IV,1, no. VI 391.
p Uhtua	Alder-coffin: soil	Where the sun never shines [sic]	Counter-magic	SKMT II, no. 349.